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Walking the talk: Co-designing a co-design approach

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This paper examines challenges implementing co-design practices in a Vietnamese campus of an Australian University and presents a tailored professional development approach addressing foundational collaboration understandings within Vietnamese cultural contexts. After three years of operation, our learning design team faced persistent issues co-designing learning experiences with academics, revealing a fundamental misunderstanding of co-design principles within the team itself. Initial interventions failed because they employed didactic approaches that violated the collaborative principles they aimed to teach. Through practice-led research combining practitioner inquiry, collaborative auto-ethnography, and retrospective sensemaking, we identified two dysfunctional power dynamics: "power-for" relationships where learning designers acted as service providers, and "power-over" dynamics where designers dominated processes, rather than the "power-with" approach needed for true collaboration. Cultural factors, including Confucian values emphasising hierarchy and examination-oriented traditions, compounded these challenges. Our "Walking the Talk" intervention employed experiential role-playing activities, positioning learning designers as clients in interior design scenarios. This method successfully disrupted habitual practices, enabling participants to embody co-design principles rather than merely understanding them theoretically. Findings demonstrate that authentic collaboration requires deliberate cultivation in Vietnamese contexts, where social-political arrangements essential to co-design do not emerge organically. This research offers strategies for developing collaborative capabilities in hierarchical cultural contexts.

Keywords: co-design, collaboration, cultural adaptation, learning design, Vietnamese higher education, professional development.

Context

The RMIT Learning Design Team was established in 2022 in response to the COVID pandemic. After three years, the team continued to face challenges collaborating with academics, rooted in fundamental cultural differences regarding collaboration itself. The hierarchical nature of Vietnamese workplace culture, where being a good servant equates to being helpful, which in turn equates to being a good collaborator, represents the norm for Vietnamese collaboration practices (Truong et al., 2017). This contrasts sharply with Western contexts, where such servant-like relationships are considered uncomfortable and counterproductive.

Confucian values in Vietnamese culture emphasise respect for authority and wisdom gained from elders and ancestors. While differences of opinion and conflict within groups are sometimes viewed as creative and necessary in Australian contexts, Vietnamese society prioritises group harmony and cohesion over asserting individual opinions (Truong et al., 2017). This examination-oriented cultural framework extends into collaborative relationships, where academics similarly seek definitive solutions rather than engaging in exploratory processes (Vallis et al., 2024). The importance of "saving face" in Vietnamese culture further underscores the sensitivity required when adapting collaborative practices across cultures, necessitating safe spaces for learning from mistakes without fear of embarrassment (Vallis et al., 2024).

A critical realisation emerged regarding knowledge transfer within our team. Initially, the team manager coached senior learning designers about co-design approaches, but assumptions about shared understanding of collaboration led to miscommunication. Senior learning designers subsequently transmitted misaligned collaborative practices to junior colleagues, with foundational misunderstandings multiplying as they cascaded through the team hierarchy. When establishing the

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team, we created prototypes and exemplars to guide practice. However, to operationalise these models, we adopted a dominant stance, defining approaches and expecting academics to follow our predetermined methods. We assumed learning designers would naturally adopt co-design practices since these were outlined in kick-off presentations.

This approach resulted in deteriorating relationships. When we investigated team members' understanding of co-design principles, none could articulate concepts beyond slide content. There was a fundamental lack of embodied understanding. Team members were repeating theoretical concepts without practical comprehension or authentic implementation.

Our Very First Attempt

Our initial intervention was a workshop designed to align learning designers' co-design practices. However, this session revealed significant misaligned beliefs and values that were undermining our collaborative efforts. During the workshop, learning designers were asked to share challenges from previous semester collaborations with academics. The pain points they identified included:

- 'Course coordinators (CCs) refuse to collaborate in the manner we propose.'
- 'Academics lack understanding of blended learning (BL) principles.'
- 'Academics make commitments but rarely fulfil them.'
- 'Intimidating course coordinators create barriers to open communication.'
- 'Difficulty being authentic when course coordinators hold preconceptions that learning designers are either there to solve all teaching problems or to complicate their work.'

The majority identified academic disengagement as the primary barrier, specifically, academics' lack of investment in the collaboration, process, and required effort. These responses revealed problematic assumptions about power dynamics between academics and learning designers. The issues they mentioned typically framed the other party as difficult to work with, lacking internal reflection on how their own interactions contributed to these problems. The workshop's second half consisted primarily of didactic presentations from the team manager about co-design principles.

Conducted from a top-down perspective, the workshop failed to achieve buy-in. Mandated practices were ignored, and problems persisted. Reflection revealed that the workshop itself was modelling non-collaborative approaches whilst appearing collaborative, replicating the very conditions that made co-design unsuccessful with academics. The intervention emphasised co-design importance without providing practical experience, demonstration, or genuine understanding. Ironically, it lacked the collaborative principles it purported to teach. Learning designers continued established patterns and disregarded mandated elements, as these represented imposed solutions rather than collaboratively developed approaches. This failure illuminated a crucial insight: teaching collaborative practices requires collaborative methods.

Research method

To investigate core problems in our co-design practice, we adopted a practice-led approach (Mäkelä, 2007; Smith & Dean, 2009) combined with practitioner inquiry methodology. Practitioner inquiry serves dual epistemological and practical functions: providing a means to understand the world (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006) while offering a collaborative and structured approach to exploration in professional settings. This framework aligns with recent scholarship on co-design practice in higher education, which emphasises practice theory insights into collaborative curriculum development (Zeivots et al., 2024).

Central to our approach was retrospective sensemaking, systematically examining specific moments to unpack gaps between practitioners' intentions and actual outcomes. Through this process, learning designers reflected on their underlying motivations, assumptions, and cultural factors driving their collaborative approaches. Our research addresses two central inquiries: What assumptions and misconceptions do learning designers bring to academic collaborations, particularly within Vietnamese cultural contexts, and how do these shape the collaborative process? How can we design professional learning interventions that address these misconceptions and support practitioners in embodying foundational co-design principles? Ethics approval was not required as participants were the researchers themselves and immediate professional colleagues engaged in collaborative reflection on shared practice.

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Data Collection

Data collection captured both real-time collaborative interactions and retrospective reflections. We participated as observer-participants in kick-off and catch-up meetings between learning designers and course coordinators, audio-recording interactions with consent. Following meetings, we conducted structured debriefing sessions where learning designers reflected on recorded interactions, examining original intentions, assumptions about academic partnerships, moments of surprise or confusion, and gaps between expected and actual outcomes. Individual interviews asked learning designers to articulate their understanding of co-design principles, revealing gaps between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of recordings, debriefing sessions, and interviews identified recurring power dynamics characterising learning designer-academic relationships. Two dominant dysfunctional patterns emerged (Huxham & Vangen, 2005):

Power-for dynamics: Learning designers positioned themselves as service providers, treating academics as clients. Learning designers received materials from academics and subsequently transformed, improved, and designed learning experiences in isolation, without collaborative process sharing or joint decision-making.

Power-over dynamics: Learning designers assumed expert positions, treating academics as novices requiring guidance in blended learning principles. Learning designers dominated the design process, controlling decisions while academics maintained minimal input beyond classroom teaching.

Both dynamics failed to achieve mutual value creation. Rather than fostering collaborative ownership, these approaches satisfied only one party, ultimately undermining the co-design process and contributing to relationship difficulties.

Walking the Talk Approach - Co-design workshop for Learning Designers

The workshop was designed to address foundational principles of collaboration for learning designers. We invited learning designers to reframe their understanding of collaborative relationships. Rather than imposing a co-design ideology, we designed activities that enabled learning designers to develop an embodied understanding rooted in their own philosophical frameworks.

First Activity:

The workshop started with a think-pair-share activity, encouraging learning designers to freely express their interpretations of co-design.

- When you present the co-design approach slide in the kickoff meeting, what message are you trying to convey? How do you feel?
- What is your understanding of this slide? What does co-design mean to you? What does co-design look like to you?

The activity successfully enabled learning designers to articulate their internal principles beyond tactical approaches and best practices. Key themes that emerged included:

- 'Partnership rather than Consultation'
- 'Neither party can develop courses alone'
- 'Shared ownership and respect'
- 'Thinking partner - not just working in the course'
- 'Trust building through small wins'
- 'Success is a design they will use'
- 'If you have fun and they like you, the work is more productive and creative'

along with some challenges

- 'Difficult academics think we are there to make more work'
- 'They do not know what they do not know'

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- 'They may feel: our project, our rules'

These insights revealed that our workshop approach should transform the kickoff slide into a collaborative artifact that reflects a collective understanding, rather than one that imposes compliance.

Second Activity

Next, to let the learning designers experience the perspective of academics, we created a three-role activity: Interior Designer, Client, and Observer. The scenario positioned participants as follows: the interior designer collaborates with a client on their apartment redesign, where the client has specific ideas about their space. Framed as a co-design activity, participants were asked to work together to understand needs and develop the best solution.

Following each 15-minute interaction, participants reflected using targeted questions:

- Interior Designer: What was your solution and process? Was it successful? How did it feel? How did you reach the solution?
- Client: How did the process feel? Did you feel heard? Will you use the solution?
- Observer: What worked well? What felt awkward? Was this co-design?

We divided the team into two groups to experiment with their co-design approach. The activity's central challenge involved a client with unique expertise making an unusual request, to place their bed in the kitchen. We developed distinct client profiles, each with unique rationales, philosophies, areas of expertise, lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, and health considerations. The goal required designers to engage in active listening to identify core needs and understand the reasoning behind the request, then combine both parties' expertise to develop solutions. We intentionally removed practical construction limitations, allowing designers the creative freedom they need. However, they needed to consider realistic concerns, including cooking odours affecting sleep quality, fire safety near cooking appliances, hygiene issues, potential impacts on property resale value, and uncertain building code compliance.

This approach mirrored the academic collaboration context, where course coordinators often have specific pedagogical requests that may initially seem unconventional to learning designers.

Participant Reflections after the Second Activity

Group 1 demonstrated a "power-for" dynamic where the designer became a "push-over," simply acquiescing to the client's request without genuine collaboration. The client felt unheard and hurt by the designer's attempts to change their mind, while the observer noted this wasn't true co-design since neither party was satisfied with the outcome.

Group 2 initially exhibited "power-over" behaviour, with the designer admitting: "I was so caught up in my goal of not letting the client put a bed in the kitchen that I forgot about what they really wanted." However, they successfully shifted to collaborative problem-solving, developing a sofa bed solution that addressed the client's underlying needs while acknowledging practical constraints.

Discussion

The role-playing activity successfully disrupted entrenched collaborative practices by positioning learning designers as clients rather than service providers. This experiential approach proved more effective than didactic instruction in revealing gaps between espoused co-design principles and actual practice. Participants were forced to examine their underlying assumptions and collaborative philosophies when experiencing the vulnerability and dependency typically felt by academics in these relationships. The workshop's effectiveness stemmed from reframing collaboration itself. Rather than presenting collaboration as a controllable, linear process, we positioned it as inherently chaotic, random, and unpredictable qualities that, while challenging, create richness by extending individual expertise through synthesis with others' knowledge and abilities. This reframing helped learning designers understand why their attempts to control and standardise collaborative processes fundamentally contradicted authentic co-design principles.

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Our findings reveal that the dynamic social-political arrangements essential to co-design do not emerge organically within Vietnamese collaborative contexts. The cultural emphasis on hierarchy, harmony, and particularly "giữ thể diện", which encompasses more than "saving face" to include philosophy of dignity, pride, and self-worth within community, creates conditions requiring deliberate cultivation to enable genuine partnership. Deference to authority further compounds these challenges, making power-sharing and collaborative decision-making culturally uncomfortable.

Our workshop approach began addressing these cultural barriers by creating safe spaces for practitioners to experience alternative collaborative arrangements and reflect on their practice implications. The collective accomplishments align with Zeivots et al.'s (2024) description of connective enactments—project-focused activities involving goal alignment, collective envisioning, and shared understanding of requirements and pathways forward. However, our work extends this framework by demonstrating how cultural contexts fundamentally shape these accomplishments and how targeted interventions can support their development in hierarchical cultural settings.

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