



# The Spaces of Learning Design – Thinking Tool

## Questions, needs, considerations, traps and tips

Design for adult learning experience can serve a wide variety of purposes and projects. It can support the development of something structured like a curriculum or multi-module structured program delivery, a semi-structured guide or toolkit, or resources for flexible or asynchronous delivery such as a compendium of training materials, job aids or microlearning resources. What is key to creating a successful learning experience is to give the process enough time, the right expertise, center the users (learners and facilitators) and clearly define what success looks like so that there is room to create with the principles of adult learning at the forefront.

What can be difficult is that the process to do this work is not necessarily linear! **Learning experience development projects are complex, full of twists and turns, ups and downs.**

We offer here our reflections on the many spaces that learning projects go through from concept to launch—mapping out not only the **work that is needed** to develop learning experiences that deliver on their promise and purpose, but also **the kind of expertise** that is needed at each space, **approaches and tools** we find effective for that space, and some of the **pitfalls and challenges**. These spaces may be overlapping, recursive, or attended to in a different order. Finding where you are starting is all part of the design process!

We hope this serves as a helpful resource for those looking to scope or write a request for proposals for the development of learning experiences. We know it can be difficult to see or advocate for what you will need to accomplish, with whom, and in what timeframe.

- Understanding and right-sizing
- Getting to the Big Picture
- Filling the gaps and finding the flow
- Giving it shape
- Making it stick
- Supporting strong facilitation
- Fine tuning and harmonizing
- Designing learning, then learning more

If you're intrigued by this and want to hear more, we've written a longer piece that delves a bit deeper into learning experience design from our perspective. We know that many people have experiences, tools, and perspectives that can also enhance our collective understanding and elevate our practice. We offer this not as a definitive guide but as an invitation. We welcome hearing from others who design materials for social and behavior change (applied learning), toolkits and guides for organizational, community and institutional change, develop training or facilitate experiential learning within community change practices or who identify as instructional designers. How does your process compare? Have you found any tips or tricks for these spaces? What is needed to help you explain the work of learning design?

## Understanding and right-sizing

Answers the questions:	Needs:	Please consider...	Avoid the trap of...
Where are we/what do we have now?	Time	An initial scoping contract to properly assess the work that needs doing	I already know what we have/need.
Where do we want to get to?	Organization (dates, folders, files, etc.)		The scope of work was already created within the ToR/RFP.
	A group! (instructional designer, technical content expert, project manager, etc.)		I can do this by myself.
			The timeline is already set.

**Don't forget ... it is *nearly impossible* for a writer/designer to properly scope work without seeing the actual materials and talking to the team.**

## Getting to the Big Picture

Answers the questions:	Needs:	Please consider...	Avoid the trap of...
What will we teach? What exists that we might build on? What new perspectives, contexts, frameworks/models or tools do we want to add or bring forward? What is our purpose in (re)creating or building on materials that already exist on these topics? What are the overall objectives?	Desk research and background material  Project, design and subject matter experts	A collaborative workshop with strong facilitation design	Existing materials provide a good enough outline/framework.

**Don't forget ... to be explicit about the nature of the gap for learners. Is the gap knowledge, skill or motivation (or something else)?** Learning does not inherently lead to doing!

## Filling the gaps and finding the flow

Answers the questions:	Needs:	Please consider...	Avoid the trap of...
What are the "aha" moments for the learner?	Knowledge of the learners, their motivations and context	Time to make this an iterative phase, with space to sit with ideas for a moment	This draft must be the final draft.
How can learning be structured to get learners to arrive at those moments?	Robust understanding of how people learn and apply new ideas		Just leave it to the technical expert.
What are the gaps in information and understanding to be filled?	Ability to quickly comprehend basic subject matter AND ability to suspend subject matter expertise for beginner's mindset		

**Don't forget ... your motivation for learners is not necessarily the same as the learners' motivation.**

## Giving it shape

Answers the questions:	Needs:	Please consider...	Avoid the trap of...
<p>What are the specific concepts that will be delivered in each session?</p> <p>How will this material be taught? What activities or stories will bring these ideas to life?</p> <p>What skills need to be developed or practiced and how will this be accomplished?</p>	<p>Existing source material</p> <p>teaching / curriculum development / facilitation experience</p> <p>AND</p> <p>subject matter experts, program staff, people with deep experience of the context (ideally frontline workers), trainers with experience with the learners in the specific settings where the program will be delivered</p>	<p>A writeshop. Focused collaborative time to get clear on the specific content and key messages, develop activities, worksheets and other tools, write stories and come to shared learner-facing definitions of core ideas</p> <p>Focused deep working time to build out the content (writing, illustrations, graphics)</p>	<p>Just leave it to the writer/instructional designer.</p>
<p><b>Don't forget ... concepts that are simple for the technical expert (frameworks in particular!) are not usually straightforward for learners.</b></p>			

## Making it stick

Answers the questions:	Needs:	Please consider...	Avoid the trap of...
<p>What existing knowledge or skills are you building on?</p> <p>How does the learner like to take in information?</p> <p>What does the learner need to reinforce their learning?</p> <p>Apply ideas to their life?</p>	<p>Teaching / curriculum development / facilitation experience</p> <p>Referral back to source material or a small library of facilitation guides</p> <p>Thinking beyond content to program and learning structures</p> <p>Clear and creative writing</p> <p>Creative direction</p> <p>Graphic design</p>	<p>Giving enough time for idea development, writing, editing, and design. This and the following phases take the most <i>time</i>.</p>	<p>Focusing on technical content but not learner context.</p> <p>Talking points and a few participatory activities are enough structure.</p> <p>It can just be a text document.</p>
<p><b>Don't forget ... the graphic design!</b> This is where the meat of it is. <b>A focus on utility means putting time and resources into visuals and layout. Good graphic design increases use.</b></p>			

## Supporting strong facilitation

Answers the questions:	Needs:	Please consider...	Avoid the trap of...
What background knowledge does the facilitator need?	Teaching / curriculum development / facilitation experience	Deepening the support for facilitators beyond just the program/learning content!	Just give the facilitators the curriculum/facilitation guide and they'll know how to use it.
Where does the facilitator need support?	Creative direction Graphic design		Train facilitators, but do it all in a day, after which they will deliver sessions over months.
What scaffolding can support facilitators with different levels of experience?	Time spent with facilitators in training		It can just be a numbered text document.

**Don't forget** ...Just like learners, **facilitators also need to take in information in small, digestible bits.** Facilitators need time and support to prepare to deliver both the content and interpersonal communication within a well designed curriculum.



## Fine tuning and harmonizing

Answers the questions:	Needs:	Please consider...	Avoid the trap of...
What details and logistics are left to smooth out?	An editor and proofreader	A small team with sufficient time to effectively catch errors, find inconsistencies, see where to connect the dots, and have fun with the polish and flair.	The main writer can also be the solo editor.
Is it consistent across all pieces?	Attention to detail		This can be done ad hoc as we go (only works with skilled facilitators and a solid plan)
What "glue" is needed to hold it all together?	Time and project management Graphic design (the design also needs this piece)		

**Don't forget ...the "glue"** is the introductory and guiding text that outlines the purpose and content of the curriculum, has overall facilitation tips and guidance, and attends to the administrative and detailed logistical questions like how many copies of the worksheets are needed for which sessions, the session timing, etc.

## Designing learning, then learning more

Answers the questions:	Needs:	Please consider...	Avoid the trap of...
What feedback did we get and how should we adapt?	Knowledge and document management	Creating a structure of capturing edits and ideas to incorporate into new versions every few (5 or so) years, depending. (for reference, most textbooks come out with a new version every 3 to 4 years.)	A "final" version means don't change it ever again.
What other learners and contexts make use of this?	A library, a place for good things to live and be checked out and used.		Every suggestion and edit needs to be made right away.
What knowledge should be added... eventually?	A versioning schedule		Others cannot draw from this work unless it is perfectly re-contextualized.
<p><b>Don't forget</b> ... to create a structure <b>to share and gather feedback</b> from implementers over time.</p>			