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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

From tools to sense-making: Designing a human-centred AI workshop

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Generative AI raises identity- and values-level questions for higher education staff. Yet professional development in this space remains largely focused on individualised technical and pedagogical skill and capability development, rather than providing structured opportunities for the collective sense-making such questions require. This paper describes the design and delivery of a human-centred workshop developed for a team of higher education third space practitioners to support collective sense-making and values negotiation around AI use. Drawing on reflective practitioner inquiry, we describe the design principles that shaped the workshop and the practical constraints within which it was delivered. We reflect on what worked, including the value of structured formats in supporting deeper engagement, and of workshop artefacts as an evolving record of shared thinking. We suggest this design offers a transferable approach for other educator teams grappling with similar uncertainty, and propose that professional development for AI should complement skills-focused approaches with structured space for the collective exploration of values, judgement, and human agency.

Keywords: Generative AI, human-centred design, professional development, reflective practitioner enquiry, learning design, third space

Introduction

Since the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, universities have grappled with the implications of generative artificial intelligence (AI). At the institutional level, universities have implemented a range of measures aimed at supporting pedagogically informed and consistent AI adaptation at scale through developing policies, guidelines and professional development resources for AI use (An et al., 2025; Luo, 2024). And yet, nearly four years on, there remains considerable uncertainty about what an appropriate and effective use of AI looks like in tertiary education, and AI readiness and capability across the sector are uneven. In the context of assessment, generative AI has been described as a "wicked problem," as it defies binary answers or straightforward solutions (Corbin et al., 2026), an argument that can be extended to AI's wider implications for the sector, including concerns about academic integrity, assurance of learning, AI's cognitive impact on student learning and critical thinking, AI literacy, and graduate preparedness, amongst others. Compounding these challenges, universities' need to adapt to an AI-enabled world was largely driven by external forces, such as widespread student adoption of AI tools (Metzgar, 2026), accelerating technological advances, competing public narratives about the future of work and the value of a degree, and in some cases regulatory intervention. As a result, many educators may have experienced a resulting loss of agency, in which they themselves had to respond to change, rather than actively shaping it (Bearman et al., 2022) – a dynamic that may help account for some of the reluctance and polarisation towards engagement with this new technology, as exemplified by organised educator pushback such as recent open letters refusing GenAI adoption ("An Open Letter from Educators," 2025). Altogether, this points to the multifaceted nature of the challenge: beyond matters of technology, pedagogy, or policy, AI also raises underlying questions about professional identity, educational values, and human agency.

This paper contributes a description of a design approach and process underlying a workshop that used human-centred principles to support collective sense-making and values negotiation around AI, developed for a mixed team of higher education third space practitioners, along with practice-based observations from its delivery and suggestions for adaptation to other contexts. Although the primary audience of this workshop were not academic teaching staff, we consider third space practitioners (Whitchurch, 2012) – such as learning designers, curriculum developers, educational media designers, learning technologists – to be educators in the broader sense, given their direct role in shaping pedagogy, curriculum, and the student learning experience. We suggest that uneven engagement with AI across the sector should not be read simply as a capability gap or

compliance problem. Rather, it reflects varying levels of individual readiness, differing values and beliefs, concerns about professional identity, and an intrinsically human need for time and space to process the implications of technological change. Many of the questions AI raises require collective interpretation, negotiation, and context-specific decision-making. Unlike skills and technical capability, which can largely be developed individually, this sense-making process depends on engagement with others, and like learning itself, it is rarely linear. It involves revisiting and adjusting understanding over time, rather than progressing steadily along a single trajectory toward capability and adoption. Consequently, professional development needs to move beyond tool-focused, skills-based, and individualised approaches alone. Alongside these, it needs to create spaces for educators to collectively make sense of AI's implications for disciplinary practice, educational values, professional identity, and judgement.

Method

This paper reports on a small-scale, context-specific practice initiative rather than a formally evaluated study. It draws on reflective practitioner inquiry (Schön, 1983) to describe the design and development of the workshop itself. Consistent with this approach, our focus is not on measuring impact and learning outcomes, but instead on reflecting on the design knowledge and principles, and sharing insights and general impressions from the workshop's delivery, as a practical resource for others designing similar professional learning experiences. We draw on our own facilitator observations and workshop design artefacts, developed and analysed collaboratively. We also occupied a dual role, as we were participants within the team for whom the workshop was created. No other participant data were collected.

Design-approach: Collaborative and human-centered

The workshop described in this paper began with a seemingly simple brief to three learning designers, all part of the same central services team: to design a collaborative workshop for a mixed team of third space practitioners that would result in a principles document for AI use, so that the team could be consistent in its practice and advice to the teaching staff it works with. Although the university already had a guidelines document for AI use for staff, this was a generic guidance document that did not provide enough specificity for the context of the team's day-to-day work. The workshop was a continuation of a workshop series in the year prior, which similarly followed human-centered design principles but was more focused on practical AI skills (Littschwager & Sequeira, 2026).

Although the three of us knew each other well as colleagues and had frequently collaborated before, we deliberately slowed down our approach to workshop design. Rather than defaulting to a backward design approach often used in our work – defining the intended outputs first and working back to the activities that would produce them (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) – our early planning began with collective reflection centered on the following questions:

- What would make the workshop feel meaningful for the team?
- Who would be in the room?
- What would they need to feel able to contribute meaningfully and honestly?

Being clear on these questions before any activities were designed was informed by our human-centred approach, which similarly begins with an early focus on users and their needs, before defining tasks or solutions. It also meant treating the brief's request for "a practical, meaningful output" and "a principles document" as root problems to be understood and questioned, before attempting to resolve them (Rose & Jones, 2024). For example, our early planning explicitly weighed the risk of designing "a space that feels open and safe," while recognising that people might still not share the full extent of their AI use. A simpler, deliverable-first approach might have designed a generic statement-generating exercise that would have satisfied the brief technically, yet likely would have missed this tension. Central to our approach was also an awareness of the diversity and power dynamics within the workshop participants, which comprised a mix of roles, seniority, and role-based authority, and a wide range of existing relationships with AI, from confident use to genuine anxiety about job security. Our own dual role as designers and facilitators, and as team members and participants, added an additional layer of complexity: we did not want to be seen as steering the

conversation in a particular direction, or as a group of "pro-AI" facilitators seeking to bring the whole team around to a single way of thinking, while still wanting our own voices reflected.

Our process of initial collective reflection surfaced six design principles that subsequently shaped every element of the workshop: (a) enabling collective sense-making rather than knowledge transfer; (b) centering human values and contributions rather than efficiency and optimisation of processes; (c) normalising discomfort and diversity of AI practice rather than assuming a shared starting point; (d) balancing big-picture reflection with practical application; (e) ensuring equitable participation across a group with varied roles and power dynamics; and (f) generating a tangible artefact that the team could relate to. Each of these principles found different expression across the workshop's four components (the pre-task, introduction, world café, and scenario-based discussion), which are described in the following section. In addition, there were practical and relational constraints that also shaped both the activities we designed and how we chose to facilitate them: the workshop ran online, for three hours, on a Friday afternoon, and included a director and two team leads alongside the wider team.

Workshop design in practice: A structured space for collective sense-making

Prior to the workshop, participants were invited to complete an optional, five-to-20-minute reflective activity, inspired by Stanford d.school's series on AI and creativity (Fajardo, n.d.; 2025). Participants were prompted to revisit a recent AI interaction and reflect on where they had exercised judgement, applied their own strengths, or made deliberate choices in how they engaged with the tool. This served a dual purpose: (1) priming a reflective, human-centred frame for the workshop from the outset, and (2) giving participants something recent and personal to draw on once the session began, especially those who did not use AI regularly during their day-to-day work. For the latter, the pre-task offered a low-stakes way to build a reference point ahead of a workshop that assumed some familiarity with AI tools; for more experienced users, it invited reflection on their own practice they may not otherwise have paused to do.

The workshop itself opened with a short icebreaker reframing "intelligence" as context-dependent rather than universal, before turning to a public statement by Open AI CEO Sam Altman suggesting AI would soon surpass human intelligence (Grant, 2025). This was followed by a brief history of the term "artificial intelligence" itself (Peter, 2024), framed as a marketing-driven choice rather than a neutral description. These activities were a deliberate tone-setting sequence for the workshop's human-centered approach. On the one hand, they opened critical questioning of tech-industry narratives that position AI as a competing, superior intelligence and put humans on the back foot by default. On the other hand, they allowed us to explicitly reframe AI as a tool over which participants had agency – not just in whether to use it, but in when, how, and why. This modelled the paper's broader argument that professional learning should help educators reclaim agency rather than respond to externally driven change.

Following the introduction, the first hour-plus of the workshop used a world café structure, a method for structuring small-group conversation around rotating themed tables, which has elsewhere been used to co-design an AI literacies framework with learning designers (Ryall & Abblitt, 2024). In our online adaptation, participants were assigned to a small breakout room group and remained there throughout, while three facilitators rotated between rooms in turn, each bringing a different thematically distinct "table": (1) individual AI practice, (2) professional development ideas embedded within a speculative future-casting exercise, and (3) implications for the team's current services. Unlike a typical breakout-then-plenary format, this structure let every participant experience all three topics while building on prior groups' contributions, moving from individual practice through to team-level and service-level reflection, all grounded in human agency rather than technical capability and tool-led adaptation, and supporting equitable participation by avoiding the pattern where a handful of voices dominate a single discussion.

The second half of the workshop shifted to a scenario-based activity, using an individual–group–plenary structure: 15 minutes of quiet, cameras-off individual reflection, followed by 20 minutes of small-group discussion, and a closing plenary share-back. This structure supported a diverse range of learners across a three-hour online workshop, giving everyone time to think before a faster or more confident voice could shape the conversation. Each group worked through a deliberately extreme, fictitious scenario, covering areas such as disagreement about AI use in a collaborative project, transparency when working with colleagues and

teaching staff, and implications for equitable practice. These scenarios served most directly the brief's request for a values and principles document as a collaborative output. By anchoring the discussion in concrete, everyday practice, the activity drew on the same pedagogy underpinning situated learning more broadly (Wilson & Myers, 2000), where values and judgement are understood to be developed through engagement with realistic situations rather than abstract principles.

Following the workshop, the three facilitators synthesised the scenario discussions and world café outputs into a values and principles document, using participants' own words wherever possible and aiming to reflect contributions from across the team. It was deliberately written in an informal, human voice, rather than as a formal policy statement, so that team members could recognise their voice in it.

Discussion

The insights from this paper are best understood as design-oriented rather than outcomes-focused: they speak to what worked in the workshop, and why, as well as lessons learned for further iterations. First, as facilitators, our observations of the workshop as it was delivered indicate that the identity- and values-level challenges presented by AI require as much attention as technical skills and critical AI literacies. The depth and engagement the activities generated in this discussion, despite the previously mentioned constraints, point to the value of creating an intentional space to negotiate such topics collectively. Second, the structured conversation formats used in the workshop appeared to support deeper and more genuine engagement with these questions than an open discussion alone might have allowed. The two parts of the workshop did different work in this respect. While the world café began by surfacing individual divergence in AI practice, and made that divergence acceptable, before moving toward collective, future-facing exploration of shared aspirations, the second part was designed to surface convergence around shared values at a professional level. This matters for a team of third space practitioners, who must negotiate shared professional standards to provide a consistent experience for the academic staff and students impacted by their work, without that convergence undermining individual values and professional judgement. The workshop provided a space to reconcile these needs in a way that gave participants agency over how they use AI tools, keeping human judgement central to how and when they use AI in their day-to-day work, including when not to use them. Third, our departure from a backward design approach also allowed us to reflect on designing learning experiences in an AI context. Backward design typically works well when intended learning outcomes can be clearly defined in advance and assessed for quality against them. However, in this instance, such pre-defined outcomes would have run counter to the very purpose of a workshop that was meant to facilitate a genuinely open conversation in which the team could surface and negotiate its own understanding of AI use, rather than converge on principles of "good" AI use we had predetermined for them. This is precisely why a human-centred approach was key to the workshop's success: it allowed us to design around the experience of the conversation itself, with an emphasis on psychological safety, freedom to disclose what one felt comfortable with, and the ability to openly acknowledge uncertainty.

One key lesson for future iterations is that the open-ended future-casting activities appeared to be more challenging for some participants than others. Additional scaffolding or more specific prompts may make these activities more accessible while retaining their value as future-oriented reflection. Another consideration is that the online facilitation model used here may be difficult to scale in contexts with larger participant numbers or fewer facilitators. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we suggest that the workshop's key value was in enabling collective sense-making, rather than in producing definite answers about AI. While the workshop did not fully and unambiguously resolve all questions of appropriate AI use in our team – nor did it aim to – it created a structured and facilitated opportunity to slow down, unpack both discomfort and excitement about AI tools, share individual practices and learn from each other, hear a range of perspectives, and be heard by colleagues. In short, it allowed participants from the same team to negotiate and articulate individual and professional perspectives on AI that were grounded in values and human agency. This also reframes the value of the principles document that we subsequently distilled from the workshop's digital white boards as requested output: rather than a fixed set of answers to guide day-to-day AI use, we see its value in being a record of shared thinking to revisit and reconsider as our understanding of AI evolves.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that AI-related professional learning needs to move beyond skills training, toward structured, human-centred spaces in which educators can collectively negotiate values, judgement, and agency. As a wicked problem, making sense of AI requires strategies that enable iteration, experimentation, and adjustments that continue to evolve, rather than a search for definite solutions. For example, in the context of AI and assessment, the wicked-ness of the challenge posed by AI means creating conditions in which educators are able to compromise and experiment, exercise judgement, and iteratively (re-)design assessments in the context of their disciplines (Corbin et al., 2026). The workshop described here offers one example of what it looks like when professional AI development is not designed as a linear pathway toward capability, but instead as a recurring space in which educators, including third space practitioners, can collaboratively work out what meaningful, human-centred engagement with AI looks like for them. We suggest the underlying design could extend to programme or discipline-specific teams, for example to collaboratively work through what human skills matter most in their field, or how their own use of AI intersects with the student experience around key topics like feedback, AI-generated content, and student equity. What matters, in each context, is not the specific principles a team arrives at, but the fact that they arrive at them together, with collective agency over how AI fits their practice.

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