ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Transform: Building creative capacity and psychological safety for innovation in higher education through professional learning

Amelia Di Paolo, Glendon Gardner, Kevin Millingham
University of Technology Sydney

This paper reports on the Innovation Lab: Transform, a six-month professional development program in the Learning Design and Technology unit at the University of Technology Sydney. Designed during a period of rapid change (generative AI, assessment security), the program created a structured, in-person space for experimentation through Creative Foundations workshops and a team-based Idea Accelerator. Co-created values and distributed facilitation helped establish psychological safety, while feedback showed gains in creative confidence, collaboration, and willingness to test bold ideas.

The success of the Transform program has since anchored a broader innovation agenda framed around three streams: Optimise (incremental improvements), Extend (modular innovation), and Transform (capability-building for radical change). This paper demonstrates how a single localised initiative can evolve into a multi-layered strategy, balancing day-to-day enhancement with capacity for systemic innovation. Insights are offered for third space professionals and leaders seeking to embed sustainable innovation in higher education.

Keywords: higher education, professional learning, psychological safety, design thinking, innovation, third space

Context

Higher education continues to undergo complex transformation, shaped by internationalisation, corporatisation, and digital disruption (Veles, 2024) and by changing workforce expectations and innovation pressures (Manoharan, 2020). Nationally, the Australian Universities Accord (Australian Government, 2023) has further emphasised equity, participation, and system-wide responsiveness as sector priorities. Within this shifting landscape, third space practitioners are increasingly called on to lead or facilitate change while sustaining their capacity and wellbeing (Murray, 2025; Irwin, 2025). Yet professional learning often remains inconsistent or disconnected from practice—especially for cross-functional teams—a gap the Innovation Lab, in University of Technology Sydney's Learning Design and Technology unit was designed to address by building our unit's adaptability, problem-solving skills and readiness for change (Kezar et al., 2025). Informed by a needs analysis highlighting limited time for collaboration and appetite for creative methods, the Transform program's primary goals were to build creative capacity and establish psychologically safe conditions for pitching and testing bold ideas.

Program design

Delivered over six months, the Transform program involved a cross-functional cohort from the Learning Design and Education Media teams (learning designers, learning technologists, media producers, digital designers). The goal was not product delivery but capability-building—strengthening creative problem-solving, collaboration, and psychological safety so the unit could navigate uncertainty and support change. It comprised two stages—Stage 1: Creative foundations and Stage 2: Idea Accelerator (team-based challenge over 14 weeks) - and we iterated between touchpoints based on participant feedback: as examples, after one

workshop from which we received feedback that the pace was too fast, activities were reduced for the following workshops: mentor support was also formalised when teams requested more guidance.

Distributed leadership in the Transform program was employed as a method of facilitation rather than a program outcome. It operated on two levels. Within the project team who led the Transform program, facilitation and coaching responsibilities were shared to model inclusion, adapt responsively between sessions, and provide ongoing support (including assigning mentors)—an approach consistent with distributed leadership in higher education, where the emphasis is on shared responsibility rather than individual authority (Jones et al., 2014; Eva et al., 2019; Nawaz et al., 2024). Participants were likewise encouraged to practise distributed leadership within their Idea Accelerator teams, sharing responsibility for ideation, prototyping, and pitching. For example, teams began by each creating a Team Canvas to set expectations and vision early, supporting a strengths-based approach to collaboration. This dual-layer facilitation enabled co-design, built internal capacity, and reinforced the Transform program's values of inclusion, creativity, and psychological safety (Kezar et al., 2025).

Workshops were in-person by default (with a single weather-related hybrid exception) given evidence that creative, embodied activities and rapid prototyping are most effective when co-located (Brucks & Levav, 2022; Minet et al., 2024). Feedback from participants also confirmed hybrid delivery was less suitable for these activities.

Methods

An open invitation went out to the unit for the initial stage, Creative Foundations, and we had between 12 and 20 participants for each of the three workshops. For the Idea Accelerator, 15 staff volunteered via unit-wide expression of interest and manager nomination, forming three cross-functional teams.

Data comprised pulse surveys after each session, a post-showcase audience survey, and participant and project-team retrospective reflections using the 4As (Acknowledge–Appreciate–Ask–Align) framework. We conducted rapid thematic analysis of qualitative comments and descriptive statistics for survey items; attendance logs were reviewed to contextualise engagement. Findings reflect outcomes for the pilot 2024–25 cohort. All data were collected as part of routine program evaluation and professional learning reflection, not as a formal research study; therefore, institutional ethics approval was not required.

Stage 1: Creative foundations

Three Creative Foundations workshops cultivated the mindset and group culture needed for creative collaboration—sketching, reflective tasks, and divergent/convergent thinking (Guilford, 1958)—so participants could practice safe-to-try exploration before committing to solutions. Together, participants co-created five guiding values—Safety, Inclusion, Play, Courage, and Reflection (Figure 1, below) —practised throughout the series.

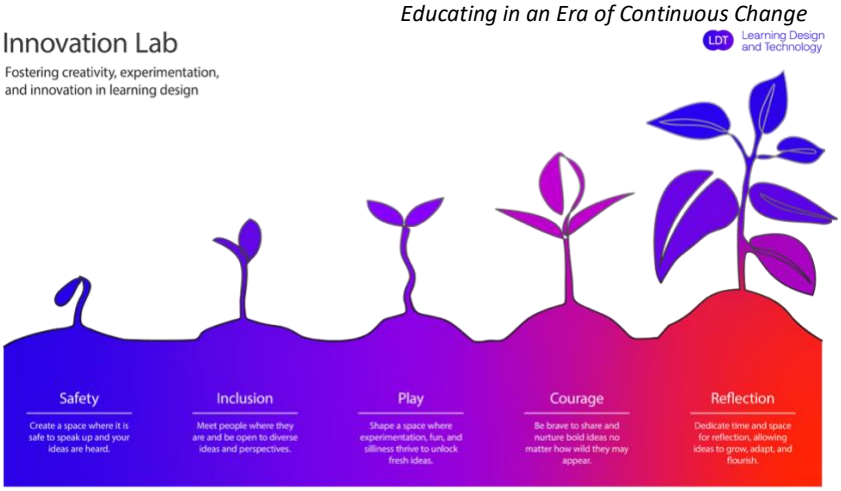

Figure 1. Innovation Lab values visual

Facilitation strategies included artefact creation, Crazy 8s, and ignorance mapping. Movement-based techniques and curated music playlists were used to regulate energy levels and focus. For example, calm music accompanied reflection activities, while upbeat tracks supported ideation sessions. The 'Walk and Talk' task, designed to foster deeper peer dialogue, was particularly effective in building connection and trust. The use of human-centred and empathy-based approaches, which focus on university stakeholders' needs and experiences, supported connection and reflection among participants, aligning with IDEO's evolving practice of design (Battarbee et al., 2015).

Stage 2: Idea Accelerator

Stage 2 was a 14-week Idea Accelerator using a simplified Double Diamond (Design Council, 2025), adapted from Banathy (1996), depicted in Table 1 and Figure 2, below, to stay longer in the problem space, map stakeholder/learner needs, and prototype low-fidelity solutions. As with cross-functional professional learning communities (PLCs) documented by Kezar et al. (2025), the Idea Accelerator fostered collaborative problem-solving that extended beyond disciplinary silos and built practical change leadership skills.

Table 1
The simplified double diamond phases

Phase	Style of thinking	Description
Discover	Divergent	This initial phase focuses on exploring the problem space thoroughly by understanding real stakeholder experiences, rather than making assumptions. It centres on building empathy with those affected.
Define	Convergent	Insights gathered during discovery are analysed to clearly frame the core problem or design challenge, often revealing new perspectives.
Ideate	Divergent	In this stage, a wide range of creative solutions are generated through brainstorming and collaboration, encouraging ideas from varied sources.
Deliver	Convergent	Proposed ideas are prototyped and tested, eliminating fewer effective options and refining those with potential for real-world application. A unit-wide showcase enables teams to pitch their ideas to relevant organisational stakeholders.

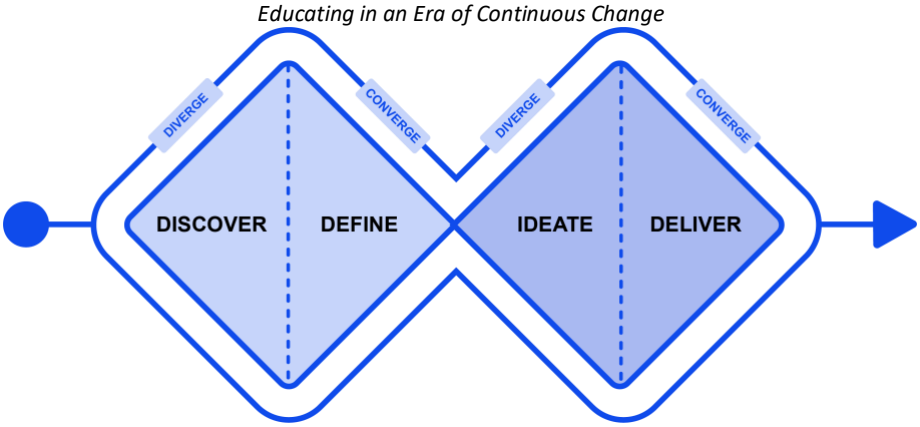

Figure 2: Simplified double diamond model
Adapted from *The Double Diamond*, Design Council (2025), licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Innovation Lab: Transform framework overview

The Innovation Lab: Transform was delivered over six months in two core stages. Table 2, below, outlines the program structure and pedagogical intent.

Table 2
Innovation Lab: Transform 6-month framework

Stage/Phase	Focus area	Sample activities
Stage 1: Creative Foundations	Establish psychological safety and shared understanding	Introduction to divergent/convergent thinking; co-creation of values; introduction to problem spaces.
Stage 2: Idea Accelerator	A structured design process focused on experimentation, prototyping, and collaboration on HE challenges	Project work (2–3 hours/week); creative and human-centred design; peer collaboration and reflection
Phase 1: Initiation & collaboration (Week 1)	Orientation and challenge selection	Program overview; problem selection; team formation and agreements; stakeholder mapping; vision alignment
Phase 2: Problem space exploration (Week 3)	Understand the problem space through human-centred methods	Empathy mapping; persona creation; journey mapping; stakeholder validation
Phase 3: Challenge framing (Week 5)	Reframe the problem to guide idea generation	5 Whys; success criteria; 'How might we' (HMW) statements
Phase 4: Ideation & prototyping (Week 7)	Generate and test solutions through rapid experimentation	Low-fidelity prototyping; storyboarding; early user testing
Phase 5: Open studios (Weeks 9–12)	Provide unstructured collaboration and feedback loops	Iterative development; coaching and feedback
Phase 6: Final showcase (Week 13)	Present concepts to senior stakeholders	Team pitches; stakeholder feedback.

Integrating values into activities

Research shows that hybrid, boundary-crossing third space collaborations can generate new knowledge and support psychological safety (Veles, 2024). The five shared values, co-created by participants during the early workshops, remained central throughout the Transform program. These values were intentionally embedded into the design and facilitation of each stage. Table 3, below, illustrates how they were translated into specific activities and environmental cues, helping to shape both the tone and culture of the Transform program.

Table 3
The Innovation Lab values embedded in the program

Value	How it was embedded in activities
Safety	Playlists were used to regulate energy. 'No right answers' framing encouraged low-risk participation, and participants were always invited—not required—to share.
Inclusion	Multiple facilitation styles (visual, verbal, embodied) supported different ways of engaging. Activities like ignorance mapping validated partial knowledge. 'Walk and Talk' sessions enabled more informal, side-by-side dialogue to support broader participation.
Play	Teams used puppets to represent stakeholders and perform journey maps, bringing perspectives to life in a playful way. Sessions opened with light improvisation activities—such as using puppets to explain learning design to someone from the 18th century—to spark creativity. We also introduced a playful feedback mechanism: participants could raise a yellow card if someone shifted into convergent thinking too early, reinforcing creative exploration while keeping the tone fun.
Courage	Participants were supported to test early, imperfect ideas through rapid prototyping. The final showcase invited them to pitch concepts to senior stakeholders, reinforcing the value of experimentation over perfection.
Reflection	Dedicated time was built in between sessions for reflection and sense-making. Chill-out music and visual tools like sticky-note harvest walls helped consolidate insights.

Outcomes and reflections

Across the Creative Foundations workshops and the Idea Accelerator, participants consistently described the Transform program as 'energising,' 'confidence-building,' and a 'space to play,' with playful methods (Crazy 8s, puppets, walk-and-talk, rapid sketching) lowering risk and unlocking idea generation. Teams reported that staying longer in the problem space (personas, journey maps, HMW statements) expanded solution ranges before converging on low-fi prototypes. The non-competitive pitch format further normalised bold ideas.

Values of Safety, Inclusion, Play, Courage, and Reflection, reinforced through facilitation choices (no-right-answers framing, opt-in sharing, curated music), created a safe-to-try environment. Participants noted feeling heard and more willing to share early, imperfect work. A recurring tension was pace—some sessions felt rushed, limiting reflection—treated as a design trade-off.

The Transform program scaffolded cross-team collaboration (mixed teams, shared tools, open studios) where few such opportunities existed previously. Project retrospectives emphasised "trust in the process and each other," and a desire to widen collaboration by involving more experts, cross-unit cycles, and mentoring.

Barriers and design adaptations. Time and pacing were the main constraints. In response to Phase-2 feedback, we pared back the number of activities and assigned mentors for additional coaching.

Showcase outcomes. Three teams pitched prototypes to senior leaders and peers. Over 85% of audience respondents reported the showcase clarified team interests, demonstrated actionable solutions, and increased intention to engage with future events. Participants indicated the non-competitive format reinforced psychological safety while sustaining ambition.

Early mechanisms of impact. Evidence across surveys and retros suggests three mechanisms: (1) psychological safety enabled idea sharing and reframing of risk; (2) boundary-spanning collaboration surfaced new perspectives on stakeholder/learner needs; and (3) structured iteration (low-fi prototypes, open studios, mentoring) converted uncertainty into action. These mechanisms align with research on cross-functional professional learning and knowledge co-creation (Kezar et al., 2025; Veles, 2024).

A three-pronged approach to innovation

The positive outcomes of the Innovation Lab highlighted the value of professional development as a driver of cultural and capability change. Building on this foundation, the Learning Design Team has since structured its innovation agenda into a three-pronged framework—Optimise, Extend, and Transform—that deliberately balances incremental, modular, and radical initiatives (Henderson & Clark, 1990).

- **Optimise**: Small, continuous improvements to existing tools and processes, akin to incremental innovation and refinement of current practices (e.g., prototyping new page designs in the LMS).
- **Extend**: Modular innovations that add or adapt components without replacing the whole system (e.g., prototyping new assessment activity types).
- **Transform**: Professional development and capability-building initiatives that create the conditions for bold, systemic change—where reframing problems and orchestrating knowledge across boundaries become central (Brown et al., 2020).

In this framework, the first delivery of The Innovation Lab represents the transform stream. Its success catalysed the articulation of the other two streams, giving the unit a scalable model that balances day-to-day improvements with capacity for more radical change. This scaffolded evolution demonstrates how a single, localised initiative can catalyse a multi-layered innovation strategy, reinforcing the importance of professional learning as a mechanism for embedding sustainable innovation in higher education.

References

Australian Government. (2023). Australian Universities Accord: Discussion paper. Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/australian-universities-accord-panel-discussion-paper

Banathy, B. H. (1996). *Designing social systems in a changing world*. Springer US.

Battarbee, K., Fulton Suri, J., & Gibbs Howard, S. (2015). *Empathy on the edge: Scaling and sustaining a human-centred approach to innovation*. Rotman Management Magazine. https://store.hbr.org/product/empathy-on-the-edge-scaling-and-sustaining-a-human-centred-approach-to-innovation/ROT254

Brown, P., Bocken, N., & Balkenende, R. (2020). How do companies collaborate for circular oriented innovation? *Sustainability, 12*(6), 1648. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12041648

Brucks, M. S., & Levav, J. (2022). *Virtual communication curbs creative idea generation*. Nature, 605(7908), 108–112. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04643-y

Design Council. (2025). The double diamond: A universally accepted depiction of the design process. https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-resources/the-double-diamond/

Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R. C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research. *The Leadership Quarterly, 30*(1), 111–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.07.004

Guilford, J. P. (1958). Can creativity be developed? Art Education, 11(6), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.2307/3184459

Henderson, R. M., & Clark, K. B. (1990). Architectural innovation: The reconfiguration of existing product technologies and the failure of established firms. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 35*(1), 9–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393549

Irwin, E. (2025). Institutional responsibility and third space professionals: A call for structural change to embrace ambiguity. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, (33)*. https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi33.1209

Jones, S., Harvey, M., Lefoe, G., & Ryland, K. (2014). Synthesising theory and practice: Distributed leadership in higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(5), 603–619. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213510506

Kezar, A., Hallett, R. E., Corwin, Z. B., & Hypolite, L. (2025). Moving toward institutional culture change in higher education: An exploration into cross-functional professional learning communities. *Innovative Higher Education, 50*, 687–714. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-024-09753-1

Manoharan, A. (2020). Creating connections: Polymathy and the value of third space professionals in higher education. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 24*(2), 56–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2019.1698475

Minet, A., Wentzel, D., Raff, S., & Garbas, J. (2024). *Design thinking in physical and virtual environments: Conceptual foundations, qualitative analysis, and practical implications*. Technological Forecasting & Social Change, 207, 123596. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2024.123596

Murray, K. (2025). The third space professional: Cultivating authentic learning experiences through collaborative practice. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, (33)*. https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi33.1223

Nawaz, A., Gilal, F. G., Soomro, M. I., Gilal, R. G., & Channa, K. A. (2024). Driving innovation through servant leadership in higher education: Unveiling the serial mediating mechanisms of subjective well-being and knowledge sharing. *Knowledge and Process Management*, *31*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1002/kpm.1761

Veles, N. (2024). Critical thirding and third space collaboration: University professional staff and new type of knowledge production. *London Review of Education, 22*(1), 24. https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.22.1.24

Di Paolo, A., Gardner, G. & Millingham, K. (2025). Transform: Building creative capacity and psychological safety for innovation in higher education through professional learning. In S. Barker, S. Kelly, R. McInnes & S. Dinmore (Eds.), *Future-focused: Educating in an era of continuous change*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2025. Adelaide (pp. 367-373) https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2025.2677