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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

People before technology? What do learning designers across sectors see as essential for successful practice?

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Positioned at the intersection of pedagogy, technology, and curriculum design, learning designers play an increasingly important role in the design, development, and enhancement of learning experiences across diverse educational contexts. Their work has been described as being characterised by collaboration, relationship-building, and the ability to facilitate change within complex educational environments (Altena et al. 2025; Walji, 2023). Recent research further suggests that effective learning design depends on adaptive relational work, trust, openness, and the integration of diverse forms of expertise across interdisciplinary teams (Papageorgiou & Bennett, 2026).

Existing studies have explored learning designers' demographic profiles, qualifications, professional backgrounds, career pathways, job titles, and professional positioning, particularly within higher education (Altena et al., 2025; Gilmore & Nguyen, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2017; Slade et al., 2019). Learning designers have also been conceptualised as "third-space" or hybrid professionals whose work spans pedagogical, technological, and organisational boundaries (Bennett, 2023; Whitchurch, 2012), and competency frameworks have been proposed to describe their professional capabilities (MacLean & Scott, 2011; Simpson, 2025). However, there remains limited evidence about learning designers working outside higher education and little empirical research examining how learning designers themselves perceive the knowledge, skills, and values that underpin successful professional practice.

This presentation reports preliminary findings from a larger survey of 268 learning designers working in Australia (88%) and New Zealand (5%) across diverse contexts, including formal education (K–12 and tertiary), enterprise, government, and not-for-profit organisations. The presentation focuses on respondents' perceptions of the knowledge, skills, and values that constitute the "special sauce" of learning design practice. Data was collected through a cross-sectional online survey and participation was on a voluntary basis.

The findings suggest that learning designers perceive the human-centred dimensions of their work as more central to their professional practice than the technical dimensions commonly associated with the role. Collaboration with subject matter experts was the most frequently reported task performed by learning designers and interpersonal skills were the most frequently selected skill, highlighting the collaborative and relational nature of the role. A high proportion of respondents identified knowledge of learning and motivation theories as a core knowledge domain underpinning effective learning design practice, followed by knowledge of educational technologies and digital learning environments. Strong emphasis was also placed on proficiency with learning management systems as an essential skill. The values identified by respondents

further suggest the profession's strong orientation toward critical thinking, empathy, and adaptability.

While technological knowledge and skills were widely recognised as important, particularly educational technology and digital learning environments, and learning management systems, they were identified slightly less frequently than the human-centred aspects of the role. These findings suggest that, although technology is an important component of learning design practice, practitioners primarily appear to prioritise collaboration, learner support, and the application of human judgement as essential to the role rather than technological expertise alone.

The presentation concludes by arguing that, as artificial intelligence and automation increasingly undertake routine technical and production tasks, the future value of learning designers may lie less in the technologies they can use and more in their uniquely human capabilities, including empathy, communication, collaboration, critical judgement, and the ability to bring people together around better learning experiences. In this sense, the "special sauce" of learning design practice may not be technological expertise but people skills. Moving the field forward will therefore require a stronger sociological and philosophical foundation for understanding how these human capabilities can be developed, valued, and sustained as educational technologies continue to evolve.

Keywords: Learning designer, professional practice, human-centred practice, knowledge, skills, values, educational technology

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