'The End of Learning Design?': Critical cogenerative dialogues on the cost/benefit of leadership, transformation, and crisis in higher education

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Abstract

This article explores the existential challenges of identity, institutional value, professional status and career progression that have shaped learning design and designers in higher education through sequences of recurring crisis. Drawing on the data from an inductive methodological approach called cogenerative dialogues, the study analyses reflections and iterations of a series of provocative, challenging workshops ran in Europe and Australia in 2023. Each workshop used the fictional University of Banford as a discursive catalyst, with participants engaging with 'hyperreal' scenarios to interrogate and question the future of learning design amid crises. Through the self-reflective and critical lens of the scenario-informed cogenerative dialoguing methodology, the authors reflect on both the impact of successive crises on learning design through immersive, hyperreal scenarios and the perspectives we developed as active actors facilitating and engaging with participants across five workshops.

Keywords: Learning design, crisis management, cogenerative dialogue, change, higher education

Introduction

This article explores the existential challenges of identity, institutional value, professional status and career progression that have shaped learning design and designers in higher education through sequences of recurring crisis. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have navigated intersecting and often existential global and local crises over the last two decades. Some of these crises have arisen through global shocks (such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the financial crisis) (Sahu, 2020), others have emerged through government policy (such as policy changes impacting on international student numbers) (Liu, 2024; Manfreda-Foley, 2024), while others are of the institutions or the sector's own making, such as the disruptions created by generative AI (Crawford et al., 2024).

The structural and personal impacts of these crises vary depending on the sector's role in creating, researching, or contributing to these 'grand challenges,' a role that Barnett (2024) argues is rarely agnostic. The planning approaches that HEIs implement in response to crises have significant

impacts on the design, provision, and quality of teaching and learning, as well as the wellbeing and productivity of their workforce and student (see Aristovnik et al., 2020; Major, 2020; Sterling, 2021). Since teaching and learning are mission-critical activities for most HEIs, the agility, responsiveness, and creativity of the staffing infrastructure responsible for teaching before, during, and after a crisis are equally critical (Alvarez & Hakala, 2024; Pingo et al., 2024). This infrastructure spans both the academic roles and the extensive pedagogical influence and input of the professional services in areas like educational development, technology and design.

In this article, we draw on the data from an inductive methodological approach called co-generative dialogues, to analyse our reflections and iterations on a series of provocative, challenging workshops ran in Europe and Australia in 2023. Each workshop used the fictional University of Banford as a discursive catalyst with participants engaging with 'hyperreal' scenarios to collectively interrogate, question and relectively imagine the future of learning design amid crises impacting on the staff and students at Banford. "The end of learning design?" was a deliberately provocative title for this article (and for the workshops that informed our analysis), in part posed as a way of provoking discussion about what we consider a crisis within HEIs, one exacerbated and sometimes hidden by the other crises that have brought about existential change for staff, students and the wider societal role of institutions. Through the self-reflective and critical lens of the scenario-informed co-generative dialoguing methodology, we reflect on both the impact of successive crises on learning design through immersive, hyperreal scenarios and the perspectives we developed as active actors facilitating and engaging with participants across five workshops.

We begin this article with a description of the historical and theoretical contexts of "crisis." We then discuss the specific eruption of "crisis" in the practices of higher education (HE) and HE learning design in particular. We describe the nature of the co-generational dialogue methodology before describing the specifics of the University of Banford workshops. Our subsequent explanation of the University of Banford workshops is then followed by our co-generational dialogue, a distillation of the summative dialogues undertaken over 14 months, constructed from the several synchronous conversations we held after the completion of the five workshops. We conclude with some reflections on the practical implications of our analysis for learning design work, and for HEI practices in a time of crisis.

Higher education in crisis

Responding to or being in crisis is not a new state for higher education. Through crisis HEIs have

accelerated their evolution, preparation and adaptation to their environment (Whitsed et al., 2024). Field (2012) argues that changes in government policy globally have moved HEIs away from enacting aspirations of individual development and sustainable societal benefit towards being deployed as a collective means for asserting a countries economic, innovation and growth *bona fides.* The resulting tension in strategic ambition and action during a crisis creates conflicting internal and external messaging, exposing pressures of academic autonomy, intellectual contribution and the consumerisation of the student (Featherstone, 2023). Crisis exposes the vulnerability and inequities in both disciplinary and professional staff and in the marketised model of higher education, often through the hierarchical decisions of relative value to the crisis response (Oleksiyenko et al., 2023). Liu et al., (2022) argue that (in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis) HEIs needed to enable shared values and ethics in a crisis response that created deliberative dialogue, a culture of safety and a clear sense of accountability and transparency. But as Andrew (2024) notes the limitations of neoliberalism exposed as they were during the pandemic also resulted in institutions being shaped not by what they learnt during crisis, but what they chose to not learn (or forget). The leveraging of structural inequalities created through and exposed in crisis, whilst critical drivers for the pursuit of productivity, have resulted in an undermining in the practices of caring and wellbeing, for both staff and students (Sai et al., 2024).

Institutions trigger their strategic and operational reactions to the next crisis before the immediate impacts of the last crisis have subsided (Benner et al., 2022; Clark, 2008). The impacts on staff and students who have been unable to reflect and heal from the professional and personal impacts of crisis are well evidenced, especially post-pandemic (Jayman et al., 2022; Neser et al., 2023; van der Ross et al., 2022; Watermeyer et al., 2023). These impacts are stark and disturbing when put in the context of the health and wellbeing of university staff. Neser et al., (2023) undertook an extensive survey of the psychosocial wellbeing of the university sector workforce in Australia. They describe serious psychosocial and welfare issues in universities because of the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing problematic organisational cultures as universities gear up for the next wave of crises, never having recovered from the impacts of the last one. Their findings include identifying that 67% of Australian university employees report poor psychosocial safety and are working in conditions of high to very high-risk for mental distress (up from 61.8% pre-pandemic), 43% reported anxiety and depression, 66% reported burnout and these figures were significantly higher for women and for staff in precarious employment positions.

Nathan (2000) in their work on the paradoxical nature of crisis theorises the institutional cultural and

strategic response to crisis through lens of what they call the threat/opportunity paradox. The argument goes that crisis represents threat to norm states. This threat makes people in organisations feel precarious, uncertain, at-risk, or fearful. Being in a crisis locates people in the unknown, but not the unconsidered or feared (the spiralling imagination of what might happen in a crisis). Crisis also represents opportunity, the capability to engage in regrowth, rejuvenation, and reimagining ways of being and doing. You cannot have the opportunity without the threat. Hence the paradox. Opportunity and threat are not experienced equally. The capabilities to engineer or leverage the conditions for opportunity are related to certainty, safety, and agency. The impacts of the threat of a crisis are magnified through precarity, lack of agency and challenges to ethics, morals, and identity.

The threat/opportunity paradox can be overlaid into the crisis responses of higher education and how it impacts learning design and designers. Bengtsen and Barnett (2016) explore the dark side of higher education as a representation of the modalities of response and action that emerge as the threat of a crisis is turned around for the pursuit of good. They argue that when faced with the need to address the challenges of higher education there is an 'importance of lowering one's guard and facing the dark side of educational institutions; the fear, the isolation, but also the learning potential of giving of oneself instead of merely receiving.' (p. 129). The threat of replacement by technology, and often the very technologies they have supported catalyse senses of precarity and obsolescence within learning designers (Ghemawat, 2015). The opportunity that the crisis presents (such as the opportunity for pedagogical change after the pandemic) can be missed in the sharp, sometimes blinding glare of techno-determinism and the uncritical deployment of platforms as increasingly reductive substitutes for the value of expertise, ethics and experience as an organisational asset in crisis (Roberts et al., 2023b; Watermeyer et al., 2023).

Learning design in a time of crisis

Learning design is widely deployed in the literature and within institutions to conceptually traverse the technological, educational and institutional skills and capabilities required to design effective, compliant and innovative experiences for students (Bean, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2017). Learning design and designers have been deployed as a 'first responder' during recent higher education crises (Ng et al., 2023) including the pivot to online learning during the pandemic (Farrell, 2022) and the massification of the marketised university (Bryant, 2024; Ryan et al., 2019).
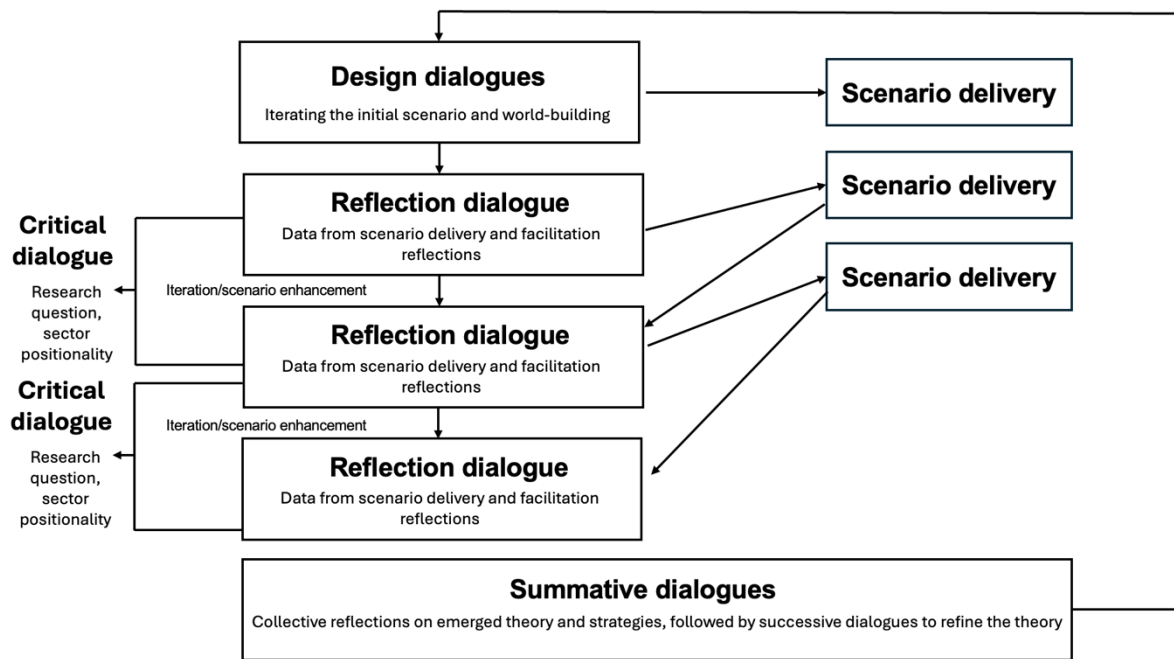
The role of learning designers in HEIs has faced significant challenges since the onset of the COVID-

19 pandemic. The rapid snapback to traditional face-to-face teaching has demonised many online and digital learning practices as being necessary evils of the remote teaching 'era' (Bryant, 2021). This creates an environment of uncertainty and liminality for the learning designer, exacerbated by real or perceived challenges to their employability, professional identity or role satisfaction (Walters, 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). The budget constraints arising from the twin challenges of the hostile environment for international students (Thornton et al., 2025) and the rising anti-intellectualism of populist governments (Motta, 2024) have exacerbated the situation.

Many higher education institutions faced financial crises are revaluating their models of resource allocation, often with a focus on core academic functions over support roles or the valorisation of the productivity gains of automation through AI (Alangari, 2024; Boateng et al., 2024; Macfarlane, 2024). For learning designers, the threat/opportunity paradox of these successive crises is increasingly entwined with their own perceptions of self-worth and how institutions are measuring and realising the value of their contribution. Learning designers straddle the technological/pedagogical nexus both in program design and course delivery. In enacting innovation and expertise in those practices they can become torn between the design/innovation and support/administration functions. This conflicted positionality creates precarity, identity tensions and the structurisation of the role as boundary-spanning or third space (Roberts et al., 2023a; Simpson, 2025). The threat/opportunity paradox creates a liminal residence for many learning designers in HEIs which compromises the culture of care necessary to navigate the precarity and makes more complex the expectations and ambitions of their role within increasingly crisis driven institutions (Bryant, 2024; Costello et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study uses an adapted model of cogenerative dialogue (scenario-led cogenerative dialogue, see figure 1) as a methodological framework for both the iterative design of the workshops and for the reflexive interrogation of the research question that is in part parsed through the lens of an unknown future state (Elden & Levin, 1991). Cogenerative dialogue creates opportunities for participants in an educational design project (in this case, workshops participants) to 'equitably participate in conversations about curriculum practice that they have enacted together' (El Kadri & Roth, 2015).

Figure 1: Scenario-informed cogenerative dialogue

The University of Banford: The end of learning design?

In 2023, we designed a series of hypothetical immersive provocations and thought experiments consisting of five workshops delivered at educational conferences, seminars and HEIs in four countries (Australia, the UK, Ireland and New Zealand) These were aimed at audiences of learning designers, educational developers, academics, PhD students and academic leaders, each with a variation on the title 'The End of Learning Design?'. Across the five workshops over 150 people attended. Two workshops were held at educational technology conferences, two workshops were held for academic and professional staff at HEIs and one workshop was held as part of an international PhD training program.

Each workshop drew on elements of an innovative problem/solution research methodology called a changehack (Bryant et al., 2019) that catalyses participant thinking outside of the rehearsed institutional responses and limitations of role to generate and articulate novel but realisable solutions to wicked challenges in higher education. The workshop design added an approach called critical artefact methodology (Bowen, 2009) which triggers emotional responses in participants by presenting them with '…scenarios and provocative conceptual designs to challenge some of their preconceptions and social conventions' (Wright & McCarthy, 2010, p. 37). The combination of these two approaches allowed us to spark informed but discursive design discussions that were freed from the structures of personal and professional context. We wanted to create a space where collectively

the facilitators (ourselves) and the participants owned the problem at hand (the conflicted and precarious role of learning designers in crisis driven institutions), owned the impacts and owned the solutions, but also noting that every context, every institution is different.

The critical artefacts we chose to use were generated through an immersive scenario of world-building within a fictional university called the University of Banford. The university was a construct and did not represent any single institution. It was neither a neoliberal or idealistic institution, and despite the focus on the leadership of the university in the critical artefacts, the scenarios at play were not allegories for the overarching influence of 'management'. We wanted the scenarios, characters and challenges to be hyperreal, leaving breadcrumbs of plausible reality that evolve into larger-than-life language and unreal but not unrealistic expectations. Hyperreality can trigger states of confusion between what is considered real life and the ways in which the hyper real scenarios can semiotically trigger emotional states by challenging our perceptions of the reality we reside in (Baudrillard, 1994). Hyperreality exposes the interconnectedness and symbolism between the lived experiences of the participants and the thoughts and ideation that those lived experiences often interfere with. The scenarios were informed by the gestalt of our own professional histories and experiences, but their words, attitudes and charcters were entirely hyppereal fictional constructs.

Each iteration of the collective problem solving was triggered by a different video call or interview from characters within the University pushing the boundaries and impacts of crisis to hyperreal ends. The first video call was from the Vice-Chancellor asserting the abolition of technology from learning at the University of Banford. This was followed by a media interview of a student who was unhappy with being unable to use technology for learning and a representative from the 'local' industry who was not willing to recruit graduates without critical digital skills. The final video call represented a 'coup' at the university where the techno-resistant leaders were overthrown and the whole university pivoted towards being 'EdTechU' a digital first university in a promotional video featuring a new Vice-Chancellor. Later workshops included an additional video call from the Chief Financial Officer representing the marketised university and its concerns about pedagogical decisions impacting student fee revenue. These artefacts were supported by university marketing collateral, student life and campus posters, stickers, badges and branding that further immersed the participants in the world of Banford.

Our research question for this study centres on the future of the role of learning designer in HEIs as they continue to navigate and respond to crisis. We ask: in a complex, hybridised and crisis impacted

organisation, what is the future of learning design and the future of learning designers in a modern university? The study acts as a mediation between collaborators about an educational or institutional problem (see Stith & Roth (2010)) in this case, the conceptualising and navigating the dissonance surrounding the role and value of the learning design. Because the workshop participants were not subjects under study, the outputs and experiences of the workshop participants are abstracted from that mediation and are not explicitly quoted nor recorded. While the methodology required the workshops and therefore the participation of people and their produced outputs, they were not part of the cogenerative dialogue. The systematic dialoguing that led to the design of the scenario and changehack activity, and the subsequent critical and reflective dialogues after each workshop and before the next are the data for analysis in the study. The critical ethical considerations of cogenerative dialoguing (collective responsibility for actions and commitment to action taking) reside with the facilitators and their engagement with the abstracted conceptualisation of learning design as a field of work in HEIs (Kim, 2006; Roth, 2006).

Each workshop was delivered by a different combination of the three authors, but the dialogues involved all of us at different stages. Initial design dialogues generated abstracts, scripting and activity design for the first workshop. The design dialogue developed scenarios that enabled an unknown future state using videos shown at different stages in the workshop as critical artefacts. At the completion of each workshop, we came together in reflective dialogues to debrief and discuss both how the scenarios landed with the participants against our objectives, but more importantly what theory was emerging to address the research question. We included our reflections as workshop facilitators to ensure multiple perspectives were captured and the ethics of the relative power dynamics of unknowing participant and knowing facilitator were recognised (Geelan et al., 2006). These reflective dialogues focused on identifying transformative moments in the workshops, examining challenges and tensions that emerged, and developing actionable insights for future iterations of the workshop. It was critical that the evaluation criteria were internally persuasive to our own frames and rationale for the workshops and that the insights emerged organically from the dialogue rather than being pre-imposed (Hsu, 2014).

Often occurring concurrently, the critical dialogue process identified the thematic connections between how the diverse range of participants reacted to the threats presented and how they parsed those threats into expected or protective behavioural tropes or catalysed the possibility for positive, negative or neutral opportunity. The critical dialoguing process enabled us to theorize what the responses and reactions in the workshop meant in the context of the research question. The

cycle of reflective and critical dialogues was repeated between each workshop, refining the scenarios, the activities and the emerging theory development. In our final set of summative dialogues we generated collective reflections and refinement on the emerged theory and strategies that underpinned our reflections of the future of learning design.

Cogenerative Dialogues: Banford Analysed

The co-generative dialogues served as a powerful tool for fostering meaningful educational change and advancing theory to articulate the future of learning design. Our analysis of the summative dialogues draws on three different broad analysis frames. The first is a thematic analysis, categorising the data into themes to understand how the broader patterns, praxis and insights reflect existing theoretical perspectives. The second is reflective analysis that analysed the effectiveness of the dialogue process and its impact on the practices and future of learning design. The third is the development of actionable insights that translated the findings into practical steps for improving the theory addressing our research question, that is: in a complex, hybridised and crisis impacted organisation, what is the future of learning design and the future of learning designers in a modern university? (Gade, 2015; Hsu, 2014; Hsu & Liao, 2018). The result is a synthesised cogenerative dialogue between the three of us (named below) around four themes that emerged across the workshops: precarity, the snapback, complexity and generative AI.

Precarity

Lawrie Phipps (LP): The neoliberalisation of higher education, where there is an emphasis on productivity and marketisation, has built a sense of precarity among academics and academic related staff. The pandemic shift to digital and remote working increased these feelings, with more strain on staff who were already struggling with workload and mental health challenges. Learning designers have shown resilience and creativity, bringing their pedagogical skills to bear to mitigate some aspects of the various crises. However, this also means they are frequently the first to bear the brunt of institutional demands for increased productivity, without associated institutional support. This relationship creates a paradox where the capabilities that make learning designers valuable during crises also render them vulnerable to exploitation and job insecurity.

Donna Lanclos (DL): Precarity pre-dates the 2020 pandemic emergency, and the current circumstances we find ourselves in, in 2024. Political actors in the UK and the US have been working (especially from the right, though not exclusively) to defund the public sector, including education, meaning there has been less and less money for people working in the sector to do the generous

and expansive work of education, and more and more money for the technology that purports to substitute for or make "efficient" the human labour of education. Precarity is both the reason for some of the technological interventions we see in the sector (e.g., adjunct teaching staff cannot articulate their teaching with that of full time staff without the VLE content that shapes and connects their teaching with the curriculum) and is also amplified by the technology, where technology is used to de-emphasise and de-value what humans bring to their work beyond content creation. Precarity emerges from systems that do not think that human connection and creativity is valuable. Precarity dominates systems that reduce education to content creation and consumption. Precarity results in people reducing the work of education to a list of tasks that comprise their job, as described in an HR database. There is no capacity for work to be imagined beyond the tasks to be checked off, and content to be produced and indexed.

Peter Bryant (PB): The indicators of precarity and uncertainty were present across all five workshops, especially the final one which ran as a panel (which descended into dark fantasy and gallows humour). It was not uncommon to see people design themselves out of the organisation. The arbitrage between the economic imperatives in the scenario (student revenue and financial stability) and the professional pride and goodwill created by doing something good for society enabled differing degrees of comfort with feeling precarious as well as different coping methods. Precarity represents a significant impact on the confidence, capability and ambition of learning designers, none of which are positive for the institution. The literature on precarious work argues that there are psychological impacts on the wellbeing, health and stress levels of the workers (Allan et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2007). In terms of learning designers, whilst their precarity supports a growing necessity for cost savings by reducing long-term financial commitments associated with permanent staff, allowing universities to allocate resources more flexibly in the face of crisis, such precarity is not consequenceless for learning designers. The learning designers that existed within the scenarios (as imagined in the workshops) felt 'overwhelmed, vulnerable, exploited, stressed, anxious, and exhausted with their employment conditions' (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). The management in the same context leveraged the short-term benefits of this precarious labour, pivoting with little consideration for the wellbeing impacts. Another interesting post-effect of the precarious future of learning design was the unintended consequences of precarious work on the remaining secure workforce and their reflections on their potentially insecure future (Wiengarten et al., 2021).

The Snapback
LP: In the UK, the push for a rapid return to on-campus learning was driven by Conservative MPs

arguing that the physical presence on university campuses was crucial for the quality of education. Michelle Donelan, the UK Universities Minister in 2021, tweeted (sic):

> *Students deserve to have the full face to face teaching experience they would have received before the pandemic - online learning should only be used to supplement this. This week I am personally calling VCs who aren't delivering this.*

The political pressure influenced university policies, sometimes prioritising the resumption of traditional campus operations over a more considered integration of remote and hybrid learning solutions developed during the pandemic. In the Banford artifacts we replicated that sudden change by having a Vice-Chancellor enforce a snapback to traditional, pre digital practices. However, whilst some learning designers in the Banford workshops felt uncomfortable during this phase, some academics welcomed the return to a "gentler time" of small group teachings and tutorials.

DL: "Back to Normal" is a cry for a time that felt less precarious, less dangerous, more familiar. But when the past is comfortable, it is precisely because it is no longer the moment we are living in and is containable and controllable by what we choose to focus on in our memories. Many learning designers during the early stages of the global COVID pandemic touted the "new normal" of digital teaching and learning as a proposed steady state, one in which their work would be finally recognised and valued. But what seemed to happen instead was that academics associated the digital not with systems and tools that helped maintain connections during a crisis, but with the emotional trauma of the crisis itself.

The "normal" that some academics yearned for during the pandemic emergency was a state of not being in fear, not being confronted with chaos and death. But that particular "normal" (chaos, death, fear) is in fact the case for people now, and was before the pandemic emergency. A yearning for a time without such chaos is understandable, and living without such chaos is also a privilege. What Peter has called the snapback in education post-2020 is less a cry for "when things were better" (because for many they were not) but rather for "when things were familiar." Disambiguating "better" from "familiar" is important work to do in change management, and crucial to the work of educators trying to meet the needs of their students while also taking care of themselves. With Banford we saw many in the room trying to re-re-centre themselves and their work within teaching and learning contexts, in contrast to the fresh marginalisation that they were experiencing in the snapback.

PB: In many ways, the conditions and the threat/opportunity of the snapback in the workshops was a conceit. Having promulgated the term 'snapback' (see Bryant, 2021), there was no doubt we collectively wanted to use the workshops to give participants a manifestation of the human impacts of the whiplash created by constant crisis and the pressure to return teaching and learning to states of perceived normalcy. This was most obvious in the 'coup' that overthrew the first techno-abolitionist VC and replaced him with a techno-determinist. The trauma of the crisis we had all collectively experienced was present in how most participants so easily accepted that a university could change directions overnight. As Gerhardt & Puchkov (2023) argue, the grief that comes from a crisis state in higher education can trigger numbness, avoidance, negative introspection, self-criticism and false equivalences and confluences. The scenarios snapped the participants from one crisis state to another in the space of minutes. My observations from this was that the trauma of change was becoming the new normal (or the familiar as Donna puts it) and when presented with a sequence of rapid pivots the response from participants was to accept the change and move onto the response. There are two interpretations of this pragmatism in the face of whiplash. The first is the collective support and resilience through crisis that was in evidence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a culture that supported teaching and learning for staff and students as an emotional and human priority, even in traumatic circumstances (Corvino et al., 2021). The other interpretation is one of coping and denial, where the focus is on surviving rather than thriving. Fleming (2021) posits the death of universities pre and post crisis. He argues that in the face of crisis staff enact coping mechanisms, from embracing 'academic capitalism' to find a conflicted place between not challenging orthodoxy and remaining committed to the traditional values to those who chose hide and hope to not be seen.

Complexity

LP: The challenge for learning designers came when the new Banford Vice-Chancellor arrived with a blank cheque for change. There were significant pauses in the conversations when participants in the workshops were told they could design from a blank slate. The first Banford artifact had taken them back to a pre-digital pedagogy, and they had, as groups, clear expectations of what returning to conventional methods looked like. Now whilst still working in those groups, they needed to advocate for innovative digital solutions and innovative pedagogy. This is a situation that is complex, it needs an understanding of the institutional landscape, ability to adapt to change, and future gazing to be able to integrate hybrid learning models that combine the strengths of both digital and physical. Complexity for learning designers is showing that the advancements in digital pedagogy

through various crises are not just temporary measures but essential components of futureproofing.

DL: The persistent historical orientation of learning design work to "solutions" sets them up to be structurally disadvantaged when needing to navigate complexity. What we saw in workshops was how liberating it could be for workers in learning design to be detached from job titles and descriptions that bound their possible responses within "solutions," so that they could meet the needs of complexity with nuanced discussions of the human dimensions of education, regardless of tech. Granted an opportunity within the workshops to act as experts, with the confidence of people who are treated as experts, they searched not for solutions but for scenarios, to conversations about what was at stake, and who would be required to collectively do the necessary work.

PB: Throughout the workshops, complexity one of the two theoretical rationales we offered as navigational markers for the reality being experienced within the hyperreal world of Banford. Our reference point was the work of Siemens et al., (2018) who define complexity as a choice between the current and future states of being in higher education:

> "What happens, however, when the modes of interacting with information presented in formal learning environments no longer align with the lived experiences of learners in work and other environments? The existing higher education system—with its focus on credit hours, semester-long courses, and formal credentialing—fails to account for new practices available in a digital, and globally connected, world."

When faced with crisis (where all their skills had to be redesigned to new, complex world without technology), learning designers were naturally drawn to wanting to be engaged with and designing the solution. When faced with the anti-crisis (the world in which complexity disappeared, in the technology-forward world of EdtechU), they designed a future without their technological foundations and tie lines. The intersections of complexity and crisis in organisations manifest through the need for adaptive leadership and strategic agility. Complexity often precipitates crises that demand rapid, innovative responses (Farndale et al., 2019). Effective crisis management in these complex settings involves understanding systemic interdependencies and anticipating potential disruptions which mitigates immediate risks but also strengthens the HEIs capacity to thrive amidst ongoing uncertainty (Job et al., 2025). Finding simple, understandable and perhaps contemplatable solutions tied back to the sense of precarity, and trauma, but also in some cases worked to silo actions away from the more complex university ecosystem.

Generative AI (GAI)

LP: The introduction of GAI, has been initially perceived as a potential solution to alleviate workload pressures by many staff, as not resolved the underlying issues of precarity. Instead, GAI has been co-opted to further accelerate productivity demands, increasing the neoliberal arguments that are at the root of the current problems. Instead of providing relief, GAI tools will potentially intensify the pressures on staff, leading to further alienation and burnout.

The reliance on GAI and potentially how some vendors are deploying them in their digital tools raises questions about the future role and identity of learning designers. As automation and GAI becomes integrated into educational practices, there is a risk that the pedagogical expertise and humanity of learning designers will be undervalued or overlooked. This shift could lead to a de-professionalisation of the role, reducing it to technical support rather than a crucial component of educational innovation and student support.

DL: The venture capitalists trying to profit from GAI tools dropped their products on the sector during exam season in 2022, a stressful time ripe for peak feelings of crisis. The end of 2022 was still not the end of the pandemic emergency, and also the pervasive feelings of dread and uncertainty primed people to be receptive to something new to talk about that was not COVID, or anything related to the pandemic and its impact on people's lives. The enthusiasm for GAI was in a larger context of desperation for something, anything else to talk about or experience. It was also a brutal turn of attention away from people who continued to need help and care because of the ongoing effects of the pandemic, and the lack of effective and long-term structural support from governments for people who were sick, recovering, or trying to avoid infection.

GAI was not created by educationalists and the tools on offer, while now wedged into a variety of tools that academics rely on, do not themselves emerge from the work of educators or humanists. The values embedded in GAI tools are those of extraction, these tools amplify and reify existing inequities and extrude content at the expense of individual human creativity, and the protection of our environment and climate. But the preexisting push for "innovation" in education technology makes the sector vulnerable to the demands of the GAI market.

PB: The influence of GAI was deeply present through the workshops, although this could be a context of the year that the workshops were run in and their general location within edtech

conferences and events. Reflecting on the workshops has led me in 2024 to ask the same research question and contemplate 'is GAI the end of learning design?' It is not a giant leap to align the dark fantasy and humour of the workshops to the outlandish promises and doomsday scenarios driving vendor sales pitches and hyperbolic social media articles by techno-solutionists. HEIs are turning their strategies and policies inside out to find defendable and ideologically acceptable pathways through the influence of GAI on assessment (Ellis & Murdoch, 2024; Rudolph et al., 2023). In the prevailing winds of this crisis, are learning designers procuring and designing themselves into obsolescence? That was certainly a present response (as both a threat and an opportunity) across the workshops, in some ways in a sense of resignation and in others, a sense of surety and confidence that whatever new skills or strategy was required, they would thrive.

Discussion: Locating learning design within the familiar and the hyperreal

The Banford experiment was an immersive experience that extended past the workshops and the original intentions of the cogenerative dialogue. The University of Banford became a metaphor for what the authors were experiencing in our professional careers. The cogenerative dialogues forced us to process the intersecting pressures of the institutional whiplash we all experienced before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The compounding of the successive polycrises unleashed on higher education (generative AI followed by the cost-of-living crisis followed by the rise of populism and the railing against the intellectual elites) made our institutional whiplash become the new normal state. Manuti et al., (2022) assert that 'Although we are longing to return to our familiar routines, it is evident that everything has changed, and we still have difficulties adapting to this new normal'. The desire to return to what we found comforting and familiar was disrupted constantly by the stacking of crisis on crisis, each impacting the workshops in different and unpredictable ways.

The University of Banford was a gestalt of our experiences, emotions and liminality blurring the lines between what was real and authentic to the human, learning design experience and what was an artifice (Freund, 2024). Baudrillard (1994) argues that whilst members of a society believe they are experiencing reality, they often live in state of hyperreality or simulacrum, which happens when what we understood to be a sign no longer represents that understanding and the misrepresented understanding becomes the new truth. The 'truth' of Banford seemed increasingly real even though it was a fiction. The hyperreality which was designed to create the necessary transitive symbolism to encourage discussion around solutions became deeply entwined with our own lived experiences.

The cogenerative dialogues were as much critically reflective therapy as they were a structured way to ideate and innovate. We found ourselves falling deeper into how we could make the scenarios more plausible, more frightening or provocatively realistic and challenging. It became as Arva (2008) suggests a magical realist hyperreality where Banford emerged as 'the only reality in which one can remember in order to forget trauma'. We added layers of contributory ephemera, inventing new constructs around the nature of the imagined campus, the organisational structure, and the policies and practices within the university. We expanded the characterisations of the 'actors' who played our management team and imbued them with inside jokes and "easter eggs" strewn throughout the artefacts. In 2024, we added a whole new hyperreal scenario that addressed the critical implications and divisions that have emerged from GAI in HEIs, further expanding not just the symbolism but realities it now represented for learning designers.

We know that the current state of universities is constant crisis. We know that learning designers have experienced institutional and positional whiplash as the crises morphed from the pandemic to AI to a financial. Does this create the conditions or the actuality of the end of learning design? We argued through dialogues and in the final writing of this paper that crisis states are not the end of learning design. The resilience and adaptability and humour of learning designers was clearly present in every workshop, even in the face of deliberate provocation through the hyperreal world-building. This is the same resilience we all observed during the succession of crises directly impacting our own engagement, leadership and training of learning designers. However, the unintended but self-protecting siloisation of learning design that was also visible in the workshops (and in the changes we made to the workshops, especially the addition of safe third-party to 'blame' for the risks to learning designers --in the form of the Chief Financial Officer from the second workshop on-- could lead to the alternate response to the same question. In an era where the narrative around GAI talks replacement and automation of tasks, could the only sustainable future for learning designers is to be part of the creative, human whole of the university and not become siloed in technology or support? The critical challenge for learning designers will be to frame their capabilities as opportunities in crisis, rather than as a way of simply ameliorating the threat.

Conclusion

We started this project with a clear design intention, constructed through critical artefacts residing in a hyperreal scenario of our making and delivered to rooms of people experiencing crisis, the threat and opportunity of it and the resulting dissonance in very heterogenous ways. The end of learning design was a provocation, a anti-call to arms of what could not possibly be the case in HEIs,

especially after the peaks of visibility and value that came during the COVID-19 pandemic (Basham et al., 2020; Santagata et al., 2024). The dialogues started with questions and assumptions about our own worlds, reflecting on why we designed the scenarios in the ways we did and why we reacted in the ways we did through each facilitated workshop. We were then able to question the connections and contradictions between these worlds (ours, the participants and the fictional ones from Banford) (Kondrat, 1999).

The threat/opportunity response for learning designers can also support extraordinary efforts to escape from a dangerous situation, one that challenges their identity, the professional status or even their jobs. And what is at the end of the dangerous situation? A place of safety. A place where the crisis has ended. A state of post-crisis. But what if the crisis never ends? This is the challenge for the modern learning designer. This study, through the hyperreal scenarios, created a hypothetical whiplash where the crisis pivoted within minutes and the participants did not have enough time to think, to reflect or even find a space of comfort. They were experiencing the sector as it has lived since the COVID-19 pandemic (and arguably longer) in less than real time in the space of the hour of the workshop. In the context of their experiences and our reflective lens articulated through cogenerative dialogue the question of the death of learning design became a counter-rhetorical one. Can learning designers survive and flourish in the crisis? Can their skills and organisational capabilities find new roles and new purposes in permacrisis? Can the pivot through rather than transition out of a sector in crisis? These were pertinent and present questions in both the workshop and our dialogues. They will shape the further research that emerges from this study.

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