

Who cares about learning design? Near future superheroes and villains of an educational ethics of care

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Abstract

This article undertakes a critical appraisal of learning design and its relation to ethical ideas of care. We give an account of three personae of near future learning designers, developed using speculative methods, seeded with real-world data comprising job advertisements and validated with learning designers. The personae illustrate conflicts about the role of learning designers within the teaching and research missions of the academy and issues of care or lack thereof for these workers. The disembodied skills of learning designer job advertisements are contrasted with the bodies of (more than) real people that can suffer and care. We finish by contributing elements of a speculative job advertisement for a learning designer, who will help shape educational spaces of the near future by entangled care and unencumbered attentiveness.

Introduction

Higher Education can be a site of heroism and villainy, a place of care and cruelty. Learning designers may be heroic 'first responders' answering the emergency online learning call of the pandemic. A surge of hiring for these roles occurred during the pandemic, with job advertisements constructing learning designers according to a range of skills and competencies. However, issues persist for workers who serve in such roles around career development and progression (Czerniewicz 2021; Watermeyer, Crick, and Knight 2021). As third space professionals learning designers may toil in the interstices between the more prominent teacher and student narratives (Prusko and Kilgore 2020; White and White 2016). Here we attempt to address this deficit. We foreground learning designers as real people with rich interior lives, hopes and dreams. We draw on more-than-real speculative methods, presenting learning designers through vivid design fiction multimodal personae. We counter the disembodied skills-based constructions of learning designers by portraying them as complex, messed-up people who work 'in material and embodied entanglements with devices and other artefacts' (Gourlay et al. 2021a).

Learning designers may labour in toxic work environments. In Ireland, the site of this study, recent national reports describe disturbing experiences of discrimination, racism, sexism and harassment in higher education (Kempny and Michael 2021; MacNeela et al. 2022). Given this, a pressing question arises for those who work in learning design in Irish higher education: How will we care for each other?

For philosophical theorists, of the ethics of care, our very nature is to be found in relation (Held 2006; Noddings 2003; Tronto 1998; Diller 2018). We manifest in relationships and are the product of them. This contrasts with any ethics centred on the rational adult, standing alone, in their uncomplicated agency. For some commentators, care may be the highest ethical precept, an even more fundamental value than justice (Diller 2018). A lot of human life goes on with very little justice exemplified, especially for women and minorities; however, without care, life cannot go on – for none of us would have survived infancy (Held 2006). Caring increases levels of well-being in the doer and small interpersonal acts, at the micro-level, are a powerful tool for affecting wider change (and preventing wider damage). In this conception, care is a virtuous recursion, for it increases happiness (Jackson 2018), and happy individuals ‘are rarely violent or intentionally cruel, either to other human beings or to nonhuman animals’ (Noddings 2003, 2).

Some argue that the notion of care may reproduce oppressive stereotypes of fitting activities for men and women (Code 2015). Care may be ‘weaponized’ (Richard and Caines 2021) and used to sell everything from baby monitors for cribs and tracking devices for infants to invasive surveillance systems for student examinations (Barrett 2021).

To further explore care we draw on the French philosopher, left-wing anti-fascist resistance fighter, teacher and Christian mystic Simone Weil (Figure 1). For Weil, care is one aspect of a form of attention that permeates all right action. She believed that a particular form of attention should be paid to endeavours in any domain of life, such as prayer, work and studying:

The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough. (Weil 1973, 118)

Weil had a deep concern with suffering, undertaking gruelling work in a car factory or turning off the heating in her classroom to express solidarity with the lowliest workers in society by



Figure 1. Simone Weil care(ful) learning designers wanted.

experiencing their labour conditions (Sharp 1984). Her contradictions mark her as the ultimate outsider – a champion of workers who turned her back on Marx, a devout Christian deeply wary of the institutional church, and a woman determined to wear the clothes and take on the roles traditionally ascribed to men. She mashes up, and messes with, our ideas of where care and radical embodied action should be situated. However, her death at 34 may give us pause to turn to self-care. The emotional toll on carers is a live issue. During the pandemic, learning designers described compassion fatigue and burnout:

The number of hours is constant. I'm so tired, and my team is completely worn out. Designers have families, and many of us are working eight to five, and after a little time with our families, we are getting back online from eight to midnight. (Prusko and Kilgore 2020)

We also draw on the figure of Weil for her centring of unseen workers in systems. We contend that learning designers are all too often portrayed according to disembodied skills (Sun et al. 2018). To counter this we attempt to present learning designers as people who have bodies that can both suffer and care. We go on to give an alternative job description for learning designers based on ideas of care that is an implicit critique of their current construction.

Method

In this study, we adopt design fiction to speculate about the near future by proposing artefacts of it (Dunne and Raby 2013). Design fictions may be products such as the fictional CompellU online proctoring platform (Richard and Caines 2021) that explored surveillance and weaponization of the language of care and protection. They may be social science fictions (Suorota et al. 2022) about imagined schools or universities (Cox 2021; Macgilchrist, Allert, and Bruch 2020; Jandrić and Hayes 2021; Costello et al. 2020). Methodologically, the trustworthiness of such accounts may be whether these studies 'may be read, and lived, vicariously by others' (Connelly and Clandinin 1990).

To seed the design fiction for this study we drew on a corpus of 29 advertisements for learning design jobs, published by 18 Irish higher education institutions between June 2020 and 2021, collected by author two, a learning designer seeking work in Ireland at the time. The advertisements were discussed, and a cluster of themes emerged: teaching, research, career progression, and the status of learning designers. The first draft of learner designer personae was written by author one, discussed by the first and third authors, and a number of revisions made based on principles of discourse analysis as storytelling and design fiction poetics (Markussen and Knutz 2013; Macgilchrist 2021). Finally, all authors discussed and attempted to validate and contrast the personae with their own lived experiences following the approach of Cox (2021). This phase aimed to uncover themes we could propose for a job advertisement for learning designers of the near future. In the next section we present the personae through three fictional interviews.

Learning designer personae

Christine

Teaching? I used to work as a teacher. It didn't seem to matter. I guess they had teaching figured out. I was more the hired help. Some Professors could be very gracious and kind. Others would treat you like something stuck to their shoe. They are just people who are stressed; I tried to tell myself. Maybe they knew I was a failed teacher – one who got fired. Yep, that's me. One summer I was taken aside by the principal and told to 'cover up', as my scars were showing. 'I was only a kid', I protested, 'It's not like I did that yesterday or the day before.' Apparently, no one needed to see that, and it could give the girls ideas. I wore long sleeves from then on but I spiralled a bit. I got paranoid that people were watching me all the time, that they were scanning my body under my clothes. I don't know exactly what happened in the end, as my memory of all that time is so

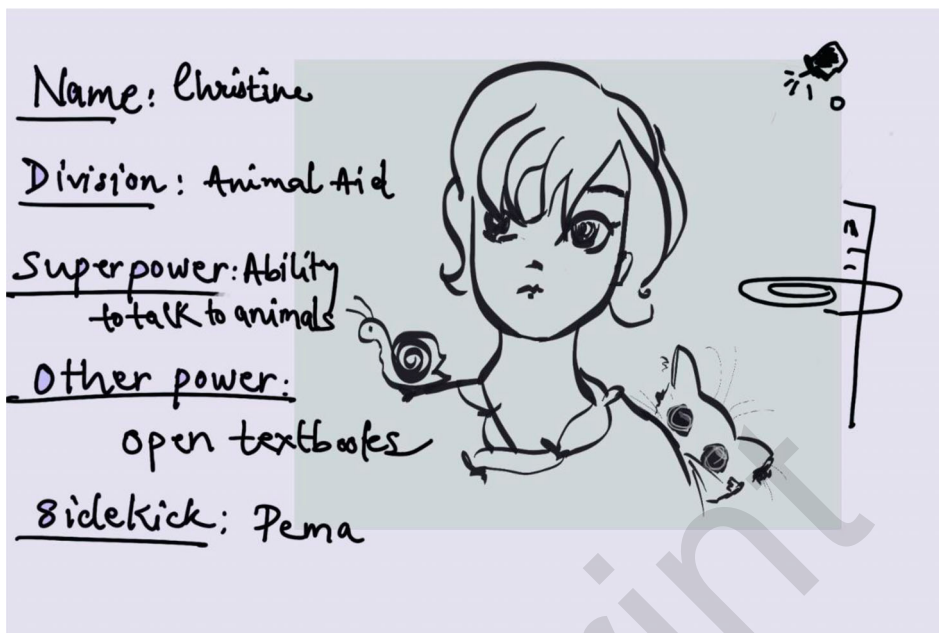


Figure 2. Persona Christine.

hazy now. I did love that job, but there also comes a time in life when you just need to get the hell out of a place (Figure 2).

I retrained in library and information studies, which was nice, but there were no jobs in it. Most of the people on the course were either already working in a library or no-hopers like me. I thought about the course director: how did he get that job? It seemed great, just teaching adults about libraries. But then I caught myself. I was fantasising about yet another nice, quiet, safe, calm job before I had even finished screwing up my current career fad!

As I said there were no jobs so I worked in a second-hand bookstore for a while. In the evenings I volunteered to help seniors learn computers in a library as I thought I might get a job there. It never occurred to me that teaching old people computers would actually be so lovely. You needed to be really, really patient, but I knew they were no threat to me, and I could walk out the door if anything went wrong without having to sign anything or even say goodbye. And next thing I had a real job! Making an open textbook about the history of education using Pressbooks. That's how I ended up working here at the University, in the Learning Design Deck. It's an odd name, I know. Most things are called a lab or a unit or an observatory or a centre now, but we had this weird name that sounded like the top of a boat or maybe a pack of cards.

Even though it's only 100 kilometres from Scoil Mhuire, the school I used to work in, the university felt like another planet. Everything was so different. I wasn't going to wear strappy tops or anything, and on hot days I stayed in the air-con or the shade, but I saw a student once with scars like mine, just walking around smiling. And there were mental health weeks and sexual consent workshops and drug and alcohol awareness sessions for students. How could people be talking about all this stuff so much? Shouting it on posters and in animations and flags. Sometimes it almost seemed too good to be true.

Younger people would put things like 'she/her/hers' on their email signatures. I like the idea that no one could tell me what to be. I do want to be a woman, but also sometimes I want to be a girl. . . . I dunno. I had this rock hunting competition with my neighbour when I was a kid. When I got a good one, I'd show Charlie and he'd be like that is literally the coolest rock ever! But now, if I'm

making something at work, and I try to show someone, I feel like there is a part of me stuck in it, like they're judging a part of me that I don't even have anymore. Why can't we be kids showing each other cool rocks?

Okaaay – that makes no sense! You can edit this stuff out. But I liked the idea that people could try to escape from whatever someone tried to paint them as, that they could try to figure it out themselves somehow. And sometimes, when I thought about this for a bit, I would forget everything and all about my scars and my entire body and just sit there and say: what even am I?

What was your last question? My learning design super-power? Ha ha I like it! Well, we took this Info Lit class one time on posthumanism and speciesism. Also, that year we were editing Wikipedia, to fill in gaps on famous women, so I did Frances Power Cobbe. She campaigned for animal rights and the rights of women to vote and attend university. I went down a bit of a rabbit hole then and read all about the Brown Dog affair, but I had to stop after a while because it was just so horrible that someone could be cutting up a dog who was clearly in distress. When I read about the medical students taking down the statue that commemorated the dog, I just felt my body shaking, and I took both hands off my iPad and let it drop to the ground. It actually made some of my paranoia and nervousness come back about doctors and medicine and just sort of science in general.

Anyway, where was I? Oh yes Frances Cobbe Power. I like that her name is unisex. I like to think it gave her some space because a name can really pin you to yourself and I never realised there were all these links between people's rights, animals' rights and education. Anyway, long story short, I pick the ability to speak to animals as my super-power. I look after all the animals here in the Animal Aid Division of the Learning Design Deck. Me and my friend Pema.

What is the Animal Aid Division? Well it all started with Isha. As a blind student she had to fight for literally everything during her time at the university and for her dog Sandy too. But one time we were doing all this big data stuff trying to catch people cheating in exam halls. An algorithm checked the similarity of students' answers who sat close together and triangulated this with sweat levels the system could see on their skin. We were looking at all these mood maps, and I noticed that people sitting near Sandy in the exams seemed calmer. So that's how the project of allowing dogs in exam halls started because they had such a positive effect on people. And then we were loaning dogs out to students to take walks with. That evolved into our Library Dogs initiative. Later I went back and looked at the data and realised that there was some uplifting effect for students in exams sitting near windows. It turns out just seeing some plant life is good for you, a little bit of green. So we started working on connecting students with trees. The researchers were all excited and talking about oxytocin levels and so on, but it just seems like basic sense to me. It's like something I heard once about how you need connection, but you don't need another person necessarily, just one tendril of love to something, and that could be looking in a dog's eyes or touching a tree (Brach 2012).

And the whole thing grew from there, really, and we are rewilding parts of the university now. I look after all the animals, primarily the dogs but also the ones that are part of other projects: cats, monkeys, snails, kites, buzzards, and crows. And the sand martins who do this like hunting ballet over the lake in the evening when I'm walking home – sweeping through invisible clouds of insects. There was some dispute I think, a student protest, as the university wanted to build something where the lake is – maybe a car park.

How does that one go? University (noun): A set of warring fiefdoms united around a common cause of parking. That's the biggest threat to the plant and animal projects – new university buildings and developments. But my favourite part of the Uni is a patch of old scrub out back of the library. It must be earmarked for a building because it's not landscaped or mowed or anything. It's just thistles and poppies and stones, but sometimes I go in and lie down there. I try to feel the world under me to see if I'm still here or maybe if it's still there.

So maybe not animals, but talking to nature in general, is my super-power. It's easy to talk to animals, and trees are okay, but it's more difficult to talk to stones and clay. I'm still working on that ha ha! Let's put it this way: I'm not an androphile – a person who prefers men to animals!

My boyfriend says I pay more attention to passing dogs when we are out walking than I do to him – ha ha! He is very jealous – it’s sweet. He even gets worried by men in the music I listen to. ‘BTS are giving me PTSD’ he said the other day, and I told him he shouldn’t talk about trauma that way. ‘But how can I compete with seven impossibly beautiful and talented young men who also happen to be multi-millionaires?’ he protested, and he kind of glanced down at himself and his brow furrowed, and he said, ‘I’m getting hairier and fatter by the day.’ And it’s true he could lose a pound or two. ‘Well whatever’, I said ‘But you’re my fuzzy bear so don’t go changing too much.’

Johan

I came to the technology-enhanced learning space via teaching, so I always have that perspective. For me really, it’s about making sure pedagogy leads technology. And what is pedagogy? Well it’s about students. A university is basically a human-centred place, and you need to start with the student experience. And build around that – and that could be a physical building or a student car park, or a rich group activity online. So yes, my teaching background has been key. I lectured in bio-technology for years but always used technology to enhance the student experience. And then got a big research grant for digital learning – which is where the money was at the time – in widening access (Figure 3).

So yeah, teaching was great, but research is where it’s at. Some colleagues spend a lot of time telling me about their teaching. But you can’t get impact with teaching. So you did your job – big deal. Do you want a medal? We’re not a school. That sounds harsh, but we need research to drive teaching because if we are not evidence-based, we are a basically a bunch of wizards traipsing about in funny costumes.

For research you need data – lots of it. You see papers with small datasets and weird qualitative methodologies. That’s basically waffle and narcissism. Although I can do qualitative too, and I think you had a question about power or excellence or something somewhere? Superpower yes – good question, by the way – my super-power would be being adaptable in research: being in the right



Name: Johan
Division: All
(Deck captain)
Super power: Kundalini
Other power: Getting
Funding
Sidekick: Mara

Figure 3. Persona Johan.

place, at the right time, with the right tool to get the funding. But also then to deliver on that. You need to deliver the outputs and get results. Teaching is different, of course, you don't want to use 'deliver' there, as that can be seen as just pushing stuff on students, and if I hear someone talking about course delivery – I gently cut them off and say: 'I'm not a milkman – I don't *deliver* milk'.

Yeah, language is key. I spent ages trying to fix this student support tool report and change all the wording basically as it was pure crap when it got to me. I could have complained and sent it back to the team, but sometimes someone needs to ... I almost used a gendered term there eh.. someone needs to just person up, quit whinging and just do it.

I was teaching two MOOCs around that time and leading several projects when my back got bad. Like I mean *really* bad, just pure pain all up and down every inch of my body. I had a pull-up bar in the doorway of my office. I would hang from that for a while and then just lie down flat on the floor dictating the report. And sometimes, I would sleep in the office on the floor, to save time commuting because the traffic was hell getting back across the city.

One morning I woke up, and it was really calm. I could hear ducks or something. I felt the smooth wood of the floor under me. The pain was still there, but I didn't care about it. Then a construction drill started outside the window, where the new swimming pool is going – at half seven in the morning! I could smell the concrete dust coming in the window, and a spasm shot up my back, from my tailbone to the crown of my head. I heard this sound like a groan coming out of me, and I lay there shaking for a while with all these muscles – these ones along here – twitching. It was kind of like I was crying but without tears or anything.

I got up, drove straight home, and told my wife I was quitting sleeping at the office. She said: That's fine, but how will you stop working when you get home? I didn't have a good answer for this because it's true, I do like to work, for maybe just an hour or two, in the evenings when I get home. So eventually, I hit upon the idea of having her bind my hands with duct tape after dinner so I couldn't access the computers or phone or anything. She would make me tea and turn on the tv and stuff for me for a while. Anyway, my back got better, and I decided to leave the Deck and go back into the Faculty full-time lecturing. I had taken the digital learning design stuff as far as it would go on my CV. The research is moving on to other things – it's all postdigital now.

At my leaving drinks thing, I told this lady ... eh.. her name is, she has a weird name like Dua Lipa or something.. Pema – yes that's it! I told Pema about my back episode, and she said, 'Sounds like you were trying to sleep with the University or something.' 'No I was sleeping *in* the University', I corrected her. 'Well either way you had a Kundalini experience', she said, and she turned her hand over and she had this tattoo of a snake on her palm. 'That is a sensitive part of the body.' I said 'that must have really hurt'. She didn't respond to this but she said: 'You have relief from some of the pain now. Mara is out of your body. However, he is still with you it seems.'

Even though this was a load of mystical woo-woo, she kind of creeped me out a bit. She's a good LD, to be fair, but all this weird stuff is well, a bit, you-know. And I think she overstepped the mark with me there too. I can't see her making it here, to be honest. Maybe that's a bit harsh – she just needs some mentoring, really, and I have tried to do that with her, as I do with all my professional services staff, but there are only so many hours in the day. Hence, one of my new projects is to do a podcast – where I can up that side of things, my mentoring role. So I can, y'know, continue to give back a little, but at scale.

Naoise

So yeah, no, I actually have no teaching background, so I have real imposter syndrome about that. I have a degree in sociology which turned out to be useless – job-wise. So I did a master's in multimedia, and for my final project, I made a game called *Ganz Andere* to teach kids about internet safety – basically it said stay offline! And that's how I got this job, ostensibly (Figure 4).

LD careers, right, right. Well we hired this one guy into the Learning Design Deck recently, and it was a *real* eye-opener. Our Professor of Micro-Ethics, Jon, calls into my office one day and asks

Name: Naoise
Division: Beginner's mind
Superpower: Trying to be himself
Other power: Designing care into the system
Sidekick: God



Figure 4. Persona Naoise.

me to serve on an interview panel. 'Oh POC, that's me', I said, raising my hand. He was kind of taken aback by this, and it was a little direct the way I said it, but I like to push back on these things because I get asked to be on interview panels *all the time*. It's thankless service work, and I don't want to be taken for granted as some kind of diversity mascot.

What I didn't say is that I actually quite enjoy it. You get a real insight into how things really work around here being in interviews, and I like meeting different people and just the general adrenaline rush of it maybe. So one candidate was good on paper, and I could see that the Prof was keen to hire him. But I had some reservations – about his mathematical ability, for a start. We needed him for this Deep AI stuff, but it was a weird role that had bits of everything in it, like tutoring and also learning design. But also, some answers he gave were, a bit I dunno – a little, all-about-him maybe, which is really hard *not* to do in interviews (which is why job interviews in general are a terrible idea).

Anyway, he was talking about being gay and a POC, and how both these things meant he had to work twice as hard as anyone else. Now I was quite shocked at this point because I thought he was White. You are *not* like me, is all I was thinking. But our Prof, Jon (who like the candidate, is also gay), stood up when the interview was over and said:

That was so powerful! He can't go back home. He needs to be here because he can't be gay and be a scientist in a Muslim country. We need to get this guy into the Deck asap. He can write up the Sweat, Timetables and Trembling study for one thing.

So I had reservations, but I had anxieties for him too. Who was going to mentor him? Or just – this sounds weird – but who was going to mind him? And where would he go from here? We had an academic career framework – be increasingly excellent at everything; a research career framework – honoured more in the breach than the observance, but for learning designers there's zilch – just sort of, be glad you work here. And no one is perfect, but once you hire someone, you commit to them, and you are in it together from then on.

Predictably enough, Prof Jon was in my office two months later to update me about the new hire. Áine, our Professor of Ingrained Personality Components, was with him. She followed Jon around like his BO or something.

'He's crap Naoise,' Jon said 'he's fucking crap!'

'You're telling me a person is a piece of excrement?' I said.

Aine smiled and chided her colleague gently, patting him on the arm, 'Jon, Jon', she said and turned to me, 'Let's put it this way Naoise – his work is not at the standard we would expect from a Grade V Senior Digital Learning Designer.'

So what has this got to do with learning design? Well, my point is: What exactly are we designing onto ourselves here before we design anything for students?

That gave me this kind of kooky idea that students should care more about their professors and their welfare. I know, the world's smallest fiddle right? You're thinking it should be the other way around: professors should be working on the problems of student debt (Cottom 2017) and textbook costs and the accommodation crisis? And yes, I agree, they should. But both things can be simultaneously true y'know? And it turns out that we have a whole division here in the Learning Design Deck working on this stuff now because there is this new theory that education is actually there to help teachers learn and grow and be better. And it's literally flipped people's minds, because if you have a high pupil-teacher ratio that is now a good thing. Because teachers get more opportunities to learn. It's kind of like a reverse therapy for teachers.

It all started with brain scans showing that older people's minds are just basically cluttered up with trash, while kids are much closer to their true essence. The challenge for adults is to try to unlearn stuff – which is really hard. The scientists couldn't figure it out for ages, but they consulted with our Non-Doing Division folks, and they just were like, *duh*, it's 'beginner's mind'! They have this idea that 'in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities but in the expert's there are few' (Suzuki 2020).

So I'm now working in the Beginner's Mind Division of the Learning Design Deck and it's amazing how far we've come. I mean, teaching is so prestigious and so hard to get into, and it used to be looked down on almost. People pay huge money trying to get on teacher education programmes because kids teach you so much.

So we have all these divisions, like Animal Aid and Beginner's Mind and then Pema doing all that sound stuff. You didn't get to interview Pema? Well, I gather it is something to do with sound being primordial – like before you have eyes to see, you hear your mother's heartbeat. Our bodies are built to process sound and produce it, but we pay so little attention in our lives to its effects on us. It's kind of common sense, right? You see a baby, and it can't talk, but it's communicating somehow with the mother all the time. So words are just like a big distraction, mostly from what's really going on. You should talk to Pema. She's great. Everyone loves Pema!

The commonality across divisions, I would say, is trying to make people more attentive. It's like God gives us this entire world to live in, but we get so crazy we allow the world to live in us (John 2021). That's the best analogy I can give. I mean, I don't like to mention God, as it marks me out as a person of faith, which is not that well tolerated in the university. On paper, it is, of course, but it's the casual jokes and little things that say: religion is not cool; if you have it just keep it to yourself please.

It's just hard to know how to fit in. Imposter syndrome, right? But sometimes, I feel, when I get that way, that my body is trying to tell me something. And the correct response may not actually be to fake it until I make it. I need to be careful: My body might be saying yes, you *are* an imposter because: do you really want to be part of *this*? It's like that phrase: 'It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society' (Kirshnamurty 1972).

And I struggled with these kinds of thoughts, and whether academia was really for me, but then sometimes, like with the project with the traveller women, when we were welcoming them on campus, and they were just so proud to be here. Forget online, the Metaverse and all that stuff. They probably live in a small, shared space and their family could even be suspicious of them going to college in the first place. So they need to come here. And it hit me that this place could be a beautiful refuge sometimes and not just contributing to more problems.

So I keep that thought with me. If I am writing an email, or putting a quiz in Moodle, or filling in a spreadsheet, or porting a class for someone from last year – I try to do it with care because I could be putting traces of things into the system otherwise.

You have these RateMyProfessor websites, but everything contributes to the picture. Like sometimes, a student is on a web page, or filling in a form and, you know what? I made that! Hopefully, I made it well. The admin staff are there too – in the front line – you just can't see us. We've been rebranded as 'professional services' staff now, but I still call myself 'admin' – it's kind of like a badge of honour. At the end of the day it's still an unhelpful binary – I mean, we are called to serve right?

Eh I'm sort of going on and on here, and maybe oversharing, so apologies. Do you have any further ... ?

My super-power? Oh wow. I don't really feel I have one. Just trying to be myself I guess. I will let you know if I ever get there ha ha!

Discussion

We next present a synthesis of a workshop discussion of the personae that was conducted with learning designers (and co-authors of this article) to validate and contextualise the stories with their own experiences. We also used this workshop to ideate an alternative speculative learning



Figure 5. Researcher sketchnote capturing group discussion.

design job description. A visual artefact of her impression of this phase of the study was captured by author three as per the sketchnote in Figure 5.

The group described Christine as a 'space maker'. She makes space for others and inhabits space to see broader pictures. Many learning designers are creative people who care about the student experience but can experience burnout working in what they feel to be 'production shops', as 'cogs in a wheel' (Patrice Torcivia Prusko 2020). Ultimately, Christine seems to escape this trap. Hence, we seek learning designers who would be space-makers and whose creativity will be accordingly recognised. Her experience has disturbing aspects. She is not properly credited for her talent or background. She toils in a caring capacity, speaks affectionately of her partner but experiences the university as a 'bad boyfriend', a master of microaggression. Hence we seek not just learning designers who care but *who will be cared for*. Learning designers must have care extended to them from the outset. This applies to the language of the advertisements themselves. As one participant put it, job advertisements for learning design often sound like a robotic enumeration of tasks, to cut and paste the applicant into a role (Figure 6).

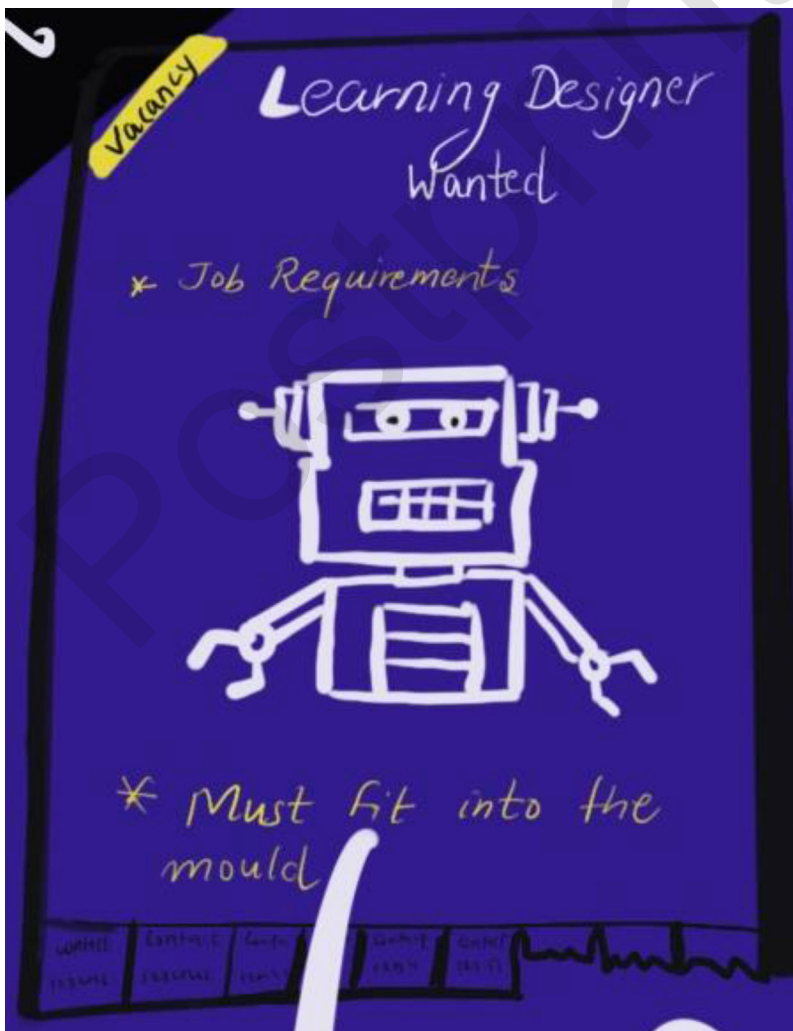


Figure 6. Robotic job descriptions.

The emergence of the robot in a learning design job advertisement calls attention to learning designers without bodies, as abstract bots constructed of skills. Christine graphically illustrates the opposite of this as someone who has experienced bodily self-harm and is further traumatised in the workplace because of her resultant scars. However, she also experiences embodiment and connection by lying on the ground. Most importantly, she speaks of brighter days of recovery and eventual recognition for her more-than-human interspecies communicative abilities.

The persona Johan, it was felt represented the notion of technical solutionism (Facer and Selwyn 2021; Weller 2015) that some new technology will magically fix and improve education. Indeed, knowledge of new technologies, the group concurred, can sometimes represent a passive-aggressive show of power. As one member role-played this version of EdTech leadership: 'I can't believe you have not heard of Quango. It's been out for three days now'. Similarly pedagogical knowledge can be seen as elite and beyond the domain of learning designers. This could be alluded to in learning design teams by an Irish/UK meme: 'that would be an ecumenical [pedagogical] matter Ted' – a phrase that implies that there are areas of knowledge that are privileged in the academy. The minimisation of the role learning designers play in teaching, and their expertise in this, diminishes team teaching and reinforces the narrative of the teacher as sage on the stage, as a lone superhero, and not simply one facet of a larger socio-material entanglement. As Arantes (2021) argues, learning designers may be seen to 'have a teacher-deficit disorder' and such narratives may be used to sell yet more EdTech solutions.

In contrast to privileged knowledge and solutionism, we seek learning designers to work on problems to which there may be no actual solutions. We seek learning designers who will 'sit with the trouble', (Haraway 2020) and question or even sometimes resist the promise of smooth digital fixes. As de la Bellacusa puts it: 'A feminist-inspired vision of caring cannot be grounded in the longing for a smooth harmonious world, but in vital ethico-affective everyday practical doings that engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences' (de la Bellacasa 2012). Education is an entanglement of place, people and things that cannot be easily unknotted (Bayne, Gallagher, and Lamb 2014; Gourlay et al. 2021a). All we can do is try to go together. Faced with a supervillain like Johan, learning designers need workplace friends (like Pema), allyship, institutional redress channels (Limas et al. 2022) and wider support because equity is neither bound by, nor limited, to the 'confines and hierarchies of formal institutions' (Zamora et al. 2021).

The persona Noaise was seen as a truth-seer. For Weil, the ability to listen and be attentive to the Other is 'a pearl so precious that it is worthwhile to sell all our possessions, keep nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it' (Weil 1973, 79). This persona could go untainted by workplace aggressions and mistreatments. Such people may stand in their own truth and speak through their actions as much as their words. Speaking through their work may be a lot of a learning designer, as it can be of a learner through learning; For Weil, there is some mysterious element to the suffering that is inherent and inevitable in life:

If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning ... Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. (Weil 1973, 120)

Hence, we seek learning designers who will suffer; who will toil to bring more light to bear in ourselves. However, this ability does not preclude an onus and a power to speak the truth at particular times, even if these utterances may be bombshells that one member described as akin to a learning designer carrying a rocket launcher poised to deliver epiphanies (Figure 7).

Recognition, support and career paths for learning design staff, emerged as key themes in our discussion. However, there is danger in focusing on 'an image of academic development as precarious and liminal [as opposed to] powerful' (Roxå and Mårtensson 2017). Career conditions must be considered within a broader picture of working conditions in Irish Higher Education where 'idealised care-free worker model operates as a care ceiling over women particularly' (Lynch et al. 2020) where racism and sexism persist (Kempny and Michael 2021; MacNeela et al. 2022) and which people navigate by many intersectionalities that mark them as not of the ideal.

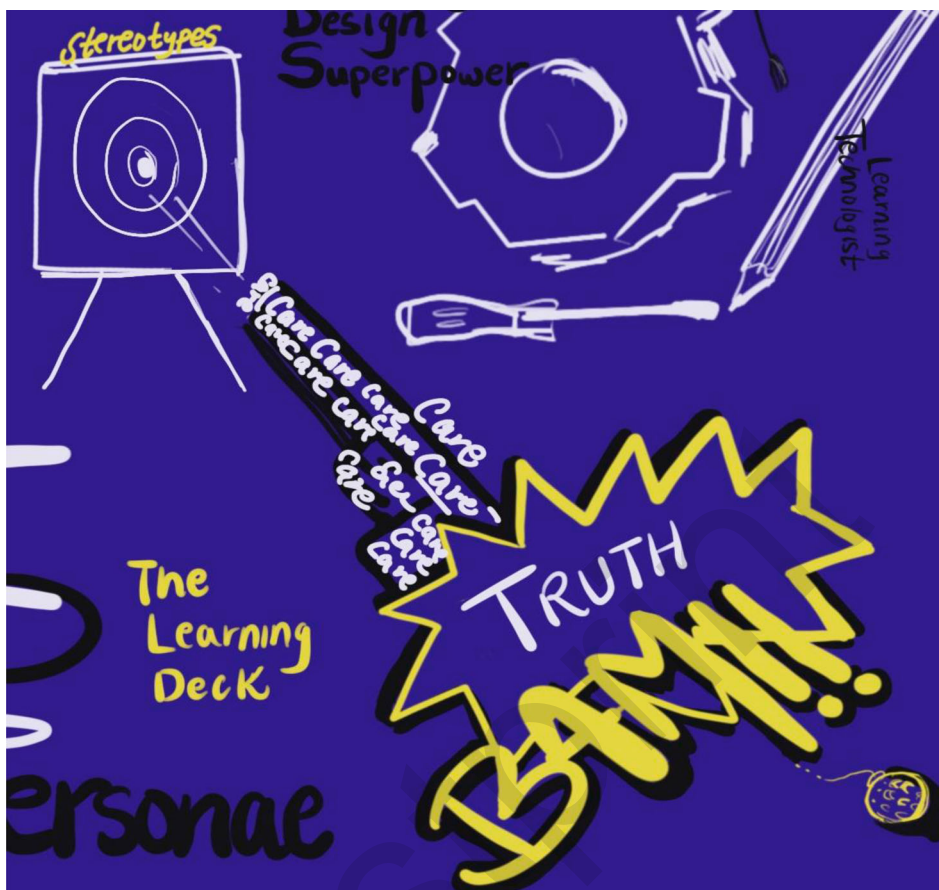


Figure 7. Epiphany bomb.

Neither the privileges nor intersectionality of the authors are discussed in this article, least of all those of the first author, the main voice, that of a white straight man. The personae are fantastical rather than representative and elide as much as they illuminate. We invoke Weil to caution that personae are ultimately selves, constructed stories, and we must use them with caution for ‘the personality is something to be distrusted. What is sacred in the human soul is everything that is impersonal ... and nothing else’ (Sharp 1984, 495).

Whilst we do not pretend that diversity is in and of itself an end game, we nonetheless seek people from different backgrounds with latent learning design superpowers. We welcome applications from failed teachers, people of different creeds and colours, fatigued academics, and people looking through strange windows on life. Key skills required: To be attentive. Attentive to yourself, to others and this natural world. A love of nature is a nice to have but not a requirement. You see, you *are* part of nature. So all you need is to love yourself. How hard can that be? Most vitally, we want you to work somewhere where we will care for you.

Conclusion

Our final participant Naoise calls to mind Simone Weil for his devout Christianity. Weil is the ultimate outsider and her religiosity is sometimes seen as something of an embarrassment, as perhaps the wrong kind of knowledge. The type of knowledge that care represents is inherently problematic

(Code 2015). But it can evade capture, we contend, as it is entangled by, and attentive to, the moment but never exists outside of it.

Here we called attention to care deficits, to micro-aggressive people, to systems that can appear unloving and unrewarding to people who work in them. The pettiness of adult human behaviours, exemplified by Jon, Áine and Johan is contrasted with Christine and Naoise, who care for animals and children. Indeed, care is seen to be critical to learning itself. Care and suffering co-arise as conceptually interdependent, yet both are curiously absent from job descriptions that typically describe learning designers. We counter this disembodied skills narrative by showing people with bodies who experience pain, and through our adoption of an ‘ethnographic sensibility, opening up educational settings in terms of the actual, situated, more-than-human “mess” of specific contexts’ (Gourlay et al. 2021b). For Weil, a core facet of our human condition is that we suffer. Springing up from just this wound is our deep capacity to care. On we go and on we suffer; with near future learning designs of care.

Epilogue

Hi there – I hope your research went well.

Oh ... it’s Naoise. Don’t apologise, most people can’t pronounce my name even if they do remember it ha ha. At least you make an effort, so thank you.

Say what? Ah I see ... The neoliberal construction of identity is relevant. Learning designers can be painted as just a bunch of skills – hard and soft. I mean, is care another construct? Am I some fabrication?

Yeah creation, wow ...

I sometimes worry that we are just the affliction of ourselves, a problem we invented to fix ...

But, as my friend Pema, says – ‘the mind creates the abyss, the heart crosses it’ (Maharaj 2017) – which I take to mean, that all of this ... is actually God’s learning design for us.

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