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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Reclaiming Wonder: Creating Meaningful Learning Experiences in a Digital Age

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The past two decades have seen higher education progressively rely on digital-enabled teaching and learning systems. Learning management systems, lecture recordings, online readings, assessment technologies, and increasingly flexible modes of participation have transformed the student experience (The University of Queensland, 2021, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). In this context, digital technologies have become an essential and expected component of contemporary higher education (The University of Queensland, 2021, 2026a).

This Pecha Kucha explores how the rapid evolution of educational technology, culminating with the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), is prompting educators and students to reconsider questions of authenticity, trust, creativity, and what makes learning memorable, meaningful and distinctly human (Lao et al., 2026; Polyportis, 2023; Rajan & Niranjan, 2025). As GenAI becomes embedded in education, learners are increasingly navigating blurred boundaries between real and generated experiences (Çalli & Alma Çalli, 2025; Lao et al., 2026; Weikmann et al., 2025). Content that once inspired fascination, curiosity, or wonder is increasingly met with scepticism (Çalli & Alma Çalli, 2025; Weikmann et al., 2025). This raises questions about what forms of learning remain uniquely valuable when information, content creation and digital assistance are readily available (Polyportis, 2023; Rajan & Niranjan, 2025).

The challenge facing higher education is not whether technology belongs in learning environments, but how it can be meaningfully used to engage students in the learning process. Two examples illustrate this approach. In a humanities literature course, students engaged with the University of Queensland library collections and spaces before developing creative responses to course texts through zines, journals or rewritten scenes. Students could work in paper-based or digital formats, supporting creativity, personal expression and engagement with disciplinary ideas. The resulting exhibition demonstrated diverse interpretations of course concepts and encouraged ownership of learning. In an archaeology course, Gradescope was used to support assessment and feedback processes while learning remained centred on collaborative, in-person activities, creating a tangible “mycelium web” of theory, mapping relationships between concepts into a shared physical artefact. This approach supported collaboration, deeper conceptual understanding and the practical application of theory through active participation. In both examples, technology played a supporting role, enabling greater focus on curiosity, creativity, connection and meaningful learning experiences.

While digital technologies have created opportunities for access, flexibility, and inclusion that were previously impossible, educators also have a responsibility to design learning experiences that cultivate curiosity, creativity, human connection, and shared discovery (Rajan & Niranjan, 2025; The University of Queensland, 2021, 2025, 2026a). Yet educators face challenges in selecting appropriate technologies, meeting assessment security requirements, and guiding students in the ethical use of GenAI and the development of human values (Al-Shamaileh et al., 2026; Qin et al., 2025; The University of Queensland, 2026b). Learning designers and other third-space professionals contribute expertise in bringing educators, technologies and human-centred pedagogies together to create engaging learning activities and assessment.

Through these examples, attendees will be encouraged to consider how learning environments can foster connection, trust, and engagement in an increasingly AI-mediated world. They will gain practical insights into using technology strategically while preserving the human qualities of learning that foster curiosity, belonging, and participation.

Keywords: human-centered, AI, learning design, creativity, digital technology, authenticity, human connection

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