Changing from Within: Narratives of Resistance from Equity-Oriented Learning Designers

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This paper draws on a larger study where 34 women practising and supporting equity-oriented learning design across the world were interviewed in early 2021. The paper highlights the strategies learning designers use to navigate clashes between their own values and those held by their institutions. The authors argue that positionality, institutional culture, and personal history impact how learning designers navigate these spaces and that understanding context is essential when using an ecosystems theory view. Finally, the paper explores four shared building blocks framed by brown's (2017) elements of an emerging strategy, which promotes a way of seeing change as small actions and connections. These in turn create complex systems and patterns which eventually become ecosystems and societies.

Introduction

Learning designers' identities, voices, and practices are highly influenced by the systems within which they work: the dominant organizational cultures, the assumptions, norms, and behaviors of their institutions, and wider societal systems. However, where there are dominant narratives, there is also resistance and counternarratives that challenge the status quo (Yosso, 2006, p. 171). This paper focuses on these counternarratives, exploring how learning designers have managed to challenge and work within and against dominant institutional cultures.

Academic staff developers and learning designers do not occupy an easy space in higher education. In academic literature it is referred to as being at the margins (Little & Green, 2012) or on the fringes (Schroeder, 2011), working in liminal or in-between spaces (Simmons et al., 2013; Meyer & Land, 2005), within blurring boundaries (Land, 2004), or occupying positions of quasi-academics or third space professionals (Whitchurch, 2008). COVID-19 has moved learning design and learning designers into a slightly more central position, at least temporarily (Costello et al., 2022). However, it remains to be seen whether this is a permanent move.

In this paper, we are expanding Little and Green's (2012) work on academic staff developers' strategies to navigate institutional power dynamics (manifested in horizontal and vertical clashes) to explore learning designers' narratives around institutional clashes, and their strategies to work within institutional cultures that are often in direct opposition to their own values and beliefs. We are particularly interested in adding an ecosystems theory lens to Little and Green's work, by showing how learning designers' different positionalities, histories, and educational and professional journeys impact how they navigate the difficult spaces of the department, institution, and institutional culture. According to a systems theory perspective, human development is linked to the understanding of contexts and the ability to navigate these (Shelton, 2019). We argue that exploring how we connect and relate to the ecosystems we are based in (brown, 2017) is an important element of a learning designer's developmental journey. Dietz et al. (2022, p. 101) remind us that critical self-reflection enables acknowledgment of our own beliefs and where we may have benefited or contributed to privileged practices, stating "When we avoid scrutinization of our personal histories, we risk blindness to the harmful impacts of power, privilege, and disadvantage in our society and institutions."

Academic staff development as resistance

We (the authors of this paper and participants in our research) are academic staff developers. We are deeply aware of how our sphere of influence can be limited by not belonging to a specific academic discipline, working outside of departments, and thus often supporting but not being directly involved in the academic project. However, this sense of oscillating between cultures and groups can lead to some degree of freedom to speak out against dominant narratives or cultures at an institution. Roxå and Mårtensson (2017) emphasize the power of academic staff developers given by the position they occupy. They urge us to recognize our power and reflect on whether we use it to support the institutional status quo or actively use it for transformation and change. Stensaker (2018, p. 276) also highlights the role academic developers can play in broader institutional/organizational change:

Given the fact that academic developers have extensive knowledge about teaching and learning practices, and of the way these are embedded in the organization, while also being increasingly informed about institutional strategies and ambitions, it could be argued that they have a key role to play in stimulating increased collaboration, coherence, and even organizational learning in the modern university.

Our paper is interested in strategies of resistance in relation to tensions with the neoliberal academy, and how it plays out in the stories of a group of women learning designers. We see learning design as part of academic staff development, adopting a wider definition that encompasses instructional, technical, academic, and organizational support (Grupp, 2014 cited in Grupp & Little, 2019), which includes both support and academic staff in central or decentral roles, all with the goal to support the academic project and academic colleagues.

While there are many accounts of collective resistance in academia (see for example Feldman and Sandoval, 2019), we are interested in the 'everyday' academic resistance engaged in individually or collectively, framed by feminist, decolonial, and intersectional theories which call for the need for multi-directional modes of resistances (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019). Stensaker (2018, p. 277) refers to it as cultural work, which he defines as: "a deliberate attempt to develop and disrupt the organization on the basis of established and emerging practices and knowledge."

Little and Green's (2012) paper discusses academic staff developers' roles in institutions based on their positions of marginality and how these allow them to navigate institutional power dynamics. The paper defines six categories of tensions that academic staff developers face: technology; academic development units' purview and policies; university policies and priorities; academic programs; university leadership; and culture and external requirements. These are placed along two tensions: horizontal, epistemological tensions between different academic positions and vertical, structural tensions between different levels of hierarchies found in academia (Green & Little, 2013). We use their model as a starting point to identify tensions but expand it further by adding an ecosystemic view which will help us further our understanding of why learning designers employ certain strategies of resistance.

Bronfenbrenner systems theory and brown's emergent strategies

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is a radical way to understand human development, recognizing the importance of context. While focusing on child development, his theory can be applied more widely. He views environments as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. Microsystems consist of "structures and processes taking place in an immediate setting containing the developing person (e.g. home, classroom, playground)" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 80). Mesosystems comprise the interaction between various microsystems; exosystems are interactions between two or more settings, and finally, macrosystems are defined as the "overarching pattern[s] of ideology and organization. . . common to a particular culture or subculture." (ibid).

Shelton (2019) argues that systems theory can be applied to any ecosystem, to any social group, be it a neighborhood, a community, employees of an organization, or an institute of higher education. Bronfenbrenner's system is useful to understand the site of our study, women learning designers' context and practice in higher education across the world, known for their equity-oriented practices. As we will show through the stories shared later in our paper, learning designers' practices are impacted by the different layers of the system. These include their upbringing and positionality in relation to identity, home culture, and educational and disciplinary background (microsystems). How these play out within their individual professional practice, within the culture in their department or center they work in, represent mesosystems. Macrosystems are how their department/center is positioned, within the institution, institutional culture, and wider societal culture or context. All these systems impact their practice, the tensions they experience within an institution, and the strategies they employ to work within these tensions.

In systems theory, human development is linked to understanding our contexts and our environments. Shelton (2019, p 117, emphasis added) explains that:

> *[t]he ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. So, to understand development we must attempt to see the ecosystem from the perspective of the developing person in whom we are interested.*

Human development can thus be seen in the way we adapt our practices of resistance to our context. While Bronfenbrenner's work is useful in understanding what influences somebody's practice, it does not necessarily give insight into how we respond to these different influences. Here, we found adrienne maree brown's (2017, 2021) emerging strategy work helpful as it focuses on how the women we interviewed intentionally attempt to both develop and disrupt their institutions' practices and culture, showing how "small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies" (2017, p. 3). In her books, brown (2017, 2021), who has worked for many years in building social movements, suggests how we can navigate complex systems in ways that "grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for" (ibid). Drawing from ecological, ecosystems, and biomimicry literature and speculative fiction, such as Octavia Butler's writings, brown (2017) argues that we need to work not just individually but systemically to effect change. Her emergent strategy sees change as systemic, long-term, deeply interconnected, and relational. Emergence also has a strong political and ideological aspect, challenging neoliberal individualistic agendas and favoring more participatory, community-oriented, sustainable solutions to life and living. To design for emergence is to value uncertainty and unpredictability as "emergent systems are complex systems that exhibit self-organizing behavior" (Bass, 2020: 163). In education, while it must be enacted thoughtfully and responsibly, designing for emergence would value experimentation that leads to greater adaptability of structures and

practices, more flexibility and diversity in interactions, and a heightened capacity for rapid organizational learning. Elements of an emerging strategy that brown emphasizes - drawing from the natural world - include (2021, pp. 14-17):

- the relationship between small and large, influenced by the concept of fractals, which shows that patterns repeat at scale;
- intentional adaptation, i.e. accepting that change is constant and intentional, not reactive but adaptive in ways that move us towards where we want to go;
- interdependence and decentralization, focusing on the importance of building authentic, intimate relationships, supporting mutual transformation and collaboration;
- non-linearity and iteration, recognizing that change comes from small cumulative shifts;
- resilience and transformative justice foregrounding the importance of affecting change systemically, addressing problems at their roots; and
- creating more possibilities, and accepting that there are many ways to grow in a healthy ecosystem.

As our discussion of participants' stories demonstrates, these elements are interconnected and may intersect.

Research design

Our paper draws on a larger study, which, in early 2021 interviewed 34 women (including ourselves) who practice and support learning design across the world, using a social justice lens. Learning design could be practiced in a formal role as part of a central academic staff development unit, or more informally, as in supporting other colleagues. We selected these participants based on their public presence on social media and their strong social justice and equity orientation. We also sought diversity in our participants. As the EdTech and learning design literature has historically been dominated by white men from the Global North, we intentionally decided to only interview women from around the world (15 interviewees are from the US/Canada, six from Europe, seven from Africa, and five from Australasia). We intentionally sought out participants of color (18 of color, 16 white) with broad disciplinary backgrounds.

Out of the 34 participants, 24 are academic staff developers (both in academic and support roles), seven are academics, two are in leadership positions and one is in a consultant role. This diversity mattered: in their interviews, participants shared stories about their equity-oriented learning design practices and how their voices are being impacted by their positionality, disciplinary backgrounds, academic hierarchies, departmental affiliation and orientation, and institutional standing. We selected women whose stories speak to the focus of our paper. We created short narratives based on interview transcripts, co-constructed with participants, and weaved direct quotes into the narratives. As these women are known in the wider public domain, most of them have decided to use their real names. Those not comfortable using their names have chosen a pseudonym. From these narratives, three main tensions emerged, which we will discuss using Bronfenbrenner's systems theory lens (1979) to show how different layers of a system impact strategies of resistance vis-à-vis these tensions. Finally, we explore four building blocks shared by these women, framed by brown's (2017) elements of an emerging strategy.

Narratives of resistance

The following stories explore how the participants experience and respond to institutional tensions around areas of their work they are passionate about, such as openness, innovation, and transformation.

Robin is the Director of the CoLab at Plymouth State. She is a national leader in open pedagogy, an advocate for public infrastructures and universities, and passionate about social justice issues. As an undergraduate, she participated in campus activism around LGBTQ+ issues, race and financial aid, and sexual assault policies. Small regional public institutions such as hers are currently under pressure to develop distinctive identities to survive in a climate of harsh budgetary cuts. Her institution's identity, combined with her management position, has allowed her to help introduce an institution-wide initiative called Cluster Learning, focusing on interdisciplinarity, project-based learning, and open education. Still, even in this comparatively innovative and open space, she is highly aware of how important it is to be strategic in how she frames her work:

> *The CoLab… where I work… it's very central. We've changed the whole pedagogy of the campus. I'm in at the table for all the big decisions. I think it gets a ton of respect on my campus and has a ton of weight. That being said, you bring up the word 'care' in strategic planning, and you're just laughed out of the room… I've been absolutely shocked how willing they are to give me money and support me and put me in the front of so many initiatives and let me run the whole faculty, but you clearly wouldn't say the word 'care' in a strategic plan.*

While she strongly believes in building capacity in colleagues and has developed a variety of innovative staff development initiatives, she acknowledges the pressure from the institution to standardize learning design: "I'm concerned that my lab is ultimately going to be replaced by more of an assembly line, churning out online course shells." At her institution, Quality Matters (QM) was used as a solutionist-oriented response during COVID-19, which she views as undoing many years of good work her center has done in terms of academic staff development. While her CoLab's initiative received a great response from faculty, and even the administration regarded it as "super successful", she shares how the QM reaction was an "uphill battle because it's so much easier to solutionize teaching than it is to wrestle with the fact that it's always going to be complex." She

strongly believes in staff development: "It's about the faculty feeling like they're ready for whatever happens next week. They've got tools… And they're constantly learning and engaged, rather than a piece of paper, recognizing the quality of a course at a specific moment in time. "

Maha, Professor of Practice at the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the American University in Cairo (AUC), employs different strategies to get her message around critical pedagogy and openness across. AUC offers a US liberal arts education system within an Arab culture. Maha is widely known outside her institution as an expert in the field of open education through her blogging, tweeting, and as a prolific keynote speaker. Having started as an instructional designer she felt that some of her colleagues would recognize her technical expertise but not necessarily her pedagogical knowledge: "I got a lot of pushback from people I was working with until after I finished my Ph.D. and then suddenly I was more credible and I was given a lot more autonomy and authority." Over time her impact outside the institution has impacted her voice inside the institution, although she still feels much freer expressing her opinions outside; it takes years of discussing something in open spaces, and building allies, before she can confidently bring the same ideals into the institution. She also talks about the importance of allyship and locating strategic allies within one's own institution who can support your position, but also about bringing external allies into the institution, who might be received more openly than herself:

> *I got a fund to bring the digital pedagogy [lab] to Cairo, 2016, one of my colleagues was in a session with them and she said: 'I came out of it and now I feel like I've been in Maha's brain', because she'd been hearing me talk about this stuff but not consistently, right. But now she had to spend like a whole day with [them] …and now she sort of understands what that was that I've been talking about all this time.*

She recently discovered that some local colleagues are allies because they follow her work on social media and are therefore aware of what she shares online, not just what she is able to share within institutional boundaries. Therefore, when she does share these more radical ideas relating to social justice and care within the institution, the ideas are not new for these allies. This eventually made it easier to create impact inside the institution, particularly during COVID-19, where she was able to champion pedagogies of care locally as well as globally.

Brenna is the Coordinator of Educational Technologies within the Open Learning division at a smaller regional university in Canada, focusing on developing and supporting faculty use of technology. Hers is a tenure-track position, which is rare in our field. Brenna is one of the most vocal voices in the field of openness in education. She is an avid Tweeter but also hosts a podcast show and is widely published. While her institution has a provincial mandate for the ethos of openness and flexibility, as evidenced by the existence of the Open Learning division, her values are not always in line with institutional practices. A key tension she experienced during COVID-19 is her position on the exam proctoring/surveillance software ProctorU, which she openly critiqued on social media, while it was mandated by some areas of her institution. On one hand, she understands the need for proctoring exams in terms of requirements for transferring credits; her university is a stepping stone into more prestigious colleges for many non-traditional students. However,, she believes the system shows mistrust towards smaller colleges. She describes her strategy as one of 'going rogue', using the relative obscurity of her unit to quietly support her colleagues in employing open practices, such as promoting the use of inclusive open-access textbooks or advising colleagues in designing exams that do not need proctoring.

She is aware of her privilege as an academic on a tenure track: "I am not going to stop critiquing either those kinds of assessment practices or proctoring technologies, just because we have thrown our hat in with both of those things, right? And, the privilege of my position, the privilege of the fact that it's a faculty position [in] this role, is that I can. "

But she is also clear about the importance for her to be able to speak her mind:

> *Without being foolish and with a sense of pragmatism, I've made the decision that I'm going to be who I am, and I'm going to go up, and there's nothing in my body of work – there is no way to deny my tenure if it isn't political, right?*

Alexandra is an educational developer at a European higher education institution. She both supports her colleagues in course design and teaches formal degree courses. She describes regular requests from the management board that contradict how she and her colleagues support educators and students, such as a request for three innovations to be implemented on campus. Alexandra explains:

> *[This] contradicts and comes into tension with how I actually work…we try to put the design, the teacher and the students in the centre and not the technology and processes. But nevertheless, two weeks later, another request comes, can we showcase this small VR project that we have? It's always the attraction to these shiny things that don't necessarily have a pedagogical coverage. But … they look nice, they feel modern. And the university leadership tends to be attracted, like children by shiny objects.*

Alexandra believes in implementing small changes incrementally. She explains, "We can do a lot of interesting things on Canvas or like really small, small things that actually matter for the learners and for the teachers, but that will never be showcased…". She is convinced that it is up to her and her colleagues to do a "better job at convincing [management] to be innovative in less disruptive ways, such as design sprints with colleagues, or modeling innovative pedagogical approaches in their course designs and teaching.

Such institution-wide "innovations" are often conceived by management in solutionist ways (albeit with good intentions) but can have unforeseen negative impacts. Working at a small, public, research-intensive university in South Africa as an educational technology specialist in both a service and academic role, Nicola shared what happened at her institution when management tried to get staff and students to return to campus while government regulations (as a result of COVID-19) restricted indoor venue capacity to 50%. A system was needed to enable lecturers to continue teaching simultaneously to students in class and online. It involved purchasing additional equipment and training lecturers to use the new system. Nicola shared that the resulting experience was frustrating for staff and students as it involved yet another "pivot" where "management believed that there was an easy technology solution but did not factor in the complexity of aging venues and equipment infrastructure." While Nicola and her

EdTech colleagues see small-scale piloting as essential practice before university-wide rollouts, management insisted on rolling out a ready-to-use system in a short time. Nicola's team had supported lecturers and provided online professional development opportunities for them during the pandemic; however, they "went from heroes to zeros overnight" as academics associated them with this new system:

> *Suddenly the rapport that took time to develop during a difficult time seemed to have disappeared, and I think we were seen as being aligned with management's solutionist perspective, which we were thrust into, and thus made complicit in causing people additional stress.*

This experience has taught Nicola about the political nature of academic development work; how relationships and decisions can be seen as serving the agendas of management over that of lecturers and thereby, "not in the interests of teaching and learning." She adds that "it is hard to be supportive when people are mad at you", and professional development workshops became a forum for lecturers to express their frustrations. While sometimes active resistance is not possible, she managed to speak to a few of her colleagues at her community-oriented university to explain her situation. Slowly regaining allies became a strategy, as well as 'taking a back seat' during an emotionally heightened time when lecturers had different views on being back on campus, and some still had concerns about contracting COVID-19. Over time, relationships with lecturers improved, and she learned that rather than just venting, lecturers were desperate for someone to listen to them and relay their frustrations to management. Upon reflection, she realized; "if people are showing up and want you to listen, it means they recognize you may have more voice than you think and believe that you can change things."

As learning designers known for their strong orientation toward social justice, it is not surprising that one of the main contentions our participants mentioned in their interviews is what they perceive as the often performative nature of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) work in their institutions (Ahmed, 2012). Bonni is a white woman based in the US, working for a small, private, Christian higher education institution. She describes herself as idealistic, and highly influenced by Black writers such as Maya Angelou in her college days. However, it was only through her teaching in less well-resourced contexts that she realized her own privileged upbringing. Bonni is currently a dean but also continues to teach courses in business and management. She is tenured and holds an administrative faculty leadership role, which gives her more voice than some of her colleagues. During COVID-19, her institution initially made a decision to invest heavily in video recording equipment to standardize the provision of online learning. However, Bonni managed to influence the university into investing money in faculty development instead:

> *We said no - invest in people; invest in skill development. We wound up equipping our faculty and enhancing their skills in areas such as instructional design and digital pedagogy. Faculty received pretty good stipends to participate in the process, too, and made that fast move to online that I know so many in higher education made.*

Her institution has transformed in terms of diversity of student population but not faculty, as yet. Bonni is very aware of how positionality impacts voice. She sees her role as trying to raise awareness among her colleagues about how who they are, impacts their ability to be heard. She attempts to use her privileged position, in terms of race and academic and managerial seniority, to advocate for more gender and racial equality in hiring processes. She is also known in her institution as a 'safe person' for those in the LGBTQIA student population, who can approach her when they need support. She is cautious about how openly she speaks out about her perspectives and values within the institution. However, she is also a well-known podcaster, producing content on teaching and learning in higher education, a space in which she feels she can be more transparent regarding her views.

Edran is the first person in her family to complete a Ph.D. She works as a (non-tenure-track) faculty developer at an Ivy League university in the US, supporting staff to think about DEI issues in their learning designs and teaching. She observes how the academic development field is predominantly white and female and that she still struggles to talk about race, even when facilitating DEI workshops. She talks about how she had to strengthen her voice and that throughout her PhD she was taught to be submissive, to submit to the system, graduate chair or committee. Culturally, as a Black woman, she was not taught to speak out, to speak up. Coupled with not wanting to be seen as an 'angry Black woman', she reflects on the necessity to perform when talking back to people.

> *[I am] very, very much restrained, and I'm very careful about how I frame things and how I approach pushing back on people when they say things that are racist or when they say things that I think are out of line with equity.*

Because she is not in a faculty position, her voice is limited. She has been told that showing her expertise in pedagogy will "scare off faculty." As an example, in a workshop on microaggressions in a department, questions came from white colleagues on her lived experience :

> *I'm asked what like, 'what is your evidence? What is your research-based evidence for what you're saying? Because I can't believe that's true.' Or I'm told, 'well, we need more evidence, you know, we need more evidence that our students of colour are experiencing this form of marginalisation otherwise, it's not real.' And I kind of want to say, well, it's my experience, and my history is the evidence, is all the evidence, I need to know that this is something real.*

Her strategy is to look for colleagues outside her department and outside her institution to work with, such as the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education: "I don't have a lot of power. But I am very attuned to the ways in which I can carve out space for myself, and so I do a lot of networking and collaboration."

Discussion: Building blocks towards an equity-oriented learning design practice

> *"Loving life means committing to the adaptation to stay alive, rather than the stubbornness to stay the same." (brown, 2021, p. 124)*

The stories shared above are exemplars of women learning designers, across the world, navigating institutional tensions. These women were intentionally chosen by the authors for their passion for social justice, which more often than not collides with higher education institutions having to survive in a neoliberal climate. As Sara Ahmed (2016) writes:

> *Most of us with feminist commitments end up working for organizations that do not have these commitments, even when they might appear to have them. After all, we often acquire our commitments to do something because of what is not being done.*

It is important to note that we cannot do justice, within the constraints of this paper, to the rich and complex backgrounds and practices these women shared with us. However, we tried to pull out what we thought important to show some of the tensions and strategies they employ.

We would like to focus particularly on three tensions: openness, different views of innovation, and the performativity of DEI work. We consider these to be vertical tensions around technology, and university leadership and culture following Little and Green's (2012) work. The stories show how our participants are impacted by different layers of the systems they are embedded in, e.g. their upbringing, their intersectional positionalities in the world in relation to identity, home culture, educational and disciplinary background, the culture in the department or center they work in, and how they are positioned within a department or center, how their department/center is positioned within the institution and the institutional culture or orientation, and finally, the wider societal culture or context. These impact on the strategies they employ to both support and resist institutional culture. However, there are also shared building blocks for these strategies, which echo brown's elements of emerging strategy (2017, 2021).

It is not surprising that 'openness' arose as a major tension and response strategy in our interviews. The women we interviewed are vocal advocates for openness in the public sphere, but not all are able to be equally open inside their institutions. While Robin, for example, uses her hierarchical power and personal standing within the institution to effect institution-wide pedagogical change based on values such as openness and interdisciplinarity, Brenna uses the relative obscurity of her center to do her work with selected colleagues 'under the radar of the institution', and Maha has to bring in external allies to advocate for openness in education.

Another point of contention is how institutions see innovation, and what we, as learning designers, understand as innovation. Rather than shiny technology and solutionist thinking which standardizes processes to make them scalable, the women we interviewed (and we, as authors and also participants in our research) believe in developing relationships, people, and practices. This may take longer but is more sustainable and more aligned with our values based on relationality and care (see also Macgilchrist et al., 2023). For example, Alexandra and Nicola have to both support and resist institutional attempts to introduce new technology that staff might not be ready for, and Bonni fought to ring-fence some of the extra funding received during COVID-19 for staff development instead of investing wholesale in technology.

As participants were selected for their shared passion for social justice, it is also not surprising that the final main tension was around the performativity of DEI work at their institutions. While some of the women we interviewed are specifically appointed to support colleagues in the infusion of DEI into their curriculum (or learning design), even those who do not have DEI specifically in their job description do see it as one of their responsibilities to support DEI work in their institution. Their values often clash with those of their institutions, as they consider the DEI agenda of their institution to be 'performative'. By this, they mean something that should appear to be happening but is not deeply believed in or addressed in all its complexity. Depending on how they are positioned within their institutions, this work takes different forms (see Bonni and Edran's stories). While Bonni can work more openly on infusing DEI- oriented work on an institutional level (i.e. in selection committees), Edran has to be more guarded within her institution but has been able to find her voice outside the institution through national professional development fora, such as POD.

As mentioned before our participants are highly aware of who they are and how they are placed in their institutions. They design strategies of resistance accordingly. This echoes Grupp and Little's (2019) findings that one of the most important competencies of academic developers is to understand their position, assess the terrain and determine how to represent perspectives. However, contrary to their findings and other literature that positions academic developers as liminal, 'in-between' and not necessarily embracing the power they have, the women we engaged with would not consider themselves as remaining 'neutral': rather, they see their work as necessarily deeply critical and political. In their efforts to deliberately "attempt to develop and disrupt the organization on the basis of established and emerging practices and knowledge", as Stensaker (2018, p. 277) calls for, shared building blocks for these strategies emerged in our respondents' stories, in the way they navigated these complex systems, which echoed brown's elements of an 'emerging strategy' (2017; 2021).

Building community in and outside the institution

brown emphasizes the importance of relationships within the context of emergence (2017; 2021). Our participants shared different strategies for building community: to look for allies across their institution; work with those colleagues who were open to their ideas; practice their strategies in their own classrooms; or draw strengths from like-minded people outside the institution. The idea of "critical connections over critical mass" (brown, 2017 p. 6) resonates with many of the stories (e.g. Nicola, Alexandra, and Edran). As brown writes, "Building community is to the collective as spiritual practice is to the individual" (2017, p. 90). Noddings (2012, p. 54) reminds us that people who work in caregiving positions, such as anyone who works towards social justice in a resistant organization, "need[s] the support of a caring community to sustain them." By reaching out to others

in the wider ecosystem of education and academic development, these equity-oriented learning designers establish networks in and outside the institution, which in turn create more and more opportunities and possibilities for themselves and others (brown, 2021).

Seeing change as small and nonlinear

The importance of "mov[ing] at the speed of trust" (brown 2021, p.17) is evident in the participants' stories. Our participants understand that change is not always linear, but that there are many ways to reach a goal, and sometimes they need to take a detour or 'go rogue', until the time is right to act more openly, e.g. Brenna and Maha. While some of the women we interviewed have a direct influence on executive decision-making, for others it takes time and intention to build voice and presence outside the institution before there is openness to listening to them inside the institution. Change can be small, as Alexandra and Nicola remind us, and we can leverage smaller changes to effect change on a larger level: "The large is made up of the smallest things, patterns repeat at scale. Help people see, celebrate, and build on the small shifts they are making" (brown, 2021, p.15). What is important is that they see both the smaller injustices within their institutions, but also how these smaller injustices are replicated within larger systemic injustices. While many of the tensions we are fighting are deeply contextual, they are also connected and framed by a "broader interconnected global struggle" (Bass, 2020, p. 9).

Centering care for self and others

While participants view their role as supporting and empowering educators in their institutions, the work they do is not easy. There is often tension with institutions in how to support colleagues, but there are also colleagues who resist interventions, such as Edran being invited to give a workshop on microaggression but then being challenged to provide evidence for her own experiences. This reminds us to ask, "How do we practice the art of holding others without losing ourselves? " (brown, 2021, p. 7). Sometimes this means withdrawing, taking a step back, as in Nicola's case, or being strategic, performing a role we would not naturally inhabit, as in Edran's or Robin's stories. Practicing care towards ourselves and others is central to all of us, even if it is a difficult concept to engage with at an institutional level.

Finding ways to stay true to yourself in relation to others

Our participants have been working in the DEI space for many years, and have dedicated their lives to advocacy for open practices in academia, or creating more equity-oriented academic spaces. As such, our participants continue the work of early pioneers in academic staff development, who, as Lee, Manathunga, and Kandlbinder (2010) argues, were driven more by a passion for political activism rather than critical debates about teaching and learning (although we see these as generative tensions, rather than a binary). Our participants are intent on staying true to themselves, although this might look different depending on how the person is positioned. Where they have institutional or positional power they will use it; if they do not, they find other spheres of influence, inside and outside the institution. Robin can effect institutional change, while Brenna can speak her mind freely but has to often work 'under the radar' of the institution. Speaking out is more difficult for Edran, based on her positionality, or Nicola, based on her position in the institution, but they still find ways of resisting institutional practices they do not agree with, sometimes by withdrawing altogether or moving into different spaces that are more supportive of them. From the stories we get a sense that participants both feel more connected to, but also draw more strength from, their external networks than their institutions, and as such build collective resilience by attending " to the relationships and power dynamics in the rooms you hold, creating structures that support authentic, intimate relationships, mutual transformation, and collaboration" (brown, 2021, p. 17).

How do these building blocks emerge in our current practice?

To exemplify how these building blocks emerge in practice, we share a recent real-life scenario from Maha's context.

With the launching of ChatGPT in November 2022, and the challenges facing educators regarding how to respond, Maha's department was tasked with leading community conversations and workshops on the topic. The institution's overall approach to academic integrity tends towards the punitive; however, on the AI front, the institution's approach was to give educators time to learn about AI and figure out what was possible. One of Maha's first moves was to learn from her online international communities, on Twitter and other spaces, including the WhatsApp group and meetings with the co-authors of our paper, and reading the work of and interacting with many of the women who had been interviewed in our research, what was happening, and to share with local colleagues. ChatGPT was banned in Egypt, but with the help of people from all over the world, she managed to get it to work. Working with colleagues in her department, they explored the guidance others worldwide were using and distilled what was most locally relevant, taking a caring approach to avoid overwhelming colleagues, as she explains: "Before giving workshops, we had smaller conversations with some colleagues to see what their concerns are and where they needed the most support, and we built our workshops around that." Maha also collaborated with an international scholar who had been working on AI, and had given workshops to the open online global community about AI.

Maha noticed a direction locally oriented toward "how can we detect AI-generated text and catch students who are using it?" While this direction went against her values of working constructively with learners to help them develop their skills, she still explored the detection tools, and, finding them inconsistent, tried to help educators find alternative ways to reduce overuse or misuse of AI tools by modifying assessment approaches. Although Maha blogged publicly about what she would do in her own classes (promote critical AI literacy and recommend transparency from her students), within the institution, a more equitable and caring approach meant curating and showcasing what different instructors were doing in their courses and showing a variety of different approaches that educators could take as "guidelines for AI" within their classes. This modeling of a way of centering the agency of the educators will hopefully help them nurture learner agency.

Conclusion

Working with these multiple narratives, we argue that equitable learning design positions are contextual and yet also permeate departmental or institutional boundaries and need to be considered from a broader ecosystemic perspective. Drawing on the elements of emergent strategy (brown, 2017; 2021), building blocks such as community building, seeing change as non-linear, centering care, and finding ways to stay true to yourself emerged, which supported learning designers' practices in both supporting and resisting institutional cultures. We advocate for valuing these socially just and equity-oriented learning designers as important change agents and amplifying their often silenced and siloed practices and voices. As such, we expand on the writing of authors such as Roxå and Mårtensson (2017), who argue that academic developers (and we see learning design as part of academic development) do have power and agency based on the positions they occupy but must also realize that the values attached to these positions by our institutions, often following neoliberal ideologies, might not match our own. Rather than withdrawing from our role as academic activists, however, we have shown that there are ways of navigating these tensions generatively, and, possibly most importantly, have shared strategies on how to amplify our voices through, for example, academic activism on social media. Our most important finding is to develop the language to have these conversations in and beyond our centers, around the positions we inhabit, how they impact our practice and what we could do collectively to make our voices heard because, as brown (2021, p. 124) reminds us: "Adaptation is not about being reactionary, changing without intention, or being victimized, controlled, and tossed around by the inevitable changes of life. It's about shaping change and letting changes make us stronger as individual and collective bodies."

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