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Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

GenAI Tinker Workshops: Developing confidence through guided experimentation

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Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is rapidly reframing academic practice, yet staff confidence to harness its potential remains uneven. Many university staff indicate that a "lack of familiarity with the technology, uncertainty about its use, or a lack of time to engage, contributed to their reluctance to use AI tools for their work" (McDonald, 2024). Building this confidence demands accessible opportunities that honour diverse starting points, and courageous experimentation which normalises trial-and-error—two of the principles guiding the University of Newcastle's GenAI response. Our GenAI Tinker Workshops operationalise these principles by offering low-stakes, experimentation-based experiences where educators co-explore AI tools, reflect on ethical dimensions and iterate on real teaching artefacts.

Playful, informal learning environments may lower cognitive load and heighten curiosity by reducing the focus on serious workplace implications (O'Hara & Lo, 2025). Tinkering studios, for example, cultivate "permission to fail" that supports creativity and innovation (Henriksen, 2021). The informal, low-stakes format of the sessions promoted engagement, echoing Worth's (2024) assertion that "AI playgrounds" backed by appropriate guidance can support learning.

Responding to TEQSA's call for structured capacity-building around GenAI (TEQSA, 2024), Learning Design & Teaching Innovation designed monthly Tinker Workshops capped at roughly ten participants. Each 60-minute session invited academics to "tinker" with tools like ChatGPT, NapkinAI Copilot, NotebookLM and Gamma to draft real artefacts (course plans, presentations, podcasts, images, etc) for use in their teaching activities. Facilitators guide the participants through a simple introductory activity and focus on identifying opportunities to promote discussion in the group.

Evaluation of the workshops, through informal participant feedback and in-session observations, showed an appreciation for this approach. Participants reported increased confidence not only with the tools but with navigating rapid change more broadly, citing reduced anxiety and a stronger sense of community

Participants noted possible operational benefits identified by exposure to various AI tools (example comments – "this will save me so much time" and "That just took about 20 seconds, it would take me three days to do the same."). They also developed insights beyond the immediate operational focus of the activity (example comments – "I'd never thought of structuring my course that way, it's really clear" and "This has really helped me think about how I use images and graphics in my lectures.").

Further, the informal nature of the sessions, with facilitator positioned as fellow learner rather than expert instructor supported honest discussion and debate around the implications (both positive and negative) of GenAI (example comments – "it's just good to be able to talk about this stuff, and know everyone is in the same boat" and "I kind of knew that not all AI is not bad, but have not had the time to learn more."). End of session discussion is guided towards awareness of the fallibility of GenAI outputs, and the importance of human expertise in co-creating learning experiences with GenAI.

By embedding accessible, iterative, low-stakes Tinker Workshops alongside more traditional GenAI initiatives, we aim to directly tackle the challenge of uneven confidence driven by

unfamiliarity, uncertainty and limited time. The format normalises trial-and-error, scaffolds ethical reflection and focuses "AI playground" tinkering on real world use cases—delivering immediate efficiency gains while supporting consideration of broader pedagogical impacts. Participants report reduced anxiety, stronger professional community and increased confidence in decision making around the use of GenAI. In short, structured opportunities to experiment safely are building adaptable educators who can collaborate with AI responsibly, meeting TEQSA's call for capability-building and strengthening resilient, human-centred learning.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), Playful Learning, Professional Development, Tinker

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