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Creating the conditions for professional services scholarship at a Russell Group university: A critically reflective account of staff development, mentoring and systems thinking

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Abstract

This critically reflective account examines the establishment of the Research Guild in King's Digital, a department at King's College London specialising in online and blended postgraduate education. The Research Guild is an internally developed, mentor-supported community designed to help professional services staff engage more confidently with educational research and scholarship. Drawing on systems thinking, I reflect on how the initiative responded to a recurring pattern: teams highly effective at delivery but lacking time, infrastructure and perceived legitimacy to undertake scholarly enquiry. The account discusses how participation in the second iteration of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) ELESIG Research and Evaluation Scholar Scheme, an internal training needs analysis and three practical pathways shaped the Guild's development. I argue that staff development in higher education becomes more sustainable when designed as an ecosystem of scaffolds, feedback loops, shared ownership and small leverage points, rather than as isolated training activity.

Keywords

mentorship, educational research, community of practice

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Introduction: Making curiosity structural

Scharmer (2009, p. 436) argues that the quality of our attention and intention profoundly influences how situations unfold and the outcomes we create). I keep returning to this thought when I reflect on how we develop professional services staff in higher education. In a busy production environment, attention is a scarce resource. When deadlines dominate, curiosity can quietly become optional. This account documents how I tried to make curiosity structural by founding a Research Guild in King's Digital, and what that taught me about mentoring, legitimacy, identity and systems change.

King's Digital is a department at King's College London specialising in the design and development of online and blended Master's programmes and short courses. Over 15 years in technology-enhanced and blended learning, I have seen a recurring organisational pattern: teams can become excellent at delivery while becoming less confident at scholarly enquiry. By enquiry, I mean the habit of asking practice-based questions in ways that can be informed by literature, evidence, peer dialogue and systematic reflection (Felten, 2013; McEwan et al., 2023).

In systems thinking terms (Senge, 2006), delivery can become a reinforcing loop. As teams deliver successfully, they build trust, and that trust often brings further delivery work. Enquiry behaves differently. Although it is valuable, it can become a balancing loop because workload pressures push it to the margins, where it is treated as useful but optional. This pattern is also shaped by wider pressures in higher education (Jisc, 2023; Office for Students, 2025; Sweeney et al., 2026), where financial constraint, workload intensification and the demand to deliver high-quality digital education at pace can make enquiry feel like a luxury rather than an integral part of quality enhancement.

In my current role, I noticed this in small moments: learning designers discussing 'what works' without always having the time or shared language to connect practice to literature; colleagues who were highly skilled in learning design but hesitant to see themselves as researchers; and a general sense that publishing and conferences sat outside the recognised world of professional services practice. This observation captured more than a lack of confidence. It pointed to a cultural boundary in higher education between those traditionally recognised as producers of educational research and those positioned primarily as implementers of teaching and learning strategy. Whitchurch's (2008) concept of third space professionals helps explain this boundary, as it describes roles that operate between academic and professional domains, where expertise may be pedagogical and strategic but not always recognised through conventional academic identities.

For learning designers, this boundary can be particularly frustrating. Their work is deeply pedagogical: they interpret evidence, advise academic colleagues, structure student learning, design activities and shape assessment and feedback experiences. The critical role of learning designers and adjacent learning technology professionals became especially visible during the COVID-19 pivot to online teaching, when they supported academic colleagues in redesigning modules, developing online pedagogies and maintaining continuity of learning (Farrell, 2022; Watermeyer et al., 2022). Yet this work is not always recognised as scholarship. The Research Guild emerged from my attempt to make that boundary more permeable.

So, I found myself asking: if we want evidence-informed practice, where is the infrastructure that makes evidence-seeking feel normal, safe and worthwhile?

Reflective approach and ethical positioning

This article is written as a critically reflective account rather than as an empirical study. It draws on my experience of establishing the Research Guild and uses systems thinking to examine the conditions that made the initiative possible, useful and difficult to sustain.

My reflective materials include planning notes, meeting notes, drafts, mentoring conversations and my own reflections on the design and development of the Guild. These materials are not treated as research data; rather, they help me reconstruct the choices I made and what I learned from them. The emphasis of this account is therefore not on proving impact, but on making visible a process of professional learning through experience and reflection (Boyd & Fales, 1983).

This distinction matters ethically. The internal training needs analysis discussed later was undertaken as part of staff development planning, not as a research instrument designed for publication. I therefore do not report individual responses, participant quotations or identifiable colleague experiences. Instead, I use the process as a prompt for reflecting on my own decision-making in establishing the Guild, and on the systems conditions that enabled or constrained the initiative. This approach is aligned with the principles of responsible representation, transparency and minimising harm articulated in the BERA ethical guidance for educational research (British Educational Research Association, 2024).

Positionality: Learning design, mentoring and systems thinking

I write from the position of a Senior Learning Designer with over 15 years' experience in technology-enhanced and blended learning across higher and professional education. I also taught systems thinking as a guest speaker at several UK higher education institutions. This dual position matters. I work within professional services, but much of my work is pedagogical, advisory and knowledge-producing. I regularly support academic colleagues in making decisions about curriculum structure, online learning design, student engagement and pedagogical alignment.

This places my work in what Whitchurch (2008, 2013) has described as a 'third space' in higher education: a space between established academic and professional domains. Third-space work can be productive because it enables collaboration across boundaries, but it can also create ambiguity around identity, authority and recognition, particularly when professional staff have to establish the legitimacy of their expertise in relation to academic audiences (Ryttberg, 2022; Whitchurch, 2008, 2013). The Research Guild was partly an attempt to respond to that ambiguity by creating a space where learning designers and related professional staff could explore themselves not only as supporters of educational practice, but as contributors to educational scholarship.

Systems thinking as a reflective lens

By systems thinking, I mean an approach to understanding professional practice as a set of interacting elements, relationships, feedback loops, constraints and leverage points rather than isolated events (Meadows, 2008). In this account, three systems ideas are particularly useful.

The first is the reinforcing loop. A small success can create confidence, which can generate further participation, which can then create more visible success. The second is the balancing loop. Delivery pressures, limited time and unclear recognition can reduce participation in scholarly activity, even when people are interested. The third is the leverage point: a small, well-placed intervention that can shift a wider pattern (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006).

The Research Guild became, for me, a practical experiment in these ideas. It was not a large, funded programme or formal research centre. It was a modest intervention into a professional learning system: a way of asking whether structured mentoring, visible outputs and a community around scholarship could begin to shift what felt possible.

Establishing the Research Guild

The ALT ELESIG Research and Evaluation Scholar Scheme as a scaffold

A significant influence on the development of the Research Guild was my participation in the second iteration of the ALT ELESIG Research and Evaluation Scholar Scheme, known as ALT ELESIG Research and Evaluation Scholar Scheme 2.0. ELESIG (formerly the Evaluating Learners Experiences of e-learning Special Interest Group) is a community within the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) focused on learners' experiences of technology-enhanced learning. The first iteration of the scholar scheme was analysed by Sweeney et al. (2026), who describe it as a cross-institutional mentor-scholar scheme designed to support learning technology professionals to develop habits, confidence and skills in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

Sweeney et al.'s (2026) account is particularly relevant to my reflection because it identifies tensions I also recognised in King's Digital: the difficulty of identifying as a scholar, finding a place within a broader scholarly community, and positioning scholarship alongside established third space professional responsibilities. Their analysis also highlights mentoring as relational and adaptive rather than simply instructional.

I joined the second iteration of the ALT ELESIG Research and Evaluation Scholar Scheme 2.0 as part of a group of three Senior Learning Designers from King's Digital, including myself. Our main purpose in joining the scheme was not only to develop our own scholarly confidence, but also to gain mentoring, structure and external guidance that would help us nurture the Research Guild within King's Digital. This group of three refers specifically to the colleagues being mentored through the ALT ELESIG scheme; the Research Guild itself was a separate and broader King's Digital initiative, open to learning designers and other colleagues working in related digital education roles.. This mattered because we did not enter the scheme as isolated individuals, but as a small professional group already embedded in the same departmental context. Between September 2023 and March 2025, we had nine one-hour meetings with two assigned mentors, both experienced academics and researchers in education from UK higher education institutions.

The meetings were semi-structured rather than didactic. We brought emerging questions, uncertainties and practical challenges from our context, and the mentors helped us think them through. The conversations moved across research methods, conference participation, theoretical frameworks, scholarly associations, sector reports, key researchers and recent literature in digital education and SoTL. The mentors also shared

insights from their own research and scholarship, which helped make the scholarly landscape feel less distant and more navigable.

My own experience of mentoring was therefore central to how I came to understand the Research Guild. Through the ALT ELESIG Research and Evaluation Scholar Scheme 2.0, I was not only facilitating a local initiative; I was also being mentored into a different kind of scholarly leadership. I began to understand mentoring less as the transfer of expertise and more as a relational process through which uncertainty can be made discussable, provisional ideas can be tested, and confidence can be built over time. In retrospect, the value of the scheme was not simply that it gave us advice. It modelled a form of scholarly mentoring that was relational, responsive and grounded in practice. The meetings helped me understand that developing a research culture for professional services staff would require more than signposting colleagues to resources. It would require repeated opportunities to bring uncertain ideas into conversation, test possible directions, and connect everyday professional questions to wider bodies of educational research.

Seen through a systems thinking lens, the Scholar Scheme acted as an external scaffold and a leverage point. It gave me access to a wider scholarly community, helped legitimise research activity within my professional role, and provided a model of mentoring that I could adapt locally. The Research Guild therefore emerged not as a direct copy of the ALT ELESIG scheme, but as a local response shaped by the same underlying problem: how to help learning design and learning technology professionals move from professional expertise towards confident scholarly participation.

Why a Research Guild?

The term ‘Guild’ was chosen deliberately. We wanted to avoid the formality of a committee, working group or research centre. A committee can imply governance; a centre can imply scale, funding and institutional authority. A guild, by contrast, suggested a collective of people connected by shared craft, interest and developing expertise.

The word also resonated with the idea of learning through participation. A guild is not only a structure; it is a social space where people develop craft through modelling, dialogue, feedback and shared standards. In that sense, the Research Guild was close to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), but intentionally lighter, less hierarchical and more exploratory. It was intended to create a space where colleagues could take different levels of participation: reading, reviewing, presenting, discussing, designing studies or co-authoring outputs. Unlike the ELESIG mentor scheme, which involved three Senior Learning Designers from King’s Digital being mentored externally, the Research Guild was open more broadly to learning designers and other King’s Digital colleagues working in related digital education roles.

By legitimacy, I mean the perceived permission to participate in scholarly activity: to read research critically, ask researchable questions, submit conference abstracts, review manuscripts and see one’s professional practice as a valid source of knowledge. The Guild was therefore not only a skills initiative. It was also an attempt to redistribute legitimacy.

Designing the Guild: from training needs analysis to three pathways

Before designing the Guild, I ran an internal training needs analysis with King’s Digital colleagues working across learning design and related digital education roles. Its purpose was operational: to inform staff development planning. It was not designed as a research survey, and I do not present it here as research evidence.

However, the process was important for my design thinking. I had initially assumed that a single research development route might be sufficient. The training needs analysis helped me recognise that colleagues would need different entry points into scholarship. Some wanted to become more confident engaging with literature. Some were interested in conferences and external dissemination. Others were curious about conducting research but unsure where to begin. This design learning led me to organise the Research Guild around three pathways rather than one programme.

The first was a literature review pathway. I partnered with King's College London Library to support colleagues in developing confidence with literature searching and review practices. This also created an unexpected feedback loop: the work began to inform resources for remote students on literature searching, meaning that staff development fed forward into student-facing design.

The second was a conference pathway. With support from the ELESIG mentors, we created individual plans for colleagues: identifying a practice-based idea, selecting an appropriate conference, drafting an abstract and preparing for presentation. This pathway was intentionally production friendly. It treated conference participation as a managed project with milestones rather than as an open-ended aspiration.

The third was a research pathway. For colleagues who wanted to conduct research, the Guild created a container for turning practice questions into research questions and for making methods feel accessible rather than intimidating. This was where mentoring was especially useful, because methodological choices can be hard to make without conversation. Gibbs et al. (2017) and Norton (2019) both highlight the value of practitioner enquiry and action research in higher education, but my experience was that colleagues first needed a safe space in which to imagine themselves as people who could ask such questions.

From a systems thinking perspective, the three-pathway structure mattered because it respected different starting points. It reduced the pressure to define participation narrowly. People could join at the level that matched their confidence and capacity and move between pathways over time.

Visible outputs as feedback loops

There were tangible outputs, and I do not want to understate them. In staff development, visible outcomes often create the credibility that secures support for the next cycle, because evaluation evidence helps demonstrate the value of professional development (Guskey, 2002). However, I treat these outputs not as empirical proof of impact, but as visible markers of a changing system. They helped me see how confidence, legitimacy and participation can reinforce one another.

The first visible outcome was conference activity. Within a relatively short period, colleagues began presenting research-informed and practice-based work at a range of conferences and sector events. These presentations covered topics including AI-supported debate simulations (Barth & Fulker, 2025), sustainable online course design and future-proofing (Barth et al., 2025; Barth & Miroshnikov, 2026), accessibility (Brigg et al., 2025), decolonial visual design (de Paeztron, 2026), leadership in online learning design (Cornish et al., 2025), transnational online learning (Abwavo & Kay, 2026; Kay & Kwihangana, 2025), collaborative storytelling with GenAI (Hamilton & Simpson, 2025;

Hamilton et al., 2025) and GenAI in learning design practice (Ferro et al., 2025; Ferro et al., 2026).

The range of topics mattered as much as the number of presentations. It showed that scholarly participation was not confined to one narrow research agenda. Colleagues were able to connect scholarship to existing areas of practice: accessibility, inclusion, artificial intelligence, online course sustainability, transnational learning, visual design and leadership. In systems terms, conference activity became a reinforcing loop. Each abstract, presentation or accepted contribution made the next one feel slightly more possible.

The second outcome was publication. Two research projects were completed, written up and published: Exploring the impact of generative AI literacy on teaching practices and pedagogical alignment (Miroshnikov & Bennett, 2025) and Conceptualisations and practices of futureproofing in online course design (Miroshnikov & Barth, 2026). This mattered symbolically as much as practically. It demonstrated that publication was possible from within a professional services context, not only from academic departments.

The phenomenographic approach (Marton, 1981) used in Conceptualisations and practices of futureproofing in online course design (Miroshnikov & Barth, 2026) was shaped through discussions with the ELESIG mentors. This became an important moment in my learning, as it showed that mentoring can support not only confidence and motivation, but also the development of more thoughtful and appropriate methodological decision-making.

These outputs also gave me a clearer language for explaining to senior colleagues why research activity was not an optional extra, but a contributor to quality enhancement, professional confidence and institutional visibility.

Peer-review as a reusable mechanism

A particularly meaningful development came when I organised an internal peer-review process for a colleague's article. The peer-review process was valuable not only because it supported one manuscript, but because it created a practical model that others could adapt. Making the process explicit helped to show how internal peer-review can become a low-risk route into scholarly activity for colleagues who may not yet feel ready to author papers themselves.

The process had several stages. First, we identified a manuscript that would benefit from educational review from colleagues with relevant professional expertise. Second, I invited volunteers from learning design, quality assurance and user experience (UX) teams. This was intentional: I wanted to include people who were interested in research but not necessarily ready to author papers themselves. Third, we agreed a light review brief, focusing on clarity of argument, relevance to digital education, use of evidence and implications for practice. Fourth, we ran two review rounds: one for broad conceptual and structural feedback, and one for refinement. Fifth, feedback was coordinated through a shared document and synthesised for the author.

The value of this experiment was that it suggested a repeatable mechanism for developing scholarly confidence without requiring everyone to become an author immediately. Reviewing can be a lower-risk entry point into scholarship because it enables colleagues to practise critical judgement, engage with literature, examine

argumentation and learn what makes a paper persuasive (McNair et al., 2019). In systems terms, it also created a reusable structure: an opt-in reviewer pool that could support future manuscripts and strengthen connections between professional services staff and academic colleagues.

This helped me see that research culture is not built only through producing authors. It is also built through creating readers, reviewers, discussants and critical friends. These roles matter because they widen participation and distribute scholarly activity across a community rather than concentrating it in a small group of confident writers.

Reflective learning and implications

What systems thinking helped me learn

Looking back, systems thinking helped me make sense of the Research Guild in three ways.

First, it helped me see that research confidence is relational, not only individual. It is tempting to describe colleagues as lacking confidence, but that can imply that confidence is a personal trait. The Guild showed me that confidence is produced by conditions: access to mentors, visible examples, time, peer support, language and permission to start imperfectly. When those conditions are absent, even highly capable colleagues may not see themselves as legitimate contributors to scholarship.

Second, systems thinking helped me see visible outputs as leverage points (Meadows, 1999). A conference abstract, a published article or an internal review process may look small in isolation. But in a professional learning system, such outputs can shift narratives. They create examples that others can point to. They help managers justify time. They make scholarship visible in spaces where it might otherwise remain informal or aspirational.

Third, systems thinking helped me recognise the limits of enthusiasm. Enthusiasm can start a project, but it cannot sustain a system. If the Guild depends too heavily on one person's energy, it remains fragile. The question therefore shifts from 'How do I keep this going?' to 'What structures would allow this to continue without me at the centre?' That is a different kind of leadership question. It moves from ownership to stewardship.

What changed in my practice

The Research Guild changed my own practice in three ways.

First, I shifted from running sessions to building conditions. Boud and Brew (2013) argue that scholarship development should be understood less as a training model and more as the development of practice, with attention to the work environments and social practices that make learning possible. Earlier in my career, I sometimes equated staff development with delivering good workshops. The Guild pushed me to think more like a systems designer. What are the reinforcing loops? Where are the delays? What creates psychological safety? What makes participation easy or difficult? Mentoring, structured pathways and visible outputs became design features rather than incidental extras.

Second, I became more explicit about power and permission. In professional services contexts, people may have the capability to engage in scholarship but not the perceived legitimacy. Ryttberg (2022) shows that professional support staff in higher education often undertake 'legitimacy work' to have their expertise recognised, particularly in

relation to academic audiences. The Guild helped me see that staff development is often less about skills alone and more about authorisation.

Third, I connected the Guild more explicitly to my research interests in systems thinking. As someone who taught systems thinking, I tend to look for leverage points: small changes that shift patterns. The Research Guild became a live case study in leverage. Mentoring changed narratives. Pathways reduced friction. Peer review created feedback loops. Conferences created an outward-facing identity. Each element was modest; together they nudged the culture.

Limits and tensions

A critically reflective account should also include what did not resolve neatly.

Time remains the dominant constraint. Even with enthusiasm, professional staff can experience research and scholarship as competing with established delivery responsibilities and longstanding professional priorities (Ball & Ribchester, 2025; Sweeney et al., 2026). I had to continually translate research activity into production-relevant value: better decisions, improved stakeholder conversations, stronger design rationales and more visible contribution to the wider sector. This translation was necessary, but it also revealed a tension. If research is always justified only through immediate utility, its more exploratory and critical functions may be weakened.

Equity of participation also needs active attention. Opportunities such as conferences can inadvertently privilege those with lighter workloads, greater confidence or easier access to professional networks. The pathway model helped by creating multiple entry points, but I would now build clearer workload protections and rotate visibility roles more deliberately. Otherwise, a research culture initiative can reproduce the same patterns of recognition it aims to challenge.

Sustainability depends on distributed ownership. If the Guild relies on one person's energy, it becomes fragile. The next iteration needs co-leads, light governance and a rhythm that survives busy cycles. It also needs to remain flexible enough not to become another committee. The challenge is to preserve the Guild's exploratory quality while giving it enough structure to endure.

Closing reflection: From pilot to sustainable pattern

I began with a hunch: that King's Digital needed a practical bridge between excellent delivery and confident enquiry. The Research Guild did not solve research culture; no single initiative could. But it created a small institutional learning loop: ask better questions, test ideas in public, build confidence through mentorship, and feed insights back into practice.

The next stage is to make the Guild less dependent on my individual coordination. That means developing co-leads or pathway leads, maintaining a light-touch reviewer pool, citing and celebrating colleagues' conference contributions, and embedding research conversations into existing departmental rhythms. In systems terms, the challenge is to move from an energised pilot to a sustainable pattern.

If I have learned one transferable lesson, it is this: staff development becomes transformative when it stops being a set of optional activities and becomes a designed ecosystem, with scaffolds, feedback loops, identity support and a community that makes

learning visible (Brookfield, 2017; Wenger, 1998). For higher education more broadly, the Guild suggests that professional services scholarship should not depend solely on individual motivation. If institutions want evidence-informed digital education, they need small but deliberate infrastructures that make scholarly participation possible.

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