

A manifesto for the metaverse: opportunities and challenges for learning development

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Presentation abstract

Drawing upon a section of the co-created learning development (LD) Manifesto (ALDinHE, 2018), in this workshop we invite participants to come and be creative – and imagine beyond what learning developers do now into what they may do in the future, inspired by the metaverse. The metaverse is a science fiction hypothetical iteration from the book *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992) set in a near future where the global political structure has collapsed(!), a tiny number of super-corporations control most aspects of life, and the rich spend their time in the metaverse (Ball, 2022).

Today the metaverse is the Facebook-owned platform Meta, which Mark Zuckerberg (2021) explains as ‘an embodied internet where you’re in the experience, not just looking at it’. Rather than our current 2D, screen-based internet, the metaverse will be a 3D virtual space, accessed by either a VR headset or AR (augmented reality) glasses, which superimpose a layer of digital information on top of the visible world. What impact might this have on LD practices, knowledge and beliefs? The metaverse is highly contentious, and we invite learning developers to take the challenge and look to possible futures and their potential value to the sector. The educational possibilities of the metaverse will build from the UNESCO (2022) ‘Reimagining education’ discussion paper.

There is also a need to focus the conversation on the ethics of the metaverse (Fielding, 2021), to consider how we can embed safety, privacy and inclusion at the core. It is fair to argue that these values closely align with LD, yet in the metaverse there is the potential for

violence, harassment, isolation and bullying. How can we promote and enhance equality, diversity and inclusion in this space?

We will invite participants (who will work in teams) to co-create a #Take5 blogpost with us from our mapping and debates.

No technology is needed for the session, and no previous knowledge of the metaverse.

What does learning development do? Our manifesto:

- It contextualises, embeds and maps knowledge, and contributes to learning gain.
- It teaches how to learn and scaffolds learning.
- It widens opportunity, not participation; it can trouble what we mean by participation.
- It infiltrates throughout the university and operates in a 3rd space, connecting and collaborating with the wider community.
- It works with the hidden curriculum.
- It legitimises the different forms of knowledge our students have.
- It levels the playing field and widens the academy.

Keywords: learning development; metaverse; inclusion; virtual reality; augmented reality; reimagining education.

Community response

This was an inspirational, horizon scanning session focused on examining emerging innovative practice and provided an opportunity to explore implications for our community, described by participants as 'interesting and thought provoking'.

The presentation began with an outline of what the metaverse is, working from the origins of the term taken from a novel *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 2003). It is described as 'an embodied internet where you're *in* the experience, not just looking at it'. An overview and context setting was provided of this experiential, immersive internet that 'merges inside out and outside in', identifying some of the major players – Facebook through FINTECH – and

summarising current challenges, ethical issues and research points. Starting from a position that clearly identified the importance of this new technology the conversation turned to ‘So what does this mean for us (as learning developers)?’

Figure 1. State of XR and Immersive Learning Outlook Report (2021, p.21).

“The future is human, and the future of learning is immersive. In the future, learning will take the shape of a story, a play, a game; involving multiple platforms and players; driven by dialogue and augmented with technology, an interplay of immersive experiences, data, and highly social virtual worlds”

Figure 2. Selection of playing card conversation prompts.



Figure 3. Workshop tabletop.

In order to better explore this, colleagues were asked to discuss in groups, which aspects of our teaching best map to the metaverse? The playing cards (Figure 2) provided a series of prompts to consider technological barriers to participation and ethical challenges that students might face accessing and using the metaverse for study. They were particularly appreciated as an effective means of scaffolding conversation in groups. Some participants used the cards as a frame for all their contributions to the session, providing different equity, diversity and inclusion lenses to the use of the metaverse. Given the concerns related to access, the cards helped to frame much of the debate. Figure 3 displays the conversation prompts which consisted of a 'flat' triangle with the key words of 'Equality Diversity and Inclusivity' around the sides, and the term 'metaverse' as the pivot point when the triangles were folded and assembled into 3D. Participants then engaged in collecting thoughts on their tables.

It was clear on the day that many colleagues had difficulty envisaging how the metaverse might impact our practice as learning developers. As one participant commented 'I personally struggle to envisage a world where HE takes place in the metaverse. For that reason, I found it hard to imagine what LD would look like in this way'.

This meant the resulting conversation, while far reaching, largely focused on hypothetical implications of the metaverse rather than concrete practical applications. This does mean much of the conversation focused on ethical considerations – the opportunities and challenges raised by moving learning development into a virtual space. One group suggested that we actually use Chat GPT to ‘create’ an argument of the type that LDs use to illustrate viewpoints to students. This is ‘Cats versus Dogs as companions’, from the different views of Socrates and Confucius: below in Appendix A we have copied and pasted the result, which led to a great debate around the relative standpoints, the quality of argument, the possible sources and how, moving forward, as teams working with students, we approach the use of AI tools.

Editorial comment

This looked like a fascinating session, both inspirational and provocative. One of the biggest challenges to me appears to be the risk of further separating exploratory learning methodology from the business of awarding degrees, where VR and the metaverse could be added to a list of new and innovative, playful approaches to learning while assessment remains limited to traditional forms. While the concept of alignment of assessment isn’t new (Biggs and Tang, 2011) as universities grow the administration of learning feels increasingly separated from the conversations around learning innovation: these different functions are managed by different teams. If the future of learning is immersive how do we ensure a coherent creative student experience, embedded in this new context, an experience that prioritises learning? In order to fully explore the huge opportunities this offers, it seems more important than ever for learning developers to work outside of our usual organisational silos, to be able to bring learning developers’ perspectives to the table when staff are designing learning.

Authors’ reflection

Carina: I, too, have struggled with the concept of the metaverse – or perhaps I’m just averse to the whole idea of handing over large elements of our existence and interactions to big tech? I’d like to believe that face-to-face contact will remain the norm and maintain its central importance in human relations, even in HE; perhaps the excitement and interest

over the cards, a tangible, tactile resource, is reassurance in that regard! However, perhaps any reticence felt around the metaverse – in many ways understandable, as this is being done to us rather than with us – can be transformed from fear to opportunity by grasping some of the affordances that AI and technology generally offers us and learning development. This is our moment to decide what LD could look like in the metaverse. Rather than succumb to the relentless sweep of technology, we can affirm our values and actively work to create safe spaces online for all our students (and ourselves). We can champion access and inclusion for every student, and harness some of the power of technology to ensure that this inclusion is meaningful. HE is changing – inevitably – so LD may have to as well, but if we keep our values at the centre of everything we do, in whichever medium we do it, then the metaverse can be more opportunity than challenge.

Debbie: An evaluation piece by TechTarget (2023) describe it [the metaverse] as this:

Imagine – a virtual world where billions of people live, work, shop, learn and interact with each other – from the comfort of their coaches in the virtual world... our devices become a portal to a 3D virtual realm, like real life only bigger and better. Avatars move seamlessly from one experience to another – taking our identity and our money with us.

My concerns remain with the ‘have’ and ‘have nots’ with claims made for Universal access by tech giants companies seeking to commercialise their platforms. Technology is not value-free, and there is a cost to access – the right devices to connect effectively and robustly; the access to infrastructure – for example, swathes of Canada, populated by the First Nation are in a satellite blackout spot; South Africa have scheduled rolling ‘blackouts’; how does this equate to the ‘grand claims’ for social justice and access to education? The learning development manifesto, re-visited through the lens of the affordances of the metaverse offers a framing for the questions that need to be asked (and answered). LD values underpinning the manifesto statements, for me, point to a continuation of shared emancipatory practice for both LD practitioners and the communities they serve.

The LD Manifesto:

- It contextualises, embeds and maps knowledge, and contributes to learning gain.

- It teaches how to learn and scaffolds learning.
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Lee: Facilitating this session really got me thinking – not just in the session, but also rethinking my journey up to this point. My relationship with the metaverse has been a long journey over the last two decades. This started through engaging with pre-cursor technology like *The Sims Online* (2002) and *Second Life* (mid-2000s) where I began to interact with others in real-time via an avatar. Even games like *World of Warcraft* have, over the last twenty years, seen me spend inordinate amounts of time online, investing in characters through which I interacted with the avatars of others. Yet – I stepped away from much of this technology as my career and family life developed. It was in the pandemic I saw new relevance for the premise not just for entertainment but for work and socialisation as well. I also realised that such technology was not just about connecting people in a technical sense but was about providing spaces for people to interact in new, equitable ways. There is no need to declare identities or disabilities – but if you do, it can also provide a safe space to interact where it might not be possible offline.

I recognise Virtual Reality (VR) is often bound in conceptualisations of the metaverse, but it has always worried me. I invested in a PlayStation VR when it first came out, but found it uncomfortable with glasses – and nauseating. Perhaps newer technology and more blended forms of VR will provide a way forward for me but it is also a concern I have for others when accessing such spaces.

Preparing for this session allowed me to revisit the concept, and I very much enjoyed reading *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 2003), acquainting me with the origins of the term. While *Snow Crash* may ultimately posit a neoliberal hell, with ultimate power to the corporations, it also represents one of the significant issues facing a modern-day metaverse. In *Snow Crash* the internet infrastructure is owned by one person, allowing a common protocol and common base of access. While we may do that with our current

internet (thanks to Tim Berners Lee HTML and HTTP), our current metaverse seems wrapped into proprietary technologies and devices. To allow seamless movement between different virtual metaverse environments, it requires a common interface and right now we have too many apps and environments to make it work.

As an educator, and someone who has long championed equity, diversity and inclusion, the metaverse worries me. If I possessed the most expensive VR technology, the fastest internet connection and no disability that would prevent my engagement, the metaverse may seem like some utopian way to connect and explore the world in new ways. Even though I have some of these tools, I don't have them all and I recognise the majority of the planet has none of these tools. The metaverse dream is far, far away. As Debbie reflects, it comes back to the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Right now, most people have not. I fear metaverse learning tools will provide a two-tier experience. We can't readily provide an equitable experience for a video, let alone an immersive three-dimensional environment. There are also practical considerations too. Right now I'm writing this while looking after my three little ones – it wouldn't be appropriate for me to be buried in a headset unaware of what they were doing, which my laptop at least affords. Don't get me wrong. The metaverse excites me. I just worry it will leave a lot of people behind, and we've not even solved the digital divide with the current (and previous) generations of technology...

Next steps and additional questions

- Would it be possible to arrange a sandpit session for staff to explore uses of VR?
(Yes, we will offer an LD@3)
- If LD is to be conducted virtually in the metaverse, how can we continue to ensure our practice and codes of practice (ethical, supportive, inclusive) extends to include the virtual?
(This session is a first step in that direction – and LD values really came to the fore)
- What would that LD code of practice for the metaverse look like?
(See Holley, 'Exploring the metaverse through metaphor', 2023, starts to position some of the wider questions)
- How can we best support students and staff engage with the metaverse?
(in all the ways LDs do best! blogs, workshops, sharing practice and engaging staff and students from where they are now).

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The authors used ChatGPT in this manuscript. The task performed by ChatGPT was the text generation of the philosophical discussions about the merits of dogs versus cats, which can be seen in Appendix A. This was illustrative only, and not part of the workshop methodology. The authors have complied with the *JLDHE*'s principles of AI use.

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Appendix A

Instruction: Chat CPT – write an argument between Socrates and Confucius on cats versus dogs.

Socrates: Good day, Confucius! I hope you are well. Today, I wish to engage in a philosophical debate with you regarding a topic that has perplexed humans for centuries: cats versus dogs. Which of these creatures do you believe to be superior companions?

Confucius: Ah, Socrates, it is always a pleasure to discuss matters of importance with you. When it comes to the question of cats versus dogs, I must admit that I have a fondness for both. However, if I were to choose, I would lean towards dogs as superior companions. Allow me to explain.

Socrates: Very well, Confucius. I respect your affinity for dogs, but I must advocate for the virtues of cats. Cats possess a certain wisdom and independence that is unmatched by their canine counterparts. They are self-reliant creatures, capable of contemplating the mysteries of the universe in their solitary moments.

Confucius: Ah, Socrates, you speak of the introspective nature of cats. While I appreciate their independence, I believe that dogs embody the virtues of loyalty and companionship. Dogs have been our faithful companions for thousands of years, offering unwavering loyalty and protection to their human companions. Their ability to forge strong bonds with their owners is unparalleled.

Socrates: True, Confucius, dogs are known for their loyalty, but I must raise the question of authenticity. Are dogs truly loyal, or do they simply follow their instinct and seek rewards? Cats, on the other hand, form genuine connections based on mutual respect. They choose their companions wisely and offer their loyalty to those who have earned it.

Confucius: Socrates, your argument touches upon an interesting point. While it is true that dogs may respond to instinct, their loyalty remains steadfast. They willingly and selflessly offer their love and protection to their owners, regardless of any rewards. The bond between a dog and its human companion is built upon trust and deep emotional connection.

Socrates: Fair point, Confucius. However, let us also consider the practical aspects. Cats require less maintenance and are generally more independent. They are capable of taking care of themselves, allowing their owners to enjoy a certain level of freedom. Dogs, on the other hand, require regular exercise, social interaction, and constant attention.

Confucius: Indeed, Socrates, cats are low-maintenance companions, but the responsibilities that come with owning a dog can be seen as opportunities for personal growth and development. Taking care of a dog teaches us patience, discipline, and the importance of selflessness. Dogs offer us the chance to cultivate virtues that contribute to our own moral character.

Socrates: Confucius, it seems we have reached an impasse. While I appreciate the qualities of loyalty and companionship embodied by dogs, I cannot overlook the individuality and wisdom displayed by cats. Perhaps, in the end, the superiority of one over the other depends on the individual's personal preferences and the unique companionship they seek.

Confucius: You make a valid point, Socrates. It appears that our disagreement on this matter may be irreconcilable, for the value of companionship is subjective and varies from person to person. In the end, it is the harmony between humans and their chosen companions, whether cats or dogs, that brings joy and fulfillment to their lives.

Socrates: Indeed, Confucius, it is the pursuit of harmony and fulfillment that truly matters. Let us agree to respect each other's perspectives and celebrate the diverse ways in which humans find companionship and meaning in the world.

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