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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Enabling human-centred learning design through trust-based third-space partnerships

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As higher education responds to learner diversity and digital transformation, human-centred learning design is increasingly important for inclusive, engaging and meaningful learning experiences. This paper shifts attention to the relationships and leadership practices that enable such design. It argues that human-centred learning design rarely results from individual educators working alone. Rather, it emerges through partnerships among academics, academic leaders and third-space professionals working across organisational, disciplinary and professional boundaries. Drawing on third-space theory and distributed leadership, this paper examines how trust, respect and collaboration enable inclusive educational innovation. A practice-based vignette spanning RMIT University's School of Science and the STEM College Learning Design and Development team illustrates this argument, showing how established cross-boundary relationships were extended through school-wide professional learning and ongoing curriculum redesign across disciplinary areas. The paper positions trust-based third-space partnerships as an enabler of human-centred learning design and argues that distributed leadership, supported by relational conditions, can build institutional capacity for inclusive educational innovation.

Keywords: human-centred learning design, Universal Design for Learning, third-space professionals, distributed leadership, trust, educational innovation, practice-informed conceptual paper

Introduction

Human-centred learning design places learners, their contexts and their varied ways of engaging with education at the centre of pedagogical and technological decisions. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) supports this orientation by encouraging proactive attention to learner variability and to barriers within learning environments (CAST, 2024). Yet inclusive learning experiences are rarely produced through the expertise of one educator or designer alone. They commonly require disciplinary knowledge, curriculum and assessment expertise, accessibility perspectives, educational technology, media production and technical development. Learning designers contribute to this work by bringing pedagogical, curriculum, technological and organisational expertise into dialogue with other forms of professional and disciplinary knowledge (Kickbusch et al., 2026).

This paper argues that human-centred learning design is enabled through trust-based partnerships among academics, academic leaders and third-space professionals. Third-space theory explains the organisational and professional context in which boundaries are crossed (Whitchurch, 2008; Whitchurch & Healy, 2024), while distributed leadership explains how influence moves among contributors (Jones et al., 2012). Within this framework, trust, respect and collaboration are treated as relational conditions that make shared work possible. The argument is developed through a practice-based vignette that connects completed cross-boundary projects with an ongoing school-wide UDL initiative. The vignette is interpretive rather than evaluative; the ten UDL projects are still in development, and no claims are made about student outcomes.

A framework for enabling human-centred learning design

While human-centred learning design is often discussed in relation to learner needs, accessibility and meaningful participation, it is also shaped by the organisational and relational contexts in which learning is designed. Translating these principles into practice depends on conditions that allow different forms of expertise to contribute meaningfully to the design process. Complex educational initiatives commonly require

disciplinary knowledge, curriculum and assessment expertise, accessibility perspectives, educational technology and specialist development capabilities. These forms of expertise are distributed across academic and professional roles and are rarely held by one individual or organisational unit.

Third-space theory provides a lens for understanding where this collaborative work occurs. Whitchurch (2008) describes third-space professionals as working across conventional academic and professional boundaries, often connecting people, knowledge and processes. More recent work positions third space as an enabler of collaboration within increasingly complex higher education environments (Whitchurch & Healy, 2024). Learning designers are prominent in this space because their work brings pedagogical, curriculum, technological and organisational expertise into dialogue with disciplinary knowledge. White et al. (2021) further characterise this work as occurring within a socio-technical third space, where professional relationships, identities and digital practices develop together. However, working across boundaries does not automatically create partnership. Collaboration remains transactional when professional staff are invited only to implement decisions that have already been made.

Distributed leadership helps explain how influence and responsibility operate within a productive third space. Rather than locating leadership solely in formal positions, it recognises that leadership may shift among academics, academic leaders and professional staff according to the expertise required (Jones et al., 2012). This does not remove accountability or suggest that everyone leads every aspect of a project. Academics retain responsibility for disciplinary integrity and course decisions, while other contributors may lead pedagogical, accessibility, technological and development dimensions. Distributed leadership therefore requires genuine participation and influence rather than the delegation of predetermined tasks (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). It may also support educational change when shared purpose, expertise and responsibility are sustained across different organisational roles (Jones & Harvey, 2017).

Within this framework, trust, respect and collaboration are treated as relational conditions rather than as a separate leadership approach. Trust builds confidence in colleagues' expertise, intentions and reliability; respect recognises the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge; and collaboration brings these forms of expertise into dialogue. These conditions develop through sustained interaction and are mutually reinforcing: established trust can encourage collaboration, while constructive collaboration can deepen trust and respect. Together, they enable academics, academic leaders and professional staff to share influence while retaining responsibility for their respective areas of expertise. Figure 1 presents a practice-informed framework in which trust, respect and collaboration enable third-space partnerships and distributed leadership, which support human-centred learning design.

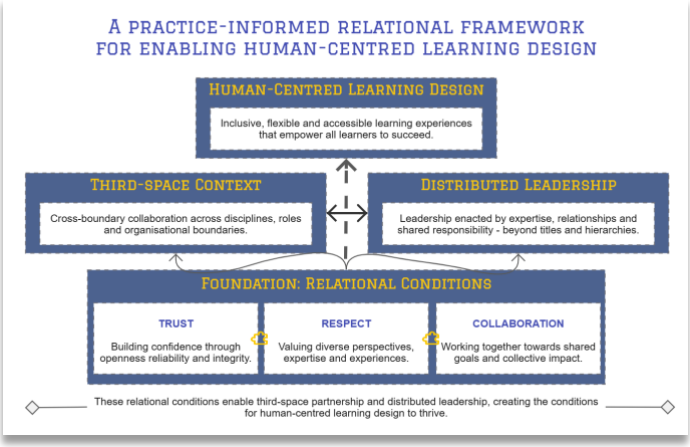


Figure 1. A practice-informed relational framework for enabling human-centred learning design.

This framework positions human-centred learning design as the educational purpose, the third space as the context in which boundaries are crossed, and distributed leadership as the process through which expertise and influence are shared. Trust, respect and collaboration form the relational foundation connecting these elements. The relationships are recursive rather than linear: established credibility can support collaboration,

successful collaboration can strengthen trust, and changing project needs can redistribute leadership. Human-centred learning design is therefore understood not only as an approach centred on learners, but also as an outcome enabled by relational and cross-boundary ways of working.

Enacting the framework through a school-wide UDL initiative

The school-wide UDL initiative emerged from relationships developed through sustained learning design support and earlier completed projects. During 2023 and 2024, cross-boundary collaboration supported the development of a suite of higher degree by research courses spanning the School of Science, Health and Biomedical Sciences, Engineering and Computing Technologies within RMIT University's STEM College, with contributions from colleagues in the College of Design and Social Context. This approach was subsequently extended through curriculum architecture work that connected academics from the School of Health and Biomedical Sciences with learning designers, immersive technology developers and digital media specialists. These initiatives produced completed course designs and established an everyday practice in which disciplinary, pedagogical and technical expertise could shape the work. They also demonstrated leadership enacted through shared expertise and responsibility rather than formal position alone, reflecting collaborative approaches to educational change in higher education (Jones & Harvey, 2017; Zou et al., 2022).

Building on this foundation, two hybrid UDL workshops were offered across RMIT University's multidisciplinary School of Science in September 2025. The workshops were designed as collaborative professional learning rather than as single-expert presentations. A Deputy Dean responsible for learning and teaching facilitated the opening activity and used student diversity data and institutional learner personas to position learner variability as a strategic and educational concern. Two academics then presented delivered courses in which they had previously collaborated with learning design staff to implement UDL-informed changes. Their participation provided discipline-based evidence that inclusive redesign could be translated into practice and made the existing academic–professional partnerships visible to colleagues.

A range of professional contributors connected the pedagogical discussion with practical design possibilities. A digital learning developer presented animation artefacts; a learning designer with a learning technology focus introduced PebblePad and Perusall; an immersive learning developer demonstrated augmented and virtual reality examples; and the Senior Learning Designer examined course learning outcomes, assessment and learning activities through a UDL lens. The workshop design therefore enacted the framework proposed in Figure 1. It created a third-space context in which academic leadership, disciplinary knowledge, pedagogy and digital expertise were brought into dialogue, while leadership shifted among contributors according to the focus of each part of the workshop.

Trust and respect were not created by the workshops alone. They had developed through repeated support, completed course development and sustained working relationships over the preceding four years. This relational foundation was evident in academics' willingness to share completed course examples, professional colleagues' contributions of specialist expertise and the subsequent nomination of 10 courses for further redesign. These actions indicate an established practice of recognising complementary expertise and entering collaborative work, rather than a one-off response to a workshop.

The 10 ongoing projects span Biology, Chemistry, Food Technology and Nutrition, Mathematics, and Environmental Science. Three are substantially advanced, while the remainder are at earlier stages of development, with delivery planned for semester one or two of 2027. The projects cannot yet provide evidence of student outcomes. Their significance at this stage lies in the extension of existing relationships into sustained, cross-disciplinary redesign partnerships and in the emerging capacity to interpret UDL within different disciplinary contexts.

One project is an immersive Virtual Gallery designed to support inclusive learning and assessment. It includes a lobby, an equipment-discovery laboratory and a poster-presentation gallery. The academic leads disciplinary and curriculum decisions; learning design contributes assessment review, quiz review, storyboarding and pedagogical alignment; the AR/VR specialist leads the immersive development and three-dimensional scanning of equipment; the digital media designer leads video production; and accessibility-focused feedback

informs efforts to reduce potential barriers. Leadership therefore moves according to the expertise required while accountability remains explicit.

The Virtual Gallery received an institutional Inclusive Education Grant and was presented as Inclusive Learning in a Virtual Gallery Space at the 2026 ADCET Universal Design for Learning Symposium (Dick et al., 2026). These milestones demonstrate institutional support and sector interest in the collaborative design process. Evaluation after implementation will be required to examine how students experience the Gallery and whether its intended inclusive benefits are realised.

Discussion and implications

The practice-based vignette suggests that trust-based third-space partnerships are developed through cumulative relational work rather than created through a single workshop or initiative. In this case, trust and respect were built through sustained learning design support, repeated collaboration and completed course development. The UDL workshops extended this existing foundation by making collaborative practice visible across the School of Science and creating opportunities for academics, academic leaders and professional staff to connect around a shared concern for learner diversity and inclusion.

The initiatives also illustrate distributed leadership as an interdependent practice rather than a transfer of authority from one role to another. Academic leaders provided strategic legitimacy and connected the work to institutional priorities. Academics retained responsibility for disciplinary integrity and curriculum decisions, while learning designers contributed pedagogical and connective leadership. Digital media, learning technology and immersive development specialists led areas requiring their particular expertise. Leadership therefore shifted according to the work required, while responsibilities remained explicit. This reflects distributed leadership as genuine participation and shared influence rather than the delegation of predetermined tasks (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Jones et al., 2012).

The College-level location of the learning design function, combined with direct support for the School, further demonstrates the enabling potential of third space. This position connects local academic priorities with broader College expertise, resources and professional networks. As Whitchurch and Healy (2024) suggest, third space can enable institutional work in complex environments by bringing together knowledge and roles that are otherwise separated by organisational boundaries.

Three implications follow. First, universities seeking to advance human-centred learning design should invest in sustained, embedded relationships rather than relying solely on one-off professional development. Trust is more likely to develop when academics experience learning design support as responsive, credible and respectful of disciplinary expertise. Second, professional learning should model the collaboration it promotes by bringing academic leadership, peer examples and diverse professional expertise into dialogue. Third, workshops require supported pathways into implementation. The 10 redesign projects emerged because academics could move from professional learning into ongoing partnerships with access to appropriate pedagogical and technical support. Such pathways can help translate distributed leadership into sustained educational change (Jones & Harvey, 2017; Zou et al., 2022).

The earlier completed projects and delivered UDL-informed courses provide a strong foundation for anticipating positive outcomes from the ongoing redesigns. Evaluation following their 2027 delivery will examine student and staff experiences, accessibility, engagement and the sustainability of the redesigned practices, providing evidence of how the intended benefits are realised across different disciplinary contexts. The current work already demonstrates how relational conditions, third-space partnership and distributed leadership can combine to build capacity for human-centred learning design.

Conclusion

Human-centred learning design is often framed around learner needs, yet its successful enactment also depends on the relationships among those who design, lead and implement learning. The initiatives discussed

in this paper show how sustained trust, respect and collaboration can enable academics, academic leaders and third-space professionals to contribute complementary expertise across organisational and disciplinary

boundaries. Third-space partnerships provide the context for this work, while distributed leadership allows influence to shift according to the expertise required without removing accountability. Building on completed cross-boundary projects and delivered UDL-informed courses, the school-wide UDL initiative has extended this collaborative practice into 10 ongoing redesign partnerships. Together, the practice-based vignette and proposed framework suggest that institutional capacity for inclusive educational innovation is strengthened when human-centred learning design is supported by sustained relationships, shared influence and meaningful pathways from professional learning into implementation.

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