



## Editorial Introduction

With the increasing adoption of learning technologies, learning and teaching in higher education has undergone continuous transformation. Learning and teaching design is increasingly shared between teaching academics and learning designers. Research into how these two groups understand learning technologies is critical if underlying tensions in learning design are to be understood. Foucauldian discourse analysis was used to examine qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with teaching academics and learning designers. This briefing paper provides an overview of the research findings and calls for policies and practices that support collaboration between teaching academics and learning designers to improve student outcomes.

## About the Authors

**Dr Amos Tay**, Associate Lecturer, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Academy of Learning and Teaching, QUT

**Professor Abby Cathcart**, Director, Student Success and Teaching Advancement, QUT

**Associate Professor Henk Huijser**, Curriculum and Learning Design, QUT

## Learning technology: An area of contestation in higher education

Amos Tay, Abby Cathcart, Henk Huijser and Sarah Dart

Globally, the learning technology market is projected to reach a turnover of US\$375 billion by 2026, which will represent an 87.5% increase from 2019 (Statista, 2022). This growth rate has driven the pervasive use of learning technologies in higher education (HE), fuelling demand for learning designers. Learning designers have been positioned as third-space professionals, a term that refers to those who operate in both academic and professional spheres of activities (Whitchurch, 2015). Given the demand for learning designers, there is now a need to move beyond the academic-administrative binary (Silvey et al., 2018). Accelerated by the 2019 Coronavirus pandemic, the heightened use of learning technologies means that teaching academics increasingly rely on the expertise of learning designers for technological and pedagogical knowledge (Halupa, 2019). Learning designers are increasingly essential in shaping HE learning experiences, especially in relation to learning technologies (Slade et al., 2020); however, learning technology research has been dominated by the perspectives of teaching academics (and students). Neglecting the views of learning designers risks hampering understandings of how learning technology use is negotiated in practice by teaching academics and third-space professionals (White et al., 2020).

Learning designers are responsible for collaborating with teaching academics, but their roles are often poorly delineated, which has created confusion about the scope and boundaries of learning design support (Halupa, 2019). Previous research has shown that teaching academics may be uncertain about the roles of learning designers, which can create conditions that can undermine the collaborative potential between these two stakeholders (Halupa, 2019; Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017). These conditions could manifest as tensions that adversely affect the student learning experience. It is thus critical for these potential tensions to be deconstructed to improve collaborations between these two stakeholders in the form of practices and policies. This research was conducted to gain a better understanding of the relationship between teaching academics and learning designers to improve both learning design and teaching practices, which constitute the core business of HE. This qualitative study used Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) to explore how teaching academics and learning designers understand learning technology discourses in HE, which is vital to understanding how learning technologies are (or could be) used and their effects on learning (Chen & Carliner, 2021).

## Research question

**This study sought to address the following research question: How is the learning and teaching process influenced by the practices of teaching academics and learning designers?**

## Method

A large metropolitan Australian university was used as a case study. This qualitative research conducted semi-structured interviews with two stakeholder groups: teaching academics ( $n = 12$ ) and learning designers ( $n = 5$ ). These interviews allowed for multiple perspectives of reality to emerge as part of the case study research (Stake, 2006). The participants were recruited based on the selection criteria that they had either taught (teaching academics) or supported (learning designers) wholly online or blended undergraduate courses. The recruited teaching academics came from a range of faculties, including education ( $n = 2$ ), engineering ( $n = 6$ ), business ( $n = 3$ ) and science ( $n = 1$ ).

Semi-structured interviews using similar questions were conducted with both groups of participants. The questions posed to the participants were designed to gain an understanding of the factors that influenced their decision to use learning technologies. FDA informed by Willig (2013), as well as Foucault's concepts of power and discourse (Foucault, 1971, 1977), was conducted to analyse the data and revealed tensions in how learning technologies were adopted and used by the two participant groups. Before data collection, the study was approved by QUT's Human Research Ethics Committee. In accordance with the ethical protocols, the names of the participants were anonymised to maintain participant confidentiality.

## Research findings

The analysis revealed interconnected discourses that reflected how the adoption and use of learning technologies was a contested area between teaching academics and learning designers. Related discourses included centralisation, surveillance, institutional homogenisation, social equity, responsibility, and time poverty. These discourses demonstrated how learning technology was understood differently and to varying degrees by teaching academics and learning designers, which created tensions that could undermine collaboration between these two stakeholders. Such tensions need to be identified to better understand how teaching academic-learning designer partnerships can be leveraged to support student learning.

### *Centralisation stifled innovation and improved technology management*

A key tension between teaching academics and learning designers related to their perceptions of centralised decision making about the use of learning technologies. For teaching academics, the centralisation of learning technologies and support services limited teaching innovations, as they felt pressured to use institutionally supported learning technologies. As one teaching academic noted, the 'drive towards centralisation of resources at the same time also stifles innovation'. However, teaching academics also recognised the

benefits of using such institutionally supported learning technologies and wished to have discretion to promote alternative learning technologies that they considered to be beneficial to their students. Teaching academics further reported a decline in personalised support from learning designers, which they attributed to the centralisation of support services and the growing provision of self-serviced resources. Conversely, the learning designers generally supported the centralisation of learning technologies as a strategy to improve technology management (Shibeika & Harty, 2015). They advocated for the use of 'institutional technologies' that were 'seamless with the overall system' and 'strongly discourage[d] using other tools, because they're not supported'. The learning designers wanted to promote teaching innovations but often operated in ways that constrained innovation to meet the institutional objective of using institutionally supported learning technologies. Often employed centrally, even if assigned to specific faculties, learning designers are given mandates to drive institutional efficiency and standardisation through the design process. The discourse of centralisation highlighted the need to adopt a balanced approach to decision making for learning technologies that prioritises both pedagogical innovation and institutional efficiency.

### *Repressive and productive surveillance*

The discourse of surveillance emerged as a second key tension. Teaching academics understood that learning technologies facilitated surveillance. For example, centrally provisioned access to individual learning management system sites enabled professional staff to review sites without necessarily disclosing a purpose. One teaching academic also noted how an 'administrator ... jumps in and says something [in the chat box function of Zoom]' creating a climate of 'repressive surveillance'. Consistent with the findings of Toh et al. (2016), teaching academics recognized that pedagogical innovation could be stifled by the adoption and use of learning technologies that afforded institutional surveillance of their lessons (e.g., tutorials conducted via Zoom) by other professional staff. Reflecting the heterogeneity among the teaching academics, another academic highlighted how such surveillance provided the ability to 'track individually how students are engaging' with the learning. In this case, surveillance was perceived as productive, as it allowed for hierarchical observations of students' learning by monitoring their use, behaviour and progress with learning technologies. For similar reasons, the learning designers unequivocally embraced the use of such surveillance technologies, as they facilitated peer observation and the sharing of teaching practices. One learning designer also noted that the ability to observe enabled them to 'interfere if something disastrous is happening or [the technology is] not working'. Thus, the participants held divergent views on the discourse of surveillance, such that the teaching academics were more critical of the potential issues associated with the surveillance than the learning designers.

### *Institutional homogenisation of learning technologies*

Engaging in practices that promoted the institutional homogenisation of how and what learning technologies should be used revealed key differences between the teaching academics and learning designers. The teaching academics expressed discontent about how institutionally supported learning technologies (e.g., Padlet) could constrain practices. For example, one teaching academic stated that they 'used to feel a lot of more free[dom] to choose whatever platform or technology' that suited the pedagogy but noted that 'now the emphasis has shifted towards using the tools' that the university 'endorsed and supported'. Conversely, the learning designers generally supported such institutional homogenisation, as they considered it important for teaching academics to use learning technologies 'within the confines of an established set of institutional technologies'. Support for institutional homogenisation was evident among the learning designers who widely promoted institutionally supported learning technologies while discouraging the use of non-institutionally supported technologies. The teaching academics prioritised academic freedom to use learning technologies to meet their pedagogical needs. Conversely, the learning designers positioned learning technology use as a branding strategy for the institution. It was clear that there was a normative institutional pressure to adopt dominant learning technologies, which is consistent with the findings of other studies (Saghafian et al., 2021). Tensions arose because teaching academics preferred the use of learning technologies (e.g., those used in industry) that were not necessarily institutionally supported, while learning designers encouraged a more homogenised use of institutionally supported learning technologies.

### *Social equity*

The uncritical institutional push towards the adoption and use of learning technologies without considering their limitations was consistently challenged by the teaching academics who also highlighted the equity aspect of using learning technologies. The teaching academics acknowledged that using learning technologies could 'support them [students] at midnight to do that learning in their own time'; however, they also recognised that using learning technologies 'creates something unequal as well because the technology doesn't reach the way we think it reaches'. The inequitable access to learning technologies by students from equity groups could then lead to the exacerbation of social inequity (Hargittai, 2018). This goes against the institutional narrative that adopting and using learning technologies promotes equitable access and opportunities to participate in HE – a view that was generally supported by the learning designers. The learning designers asserted that using learning technologies 'enabled students to access learning from beyond the campus' and promoted 'equitable opportunities, equitable outcomes, equitable access to information'. However, rather than enhancing learning, the adoption of learning technologies often concealed this debilitating asynchronous engagement phenomenon by facilitating asynchronous engagement and creating the illusion that students could study more efficiently (e.g., by watching lectures at higher playback speeds). Consistent with the findings of Morris et al. (2019), the teaching academics recognised that mere access to lecture recordings does not necessarily improve learning. Thus, while the adoption and use of learning technologies were cited as a means of achieving equitable access for students, the potential limitations and challenges to achieving this goal (as highlighted by the teaching academics), suggests a need for a more nuanced approach to understanding social equity.

### *Disputed responsibilities*

The discourse of institutional homogenisation created pressure to use particular learning technologies. Tension is created when learning design managers encourage learning designers to 'train' teaching academics to use learning technologies (specifically institutionally supported learning technologies). The teaching academics stated they wanted autonomy and agency to shape the learning space, but they also wanted the expertise of learning designers to make learning with learning technologies possible rather than having learning designers simply teaching them how to do so. For example, one teaching academic stated how they 'used to have learning designers do' technical-related activities, such as putting 'a Padlet into Blackboard', but they 'now have to figure it out all' by themselves. Potential conflicts between these two groups could arise, as the roles of learning designers are not being clearly defined (Halupa, 2019). The learning designers asserted that it was the responsibility of the faculty to decide how and what learning technologies should be used. One learning designer noted that there was a 'huge number of teaching academics who need to be responsible for their own use, the learning management system and the capabilities to use them'. However, the teaching academics also expected the learning designers to provide personalised support rather than merely 'sending an email to a generic email address'. The learning designers expected the teaching academics to be responsible for developing their capabilities to use learning technologies; however, the teaching academics desired the academic freedom to choose the learning technologies that they believed met the students' pedagogical and learning needs.



## Time poverty

The learning designers promoted the institutional narrative that using learning technologies would enable teaching academics to be more efficient, potentially reducing their workload. One learning designer suggested that using learning technologies could 'save time answering all those emails or improve the marking process'. However, this notion of improved efficiency proved elusive, as the teaching academics were highly aware that adopting learning technologies required professional development and time (Sagnak & Baran, 2020), thus increasing their workload. The teaching academics recognised that using learning technologies 'takes a lot of time' and it 'doesn't matter how much support there is because the workloads are just so big'. Despite promises by the learning designers that using learning technologies could improve efficiency, the teaching academics continued to experience heavy academic workloads that were further exacerbated by needing to keep up with technology updates or centralised decisions to replace one technology with another. This suggests that more time needs to be allocated to allow teaching academics space to build their capabilities to use learning technologies in ways that could ultimately improve their efficiency and thus reduce their workload (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). Attempts to encourage teaching academics to invest time in upskilling in the learning and teaching space is likely to fail without more understanding and transparency about the time this takes and the longer-term implications.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research revealed how discourses related to the adoption and use of learning technologies have become a field of contestation between teaching academics and learning designers. The identification of the different discourses illuminated potential areas of tension between teaching academics and learning designers. The findings do not suggest a dichotomic relationship between the two stakeholders within these discourses; rather, they suggest a complex web of power relations that influence the ways in which the two stakeholders adopt and use learning technologies for learning and teaching. This suggests that institutional leadership needs to recognise the collaborative yet contested nature of adopting and using learning technologies in HE. A more nuanced approach to examining learning technology adoption decisions involving teaching academics, learning designers and institutional leaders needs to be adopted to address tensions and areas of contestation. As long as these areas of contestation remain hidden, institutions will not realise the full benefits for students of engaging with learning technologies. This research calls for practices and policies to be developed to reduce tensions within the identified learning technology discourses and to support a more collaborative and less hierarchical teaching academic-learning designer relationship.

## References

1. Chen, Y. & Carliner, S. (2021). A special SME: An integrative literature review of the relationship between instructional designers and faculty in the design of online courses for higher education. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 33(4), 471–495. <https://doi.org/10.1002/piq.21339>
2. Foucault, M. (1971). Orders of discourse. *Social Science Information*, 10(2), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847101000201>
3. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage Books.
4. Gregory, M. S.-J. & Lodge, J. M. (2015). Academic workload: The silent barrier to the implementation of technology-enhanced learning strategies in higher education. *Distance Education*, 36(2), 210–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2015.1055056>
5. Halupa, C. (2019). Differentiation of roles: Instructional designers and faculty in the creation of online courses. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 8(1), 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v8n1p55>
6. Hargittai, E. (2018). The digital reproduction of inequality. In *The inequality reader* (pp. 660–670). Routledge.
7. Kumar, S. & Ritzhaupt, A. (2017). What do instructional designers in higher education really do? *International Journal on E-Learning*, 16(4), 371–393. <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/150980/>
8. Morris, N. P., Swinnerton, B. & Coop, T. (2019). Lecture recordings to support learning: A contested space between students and teachers. *Computers and Education*, 140, 103604. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103604>
9. Saghafian, M., Laumann, K. & Skogstad, M. R. (2021). Staged overview of issues influencing organizational technology adoption and use. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.630145>
10. Sagnak, H. C. & Baran, E. (2020). Faculty members' planned technology integration behaviour in the context of a faculty technology mentoring programme. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 37(3), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.14742/AJET.5912>
11. Shibeika, A. & Harty, C. (2015). Diffusion of digital innovation in construction: A case study of a UK engineering firm. *Construction Management and Economics*, 33(5–6), 453–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01446193.2015.1077982>
12. Silvey, V., Pejcinovic, L. & Snowball, T. (2018). Crossing divides: Professional development for third space professionals. In C. Bossu & N. Brown (Eds.), *Professional and Support Staff in Higher Education* (pp. 39–54). Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6858-4\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6858-4_6)
13. Slade, C., Parker, J., McGrath, D. & Greenaway, R. (2020). Learning designers as capacity builders in Australian universities. In E. Heinrich & R. Bourke (Eds.), *Research and development in higher education: Next generation, higher education: Challenges, changes and opportunities* (vol. 42, pp. 94–104). Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia. [https://research.usc.edu.au/discovery/fulldisplay/alma99450962402621/61USC\\_INST:ResearchRepository](https://research.usc.edu.au/discovery/fulldisplay/alma99450962402621/61USC_INST:ResearchRepository)
14. Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford.
15. Statista. (2022). *Global e-learning market size by segment 2019 with a forecast for 2026*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1130331/e-learning-market-size-segment-worldwide/>
16. Toh, Y., Hung, W. L. D., Chua, P. M.-H., He, S. & Jamaludin, A. (2016). Pedagogical reforms within a centralised-decentralised system: A Singapore's perspective to diffuse 21st century learning innovations. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(7), 1,247–1,267. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-10-2015-0147>
17. Whitchurch, C. (2015). The rise of third space professionals: Paradoxes and dilemmas. In U. Teichler & W. K. Cummings (Eds.), *Forming, recruiting and managing the academic profession* (pp. 79–99). Springer International. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16080-1\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16080-1_5)
18. White, S., White, S. & Borthwick, K. (2020). MOOCs, learning designers and the unbundling of educator roles in higher education. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 36(5), 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.6111>
19. Willig, C. (2013). Foucauldian discourse analysis. In C. Willig (Ed.), *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 129–142). McGraw-Hill Education.