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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Relational alignment:
Project management and learning design as a site of innovation

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In contemporary higher education, innovation in learning design is often shaped by competing priorities, including timelines, resourcing, scalability, and strategic direction. These conditions are frequently positioned as constraints that limit creativity and innovation. This poster positions relational alignment as the primary driver of sustainable innovation over the removal of constraints. Research on creativity demonstrates that constraints can productively shape innovation rather than inhibit it (Acar et al., 2019; Caniëls & Rietzschel, 2015).

Aligned with the subtheme of *Reflective Practice and Career Communities*, this reflective practice case study examines the partnership between the Project Manager (PM) and Educational Designer (ED) as a critical, yet underexplored, site of collaborative practice representing the intersection of project delivery and pedagogical design. Rather than viewing these roles as operating in tension (operations versus pedagogy), this partnership is framed as a micro-community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020), where shared reflection, trust, and ongoing dialogue enable a deep understanding of both educational intent and operational realities.

The distinct roles of PM and ED enable each practitioner to sustain expertise and attention to their respective domain, fostering productive dialogue between pedagogical intent and operational feasibility. The underlying principles of mutual enablement, shared prioritisation and dialogue between these perspectives are equally applicable where these responsibilities are combined within a single role or distributed differently across multidisciplinary teams. The PM plays a central role in translating strategic, logistical, and resourcing considerations into actionable design opportunities, while the ED contributes pedagogical expertise and experimentation in learning experience design. The partnership is operationalised through co-facilitated subject specification workshops, where the PM establishes project scope, timelines and resourcing parameters; the ED identifies pedagogical and technological opportunities; and subject matter experts articulate disciplinary and curriculum requirements. Bringing these perspectives together at project commencement enables feasibility, pedagogy and innovation to be considered concurrently rather than sequentially. Further, collaboration strengthens shared understanding, aligns stakeholder expectations, and improves the consistency of course development outcomes. This partnership also results in additional opportunities for innovation where the ED can identify the relevance or necessity of learning assets, and the PM supports by adapting project parameters. Since the introduction of specification workshops, nine subjects have embedded XR and AI learning assets while maintaining budgetary and timeline constraints, compared to four subjects where the production of these assets exceeded initial budgetary or timeline parameters. The poster will illustrate the benefit of dual purpose, co-facilitated subject specification workshops, and how they were associated with a marked shift in the level of innovation in course design and the consistency of project deliverables.

The partnership functions through mutual enablement, not compromise, where each role actively supports the other in achieving innovative outcomes. For example, the PM may identify creative approaches to budget allocation or project structuring that create space for more ambitious pedagogical initiatives, while the ED ensures these opportunities are translated into meaningful and scalable learning experiences. This reflects research highlighting the value of cross functional alignment in complex project environments (Bennett et al., 2017; Pollack & Matous, 2019). Through practices such as an agile methodology and shared prioritisation informed by mutual respect and understanding, the partnership establishes a strong foundation for collaboration.

This enables creative problem-solving in contexts where innovation may otherwise be perceived as

restricted. Agile approaches emphasise responsiveness, learning, and professional judgement over rigid process adherence (Conboy, 2009). These practices support real-time decision-making in response to context, where design choices emerge through dialogue rather than reliance on static processes. Grounded in social constructivist principles (Goodyear, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978), learning design decisions emerge through interaction, ensuring that both educational and organisational outcomes are mutually reinforced. Importantly, this reflective partnership also provides a counterbalance to technology-led decision-making. Instead of allowing AI and digital tools to dictate design, the PM-ED relationship enables intentional, context-aware choices about when and how technology meaningfully supports learning. The poster will visualise this process and invite participants to map where pedagogical and operational decision-making occurs within their own institutional contexts and consider how relational alignment might strengthen their practice.

Sustainable innovation in learning design emerges not from removing constraints or adopting new technologies, but from strong, reflective partnerships that align pedagogical intent with operational reality.

Keywords: Reflective practice, collaborative learning design, project management, communities of practice, sustainable innovation, human-centred learning design

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