Regina Obexer, Natasha Giardina

What is a Learning Designer?

Support roles and structures for collaborative E-Learning implementation

Zusammenfassung

Im Zuge der fortschreitenden Digitalisierung setzen sich Universitäten weltweit damit auseinander, wie man Online-Studienangebote und Blended-Learning-Szenarios nachhaltig planen und implementieren kann. Dabei stellt sich die Frage, welche Supportstrukturen und -rollen notwendig sind, um Lehrende in diesem Veränderungsprozess effektiv zu unterstützen. Während die Diskussion über die Professionalisierung von universitären E-Learning-Supportrollen im deutschsprachigen Raum weniger ausgeprägt scheint, hat sich im angelsächsischen Raum die Rolle des „Learning/Educational Designers" (Australien), „Instructional Designers" (USA) oder „Educational Technologist" (GB) etabliert. Sie fungiert als Schnittstelle zwischen Didaktik und Technik und unterstützt in enger Zusammenarbeit mit Lehrenden die verschiedenen Facetten der Implementierung von E-Learning-Angeboten. Der vorliegende Beitrag gibt einen kurzen Abriss der Literatur zum Thema E-Learning-Support und geht dann auf die Rolle sowie die verschiedenen Verantwortungsbereiche von Learning Designern ein. Mögliche Organisationsmodelle ebenso wie Faktoren erfolgreicher Zusammenarbeit werden ebenso angesprochen. Abschließend werden weiterführende Forschungsfragen und Zukunftsperspektiven aufgezeigt. Der Artikel basiert auf den Ergebnissen eines Reviews des Learning-Design-Supportmodelles an der Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane, Australien).

1 Introduction

Higher education (HE) around the world is undergoing fundamental transformation. The shift from traditional models of education to connected, technology enabled, and learner-centered paradigms requires significant changes in culture, practice, process and policy. The institution wide introduction of blended or online learning models requires not only collaboration between and coordination across different institutional stakeholders (cf. ACODE 2012), but also the establishment of support resources who can provide expertise and support in the broad spectrum of educational technology use. One of the key questions to be

addressed then is what types of support roles are required to help institutions in this shift, and how these should be organised and placed in the institutional structure to maximize their effect.

In the English speaking HE arena, the position of the Learning Designer[1] has long played the role of supporter, change agent, catalyst and provider of expertise in this context, and is seen as critical in supporting sustained change. Browne & Beetham (2010) contend that "Education technologists find themselves at the centre of a redefinition of post-compulsory education, which combines dynamic new environments for learning with significant challenges to institutions' traditional purposes." (p. 9)

Yet even in academic cultures where the role is well established, one of the issues encountered in effectively providing support for E-Learning is that the role is not well understood by the very people who should be supported by it – academic staff. This article aims to contribute to the understanding of professional roles and models in the implementation of online and blended learning in Higher Education by providing a snap-shot of the current facets and discussing future aspects of the role of the Learning Designer. It is based on the outcomes of a review project carried out by the authors at Queensland University of Technology in mid-2014, the aims of which were to evaluate the provision of learning design support, identify existing and emerging needs and drivers, and finally propose a future model of support for the University. Defining the role of the Learning Designer was a particular focus of the review, both within the institution, but also more broadly in the context of Australian HE. Data were collated from a range of sources, including a literature review of support models and roles for E-Learning implementation, consultation with a range of internal stakeholders in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and expert interviews with representatives from five other Australian universities. The results were transcribed and analysed using a deductive data analysis method as proposed by Mayring (2000). This contribution draws on the findings of the review with a particular focus on describing the changing role of the Learning Designer as a key collaborator, accelerator and connector in a rapidly changing environment.

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1 The label of the role varies considerably. In Australia, the role is also called "Educational Designer" and several other titles are emerging. In the US context, "Instructional Designer" is the most common name, and in the UK "Educational/Learning Technologist" is generally used. This myriad of job titles points to variations in the role, which depend on institutional, national and sector differences. A discussion of these specific differences is beyond the scope of this paper.

2 Support roles for E-Learning implementation – a review of the literature

2.1 Institutional support for E-Learning

The literature reflects strong agreement that the transition from traditional models of teaching to online and connected models of learning is complex, and requires strong institutional vision as well as support and investment at both strategic and operational levels, spanning technology, pedagogy and administration (Arabazs et al. 2003). Both top-down vision and bottom-up support are required to successfully drive change, and "in between resides a web of centrally administered resources that must evolve uniquely to reflect each institution's culture, academic programs, and characteristics" (ibid. p.18). In a review of 110 papers describing and critiquing approaches taken by tertiary institutions when implementing E-Learning strategies, Guiney (2013) emphasises the need for a deliberate and strategic approach and finds that "[w]hile some of the literature questions the suitability of establishing centralised, dedicated teams to support e-learning, the majority of papers recommend this approach." (Guiney 2013, p. 8) A more in-depth report about the organisation of E-Learning support in the Canadian context comes to a similar conclusion. Haughey (2007) emphasises the need for close collaboration and coordination between technology support and faculty development areas, and argues that "Organisational structures provide a public mark of the relative importance given to technology within the university." (Haughey 2007, p. 30)

The literature highlights academic development as a principal success factor in the effective implementation of any E-Learning strategy. Several case studies point to the importance of deep collaboration between all stakeholders involved in transformative blended or online learning efforts. Communities of practice, peer-to-peer support, learning on the job and informal, localized learning are often referred to as successful ways to share knowledge, build local capability, and connect the various stakeholders (cf. Cochrane et al. 2013, Singh & Hardacker 2013).

2.2 The role of the Learning Designer

Within this wider context of E-Learning support, the importance of the role of the Learning Designer specifically, seen at the nexus of technology and pedagogy, is emphasized in several studies relating to E-Learning implementation. Bichsel (2013) argues that more mature institutions have an increased number of support staff for E-Learning initiatives and adds that "instructional designers and professional development staff are especially critical" (p. 38). Similarly, bench-

marks such as those developed by the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE 2014) and the E-Learning Maturity Model (Marshall 2007) also emphasize the need for adequate support in this space.

In the UK HE arena, the role of the Learning Technologist specifically has gained significant attention, with a number of reports and investigations seeking to define its strategic importance, scope, and competency profile (cf. Hopkins 2015, Browne & Beetham 2010, Shurville at al. 2009, Beetham et al. 2001). The critical literature review by Shurville, Browne and Whitaker (2009) in particular is seen as a baseline review in this field, drawing on over 200 sources to define and discuss the various facets of the role as well as the complexities in establishing it within HE institutions. In the US HE context, the role is typically called "Instructional Designer". The themes emerging from the literature however are similar to those in the UK, with topics such as the variety of the role, organizational structures, challenges and how to overcome them prominent in the discussion. (cf. e.g. Moskal 2012, Intentional Futures 2016).

There are several national and international professional associations for Learning Technologists such as the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) in the UK, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), or the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) to name only a few. Certification programs for professionals seeking accreditation by these bodies are also available. In addition, there are many blog posts and other contributions on social media by learning technologists reflecting on the complexity of their role, and the difficulty in explaining it to others. A collection of particularly in-depth reflections on the role can be found in Hopkins (2015).

Building on the strong arguments for the importance of the Learning Designer as a key factor in helping teaching staff in the transformation towards blended and online learning approaches, the remainder of this article will focus on defining the evolving role and the scope of its various areas of responsibility, based on the outcomes of the QUT review mentioned above.

3 What does a Learning Designer do?

A commonly used definition of the role is that provided by ALT: "Learning technologists are people who are actively involved in managing, researching, supporting or enabling learning with the use of learning technology" (cited in Browne & Beetham 2010, p. 6). This is very broad, and can encompass a range of different types of activities which often evolve in response to particular needs within the institution and its organizational sub-elements. Therefore, in exploring comparative models of support, it is essential to contextualize the role within

the entire range of techno-pedagogical support services. Many universities today provide such services, although they might be variously articulated. The institutions consulted as part of the review used titles as varied as *learning/elearning/ blended learning/educational/instructional designer, blended learning advisor, and educational technologist* to denote the role discussed here. This multitude of titles is also mentioned in the literature (e.g. Intentional Futures 2016, p. 8) and indicates both the broad spectrum of tasks carried out by the role as well as institutional differences and requirements.

The diagram below provides an overview of the key responsibilities emerging from the review findings, drawing in particular on the internal interviews and focus groups as well as the interviews with experts from other universities:
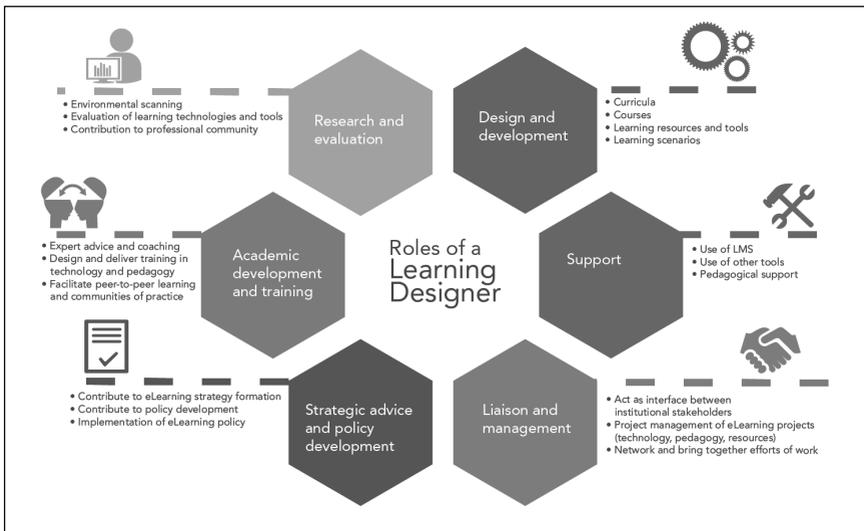

Fig. 1:   Roles of a Learning Designer

The key responsibility areas and competencies resulting from the review correspond with those presented in the literature. The report by Intentional Futures (2016) identifies the four responsibility clusters "Design, Train, Manage and Support" for instructional designers, always with a focus on supporting faculty in the effective use of educational technology. In a 2001 report on the role and function of the Learning Technologist, Beetham et al. defined ten key clusters of activities: "Of these 'keeping abreast of current developments in learning technologies' scored most highly. All of the remaining nine were educational, developmental, interpersonal/communicative or strategic rather than technical activities." (Beetham et al. 2001, p. 5) In an analysis of 400 job announcements for

educational technology professionals, Kang & Ritzhaupt (2015) found that traditional instructional design knowledge and skills, project management and technical skills are of high importance, but that so called "soft skills" (communication, interpersonal skills, customer service, organizational and leadership skills) are increasingly essential. This points to the collaborative nature and the increasing complexity of E-Learning implementation within HE institutions.

In addition to the facets of the role noted above, further aspects regarding the evolving remit of Learning Designers emerged in the course of the review:

Curriculum design and development: This area has traditionally not been a key responsibility for Learning Designers, who tended to be engaged in course design and development, (i.e. at the implementation stage) rather than the planning stage of new programs or those under review. This may point to the fact that program offerings are increasingly being planned as online or blended programs and the use of technology has to be considered from the outset. At QUT, for example, Learning Designers now contribute systematically to curriculum design and development processes which adds an additional component both to their competency profile and the set of responsibilities.

Academic staff development: Another trend observed at the institutions consulted is that there is increasing collaboration with traditional Academic development units (in some cases the E-Learning department is even merged with these units). This may point to a broader tendency to view academic capabilities in blended and online teaching as part of overall academic competencies rather than a separate, specialized skill. Increased collaboration rather than often observed competition between these areas will certainly benefit the institution as a whole.

The impact of the LMS: The implementation of institutions wide E-Learning initiatives has been closely tied to the deployment of a Learning Management System (LMS), which has also strongly shaped the tasks of the Learning Designer. Whilst the role before the prevalence of the LMS was very much about designing and developing online resources (including software) for online learning, the advent of the LMS has seen a shift towards Learning Designers focusing on training and supporting academic staff in the use of the system, and developing and implementing good practice examples, standards and policies. In what some call a "Post-LMS" era, this focus on LMS support shifts towards a much broader spectrum of technologies used for learning and teaching, with social media and other open source and proprietary tools becoming both more easily available and widespread throughout higher education teaching. The corresponding change in the role of the Learning Designer is towards a stronger focus on evaluating available tools and making recommendations, providing support and advice to academic staff planning to use tools beyond the LMS, and

contributing to policies that help maximize the benefits but minimize the risks associated with this practice.

These findings reflect both the fact that the use of educational technology is becoming mainstream at least in the Australian HE context, and that the role of the Learning Designer evolves with the technological affordances available. Both aspects also emphasize the central importance of the role, the need for Learning Designers to engage in continuous professional learning, and to be prepared for a constant re-definition of the role's scope of work and competency requirements.

4 Organisational structures of Learning Design support

There are variations in the ways universities organise their E-Learning support. Common models include centralised or faculty-based models, or a hybrid model where the central and faculty services intersect. An unpublished survey conducted by Marshall (2014) found that of the total numbers of support staff across 26 Australian and New Zealand HE institutions around 70% (305) of support staff were located in a central team whereas around 30% (134) were embedded in faculties. The size of the organization plays an important role in the way support services are organized, as does the strategic importance given to online learning.

Half of the institutions interviewed as part of the review have a hybrid model with some staff in a central team and other distributed across the organisation. Central teams are often embedded in divisions or departments responsible for academic support more generally, whereas there was only one example of an E-Learning support team being part of IT Services. All of the institutions however had either recently undergone a restructure, or were under review, or had new strategic initiative underway that would have an impact on the constellation of support teams and the roles of staff within them.

In practice, a stronger indicator of successful organisation than the location of support staff is firstly in how far the structure supports successful collaboration with faculty staff, and secondly whether the Learning Designers – if dispersed – have the opportunity to come together and share their knowledge, expertise and experiences. Browne & Beetham (2010) confirm this finding: "Whatever organizational structure is adopted, it is important for the stakeholders to consider how appropriate synergies can be facilitated, most particularly between educational technologists and academics […] (p. 216). The following chapter highlights some indicators of successful collaboration between Learning Designers and academic staff.

5 Building effective collaboration

Productive relationships between Learning Designers and faculty staff are the basis for success in E-Learning projects. Whilst the physical and organizational location plays a role, it is not the only indicator of success. The review found the following factors that contribute to successful collaboration between the stakeholders in online and blended learning implementation.

Communication
It is critical for Learning Designers to conduct effective and sustained communication with faculty staff about the kinds of services and support they can provide. Learning Designers also need to have productive relationships with the other support staff they work with – for example, with academic developers or IT support staff – to support academic staff effectively and often act as "translators" between stakeholders in academic, technical and administrative areas of the organization. The need for excellent communication skills mentioned as key to the competency of a Learning Designers highlights this role.

Project based approaches to curriculum development
One emerging trend in the organisation of support is the adoption of a project-based approach where support staff from different services come together to work with academic staff on larger scale curriculum development activities. This approach has recently been adopted by Queensland University of Technology in a push to digitally transform programs systematically and strategically. Initial feedback indicates that such approaches are having positive outcomes.

On task academic development
Another factor that improves the likelihood of sustainable impact is associating staff development activities with practical output, either within an established staff development program, or within a project-based curriculum development activity. Having faculties or disciplines set priorities for staff development activities within their group is a successful approach, improving the likelihood of buy-in from academic staff, who perceive that the development activities have discipline relevance and engage them in collaborative activities with a real outcome.

Research collaboration
The innovative nature of learning design and academic development suggest productive possibilities for research output. However, in practice, Learning Designers are often limited in time and appropriate research skills. One strategy to overcome this problem is in research collaborations between academic staff and support staff, which can also be an important incentive for academic staff engagement in E-Learning initiatives.

6   Conclusion and outlook

The Learning Designer role has a long tradition in Australian Higher Education, and is increasingly well accepted as critical in supporting and driving the successful and sustainable implementation of blended and online learning. In other settings and different academic cultures and organizational structures, it may be more difficult to establish central positions to support the collaborative effort to transform higher education towards more digital teaching and learning models. The authors argue that such roles are essential as universities are responding to a set of drivers prompting them to examine and re-conceptualize their learning and teaching strategies. Areas of further research may include questions such as:

* Are the roles of E-Learning professionals in other national and cultural academic contexts different from those described here? How and why?
* What perception do E-Learning professionals have of their own role? What is the perception of their role amongst others (especially academic staff)?
* What is the strategic relevance of these roles within their institution? In how far does this reflect the importance given to digital transformation efforts?
* Is there a common competency profile and a career path for people entering the profession across the national HE sector?

In conclusion, as the nature of academic teaching is changing, support requirements will change with it. Support services and roles will need to continue to be agile and develop with the emerging needs of the organization, now and into the future.

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