

The Future of the Field is Not Design

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The field of learning and instructional design and technology (LIDT) has an important contribution to offer towards what Beckwith (1988) called “the transformation of learners and . . . learning” (p. 18). However, in pursuit of this mission, we have become too fixated on being designers and applying the methods of design thinking. As valuable as design is, it’s ultimately too narrow an approach to help us have the impact we desire because it overemphasizes the importance of the products and services we create. To be more influential, we need other approaches that focus our efforts on nurturing people’s “intrinsic talents and capacities” that are ultimately outside of our ability to manage and control (Thomson, 2005, p. 158; see also Biesta, 2013). In this chapter I first describe how design’s focus on creating and making misleads our understanding and application of important dimensions of our field. I then describe how we can cultivate an LIDT identity that is better suited for the aims we are pursuing. An LIDT-specific identity may include some methods from design thinking, but it will also encompass additional ways of improving the human condition. I end by calling on readers to consider what this important evolution for our field means for their personal practice.

We currently face a problem in the field of learning and instructional design and technology (LIDT). We have an important contribution to offer towards what Beckwith (1988) called “the transformation of learners and . . . learning” (p. 18). However, in pursuit of this mission, we have become too fixated on being designers and applying the methods of design thinking. As valuable as design has been for our field, it’s ultimately too narrow an approach to help us have the impact we desire because it overemphasizes the importance of the products and services we create. To be more influential, we need approaches that focus our efforts on nurturing people’s “intrinsic talents and capacities” that are ultimately outside of our ability to manage and control (Thomson, 2005, p. 158; see also Biesta, 2013). Tying ourselves to design will not accomplish this, so we need to cultivate an identity of our own—an identity centered on what Dunne (1997) called the character and dispositions of “practical judgment” (p. 160).

In this chapter I hope to make these issues clear. I start by describing how design’s focus on creating and making misleads our understanding and application of important dimensions of our field, and so limits our impact. I then describe how we can cultivate an LIDT identity that is better suited for the aims we are pursuing. An LIDT-specific identity may include some methods from design thinking, but it will also encompass additional ways of improving the human condition, all centered in the character of practical judgment. I end by calling on readers to consider what this important evolution for our field means for their personal practice.

What is Misunderstood When LIDT is Defined as Design

The field of LIDT was drawn towards design thinking because it promised to help us create better learning products, strategies, services, and environments. Historically, the field relied on detailed processes for creating instruction that provided predictable, dependable results (e.g. Merrill et al., 1996). However, towards the close of the 20th century, it became clear that these processes were too rigid to be useful in many real-world settings (Rowland, 1992; Wedman & Tessmer, 1993). There were also questions about whether traditional instructional design processes, like Instructional

design fields like architecture or industrial design (e.g., Boling & Gray, 2014; Hokanson & Gibbons, 2014; Lachheb & Abramenska-Lachheb, 2022; McDonald, 2011; Tracey, 2016). The claim was that embracing the way designers worked would “produce improvements in learning and performance far beyond those we are able to achieve today” (Boling & Smith, 2012, p. 363).

Design thinking did provide LIDT more flexibility, along with associated benefits such as a renewed emphasis on addressing the complexities found in every learning environment (Becker, 2007). But what did not change was the field’s near-complete focus on creating learning products or services. This was because design is fundamentally about creating and making. Indeed, Nelson and Stolterman (2012) defined design as “the ability to imagine that-which-does-not-yet-exist [and] to make it appear in concrete form as a new, purposeful addition to the real world” (p. 12). And Archer et al. defined it as, “the conception and realization of new things . . . [through] planning, inventing, making, and doing” (as quoted in Cross, 2007, p. 16). This is the case even if LIDT professionals claim they have “moved beyond making artifacts,” such as designing learning strategies, cultures, or relationships (cf. Lee, 2021, p. 497). To do this, they still tend to create some kind of object or operation (product or process) that is meant to have a discernible, concrete effect on the people using them (McDonald, 2021).

Design’s emphasis on creation, however, threatens to distort our view of LIDT and its potential impact. To illustrate, consider what the effects have been of defining the field of teaching as also being a type of design (Henriksen & Richardson, 2017; Norton & Hathaway, 2015; Paniagua & Istance, 2018). Henriksen (2020) went so far as to claim that “teaching is *always* an act of design towards a learning purpose,” because teachers create “engaging learning activities, effective assessment practices, and students’ experience” (p. 294; emphasis added). On the surface, this seems to make sense. Teaching undeniably includes the activities Henriksen identified. And design methods often can help teachers do this kind of work well. However, as Biesta (2013, 2021) persuasively argued, there are many other dimensions of teaching that go beyond what teachers create. Teachers are role models. They manage the everyday, spontaneous events that just happen in a classroom. They counsel both students and parents. And they “call” students to live up to their full potential—not just through what they do but also through their relationships with those students (Biesta, 2021, p. 47).

These non-design dimensions of teaching are at least as definitive of teaching as creating materials or setting up conditions for students to learn. But they are not really *made* in the same way an object is made. Consider the important role teachers play in helping students believe in their own potential, especially when facing moments of self-doubt. Countless students have experienced the motivational effects of such encouragement. And it can sometimes be even more powerful than how caregivers (like parents) show confidence—given the unique fusing of care, expertise, and authority inherent in good teaching relationships. This is real teaching, as much as designing a lesson plan, and it can be life changing (Noddings, 2012). But it seems manipulative for a teacher to design situations where students experience doubt just so the teacher can show how much they care. Both common sense and research show that such Machiavellian tactics are damaging (Krause, 2012).

Biesta (2017, 2021) further argued that if teaching is primarily defined in terms of what teachers make, we can easily lose sight of its other dimensions. Thus, reducing teaching to design, because teachers sometimes make things, can ignore or dismiss as inconsequential other important teaching practices. At the extreme, this has led to both historical and contemporary attempts to replace teachers with designed learning products (Casas, 1997; Ovetz, 2021). Why hire a teacher who is likely a second-rate designer, when you can hire a trained learning designer instead? Or why not buy a curriculum that just “works” without a teacher at all? (cf. Heinrich, 1995) Even without going to those lengths, when teaching is defined as something that can be made, there is a tendency to only recognize, evaluate, and reward what teachers make. And ultimately, this limits the scope of what is considered legitimate for teachers to do (Biesta, 2010). If the scholars cited earlier were asked, surely they would agree that the other dimensions of teaching identified above are important. But when they claim that teaching is defined by its activities of planning, making, and designing, the ultimate end is to eventually erase the possibility of doing anything other than plan, make, and design (Dreyfus, 2002; Thomson, 2005; Wrathall, 2019).

rather, that design is only one part of what it takes to accomplish our purpose of transforming learners and learning. They are an important part, to be sure. But, also like teaching, if what we design is viewed as our sole contribution, there will be dimensions of the field that we misunderstand. As one example, when LIDT is considered to be only a type of design, there is a tendency to consider learning to be the product we create, and students as the output of our design efforts (Gur & Wiley, 2007; Lee, 2021; McDonald, 2021). This, however, is an overly simplistic view of learning (Yanchar & Francis, 2022). Additionally, there are important dimensions of learning that are distorted if we attempt to design them, as much as if a teacher designs situations to manipulate how students feel about them. If we consider LIDT's purpose to be the design of learning, our tendency will be to "view learners in a similar manner as other makers view the material with which they work. Learners become matter to be mastered and shaped, and instructional strategies and techniques are the tools designers have to produce . . . learning" (McDonald, 2021, p. 47).

Further, just like important teaching practices are ignored when we overemphasize the materials or activities that teachers create, the scope and types of educational help LIDT can offer is limited when we define the field as a type of design. But given our historical emphasis on creation and design, we have spent very little effort considering what other contributions we could make. To understand the possibilities, we need to broaden our views of LIDT to encompass more than the creation of products and services.

LIDT's Future: Moving Beyond Design

What alternatives are available to us beyond creating, making, and designing? Designers suggest that whenever people seek to improve the human condition, by definition, they are designing (Nelson & Stolterman, 2012; Simon, 1996). However, a little reflection shows that this is not true. For example, doctors and nurses do not design a patient's health. They support the body as its own natural functions return itself to health. Similarly, a host of practices exist to improve ourselves and our world apart from design, including policy making, therapy, law, and—as discussed earlier—teaching. Proponents for design argue that, at least at times, such professionals are really designers even if they do not know it (Aakhus et al., 2018; Henriksen et al., 2020; Lachheb & Abramenska-Lachheb, 2022). But, as already discussed, when designers do this, it is an indication that they do not understand, or are simply dismissing, dimensions of these professions that do not involve making and creating. Of course, doctors, lawyers, and teachers sometimes make things. But what they make does not define them. They do many other things as well—things at least as definitive of their professions, if not more, than what they create. If we pay attention to those dimensions, we might learn new approaches for how LIDT can offer more, and better, contributions towards the transformation of learners and learning (see Beckwith, 1988).

In particular, we can pay attention to how these fields cultivate improvements to the human condition without managing, controlling, creating, or making. For instance, as discussed above, doctors and nurses do not actually make or create health. Instead, theirs is a *caring* profession. They rely on other forms of influence than designers rely upon with their making-oriented aims (Dunne, 1997). Sometimes this is no more than explaining the consequences of someone's current lifestyle to persuade him to live more healthily. Or, like teachers, sometimes it is by simply offering "a thoughtful glance, a soothing word, and other manifestations of caring and concern" (Arndt, 1992, p. 291). Since helping people learn also includes these kind of persuasive and caring dimensions, it seems that fields like medicine and nursing could provide insights for LIDT practice that design cannot. What might LIDT look like if we emphasized its caring dimensions as much as did doctors and nurses?

But simply importing practices from other fields (like nursing) is not enough (McDonald & Yanchar, 2020). There is something more fundamental that all these fields—including design—share that is important to help LIDT accomplish its purpose. At their core, all these fields share an assumption that instead of relying on methods and processes that attempt to define their response to every situation, the proper way to engage with the world's unpredictable and ever-changing circumstances are what Dunne (1997) called the dispositions of "practical judgment" (p. 160). Although practical judgment is difficult to define, Dunne summarized it as being when people are perceptive enough to recognize

is doing the right thing “to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way” (p. 368). Since one of the original reasons for importing design thinking into LIDT was to correct our overemphasis on following rigid processes, it seems that we can better accomplish this goal by focusing on practical judgment directly, instead of tying ourselves to one field, design thinking, that attempts to create methods for enacting it.

In fact, as Dunne (1997) further emphasized, practical judgment is not merely an alternative, more flexible kind of process at all. Instead, it is a kind of character that people develop as they learn to respond to certain types of issues to which they were previously insensitive. Thus, it is the character of LIDT professionals that should enable them to respond to opportunities they discern for transforming learners and learning. No set of methods or processes themselves can accomplish this on their own. What a teacher does to show students they care is less important than that their actions arise out of their authentically caring disposition. This is not to argue that practices do not matter; certainly, students will view some actions as more caring than others. But practices must be situated in their proper place, as an outgrowth of a person’s existing, or at least developing, dispositions and character.

Expanding our view of LIDT should therefore begin by considering what dispositions and character are associated with practical judgment in the specific context of transforming learners and learning. Issues like this have received little attention in our field’s literature, although we can find a few examples (Belland, 1991; Parrish, 2012). As one example, if it is true that practical judgment “is mediated through feelings” (Dunne, 1997, p. 358), what emotional sensitivities are important for LIDT professionals to cultivate? One emotional sensitivity is certainly empathy (Matthews et al., 2017)—a disposition shared, of course, with other fields; this includes design. But how would our empathy change if we understood it in the same way the caring professions did—as the foundation of real relationships—instead of as a technique for making better products, as sometimes seems to be the case in design fields (Heylighen & Dong, 2019)?

Beyond this, are there other emotional dimensions of practical judgment, especially ones more distinct to the transformation of learners and learning? And how do we help LIDT professionals cultivate them? As we come to answer questions such as these, we can use what we learn as the basis for remixing useful practices into forms that reflect what we are trying to accomplish, while jettisoning those that are found to be counterproductive. Some of those practices could be derived from design. But others might also originate in science, nursing, teaching, law, or any other field where we find people exhibiting practical judgment in attempts to improve the human condition.

If this vision of LIDT's future appeals to you, the most important thing you can do is become the kind of professional that embodies the character and dispositions of practical judgment. We need a groundswell of professionals who are not satisfied to only create products, processes, or other services, but are also willing to explore other ways of transforming learners and learning. We also need people who are explorers—who are curious about what other forms of practice are missing from our repertoire that will help us pursue our mission. What else should be part of an LIDT identity that we haven't yet imagined? What do those dimensions contribute towards the transformation of learners and learning? And how can you become the kind of person who exemplifies these attributes?

Reflect upon these questions. Consider formalizing your reflection in a journal entry or personal statement of values:

- Based on *your own* background, talents, beliefs, and values, what do you find missing in our field's approach to learners and learning?
- Based either on precedent (examples you learn from elsewhere), or brainstorming (your own creativity), what new ideas could we incorporate into LIDT that address your concerns?
- What kind of character (practical judgment) could you exemplify to become the type of person who authentically pursues the transformation of learners and learning?
- How can you begin to develop your practical judgment through your education or practical experiences?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that design is not the pinnacle of LIDT as a field of practice. This does not mean that LIDT professionals should never design. Rather, it means that design alone is too narrow to help us accomplish our mission of transforming learners and learning. Instead, we should be a field organized around the dispositions and character associated with practical judgment. It is understandable why LIDT professionals would want to define themselves as designers. Design is fashionable. It provides the esteem that our field so often seems to desire. But the label *design* does not need to be attached to every method of attempting to improve the human condition. Design is also not the only way to enact the dispositions and character of practical judgment, which is the real core on which our field should focus. We should be in conversation with every field that exhibits such virtues, and not only design. It is true that an expanded vision for LIDT's purpose and practice will include some design activities. But if we only design, we will be limited in the types of influence we have. So, our practices should also include influences from other fields as well, remixed into a unique identity that reflects our primary focus on practical judgment and in service of our distinctive purpose. Thus, in conclusion, instead of asking how we design the future of LIDT, we should be asking instead: what future is possible for us that design does not provide?

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