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Freedom to experiment? Design as an impetus for collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This contribution is a collective autoethnography conducted by the co-authors to capture their experiences within the Discovery Delivery Group, a group which has been tasked with re-imagining existing extra-curricular provision at the University of Leeds, U.K., aligned to its ambition for flexible, inclusive and transformative student education. Design thinking and further participatory curriculum design strategies were used to experiment and to explore more novel approaches in this two-year project. In this autoethnographic work, the researchers and members of the Discovery Delivery Group participated in an inquiry to share and gain insights into the experience of participation in this group, reflecting on a shared appetite for change and innovation as transformative educators and colleagues. The study reveals how such transformational pedagogical project groups can create a space for learning, experimentation and innovation.

Context: collaborative Curriculum Redesign

The university that sponsored this project has been bold and identified pedagogic risk-takers and transformative educators to be a force for change inviting them to join the efforts of colleagues already working at the institution to become part of the ambitious Curriculum Redefined (CR). Over 60 academics on teaching and scholarship contracts were recruited at different grades to act as 'Curriculum Redefined Transformative Educators' to support and enact the institution's vision for transformative change. This vision was expressed as an invitation to re-imagine and redesign the academic offer and inject fresh energy and creativity into what we do, and how we do it, together as an institution. Professor Jeff Grabill, Deputy Vice Chancellor for Student Education, describes Curriculum Redefined as a 'once-in-a-career opportunity to transform learning and teaching for future generations' (Grabill 2022). Investment at such a scale to enable, and nurture practitioner-led change to transform student education is unusual in the sector at present facing many staff cuts and course closures. Jackson (2014, 41) recognises the potential of innovators saying characteristically that they 'are the key resource for leading bottom-up change and changing institutional culture'. Grabill, Gretter, and Skogsberg (2022, 94) recognise that ' … the most lasting and impactful changes in an organization are going to come from the bottom up, from a thoughtful and participatory process'. It is this participatory process that is being captured by +++++Educators through initial reflections on their engagement in the Discovery Delivery Group.

Discovery delivery group: a case study

Macro-curriculum transformation

Like many UK Higher Education Institutions, the University of Leeds has 'broadened' its learning offer by creating opportunities for students to study beyond programmes aligned to their core discipline. At Leeds this sits within an institution-wide scheme known as 'Discovery', which offers undergraduate students the opportunity to select modules from other disciplines and professional areas that are designed for cross/inter-disciplinary learning as part of their degree programme.

While the scheme has broadened the curriculum offer for students, and boosted their career readiness. It also creates alternative opportunities for educators to support wider interest-driven learning and enable educators to work with a wider range of students beyond a specific programme of study. Established in 2009, it is currently being rationalised to streamline the existing number of modules and to develop new complementary provisions to meet learners' expectations and requirements. This means that the existing and rationalised Discovery provision, and enhanced Languages for All provision (an opportunity to learn a language as part of an unrelated degree) will be

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complemented by our newly reimagined Discovery offer. New non-credit bearing pilot Broadening learning activities are currently being designed to provide expanded opportunities for learning while creating a scaffold to allow learners to gain credits via new Discovery modules.

The Discovery Delivery Group was set up, by the institution as a Curriculum Redefined Project, to focus on the development of this new provision. Over 40 staff and students from across the institution have joined this project since September 2023 to reimagine the new provision, aligned with the ambitions of the University's Curriculum Redefined Programme. It is anticipated that the outputs of this group will be prototyped and ready for implementation in 2025/26.

Before exploring how this diverse group collaboratively redesigned this aspect of the university offer, it is worth examining briefly some of the more values-focused drivers behind our work.

Rationale and vision

Our vision to transform Discovery and Broadening aimed to create a sustainable vehicle for personal and collective growth for all our students as well as staff, creating opportunities for wider engagement and collaboration where the learner is in the driving seat of their own learning and able to pursue their personal interests in a supportive and stimulating environment. Students and educators learning together in practice means our collaborators will be able to design, learn and work in partnership across disciplines, professional areas, and levels of study. Within the Broadening endeavour, learning in cross-disciplinary, vertical teaching groups, i.e. with students from different years – first, second, third and postgraduates as learning assistants and reverse mentors, creating a learning community – are ideas that are being considered. This offers academic staff a transformational experience of co-learner-teacher collaboration.

We envisaged our new endeavours under Discovery and within wider Broadening will awaken and stimulate social responsibility, civic and community engagement, action and activism, learning and development. Bringing fresh, authentic and renewable opportunities for curiosity-driven, inquiry-based learning that not only connects the University with global communities at micro, meso and macro levels but also serves to connect these global communities with the University in enhancing spaces for connection, collaboration and growth for all. Recently, Resnick (2024, online) appealed for:

> learners to have more control over how they are learning, what they are learning, when they are learning, where they are learning. When learners have more choice and control, they can build on their interests, so that learning becomes more motivating, more

memorable, and more meaningful—and learners make stronger connections with the ideas that they are engaging with.

This placing of the learner at the centre of the learning process, learner-centred and learner-driven approaches, putting them in the driving seat, was crucial to our redesign of New Discovery (Nerantzi et al. 2024).

Discovery and *Broadening*, as the names suggest, aim to stretch, enthuse and motivate. These experiences are intended to stimulate individuals' curiosity and imagination and boost capacity and capabilities to co-create, radically collaborate, problem-solve and innovate in order to make positive change happen within us, around us and in the world we live in, locally and globally. The report by the British Science Association (2022) based on a study of 1000 14–18-year-olds in the UK, shows that young people recognise the importance of cross-disciplinary, collaborative learning and creativity in addressing some of the challenges of our times and propose structural changes to education to enable closer links between STEM and creative subjects. We aim to bring about such changes within Discovery and Broadening, which will bring diverse people and ideas together and provide a plethora of lifewide learning opportunities that are not only vital for well-being and happiness but will also enrich personal and professional lives (Jackson 2021, 2022). The opportunities afforded by the new Student Orientated Unbounded Learning - *SOUL* modules currently under development and those under Broadening non-credit-bearing courses will help learners to explore across boundaries and beyond organisational silos to make novel connections to elements that are vital ingredients for creativity and innovation (Nielsen and Thurber 2016).

The group's ambitions for Discovery philosophical and practical were framed by the wider social mission of universities as well as the institutional ambitions of the University of Leeds, which was led by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Student Education and the Knowledge Equity Network led by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation and sponsored by our Vice Chancellor. The institutional values of collaboration, compassion, inclusivity and integrity (University of Leeds 2020–2030 Strategy and Equality and Inclusion Framework, 2020-2025) as well as our responsibility to make a difference to the world were thus strong drivers. These broad principled ambitions for curriculum redesign were condensed into a series of initial guiding questions for the Design Team (see Appendix 1), articulated by our project lead. These questions, particularly those exploring accessibility foregrounded our focus on our present and future student body, a starting point for user-centred design.

Developed from the Guiding Questions, the design brief included designing flexible, diverse learning opportunities that extend choice and have content

renewal built into the pedagogic design. The aim was for a design that supports open, experiential, dynamic, collaborative, digital and connected learning in formal and informal settings.

These learning opportunities are enabled by a team of diverse stakeholders from the University community: educators, learning designers, colleagues from professional services, students and the wider academic community. This is an intentional learning community that converged to re-imagine and design learning opportunities in novel and bold ways to open new opportunities for curiosity, exploration and adventurous learning. The pedagogic design and experience provide new opportunities but also come with implications for existing approaches or models. Kleon (2012) claims that creative thinking is about what not to include. Along the same lines, Kleiman (2009, 10) reminds us that:

> one of the most significant design principles is to omit the unimportant in order to emphasise the important. Good design starts with identifying the essential element(s) of the problem and building from there. It is not about being able to justify inclusion: anything can be justified. It is about really understanding the design problem and focusing on the essentials.

A Space for Innovation: Student-Organised, Unbounded Learning Modules

The Project Team proposed the design of Self-Organised, Unbounded Learning *SOUL* modules at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. These modules will complement the existing organised Discovery modules including provision for language learning. The rationalised existing Discovery modules are primarily for undergraduate students. Figure 1 shows the Discovery ecosystem with the existing and under development modular provision.

The SOUL modules will operate as a way to claim credit in a highly personalised way for endeavours and learning that currently sits outside the taught curriculum: they can be linked to lifelong and lifewide learning, such as open courses offered by the institution and other providers, workshops and short courses, life and work experience, community engagement, fellowship, fieldwork, virtual learning, study abroad, student leadership roles, conference participation, co-facilitation and co-design of learning opportunities, projects, volunteering and internships as well as other forms of informal and non-formal learning. Students will be able to work on a specialised project or area of interest that links to their discipline as well as cross-disciplinary or wider interests, selecting activities themselves as well as organise their own learning activities. Their learning, intended future actions and change and related reflection in and on their experience of their learning activities will be captured in a digital portfolio. During their module students will be supported by a tutor and encouraged to join and engage in peer-to-peer learning via a SOUL community. Activities are designed to provide a learning scaffold for SOUL modules, which could in the future also be used as flexible, stand-alone, stackable modules that exist beyond current curriculum structures and programmes. These modules could appeal to learners who may be interested in a bite-size learning approach due to personal or professional circumstances and/or preference. Such a mode of learning would open university study to a wider range of individuals and make learning more accessible, affordable and relevant for professional or personal development, up – and re-skilling. These opportunities would allow individuals to engage with qualifications in a more flexible and connected way by stitching together stackable credits from a range of providers (EDUCAUSE 2023; Parker 2020; Scottish Government 2023). Parker (2020, 15) states that in the future:

> Fewer students will wish to undertake full-service degrees. However, more students will be interested in micro-credentialing, competency-based education, nano degrees, and curated degrees. Unbundling will be prominent, with tuition fees itemized separately for teaching, campus experience and so on. Students will be able to opt out of some aspects of university life and not pay for them.

Mount (2024) calls for higher education providers to consider breaking free from programmes towards tailor-made provision that offers learning opportunities in much more flexible and agile ways on the basis of three considerations: (1) to future proof provision, (2) to keep the offer current and relevant and (3) to provide an opportunity to really experience engagement in higher education as a lifelong endeavour.

Beyond the SOUL modules, the group is also designing learning opportunities including a new and renewable suite of non-credit bearing blueprints for courses under the Broadening remit which will connect curricular and co-curricular activities. These blueprints provide a flexible structure, a placeholder for learning that can be used with thematic areas from across the university. As well as diversifying the learning on offer, the use of blueprints offers consistency for the institution, for students and also for staff. In developing an institutional blueprint for Jam, Open and Block learning opportunities we reduce the design demand on academic staff. These blueprints will provide a bridge between the existing fully organised Discovery modules and the new SOUL modules providing further scaffolding towards autonomous learning and enabling students to gain academic credits via the SOUL modules together with a plethora of further learning opportunities offered by the institution and beyond. It is envisaged that Jam, Open and Block learning formats will complement other existing offers internally and externally by a wide range of providers (see Figure 2).
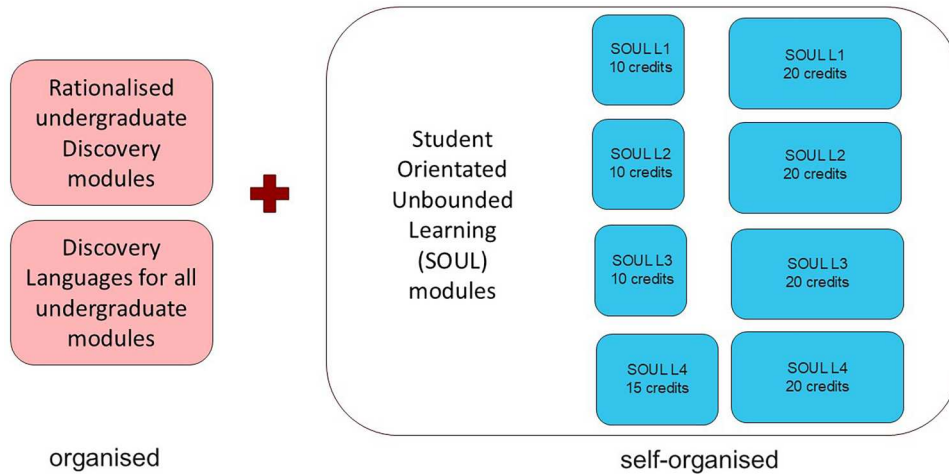
Complementary Discovery modules

Figure 1. Discovery ecosystem with organised (existing) and self-organised modules (under development).

The blueprints for these non-credit-bearing courses emerged through a design thinking process focused on the development of prototypes that are currently being designed by staff and students at the university. These blueprints have been titled, 'Jam', 'Open' and 'Block'. Jam refers to a fast-paced short and intensive learning offer over a day or a few days online, blended or physical location-based learning, Open refers to completely online delivered short courses available to learners internally and externally to the institution by default, while Block, are short or codensed intensive term time courses less than a semester-longt that could be offered outside routine timetabling,. As well as providing an innovation and experimentation space for those wanting

to trial alternative ways to learn and teach, these new formats offer an important opportunity for curriculum co-design that brings together staff, students and where appropriate other external stakeholders. Recognising the prerogatives of institutional and sector governance, expression of interest and approval mechanisms will be designed in conjunction with the ongoing renewal of these courses, to ensure existing rigour in quality processes is maintained.

SOUL modules will follow the required scrutiny of institutional assessment procedures, drawing on a range of perspectives. In engaging with curriculum innovation, we responded to Richardson's (2022) open invitation to critically and creatively engage with the current (dominant) assessment narratives
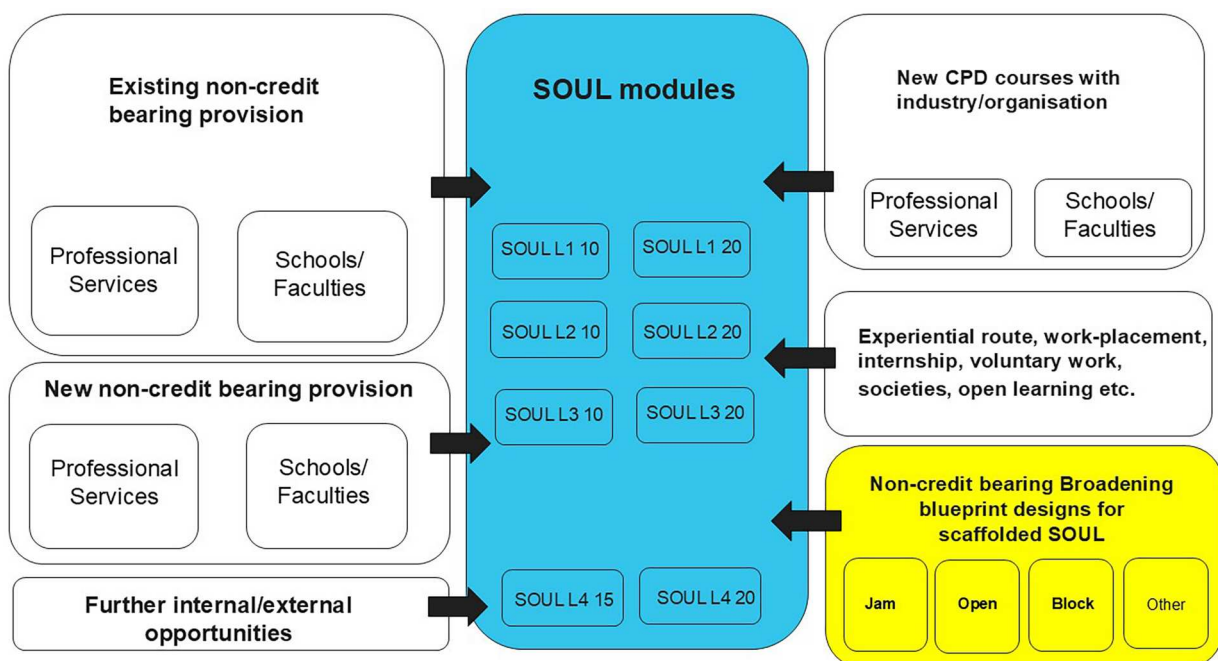

Figure 2. Learning activities that can be used to claim credits via SOUL modules. Including Broadening courses: Jam, Open and Block.

and practices. Furthermore, McArthur's (2023, 87) framing of authentic assessment as 'a vehicle for transformative social change', and Ayyappan's (2024) reminder to consider the importance of lifelong learning, not exclusively in economic terms but also in terms of our societal objectives play an important part in looking again at assessment through the lens of this project. Ayyappan (2024, online) states that education:

> Is about recognizing and responding to the diverse needs of learners, contributing not only to economic growth but also to building a more inclusive society.

The current primary focus appears to be exclusively centred on economic gains, employability value or career readiness, while the much wider important societal role of education seems to be downplayed or ignored. We are attempting with the design of SOUL modules to better align values and ambitions with novel curriculum design.

Design thinking: discovery design experience

At the heart of this transformative work are people and how they work together. The learners we are designing for and with, include potential module leaders, tutors, facilitators and learners. To imagine new ways of learning, the group used design thinking principles to make change happen (Lockwood 2010). While it is acknowledged that design thinking can be articulated in a range of ways (Kimbell and Sloane 2020) the core principles including participation and inclusion, empathy and experimentation are common across different definitions and interpretations. These principles drove our work on this project; a fusion of end users' ideas, educational designers' ideas, insights and modes of collaboration are at the heart of this type of design process, aimed at embracing uncertainty, generating ideas and experimenting together, to rapidly prototype, implement and collectively learn and adjust what does not work (yet) and what needs to change (again). The Discovery Delivery Group applied these design thinking principles to our project work, coupling this with developmental evaluation for rapid prototyping, testing and adjusting the emerging design in response to insights gained during the design process and to the implementation of any prototypes (Preskill and Beer 2012). Our ongoing reflections were integral to the design. It is important to note that dealing with uncertainty and less than perfect knowledge (higher education, privileges) while working in higher education, is a conundrum. As Finlay acknowledges, in a 'tangle of understandings, misunderstandings and difficulties, exactly how to apply and teach reflective practice effectively has become something of a conundrum' (Finlay 2008). We are conscious that in writing a collective autoethnography we are attempting to describe a tangled iterative process. Nevertheless, our collaborative learning design process fuelled by active ongoing reflections helped the project team to remain agile, embrace the diversity of ideas generated by a large group and create a sense of shared ownership increasing motivation, commitment and support. This contribution focuses on the nurturing of human relationships that is experienced during this collaborative design work (Bene and McNeilly 2020) to transform experiences and practices (Grabill, Gretter, and Skogsberg 2022; Morgan and Jaspersen 2022).

Method

To investigate the co-authors' individual and collective experiences and initial reflections on their participation in the Discovery Delivery Group and to respond to the research question of this inquiry, co-researchers came together to study this specific phenomenon of curriculum reimagining. The aim was to make sense of a collective experience and to seek insights into this collaborative innovation as part of the co-design process. The Discovery Delivery Group and colleagues are viewed as a particular case justifying the use of intrinsic case study as a methodological approach in this inquiry to learn how innovation was experienced in these particular settings by the Curriculum Redefined Educators (Stake 1995). Therefore, purposive sampling was used (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011).

This purposive sampling meant that co-authors are understood as study participants and insider researchers. They are aware of their positionality and how this may have influenced the data collection. Co-authors participated on a voluntary basis in this study and had the right for their contributions to be withdrawn up to the completion of the review process. The positionality of participants is acknowledged, and the inquiry is approached with a disposition towards transparency and openness mindful that the inquiry and related findings are subjective and include biases (Greene 2014). Data were collected using a collaborative autoethnographic approach. Lapadat (2017, 589) defines it as

> *a multivocal approach in which two or more researchers work together to share personal stories and interpret the pooled auto ethnographic data, builds upon and extends the reach of autoethnography and addresses some of its methodological and ethical issues.*

These reflective stories frame this collaborative autoethnography as a form of narrative inquiry where insights are shared into the lived experiences associated with the collaborative design work and carefully listening is required to understand what is

experienced, what it may mean (Hickson 2016) and to identify affective connections (Moon 2010).

In searching for common or shared meanings, this work is situated within critical realist and constructivist paradigms (Kiger and Varpio 2020, 847): as critical realists, we acknowledge experiences as a material reality and look to explore social meanings and implications behind these, in particular, we are interested in power relations informing the reality of the world of work. Similarly, we are conscious that the act of research and collecting reflections on a group project we are exploring, offer a socially constructed set of meanings that have been established through joining and working collaboratively (Braun and Clarke 2006) and that engagement in the act of research contributes to that shared construction.

The research addresses the following questions:

How is innovation experienced and lived as part of the collaborative design process within the Discovery Delivery Group by Curriculum Redefined Educators and colleagues?

Co-author-researchers were invited to share their stories in response to the following questions to reflect on their experiences as part of the Discovery Delivery Group:

- What does it mean to you being part of the Discovery Delivery Group as a Curriculum Redefined Educator or friend of the group?
- What has your experience been since joining this group?
- What is the potential for this group in relation to flexible, inclusive and transformative student education and realising the institutional ambitions around redefining the curriculum?

The responses to these questions were written independently and collected using an online MS form. Authors were invited to record responses to the above questions anonymously without including any details that could identify them, without having access to each other's responses or engaging in any related discussion before submission. Only the author who set up the survey could see where the responses came from. As soon as all responses were submitted, they were copied into a secure file and random coding was used that was not aligned to the order of the authors of this paper. We used labels Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. and the numbering was assigned randomly. Two of the co-author-researchers worked on the analysis of the data which was then further discussed and finalised with all other co-authors. This collaborative analysis process injected openness and transparency and facilitated peer discussion to check, agree and stabilise the findings. The complete dataset is provided in Appendix 1. In the Findings section of this paper, we used extracts to illustrate the patterns and themes that emerged.

Sampling decisions were made in advance (by relying on self-selected volunteers) and resulted in a small sample of responses from seven participant researchers (15% of the larger group). This sample included a range of different roles within the group including professional services, academic teaching staff as well as design leads, which reflected the composition of the larger group Once the responses were anonymised and uploaded to NVIVO the process of analysis was an iterative one which remained open to new emergent possibilities. Working in line with the grounded theory approach to analysis (Hutchison et al. 2009; Hutchison et al. 2011) the initial codes emerged from the data itself. Codes were identified through close reading of the anonymised data set and using NVivo features such as the keyword counts to identify common language and metaphors used across participant accounts. These codes were sense-checked through discussion by two participant researchers. Once initial codes were agreed these were applied data re-analysed and an initial analysis was written up for further discussion between two members of the team before being shared with the team for commentary. This repeated discussion and collaborative sense-checking informed our interpretation and analysis.

Findings

How the Discovery project and the staff group were described by participants was scrutinised in order to identify key features of the group and to share an emergent understanding of the initiative. The way language was used to describe shared experiences and staff conceptions of the project was central to establishing themes. Some common metaphors and themes emerged, specifically how involvement in the Discovery group offered space for thinking and the development of ideas. Staff accounts also foregrounded the growth of the staff community engaged in innovation and the positive emotional response was a significant feature of a number of accounts. Just as staff were appreciative of the sense of freedom and permission to explore, they were alert to the challenges the project posed. These themes can be summed up as *space, community, opportunity and challenges*. They are examined in more detail below.

Space

The majority of project team meetings were conducted online, virtually rather than face-to-face. Nevertheless, a key image that participants returned to was describing this project as offering 'space'; clearly more

figurative than literal, as this refers primarily to 'the freedom to act, think, and develop' (OUP). Thus, the group was described as

> A freedom space, an oasis … A place of possibility … . (Participant 2)

> This exploratory space … The safe space to explore … a sandpit … . A place where innovation is understood and taken seriously A space for blue sky thinking … … (Participant 1)

> The most dynamic forum for pedagogical innovation I've come across at [institution] (Participant 7)

It also proved a space for collaboration.

> it provides the space to work with others who are very much committed to transformative education. (Participant 2)

> This group has created a space for people from various institutional areas to come together and think creatively about how our student education can be reimagined to benefit learning, teaching and outreach to communities. (Participant 7)

> A place where questions can be asked … 'Wouldn't it be fun to?'; 'Do you think we could?'; 'A place where we can … ' (Participant 1)

The repeated use of modal verbs orients this group to hypothetical futures. The group and space they create being characterised this way identifies this as a place of creative opportunity. This metaphysical connection made between literal space and freedom of opportunity is one that intersects in an intriguing way with the body of research on meaningful work (Martikainen, Kudrna, and Dolan 2022) and the importance identified in both connecting and contributing to others and avoiding confinement. Here the liberatory space and opportunity to collaborate coincide.

Community

There is a sense of the community of the group that was made tangible for a number of participants.

> The Discovery Delivery Group for me offers a space for connecting with like-minded individuals who share passions in transforming university education and generating positive societal impact. It is a group open to new ideas with an appetite for innovation, which frequently extends invitations to other services, initiatives, contributors to come and share work and views. It is very friendly, offers opportunities for true collaboration and trying new things. Group members are very supportive and available to offer a helping hand. It creates a platform by which we can share views on how teaching, learning and assessment can be reimagined at the University of [X] that may motivate institutional change. (Participant 7)

Similarly,

> It meant working with a community of practice who I felt I shared similar transformative educational and

pedagogical values with, and the possibility of participation in a project that would actualise me and offer me some tangible agency. (Participant 4)

> being part of the … . Group means (meant), conceptually, being part of a mutually supporting community of practice and learning. I love it. (Participant 6)

> Working alongside talented individuals and envisaging the ways that this innovative work will transform students' lives, has instilled in me a strong sense of pride which further increased my commitment and motivation as a Curriculum Redefined Transformative Educator. The work that the group is undertaking feels truly people-centric taking into consideration best possible outcomes for both staff and students. Effective teamwork is at the heart of this initiative and the formation of the group has created a strong sense of community. As a result of this, I developed a deeper understanding of how individual efforts, when joined in a constructive manner, can successfully come together to achieve ambitious goals. (Participant 7)

There is a tacit acknowledgement that change is risky and thus a number of participants refer to the group as offering solidarity.

> {creativity} can only happen when you feel understood and that someone has your back. My experience has been that in Discovery they have your back. (Participant 1)

> The camaraderie, the solidarity, the commitment to each other and the appetite for innovation, as well as the positivity about each other and the joy that comes from re- imagining the curriculum together and doing something that is worth doing, for our students, our colleagues, our institution but also ourselves. Maybe our collective aim to make a difference is our superpower. (Participant 2)

> The group has brought [staff] together in an unparalleled way, forming a strong community of dedicated individuals who strive to create a transformative, flexible and inclusive curriculum. (Participant 3)

a supportive community of critical friends (Participant 1).

> What has been most valuable is the sense of collective energy and purpose, (participant 4)

> Effective teamwork is at the heart of this initiative and the formation of the group has created a strong sense of community. (Participant 3)

Opportunity

The sense of community and support provided by like-minded individuals was ultimately enabling, providing staff with permission and agency to explore change. Consequently, the group was described in positive terms as somewhere that was interesting, exciting and energising.

> It's a place where I feel happy, alive and excited … . Heart-warming (Participant 2)

> I love it (Participant 6)

The data set from this enquiry revealed distinct elements of group formation. While each of these underpinning elements of developing a Community of Practice was clearly present, the end result of a powerful sense of creative agency is a result of a combination of the previous four elements holistically engaged with, rather than a linear output.

Challenge

The most common challenge identified by respondents was the dissonance between this group's ethos of regenerative transformation and hopeful education, and a wider ingrained sense of anxiety and experience of an unwillingness to practically engage with change, perhaps due to the wider contextual pressures HE institutions currently face.

There was discussion of the need to manage this disjuncture, not only to sustain innovative ideas that emerge in this space but also to continue to demonstrate the positive value of design thinking approaches for regenerating education as a space of continuous questioning and experimentation. Our reflections on the quality of this disjuncture, to productively explore the tension of the 'conundrum' Finlay describes (2008) of reflecting while designing, resulted in this collaborative paper. There was a general sense amongst the group that the fusion of design approaches with transformative education offers hope for the creation of educational experiences that are better suited to responding to uncertain, complex, and unpredictable futures (Wahl 2016, 123).

In addition, this synthesis of design approaches allows us to 'maintain a sense of connectedness amongst such educators' (participant 4). While there was lots of positive engagement, enthusiasm for the project and an almost phatic emotive response to the tenor of the group and the feeling of liberation it engendered, this powerful emotive response meant participants were very sensitive to the varying appetites for change in different parts of the institution. Projects such as this, that offer staff opportunities for agency and creativity elicit strong emotional responses as they address something central to professional well-being. Consequently, the enthusiasm for the initiative was tempered by the need to 'be very mindful of the implications of institutional resistance to change for our individual and collective wellbeing' (Participant 6).

Synthesising thoughts

The many post-pandemic political and economic pressures imposing themselves upon HE organisations continue to disrupt the traditional business as usual approach to teaching and learning whilst presenting opportunities or space for more open modes of learning (Nerantzi et al. 2023). The need to respond to these challenges underpins the University of ****' leadership rationale for a progressive and radical organisational change programme such as +++++. The psychological, creative, and emotional resources necessary for navigating such organisational change are considerable and may account for why so many transformative educators were brought into the University in such a short period of time. The simultaneous arrival of new colleagues identified as a new community under the label of ***, however, risks that community being identified as the source of that disruption, instead of as new resources to respond to wider disruptions. The transference of anxiety about the wider technological, social and political changes imposing themselves on HE, onto the newcomer transformative community creates new challenges for the leadership of that community and the institution. In particular, external antagonisms can place additional emotional demands on leaders trying to preserve participation through the maintenance of a relatively calm space for experimentation (Nerantzi et al. 2023). These tensions may, in turn, contribute to the transformational educational community's emotional identification of the Discovery project with a sense of refuge from the institution's wider emotional transference in response to continued change.

Part of the wider organisation's response to the symbolic disruption represented by new, open or free spaces for experimentation may be to seek to restrict experimental freedom, by limiting time and space for participants through the control of participants' work roles in wider organisational structures and spaces. There have been attempts to address this tension by delineating the role of Curriculum Redefined Educators splitting teaching functions determined by the traditional organisational hierarchy from any remit to continue to participate in transformational activities as part of the Discovery initiative. However, this separation is open to local interpretation. The investment in people, experimentation and communities has been identified as a key factor that can lead to transformative practice (Nerantzi and Thomas 2019). One participant reflected that what is needed for this investment to provide a return, however, was 'Freedom to experiment: more time and space for reflection. Free up space in the timetable for experimentation'. (Participant 7).

Reflections on the Discovery Delivery Group reveal that for many, transformational educational initiatives represent a paradox, that freedom to participate in an experimental community in Higher Education requires protection, and comes at a risky cost of investments in time, space and emotional energy. This creates a particular kind of creative alliance amongst educators. The artist and educator Sfougaras (2023, online) said it beautifully,

> I am talking about creative partnerships, and the need to choose people to work with, who can 'see you'; acknowledge you; value you, whom you trust, and okay … let's say it plainly: who accept and acknowledge your pain.

Curriculum Redefined is two years into what is proposed as a ten-year transformation project. This necessitates building constant change into the regular patterns of organisational operations, while simultaneously managing the additional resource demands that this places on emerging communities of practice. The tonal and value shift, of maintaining such a transformational process, means being attentive to the risks of reductionism through the translation of ethos and values into consumable goals or deliverables that can be used to argue that the ongoing reflexive and risky work of self-transformation has been done or completed as if such a thing were ever possible. Such transformation cannot always be dictated from the top down but has to be generated from within a community, and thus may necessitate bringing in new members more motivated by the potential rewards and resilient to the demands of risky open-ended education.

Research by Mankins and Litre (2024) into business transformation found successful programmes employed six critical practices:

1. treating transformation as a continuous process.
2. building it into the company's operating rhythm.
3. explicitly managing organisational energy.
4. using aspirations, not benchmarks, to set goals.
5. driving change from the middle of the organisation out.
6. tapping significant external capital to fund the effort from the start.

One challenge identified by colleagues in the Discovery Delivery Group is at the intersection between this group and the larger institution and the sensitivity to the change in appetite for and tolerance of change. Occupying a liminal space outside business-as-usual practices is both liberating and risky. While we can evaluate the project against these criteria, it affirms a values-driven focus and a bottom-up change process, emphasising that embedding lasting change may need a change of tack to bridge different operating rhythms. The reflection here acknowledges that such projects may be experienced as turbulent by both project participants and wider institutional actors.

Contextualising this curriculum redesign initiative against other change projects prompts us to consider practical lessons drawn from our experience. These listed below primarily focus on how we worked collaboratively. Focusing explicitly on the people, reducing constraints and opening up space and time for collaboration and creativity, makes clear how we, in this instance used aspirations to set goals and drove change from the middle out.

Recommendations for cross-team working

- Practise radical democracy in group ethos and practice. All voices are equal and all are welcome.
- Prioritize time to work together.
- Establish common ground in terms of shared goals (blue sky thinking rather than how these are enacted)
- Create space and opportunity for creativity – choose playful experimental experiences.
- Be responsive to the energy and dynamics of the group. Acknowledge challenges.
- Foster tolerance of ambiguity

Final words

In reflecting on the experiences of co-authors and members of the Discovery Delivery Group the words of Linda Finlay's 'Reflecting on Reflective Practice' might be paraphrased to describe this text as Discovering Discovery. However, this would be to draw only a surface parallel. To adopt a more authentic interpretation of Finlay's proposition and one that has been germane to the Discovery Delivery Group is to recognise the seemingly inherent difficulties of reflecting on practice as one undertakes it.

This reflection on what the experience of the Discovery Project Group has meant for some of its participants has identified three themes: solidarity, space for experimentation and that change is challenging. They are all related and reflect a networked understanding of working at the nexus of institutional and sector governance and learner expectations and experiences. The range of stakeholders the Group has engaged with speaks to the ambition to involve all sectors of the University community in designing, developing, and delivering the programme and, importantly, including those outside the immediate educational operations of the University of Leeds. Furthermore, this dimension also speaks to the challenge of speaking to these stakeholders as having singular homogenous identities. Instead, our practice recognised the diversity of identities as they run across professional and institutional badges of authority. In this, the requirement to critically think – our second emergent theme – was perhaps self-evident but worth intentionally sharing as none of the activities were done without it. Related to this there was an expectation of the Discovery group to be flexible and adaptable to the challenges they faced. This manifested itself not only in 'learning' about external dimensions e.g. what was

known, and what needed to be done; but also, in further reflection and adaption, to intra-group knowledge diplomacy – a concept that looks beyond knowledge exchange and recognises normative considerations to knowledge and understanding.

It is apparent that the concrete processes of course prototyping and collaborative design prompt complex social and cultural reflections and analyses from staff alert to fluctuations in groups, groupings, authority, professional identity, allegiances, liminality and creative opportunities. At the heart of this effort appears to be a drive to find or create meaning in collaborative regenerative work and professional contribution. Above all participants remain hopeful, of finding or designing the space, opportunity, and community to enact a reimagining of the curricula. Thus, while the complexity and changing nature of professional roles and the fluid nature of curriculum design experiences point to a need for further research to capture this rich experience, a concluding reflection is offered as to what spaces of uncertainty may offer others, in terms of freedom to hope collectively.

> Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognise uncertainty, you recognise that you may be able to influence the outcomes – you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement: pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things that we can know beforehand. (Solnit 2016, xii)

Appendix 1

Design Questions

The project started out by defining a set of initial guiding questions. These were:

Purpose

- How can we maximise engagement and societal impact?

Accessibility: who are we designing for?

- How can we create learning opportunities to support widening participation within the new provision?
- Can the new provision be expanded to include all undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students and staff?
- How can we in the future also offer non-credit bearing courses to all our staff and communities outside the institution?
- Can timetabling issues (pressure on in-semester availability) be addressed to make the new offer attractive and accessible to more students?

- Can the new Discovery modules be offered as standalone formal learning opportunities to anybody currently not enrolled on a University of Leeds programme of study for personal or professional development?

Active involvement: how do we want to work together?

- How can we involve the wider academic community, staff and students in the design of this new provision through co-design and co-creation collaboration and partnership working?

Content: what learning do we want to offer?

- How can the Broadening provision and Discovery modules complement each other?
- How can we design a diverse and simple offer that can be kept fresh and current?

Recognition: how do we diversify recognition of learning?

- How can we offer new Discovery modules that are based on self-organised learning that enable students to gain credit for informal, non-formal and experiential learning?
- How can we add non-credit-bearing provisions within Broadening?

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