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# Speculative Practicescapes of Learning Design and Dreaming

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**Abstract**
This article addresses a serious issue that besets learning design: its over-reliance on frameworks that promise particular outcomes for individual learners that accord with pre-defined metrics. This is partly a function of the nature of learning design and development itself which is commonly seen as outcome-oriented activity that should benefit individual learners in specific ways. An alternative approach is adopted here which calls attention to other happenings at the heart of education, including positive emotions we experience that are made known through less measurable and more fleeting points of reference. Hence, we draw on sources such as poems and personal reflections in order not just to design learning but to dream it. The concept of a practicescape is invoked which serves not just to situate learning but to remind the learner that their learning experience only happens within the context of their finite lifetime. Seven practicescapes are presented and reflected on by the authors as a conversation framework for interrogating ideas of learning that owe more to dreams, poems, and possibilities than aims, objectives, or outcomes. Drawing on early Buddhist philosophy, the practicescapes attempt to honour particular affective states and conjure a heart-centred framework on which to hang speculative questions and provocations for learning design that are focused on cultivating and sustaining the most positive forms of human experience. These practicescapes are offered as a speculative learning design climbing frame that could take us from dreams of possibility to enlivened and embodied presents.

**Keywords** Postdigital · Speculation · Practiscape · Learning design · Dreaming · Religion · Buddhism · *Brahmavihārā*

## Introduction

> The heart has four faces. Each sees the world in a different way and speaks with a different purpose. Yet, as each aspect belongs to the same heart, they are inseparable, like the four directions of a compass. (Fronsdal 2021)

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Our affective, or feeling state inevitably impacts the quality of work we do. It seeps quietly into the ways we teach and learn. It has been said that happy teachers are rarely cruel to students (Noddings 2003). Moreover, we all want to be happy; to feel good. So why then, does life suck so much? Life is suffering, Buddhism tells us, inherently unsatisfactory, pervaded with *dukkah*, a word which can be variously translated as pain, unhappiness, suffering, unsatisfactoriness, or unease (Thera 2004). However, there is the promise of an end to suffering and we will explore one aspect of this path here, via four interlinked emotional states known as the *brahmavihārās* (Fronsdal 2021). We will use these as a springboard to explore positive aspects of our human experience that help us relate to the strangeness of our shaky, temporal existence so that we can not just design but dream learning.

Before we start, it must be acknowledged that there are critiques which warn of the co-option of Buddhist or any religious/spiritual practice into individualistic, do-it-yourself, self-help techniques. This has been seen as a form of 'neoliberal McMindfulness' (Barker 2021) that could placate and distract us from the need for collective action. The contention however that we hope to explore here, is that there is a depth of accessible Buddhist affective and imaginal practices that people of any denomination or none can draw upon and partake of, to the extent that they find them personally useful (Locke 2022).

The specific practices we draw on here revolve around four interlinked concepts known as the *brahmavihārās*. These were said to be the 'sublime abodes' or 'heavenly dwellings' of the god Brahma:

- Loving-kindness (*mettā*)
- Compassion (*karuṇā*)
- Resonant Joy (*muditā*)
- Equanimity (*upekkhā*).

What could these heart practices, formulated thousands of years ago, tell us about our contemporary condition?

Consider *muditā*. There exists no direct English translation for vicarious, empathic, or resonant joy (Baird 2021). We have no one word for taking pleasure in the happiness of someone, to which you yourself have not directly contributed. We may be more familiar with its antonym—*Schadenfreude*—joy in the misfortune of others. It seems we have a problem with the orientation of our thinking if our words are its limits. The problem is that we are often fixated upon our own happiness (or what we think is happiness). For instance, it is not hard to imagine a scholar in thrall to the dopamine fix of citations and acclaim to their published works. But imagine instead one who considers their work a bloom of citations for others, who takes as much joy in the ones they create, as in those they accrue and who takes care in which voices they amplify. The point here is that one's own successes are hard fought and time-consuming; hence, joy that is solely dependent upon them will never scale.

*Mettā*, which underpins the other *brahmavihārās*, is the adoption of a stance of friendliness and goodwill towards others—something easily accomplished

towards friends but more difficult with strangers and enemies. We know its opposite. We see around us the distrust and fear built into educational designs, discourses, and technologies to monitor attendance, detect cheating, and dispense truth serums such that we can all know each other's thoughts and intentions. Systems premised on distrust will bring most focus upon, and penalty to, those we deem most strange or other to us. They may become sexist, racist, or ableist (Birhane 2021; Costanza-Chock 2020).

This negativity bias—which primes us to scan our environment for problems and threats—will ultimately scar our own hearts. It will make our human experience more afraid and unhappy as we saturate our day with unconscious messages of fear, threat-detection, and punishment (Fredrickson 2006). Negative emotions that we privilege by writing into our learning designs, policies, and technologies, will reflect sharply back at and into us. It is akin to wearing a shirt made of barbed wire to ward off one's enemies.

Beyond mere distrust, we can actively dislike and even wish harm or ill-will towards others. This is the opposite or 'far enemy' of *mettā*. Each of the *brahmavihārās* has an obvious 'far enemy' but also a more subtle 'near enemy'. For example, in the case of compassion (*karuna*), we may easily know cruelty as its far enemy. Its near enemy, pity, can be harder to recognise. We may confuse our feeling of pity with one of genuine compassion. If you want to know the difference, just ask the receiver, for who wants to be pitied? Simone Weil (1973) alludes to such near enemies in her teaching philosophy, warning against sentimentality, impulsiveness, and pity:

> 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)

The fourth *brahmavihārā* is *upekkhā* or equanimity. Theological philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr described this well in his oft quoted plea to be gifted 'the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference' (Shapiro 2023). Equanimity is a capstone practice, tuned by the others (Joan-Halifax 2012) for only a heart that can love, suffer, and be joyful can truly find the peace of acceptance of things as they are. It is said to be 'the capacity to be in touch with suffering and at the same time not be swept away by it. It is the strong back that supports the soft front of compassion' (Joan-Halifax 2012).

The 'near enemy' of equanimity, of keeping a cool head, is indifference or apathy. The latter may be characterised in teaching work by a 'lack of intellectual demand, failure to connect, and to work with and value difference' (Lingard and Mills 2007). Both are characterised by stillness but indifference connotes numbness, whilst equanimity is to be alive to non-action, to allow the world to slow down enough to touch it. These concepts of the far and near enemies give us ways to see where key positive emotions are obviously absent, but also, more insidiously, where they may be misapplied, weaponised, or co-opted—see for example the weaponisation of care (Bali and Zamora 2022; Caines 2021).

**Fig. 1** The *brahmavihārās* and their enemies by Irina Grigorescu (CC BY 4.0)

Figure 1 gives an overview of these four 'immeasurable' or sublime concepts and how they relate to their near and far enemies. In the next section we discuss speculative approaches and how they relate to the concept of practicescapes which we will use to frame and situate some of the affective concepts we have just touched on.

## Practicescapes of Learning Design and Dreaming

Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (Lorde 1993)

The recent speculative turn in postdigital education has given rise to a flourishing of writings that tell stories and science fictions of education and its futures (Bayne et al. 2022; Bozkurt et al. 2023; Costello et al. 2022; Garcia and Mirra 2023; Houlden and Veletsianos 2022; Macgilchrist et al. 2020; Ross 2022; Selwyn et al. 2020; Suoranta et al. 2022). Speculative forms, it is argued, can allow the individual to respond to wider social problems from the deep wellspring of their own personal critical imaginal enquiry. In this way, Benjamin (2019) enjoins her readers to cultivate a deep and bold private imagination:

You the reader are encouraged to explore the edges of your own imagination—the border patrols others have imposed, as well as the monitoring sys-

tems you may have installed yourself, including those gatekeepers squatting in the nooks and crannies of your thinking, forcing you down certain pathways and telling you to avoid others. How can we expect to change social structures when we continue to nurture the same habits of mind in our mental structures? (Benjamin 2019: 11)

To further explore this linking of social and personal imaginations, we adopt the concept of a 'practicescape' which is articulated by scholar of Chinese mediaeval Buddhism Adamek (2021) as 'a landscape shaped by practice but also designed to facilitate the escape from worldly ways of living—ultimately, even from the cycle of birth and death itself'. Although our purpose is not to make overt soteriological claims, we nonetheless value this account of a practicescape for two reasons. Firstly, it is valuable in its portrayal of the inseparability of daily lived practices and liberation, that freedom is already here with what we already have. Secondly, it is useful for its contemplation of death, transience, and human finitude which can provide helpful waymarks to increased freedom and happiness as we will explore below.

For our purposes we use practicescape to play upon, and with, the word 'practice' itself. In an educational practicescape, we find the dependable repetition of something (a practice), which is the design of that which might allow us access to something unexpected, something that we are wholly unprepared for, something which cannot be practised. This indeterminate aspect of a practicescape, it is not-yetness (Collier and Ross 2017), is important because learning design can be problematic if it comes to be seen as an instrument to ensure educational outcomes (McDonald 2021). In order not to stray too far into solutionism, and retain an orientation of design humility (Latour 2008), we use the word dream in tandem with design.

Dream is a verb from the speculative design lexicon (Houlden and Veletsianos 2022), and in pairing design with dreaming, we endeavour to soften educational instrumentalism at least a little, so as to encourage more expansive ways we can think together. Forms of expansive thinking with others can also counter the tendency, indeed sometimes the function, of design to abstract, for in the process of this abstraction, feelings, moods, and emotions may be discarded as extraneous details. Dreams can help us weave the affective back in, as necessary surplus rather than uncomfortable details.

One way we introduce dreamlike elements to the praticescapes that follow is through poetry. We proceed from the standpoint that 'poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change.' (Lorde 1993) Poetry can be a non-scientific and non-rational type of knowing and of knowledge representation but can also have practical implications for psychological wellbeing (Croom 2015). Several of the practicescapes are rooted in poems. Several were developed through reflections on teaching practice or speculative propositions.

The first author developed initial drafts of seven practicescapes around issues that arose in his practice that appeared to pose some intractable and knotted essence of a learning environment that he could not fully understand. In each

practicescape, a short invitation to pedagogical intention or orientation is offered. Co-authors, who had written or spoken about some aspect of these knots, were then invited to help further depict them through reflective commentary or thought experiment. The seven practicescapes are:

- Practicescape 1: Dreams of The Snake Circle-Turning.
- Practicescape 2: Trust-Centric Learning Environment Audits.
- Practicescape 3: Dreams of The Voiceless.
- Practicescape 4: Dreams of An Edtech Supply-Chain Link.
- Practicescape 5: Design Time in Edtech Graveyards.
- Practicescape 6: Dreams of An Edtech Cathedral Mason.
- Practicescape 7: A Deathbed Dream of Love in All Its Guises.

What follows is a description of each practicescape and associated commentaries.

## The Seven Practicescapes

### Practicescape 1: Dreams of The Snake Circle-Turning

An increasing body of research indicates that being grateful is a key way to feel happy; a building block of goodwill practice (McCullough et al. 2002). Hence, we start here. You are thanked for reading this. Thanks is a practice of non-doing, such as a prayer before a meal, a silent moment to acknowledge our interconnectedness, or any reminder that we are part of a web of conditions that presents everything to us (Fig. 2). How could we honour such practices in classrooms in befitting ways? Are there parts of our learning environments, classroom walls, or Internet pipes, that we take for granted, that we could touch or see for a moment so as to be grateful for the craft, care, and industry of all the people who cooperated to create them? What if we could try to give more thanks to the scale of the problems that have been already solved for us, in a myriad of ways, than the ones we think we face?

The research methodology of appreciative inquiry has corollaries here as it was developed in reaction to our compulsion to solve problems for other people. It asks us instead to begin by honouring the existing solutions of participants, in conditions however precarious. The call here, is not to any such methodology or practice per se however. You the reader, are simply asked to consider the poem 'The Morning Walk' by Oliver (2004).
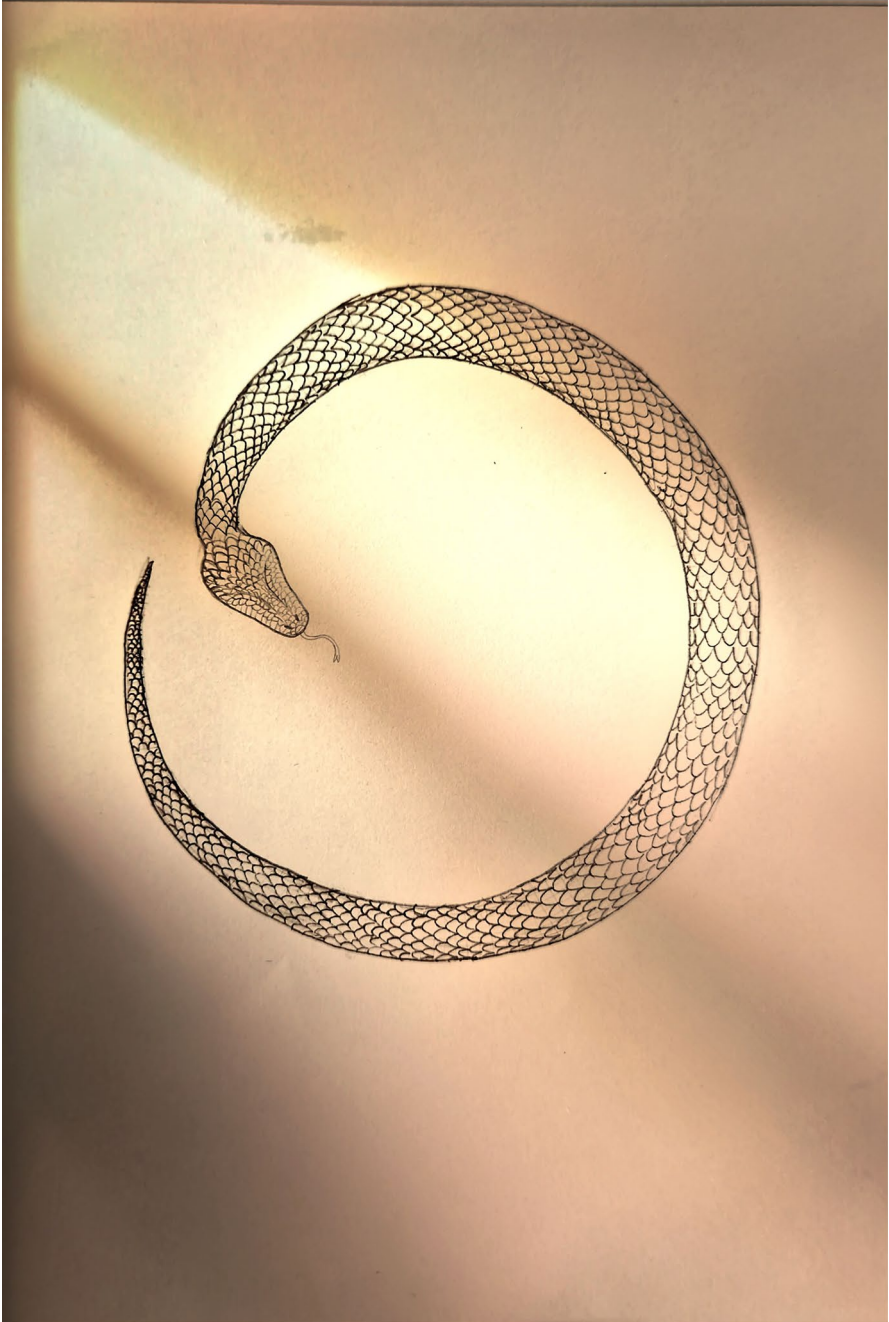
**Fig. 2** Dreams of the Snake by Irina Grigorescu (CC BY 4.0)

**The Morning Walk**
There are a lot of words meaning thanks.
Some you can only whisper.
Others you can only sing.
The pewee whistles instead.
The snake turns in circles,
the beaver slaps his tail
on the surface of the pond.
The deer in the pinewoods stamps his hoof.
Goldfinches shine as they float through the air.
A person, sometimes, will hum a little Mahler.
Or put arms around old oak tree.
Or take out lovely pencil and notebook to find a few touching, kissing words.
(Oliver 2004: 87)

Now ask yourself: What will my thanks be and how will I express it? How will I weave gratitude into the things I do, such that I model ways that call students to an appreciation of their learning environments?

## Practicescape 2: Trust-Centric Learning Environment Audits

Under a cherry tree
There are no strangers (Issa 2015)

This practicescape explores how distrust is expressed in educational spaces. It proceeds from two visual prompts. Figure 3 is a photo taken in a teaching space where author one was working. It warns students that eating and drinking are not allowed.

As per Fig. 3, students are regularly confronted with stark prohibitions. Obvious examples are the plagiarism and academic integrity alerts in course webpages. These are often some of the first signs that students see upon entering these spaces. They carry implications about whether students are to be trusted or are indeed trustworthy. This is not to say that there can be blind trust, or that we do not need to hold each other accountable for building shared worlds. Instead, the invitation here is simply to reflect on the feelings we get from messages that hang in our environments and to which we are regularly exposed.

In Fig. 3 the sign was temporary, a hastily erected paper annotation designed to prevent an undesirable behaviour. The next image is a more permanent and visceral type of hostile architecture. In Fig. 4, spikes protrude from a chimney so that birds cannot land on it. These spikes are aimed to deter the noisy presence of birds and their droppings. In the foreground of the picture a turtle dove, on a non-spiked chimney, looks on. The question arises: Which is the more desirable vista, a piercing array of spikes, or birds? Do we wish to be with fellow beautiful messy beings or lifeless armour? Do we wish to accentuate 'alienation devices' and 'ways by which we are allegedly being kept safe by not being in contact with one another' (Ross and Macleod 2018)? Can we become more aware, in educational spaces, of the 'policies
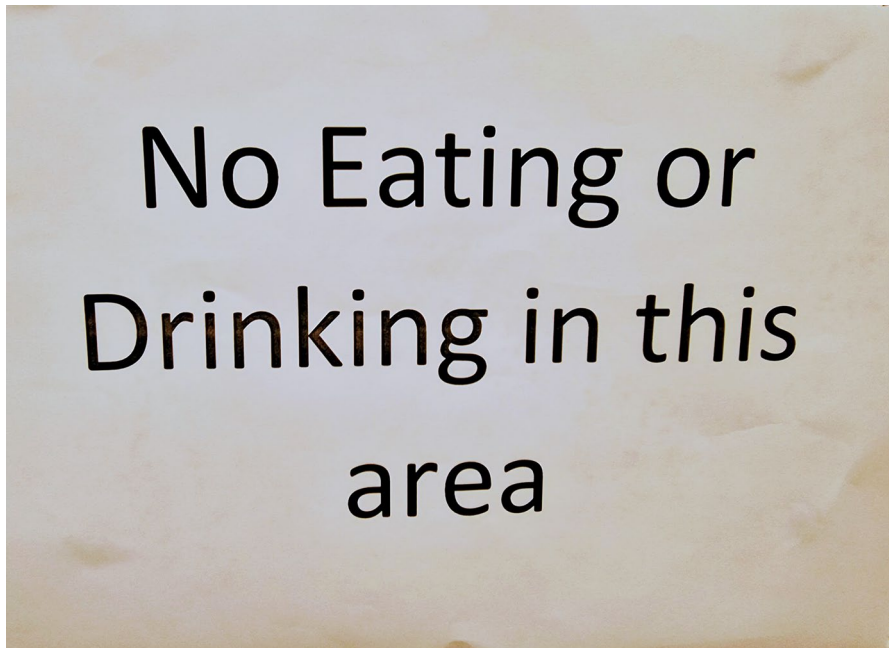
**Fig. 3** No eating or drinking

overseeing the most mundane aspects of social life that act like so many skewers' (Benjamin 2019)?

Students are invited to consider the two visual prompts above and then conduct 'trust audits' of their learning environments in which they simply label signs and signals that they see as either *trusting* or *untrusting*. In the context of trust, they are invited to then ask: What feelings do signs and notices in my learning spaces give me and why? How do we hold ourselves accountable for building shared worlds?

## Practicescape 3: Dreams of the Voiceless

This practicescape draws on the concept of compassion and asks whether we can balance justice with mercy (equanimity). It goes on however to problematize this concept by alluding to apathy—the near enemy of equanimity—and ends by inviting an alternative dream of the past, to show that it is never too late for voices from the margins to be heard.

We start with the Biblical parable of a father who had two sons: one was one dutiful and hard-working and the other was a thrill-seeking spendthrift known as *the prodigal*. When this second wayward son returned home, from a reckless misadventure, the father embraced him warmly, much to the annoyance of the loyal and hardworking son. The moral, it would seem, is that life is unfair and we should show compassion and forgiveness to those who lose their way. If the story works, it is because we sympathise with the dutiful son, who has been playing by the book—for we always think ourselves

**Fig. 4** Anti-roosting spikes by Liam Costello (CC BY 4.0)

to be the 'good guy'. It speaks to sibling rivalries, the petty jealousies we feel towards our co-worker, the unfairness of their unmerited status and success. This jealousy, the *brahmavihārās* tell us, is the far enemy of *mudita* (vicarious joy).

However, the story does not work for everyone. Consider instead Alison Funk's (2020) speculative reimagining of the parable that calls our attention to whose story was not being told:

**The Prodigal's Mother Speaks to God**
When he returned a second time,
the straps of his sandals broken,
his robe stained with wine,
it was not as easy to forgive.
By then his father
was long gone himself,
leaving me with my other son, the sullen one
whose anger is the instrument he tunes
from good morning on.
I know.
There's no room for a man
in the womb.
But when I saw my youngest coming from far off,
so small he seemed, a kid
unsteady on its legs.
She-goat
what will you do? I thought
remembering when he learned to walk.
Shape shifter! It's like looking through water—
the heat bends, it blurs everything: brush, precipice.
A shambles between us. (Funk 2020)

This beautiful reboot of the parable of the prodigal son tells of a mother picking up the pieces of addiction and co-dependency. She grapples with the boundaries or limits that care might have. The original story featured four men: God, the father, and the two sons. Funk's (2020) retelling, by a woman, honours some essence of the original but not the patriarchal society it was a product of.

Following Funk's (2020) poem, this practicescape calls teachers and students to imagine the history of learning theory and of instructional/learning design in alternative ways. Current educational canons, by simple virtue of who are in them, can contribute to the reproduction of classed, raced, and gendered inequities in higher education. But let us imagine otherwise. Imagine a practicescape that challenges students to read Alison Funk's poem carefully and then come up with their own speculative re-telling of an educational learning theory from someone *who had no voice in the original*. The question posed to students in this case is: Can we honour useful ideas from the past, about how and why people learn, but also listen carefully for the songs of the voiceless, of prodigal mothers who spoke to God?

## Praticescape 4: Dreams of An Edtech Supply Chain Link

> A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (Einstein in Sullivan 1972)

If we look at the movement of care in ourselves, we will see that it is bounded. This is a natural part of being human. We care according to attachments developed over time and in proximities. The concept of *metta* posits care as immeasurable and the practices of *metta* are designed to cultivate ways to widen the circle of our care. Ultimately, we try to widen them to include people and beings we have never met and never will (Burbea 2010). Hence in this practicescape, we attempt to open ourselves to the people of supply chains of which we are a part.

Consider, for example, essay mills. These mills may provide a source of income for people who write the essays. The discourse however around essay mill work is often tinged with racism, of moral panics, about a malevolent other in a distant land (Draper et al. 2021). Although we may need to make what feel like difficult decisions in our work-life, we should always try to make space for compassion when fear starts constricting us. We should hold in our thoughts the people who toil as links in all of the supply chains that we directly or indirectly create. We should seek ways to depict them in our work.

The invitation here is to engage in ways of seeing that lovingly depict people in EdTech supply chains, the unseen labour that goes into our technologies, the clickworkers training AIs (Dzieza 2023), those essential workers we do not want to think about (Press 2021). Practices might be as simple as learning the name of the person who serves you your coffee or as detailed as a project that dives deep into the production origins and labour conditions of a learning technology or service.

## Practicescape 5: Design Time in EdTech Graveyards

One of the keys to feeling good is letting go; relinquishing our grip on ideas, thoughts, and feelings when they become unhelpful. To this end we should regularly contemplate the transience of all the stuff we believe our professional world to be. As a bulwark to the stress of high impact we should contemplate uncited scholarship (Arnesen et al. 2020). We can take a walk on the shores of the great sea of research that people invested time and effort into that has gone unloved and unheralded, watch each article sinking slowly in the academic record, never to be read or recognised.

Similarly, we can take a walk every now and then in an EdTech graveyard. Inventories of EdTech tools from three, five, ten, or fifteen years ago can be such places. We can go there to count which ones no longer exist or are barely used anymore. We can contemplate the apps that are indispensable to our work today that did not exist

five years ago and then note that these too will pass. We can think of opening all of the drawers and cupboards full of unused and obsolete devices (Selwyn 2021; Cormier at al. 2019). We should think about the 'dead' of EdTech and find time to walk with them regularly. We can try to deepen into the peace of seeing these graveyards as vast fields, stretching out behind us like an infinite sea of souls.

Only after wandering down these peaceful walkways for a while can we stop and ask: Does the vastness of these quiet places not dwarf the tiny pockets of hype in which we spend most of our time (Jandrić 2023)?

### Practicescape 6: Dreams of A Cathedral Mason

As metrics, impact factors, and performance indicators are dangled before us, how can we be happier in and with our work? The set-up is such that we are conditioned to believe our impact will be here and now. Mediaeval cathedral masons, by contrast, might labour knowing they would never live to see their works finished, for cathedrals were intergenerational projects raised towards something greater. Cathedrals did not belong to a named artist, architect, or influencer in the way much creative and intellectual work now does. There was no space on the stone canvas for a signature. It was the workers who collectively belonged to their mutual enterprise as they trained their thoughts upwards towards the biggest picture of all.

As I wrote these words I was consumed with angst over their worth. Are these words great? Or terrible? The twin thoughts, circling each other, that I myself might be great or terrible, often consumed me. I was consoled by knowing that I work, as a cathedral mason does, on but one face of one stone of the scholarly project. I work on only one word at any given time. And, once I have worked on several words, I must pass them on. When, where, or how they will be received is unknowable.

Learning design is like this, for it is an illusion that the eventual learning outcomes can ever be under our control (McDonald 2021). All we work on are beginnings which others may then encounter. If they do not reject our beginnings, they may respond with 'something new … which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before' (Arendt 2018: 177).

We end this practicescape with a poem by the nineteenth-century poet Longfellow (1998):

**The Builders**
All are architects of Fate,
Working in these walls of Time;
Some with massive deeds and great,
Some with ornaments of rhyme.
Nothing useless is, or low;
Each thing in its place is best;
And what seems but idle show
Strengthens and supports the rest.
For the structure that we raise,
Time is with materials filled;
Our to-days and yesterdays

Are the blocks with which we build.
Truly shape and fashion these;
Leave no yawning gaps between:
Think not, as no man or woman sees,
Such things will remain unseen.
In the elder days of Art,
Builders wrought with greatest care
Each minute and unseen part;
For the Gods see everywhere. (Longfellow 1998)

## Practicescape 7: A Deathbed Dream of Love in All Its Guises

Things are not as they appear, nor are they otherwise. (Lankavatara Sutra)

In this final practicescape we contemplate love, but we never say its name. Instead, we simply interpolate between life and death, so as to create a space into which everything, including love, can arise.

We are finite, yet the number of things we feel are important, that we could or should do, is effectively infinite (Burkeman 2021). Technology is a device of this infinity, telling us that we can do things faster; learn better; teach more efficiently, effectively, and accessibly. It promises that we can digitise, transform, chunk, and credential what we do in a myriad of ways and thus detain ourselves from the one thing that is certain—death.

Everything brings us closer to death. The recognition of this certainty happens all of the time, but its consequences can be hard to sit with. As Burkeman (2021: 95) puts it: 'When you pay attention to something you do not especially value it is not an exaggeration to say you are paying with your life.'

What then should we value? It is not certain which things are valuable, for value only makes itself known in retrospect. As we spend our time and give our attention, value has yet to accrue and we are simply working. At this point teaching is just teaching, learning is just learning, desire is just desire and dying is just dying.

In this sense we are always on our deathbed. As we sit on its side, our achievements crumble behind us. Their dust drifts forward into the future. We reach into this dust and create new learning experiences. They materialise right as we craft them. Then, after a while, they too will change and disintegrate.

As we sit, from time to time, feelings of sadness may come into the body. Each sadness cannot learn anything and has nothing to teach us. Each one is a beautiful feeling that can live for a while. Each is a guest. Each one has no explicit form or function. Each one cannot be altered or directed. We have no designs for them because sometimes there is nothing to learn. At this point, sadness is not sadness, teaching is not teaching, learning is not learning, desire is not desire, and dying is not dying.

## Discussion

The first author of this text so far is set to fade back at this juncture in order to admit more voices to contextualise the discussion of these practicescapes. Authors whose work had informed or inspired the practicescapes, or who work in related areas of critical EdTech, were invited to respond and keep weaving or unravelling the speculative practicescapes presented. The invitation welcomed a discussion of any implications for theory or practice, a commentary on any relevance of a particular practicescape to them and their work, and any suggestions as to how a particular practicescape could be extended or deepened.

### From Shallow Glories to Deeper Creative Force (Jason McDonald)

Popular discourse around educational innovation seems to be caught up in the myth of the heroic designer (Kimbell 2011; Lourens 2015). In this myth, our world – including education – is fundamentally broken, and needs designers to sweep in to apply their magical design thinking process. Designers have insights that no one else has, so the story goes, and through their creativity, ingenuity, and powers of empathy and ideation, will offer us products that radically transform teaching and learning (for examples, see (Korkmaz 2018; Nelson and Palumbo 2014). At least until the next round of entrepreneurs emerge, and design yet another generation of EdTech that sets out to fix what the last somehow never actually managed to put right.

Practicescape 6: Dreams of A Cathedral Mason offers at least two insights to help temper this myth, and imagine more useful forms of design that contribute towards meaningful educational renewal. First, when we conceptualise ourselves as cathedral masons, we see that our role is best understood as one link in a chain of actors who care about education; a chain that existed long before we were involved and will extend far, far beyond any efforts we contribute. We can, and should, offer our best part. But that part will never be more than a beginning to others' efforts (McDonald 2021). Will we artificially inflate our role by imagining ourselves as the one with the impressive creative insight that finally lays to rest problems that have vexed education for generations? Even those lucky enough to make significant contributions would do well to remember that they always build on the insights of others, and however impressive their results, those results will eventually need renewal of their own (Ingold 2013).

Second, the practicescape should also draw our attention to the ends towards which we should be aiming. Whilst recognising that reality was much more complex (bound up in unavoidable political and economic concerns), at least the dream was that a cathedral was a gift that a community offered to their God. It should not have been for the masons' personal glory or to acquire inordinate fame. In our age of rock star designers, or so-called 'visionaries', who are viewed as helping 'humanity process its relationship to new technology' (Eskilson 2023), it is important to be reminded that the aim of educational change is more inspiring, more impressive, and more important, than any celebrity status we could attain for ourselves. When

seen in its existential light as the way we free people to 'exist … in their own right' (Biesta 2021), education is as important as the ends towards which the cathedral masons were aiming. Playing our part in that, big or small, can be more fulfilling than becoming the Jony Ive[1] of EdTech.

Of course, there is design scholarship that does align with these ideals, so what I am advancing here is not unprecedented (for example, see Rosén et al. 2022; Key et al. 2022). Yet consistent with the poetic nature of the rest of this article, instead of referring to them, I end with a meditation from the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien (1977) that expresses something of the same. Speaking of the creative forces in his imaginative world of Middle-Earth (called the Valar), he wrote: 'it is the necessity of [the Valar's] love, that their power should … be contained and bounded in the World, to be within it for ever, until it is complete, so that they are its life and it is theirs'(Tolkien 1977: 12). As they went about their work of creating a world worthy to meet its other inhabitants, the Valar found that, 'though nowhere and in no work was their will and purpose wholly fulfilled, and all things were in hue and shape other than [they] had first intended, slowly nonetheless the Earth was fashioned and made firm'. May we in EdTech approach our work with the same sense of devotion, patience, commitment, and care.

## Reclaiming, Recentring, and Rehabilitating Voices (Felicitas Macgilchrist)

When I read the practicescape on 'Dreams of The Voiceless', my thoughts spun in two different directions. The first train of thought went to those people sometimes thought to be voiceless who are (re-)claiming their voices. In Alison Funk's (2020) poem, it is a woman, a mother, who is voicing her thoughts and feelings. Reflecting on the canon of academic literature, the 'gender citation bias' is now widely recognised. Many scholars attend thoughtfully to their citation practices, actively seeking out a more diverse set of perspectives. Citation bias goes, of course, beyond binary gender categories, for scholars who inhabit or are assigned to different (intersectional) identity categories. Slowly, this awareness of citational bias is being materialised in publications and events.

This first train of thought also took me beyond the voices of academics. The people, as well as the critters and minerals, involved in producing and recuperating hardware and software for education, have long been silent in writing on educational technology (from the clickworkers detoxifying social media or AI and the people recuperating hardware from rubbish dumps, to the minerals being mined for batteries and the water required for data centres). These human and more-than-human voices are being (re)centred in recent eco-justice-centred writing or writing on the planetary scale of edtech (Macgilchrist et al. 2021; Selwyn 2023).

A second train of thought turned to the 'shambles' of learning theory, hinted at above. What opens up if we reimagine the history of learning theory, and not only deconstruct canonical classed, raced, and gendered texts, but read and discuss other voices outwith the canon? And what happens with the opposite move, if we

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[1] Jony Ive is Apple's famous former chief design officer and individual often personally credited with Apple's iconic style.

rehabilitate theories deemed unseemly from today's more widespread learning theories? I appreciate recent critiques that much EdTech is bringing back behaviourist learning theories in the guise of 'interactive', 'personalised', 'adaptive', 'playful' apps (Watters 2023; Bock et al. 2023; Heath et al. 2023; Knox et al. 2020). The EdTech industry promises 'innovation'. When we unpack these apps and services, we find learning theories from the 1960s.

I would like, nevertheless, to spend a moment with those voiceless users who find a guilty pleasure in repetitive apps with immediate gratification. Or the teachers who know they have behaviourist elements in the midst of their constructivist or explorative lesson plans. I remember sitting in the 1990s in the computer lab in a basement at the University of Edinburgh, using a website for learning German grammar. It had been developed by someone at the university, and looked more like MS-DOS than anything motivational. For about a month it helped me learn more grammar than the books I owned but had rarely used. At the time of writing, Duolingo claims to have 83.1 million monthly active users, and Mondly 110 million users. Learning a language is more than learning vocabulary and grammar, but for those aspects, these websites and apps appeal to many language learners.

The central problem prioritised in the critical research cited above is that the EdTech industry makes all-encompassing promises, yet imagines students as versions of Pavlov's dogs. These industry narratives formulate a capitalist and neoliberal critique of public schooling as old-fashioned and out of touch with students. Sufficient research has demonstrated the opposite: that teachers already personalise and adapt their teaching for their students, that human relationships are crucial to learning, and that more structural resources for schools and deeper reflection on colonial ways of knowing lead to greater equity for learners.

What if the EdTech industry marketed their apps like the advertising executive in the film *Crazy People* (Bill and Young 1990) instead? He has a crisis and starts making truthful claims about the products he is supposed to be advertising. 'Volvo: Boxy but good.' The equivalent would be something like '[App Name]: Behaviourist drills, but kind of fun for a few minutes'. This rehabilitates behaviourism as a resource that is suited to a limited set of learning situations, but is very well suited to precisely those learning situations. Not innovative, not personalised. The EdTech industry would position itself as reproductive, rather than revolutionary, with its claim that drill helps, at least until education systems move away from high-stakes testing.

Perhaps this is one way of honouring a useful idea from the past, about how and why some people learn some things. If we listen for these learners' voices about very specific learning moments and goals, we rehabilitate behaviourist learning theory whilst simultaneously putting it in its place.

## To Learn from Own Mistakes (Petar Jandrić)

I have thought and written about relationships between scholarly research, myth, religion, and feeling, for what now seems like an eternity. And I often wondered: How much of this interest is 'scholarly'? And how much of this interest is indeed 'mine'?

Answering the first question, I once wrote: 'Humans are not only beings of logic and emotion—we are also beings of myth and faith.' (McLaren and Jandrić 2020: 255) Answering the second question, I noted 'a huge debt of gratitude to all people who passed through my life as a person and as a scholar (not that the two are exactly distinguishable). Recognising this debt of gratitude is not only about good manners; it is an epistemic necessity.' (Jandrić 2019: 277) Walking my own talk, acknowledgement sections in my books and articles name many important people who helped me become who I am: family, mentors, friends, authors I've met only through their works, and many others.

Anyone who has tried and write a book acknowledgement knows the accompanying stress and anxiety. What if I miss someone important? What if they get annoyed by my omission? This is why many acknowledgements end with a general statement such as '… and all others whom I failed to mention'. Today, I would like to focus exactly on those whom we regularly fail to mention; people from brief, oft-forgotten encounters, who have nevertheless left some important traces on our thinking.

On the first day of freshman week, I was standing in a long queue in front of the Student Registrar, with a pile of enrolment papers. This was my second visit to the School of Physics (after the dreaded Entrance Exam) and the first one as a 'real' student. The queue was standing still for what seemed like an eternity. I asked a neighbour to keep my spot in the queue and lurked into the hot room packed with people. Semi-erect in her large chair, radiating a deadly combination of importance and impatience, a blonde 50-something lady with tired eyes vociferated: 'I cannot glue the photo of Sai Baba to your Transcript of Records!' Opposite the desk, a guy in an orange gown and leather sandals quietly but persistently replied: 'But I'm telling you for the millionth time – Sai Baba teaches that we are all One!'

I never saw that guy again, yet this scene has remained with me for the rest of my life. Over the years, I used the story of my first day at the university in pubs and water-cooler conversations to show off my 'cool' life. Look how crazy my university was back in the day! Today, this admission fills me with shame. After three decades of ridicule, I'm finally trying to make things up and learn from our encounter.

My fellow freshman had clearly messed up categories; Sai Baba's 'we are One' has nothing to do with using the same photo in our identifying documents. Nevertheless, it was just cruel that he was not allowed to read Physics because he failed to acknowledge the schism between administration and (wrongly interpreted) belief. It was cruel of me to ridicule him in pubs and around watercoolers. Such cruelty was not just wrong; it also closed down my thinking, placing my colleague into a written-off drawer. Compassion, on the other hand, is not just the right thing to do; it also opens up a myriad of important questions. How did this guy end up in such a situation? What, if anything, was wrong with his thinking? What can I do to avoid similar mistakes in the future?

It is only recently, that I started to think about that guy with compassion. Morally, it feels good; epistemically, it helps me learn and grow. Today, I would like to publicly announce my previous mistakes and compassionately acknowledge the importance of that unknown guy in an orange gown and leather sandals for my own intellectual development. I apologise for using him to obtain a minute of fame in drunken pub conversations, and I express my sincere gratitude for teaching me an important lesson.

Reflecting on influences on my own work, I often referred to 'elephants in the room': big, obvious facts such as religious education, war childhood, and so on. Small things, such as my ten-second encounter with the guy in an orange gown and leather sandals, tend to escape beyond the radar – even if regularly and fondly remembered over the course of thirty years. Yet who can say, which encounter is more important than the other? And who can say, which encounter will teach us a more important lesson?

The *brahmavihārās* do not recognise big and small, more and less important; an insight revealed in one's dream is just as valuable as an insight resulting from data and calculations. A memory of a ten-second encounter has impacted me more powerfully than reading many academic books on relationships between science and religion. An honest acknowledgment of this impact is the least I can do to make a tiny step closer to understanding my own work. A sincere public apology is the least I can do to try and avoid similar happenings in the future. As epistemic and moral necessities, such practices can both improve our work and make us better people—needless to say, for as long as we do not confuse concepts such as 'we are One' with the realities of life such as identification documents!

## Towards Distrusting Distrust (Henrietta Carbonel)

As suggested in Practicescape 2: Trust-Centric Learning Environment Audits, I started with a 'trust audit' of the learning environments I engage in. Some signs and signals are manifestly trusting; the warm greetings from the people in the building or on the LMS, bags lying around without supervision, or the invitations to attend a number of events in all different fields, on-campus or online. Others clearly express distrust; such as the locked rooms or floors requiring a pass or invitation to enter, the two-step authentication to download a document, the compulsory acceptance of a plagiarism check before uploading an assignment, and the online proctoring imposed for exams. Some signals, such as learning analytics, are hidden, but students know they exist as they accept that their data be collected and used when entering university although they do not know precisely what the data consists of or how it may be used. Examples of hidden control include the monitoring of questions by the teacher before they are released in the chat or, again, the administrative rights in the LMS that limit the students' role to that of a user rather than an equal actor in the learning space.

What do students feel when faced with these signals? Most students say little, as the choice is often between accepting the control or not entering the university. Once in the university, fighting the system takes time and is not most students' priority.

Moreover, they may worry about negative repercussions if they lodge a complaint or do not comply. When students are asked about their feelings, there is a diversity of reactions. Lee and Fanguy (2022) note that many students are happy with the control as they feel it is fairer, especially in the highly competitive environment of South Korean universities. Many probably feel relieved that their admin rights are limited so that they do not inadvertently delete someone else's work or a whole module. However, Ross and Macleod (2018: 240) recount their experience with 'students expressing anxiety, fear of judgement, and resistance' when digital data practices are made visible. Often off the record, students have been speaking up against online proctoring about their anger at not being recognised as being even present in the room, especially black women, the violation of privacy, or the shame of crying or throwing up on a shared video (Chin 2021).

Many students have internalised the rules and, as described by Foucault (1975), act according to what the teachers and institutions expect from them. As Lyon (2017) notes, surveillance has become normalised to the point where we no longer expect privacy and sometimes even ask for more surveillance. However, the feeling of distrust remains. When teachers and institutions systematically use plagiarism detection software or online proctoring services, they signal that they do not believe students will show academic integrity. This is problematic as the educational relationship requires trust for students to feel safe, take risks, collaborate, share ideas, and accept feedback (Dewey 2009). Moreover, distrust tends to be biassed and self-fulfilling, undermining the autonomous motivation to be honest when wrongly treated as untrustworthy (D'Cruz 2020).

International students, particularly Chinese students, are more often accused of cheating and plagiarism than local students. However, practices need to be understood in the context of Chinese cultural norms, such as building relationships, reciprocity, and respect for the elders and professors (Chen and Macfarlane 2015). Academic integrity, as defined in the Western world, can be learned but needs to be taught. Assuming dishonesty and believing students to be untrustworthy comes with a cost. I do not suggest that teachers and institutions trust all students. However, as the partners with the most power and the role of educators, we should not distrust students a priori but work to build a trusting relationship (Scheman 2020). As D'Cruz (2020: 48) suggests, we should monitor our feelings of trust and distrust and 'be distrustful of our own distrustful attitudes'. Trust implies taking a risk and being vulnerable.

In education, you cannot separate the goals from how they are achieved. '[M] oral means contribute qualitatively to the very character … of the goals which they produce.' (Carr 1992: 249). Should students comply or question the world, including their teachers and university? Should universities further a surveillance culture and commodification of student work or encourage students to be critical? We must move away from the technology race trying to catch students cheating towards a culture supporting and modelling ethical behaviours, including academic integrity. Can we create learning spaces such as those under the cherry blossom, in Tokyo or Berlin, where we are no longer strangers and can build a trusting relationship to teach and learn?

## Community and Mattering (Sally Crighton)

The first author notes an urgent need for affective, human-centred development fashioned from an inner phosphorescence that sustains us through the darkest of times. Hence in response to Practicescape 2: Trust-Centric Learning Environment Audits, I share thoughts from a research study aiming to explore and foster *joie de vivre* in professional practice, in the spirit of *mettā* loving-kindness. Inspired by Liebling's work in prisons (Liebling 2019; Liebling et al. 2010), appreciative inquiry was chosen as an approach in my research to foreground participants' who feel their voices are scarcely heard. Belonging to a community and actual human connection were unanimously cited as the peak experience sought by participants: 'I think the whole belonging thing is so important. And feeling that you properly belong rather than you're just a little hired hand. (Jack, research participant).

Clues such as the pejorative 'just a little hired hand' from Jack, however, offered a glimpse into a sense of marginalisation. An appreciative inquiry accentuates the positive yet doesn't overlook the negative. With vicissitudes of organisational and societal change our early sensemaking journey was collectively perceived as being less walk-in-the-park than science-fiction landscape and what-to-do-in-a-combat situation. The appreciative lens allowed space for the earlier mentioned personal critical imaginal enquiry (Benjamin 2019) to highlight these changing perspectives. As research participant Joy mused:

> I'm imagining we're on a planet somewhere we don't quite understand.
> A little troupe of us going on stepping stones though a bubbling mud spring
> The ground is … we're not quite sure.
> Can we walk here?
> Things bubble up over here … and over here …
> Bloody great thistles just pop up! (Joy, research participant)

Changes in teaching practice are always to be expected and explored, yet at what expense? Coined as 'navigable distance from practice' are matters relating to practice meritorious of thought and collective inquiry, such as professional recognition (Spowart et al. 2016). This is contrasted with 'harmful distance from practice' where decisions affecting practice are made with no opportunity for negotiation or choice. Goffman's (1961) concept of role distance, which can be understood in relation to the capstone practice of equanimity, is useful to explore how people feel and react in such situations. Expressed simply, role distance can happen either when people feel anxious when they don't understand what is required of them, especially in times of change, or disengaged if not enough is required of them, the latter an illustration of the near enemy of equanimity. Events began to be viewed as opportunities to minimise role distance and maximise collective flourishing—a vehicle for open discussion of matters perceived as being a navigable or harmful distance from practice.

In addition to community, the concept of mattering described as 'a sense of being connected to other people' together with 'a sense of agentic effectiveness' (Flet 2018) becomes central to unpacking powerful stories from appreciative conversations. The journey from inclusion to mattering requires reassurance that individuals can choose their own contribution, emphasising the overarching importance of

people being there as part of an appreciative audience, so necessary for bold performers (Goffman 1959). Knowing you are valued for your empathic smile, say, you can feel comfortable to tap your foot and perhaps 'hum a little Mahler' or 'put arms around old oak tree' and choreograph your own merry dance.

## Conclusion

As the first author, I could stand in great gratitude for all that has been written here that was not mine. However, as Practicescape 6: Dreams of An Edtech Cathedral Mason tries to say, words barely belong to us. We try to grasp after our own and we point to those of others. All of these words are building or weaving something, but it is hubristic to say who owns which ones and why. Likewise, it is arrogant to say that we 'design' learning or predict its outcomes. To be sure we live with the realpolitik of frameworks and metrics. Similarly, many things occur in roughly the way we have predicted. But never exactly so and we can always pause to ask if we are simply predicting the past—if our so-called learning designs are not simply one giant 'I told you so'. This piece disrupts the safety of rigid and unfeeling frameworks. Instead, if offers practicecapes set in graveyards, cathedrals, and poems.

Here we call attention to the types of knowledge and knowing we often see as academically or otherwise less legitimate in educational work. Although we can speak of ideation or development in design work, these words do not always work. We need ways of being that are further from words which can only go so far. We need to dream. We need to be present, to really feel the classroom, the visceral pulses in our body that signs in our learning environments give us. Whilst we listen for signals of danger, we follow the horrible peaks in our negative states down to their troughs. It is from there that the most positive ideas and feelings we can possibly experience will arise and dream us new learning designs of happiness and freedom.

## Review 1: Please Mess with Mr(s). In-between (Anders Buch)

My faculty for disappointment surpasses understanding. It is what lets me comprehend Buddha, but also what keeps me from following him. (Cioran 2012: 5)

'Speculative Practicescapes of Learning Design and Dreaming' is a rich and complex attempt to approach discussions of learning designs from an unorthodox angle. It mobilises Buddhist philosophy as a framework to disrupt conventional notions of learning design and introduces seven 'practicescapes' that serve as platforms for escaping (transcending?) worldly ways of living to glimpse the unexpected, thus interweaving dreams in the facilitation of processes of learning.

The seven practicescapes introduce poems, visuals, parables, and observations on EdTech supply chains and EdTech graveyards, igniting an explosion of

interesting and very diverse reflections in the discussion section. The conclusion stresses the inherent unpredictability of learning and outcomes of learning designs and the need to integrate dreamlike elements in learning designs.

Reading this article made me think of the old Cosby, Bing, and The Andrew Sisters song (1944), 'You got to ac-cent-thu-ate the positive'. The lyrics go as follows:

E-lim-i-nate the negative
And latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mr. In-between
You got to spread joy up to the maximum
Bring gloom down to the minimum
And have faith, or pandemonium
Liable to walk upon the scene (Cosby, Bing, and The Andrew Sisters 1944)

Allow me to use this song as my 'practicescape' for reviewing this article. Whilst I concur with the first author (and the discussants) that learning designs should be inclusive, stimulate imagination and speculation, honour affectivity, embodiment, and participation, I am not so sure that these values are nourished by the proposed framework. I also concur with the author(s)' conclusion: '…it is arrogant to say that we "design" learning or predict its outcomes'. But instead of seeing it as a conclusion, I think the statement should be seen as a fundamental premise for all developments of learning designs.

The discussants' responses to the 'practicescapes' evidently demonstrate that reflections (and potentially learning) are spurred by poetry, speculation, etc. This is what unorthodox approaches do: they provoke thoughts and forge the initial step for learning processes. But I also think that the 'appreciative' and 'positive psychology' approaches that underly the narrative of the article are likely to become a 'Near Enemy' of learning – it is very likely that the appreciative latches on to the 'affirmative' (cf. McDonald and O'Callaghan 2008). I am not so optimistic as Sally Crighton that 'the appreciative lens allow[s] space for the … personal critical imaginal enquiry'.

In my book, speculative practicescapes should neither be framed as positive/ optimist nor negative/pessimist – but rather as critical and destabilising. Practicescapes should indeed mess with Mr(s). in-between – the trickster and coyote (Haraway 1991) – who occupy the unsettled floating territory of the unresolved not-yetness (Collier and Ross 2017) and no-longerness (Buch et al. 2023). Speculative practicescapes should indeed become a stage for the pandemonium where we can make inquiries and experiment with new practices to imagine how to go on (Buch and Stjerne 2024) in rewarding and responsible ways.

## Review 2: Dreaming of Learning Design (Michael Peters)

'Dreaming of Learning Design' embarks on an exploratory journey, challenging the conventional paradigms of learning design that are heavily reliant on outcome-based frameworks. This traditional approach, characterised by its focus on achieving pre-defined metrics and specific outcomes for individual learners, is critically examined

for its potential limitations. The article posits that such a methodology, whilst practical in its intention to ensure measurable progress, may inadvertently overlook the intricate and subjective dimensions of the educational experience.

At the heart of this critique is the argument that education should transcend its outcome-oriented confines to embrace a broader spectrum of human experience. The authors argue for a paradigm shift that recognises the value of emotions, personal reflections, and the ephemeral moments that define the learning journey. This perspective is not only refreshing but necessary, inviting educators and designers to reconsider what it means to truly engage with the process of learning.

To articulate this vision, the article introduces the concept of 'practicescapes'— a novel framework designed to anchor the learning experience in a more holistic context. This idea is revolutionary in that it acknowledges the learner's journey as an integral part of their finite lifetime, adding a poignant layer of meaning to the educational process. The seven practicescapes outlined serve as a scaffold for dialogue, encouraging a reevaluation of learning through the lens of dreams, poetry, and the boundless realm of possibilities, rather than strict objectives or outcomes.

Drawing inspiration from early Buddhist philosophy, the practicescapes aim to celebrate and cultivate positive affective states. This approach is heart-centred, prioritising the cultivation of emotional well-being and the most enriching forms of human experience. It is a call to dream, to speculate, and to imagine what learning could become if it were liberated from the constraints of conventional design principles. The article's invocation of poems and personal reflections as tools for learning design is particularly compelling.

This methodological choice underscores the importance of narrative and storytelling in education, suggesting that these elements can provide a more nuanced and deeply resonant learning experience. It is an invitation to educators to weave these less tangible, yet profoundly impactful, elements into the fabric of learning design. Moreover, the practicescapes serve as a metaphorical 'climbing frame', guiding learners through a journey of self-discovery and growth. This journey is not linear but is characterised by exploration, curiosity, and the joy of learning. It represents a shift from a focus on the destination to a celebration of the journey itself, from dreams of possibility to a vibrant and embodied present.

'Dreaming of Learning Design' is a visionary article that challenges the status quo of learning design. It offers a profound critique of outcome-oriented methodologies and proposes an alternative approach that values the richness of the educational experience. By embracing emotions, personal narratives, and the concept of practicescapes, the article advocates for a more holistic, heart-centred approach to learning design. This perspective is not only innovative but deeply necessary, urging us to dream of what learning could be and to reimagine the possibilities of education. The authors remind us that in dreaming of new designs the aim of the journey is not to arrive at a particular place and know it for the first time but rather to focus not on the arrival but on the process of self-cultivation as a form of legitimate human experience.

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