

The Art of Jamming: Fast, Collaborative - and Possibly Transformative Action

Sandra Abegglen, University of Calgary, Canada

John Desire, London Metropolitan University, UK

Janet Gordon, London Metropolitan University, UK

Fabian Neuhaus, University of Calgary, Canada

Sandra Sinfield, London Metropolitan University, UK

Abstract

Jams - fast-paced, short-duration events - rooted in the improvisational spirit of jazz - have evolved into collaborative problem-solving arenas where diverse participants converge to tackle complex challenges with urgency. Some embrace their energy and immediacy, while others question their depth and sustainability, especially given the increasing need for slow moments in academia. We present two case studies from distinct geographical and disciplinary contexts: one from a UK Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) program in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) and the other from a Design Masters course in Canada. We discuss the PGCert, illustrating how we act at speed in the classroom, creating many collaborative learning tasks delivered over a short, intense period of time: a series of fast-paced jams - where the reflection in and on action feeds into dialogic interaction and metareflection - and deep learning for the participants. In our Canadian example, the juxtaposition of a School of Architecture and Design with the city's homeless served as a catalyst for asking critical questions about the School's role in addressing social challenges. In Spring 2024, the School hosted a two-day Design Sprint involving 100 participants, including students, educators, municipal decision-makers, and frontline workers, to tackle the issue of homelessness in a short, powerful and influential period of time. This viewpoint article outlines what activities like this afford for education as well as the wider educational and social communities. We conclude with a provocation: is there a better way of naming and celebrating the power and potential of the jamming space in academia?

Keywords: fast-paced collaborative learning, jams and design Sprints, reflective and dialogic practices, social challenges in education, interdisciplinary problem-solving, deep learning and metareflection

Received: 17 Dec 2024

Revised: 14 April 2025

Accepted: 30 April 2025

ISSN 2056-757X

<https://doi.org/10.18646/2056.121.25-001>

1. Introduction

Jams - fast-paced, short-duration events, also referred to as compressed development processes - are sparking new ways to learn, create, and connect across disciplines and sectors (Kultima, 2015; Tang et al., 2020). Rooted in the improvisational spirit of jazz (Merriam Webster, 2025), jams have evolved into collaborative problem-solving arenas where diverse participants converge to tackle complex challenges with urgency. From hackathons revolutionizing digital innovation to design jams fostering creativity and experimentation, as well as Game Jams where participants try to make a video/online game from scratch, these dynamic gatherings inspire outputs with local and global impact. Jam platforms like Global Jams (<http://globaljams.org/>) demonstrate the potential for transformative learning with real-world implications, drawing participants together in shared missions for social good.

Yet, for all their buzz, the idea of jams can be polarizing. Some embrace their energy and immediacy, while others question their depth and sustainability (Holtham et al., 2020). In a world increasingly sped up and complex, jams particularly raise concerns about their ethics, especially when considering the value of 'slow' approaches - e.g. Slow Academia (Berger and Seeber, 2016), The Slow Academic (Bosanquet, 2024). Do jams have a place in learning landscapes that prioritize reflection, creativity, and depth? Perhaps the beauty lies in balance: embracing the collaborative essence of jams while integrating opportunities for slow, reflective growth.

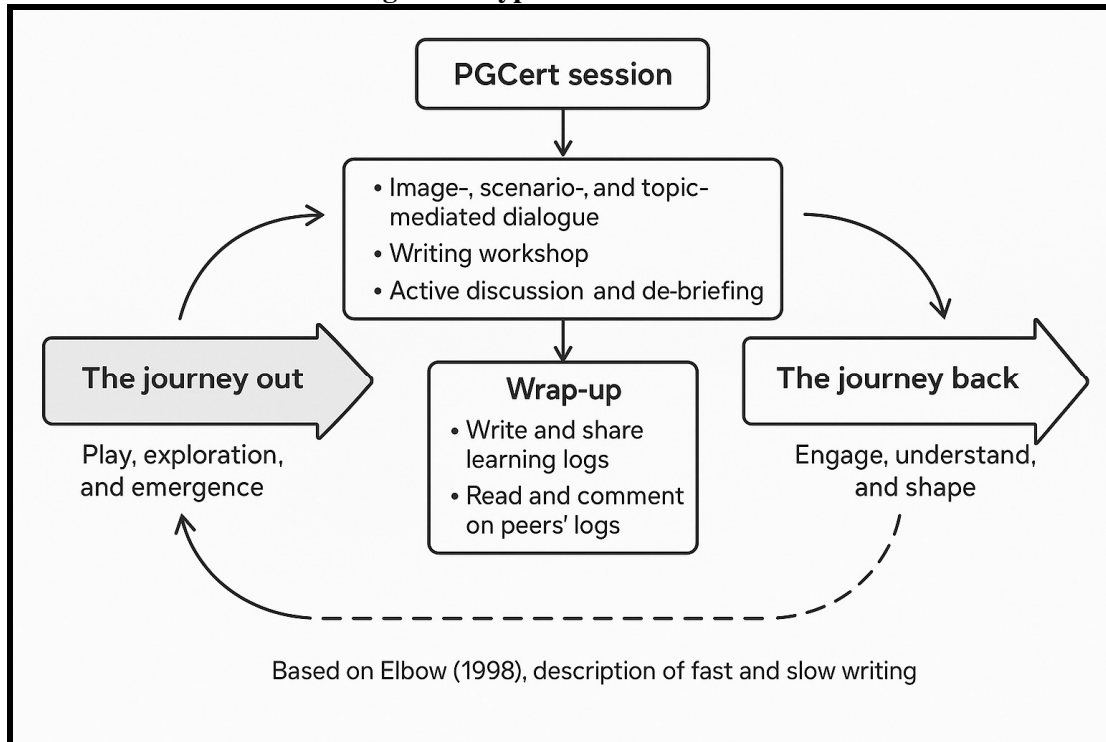
2. Jams for Learning: Case Study Examples

In the following, we present two case studies from distinct geographical and disciplinary contexts: one from a UK Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) program in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) and the other from a Design Masters course in Canada. Each case explores its unique approach to the concept of jams: a dynamic, active PGCert LTHE with a "jam-within-a-jam" model and the use of jams for developing communal social justice solutions through design sprints.

2.1. Example 1: The PGCert LTHE

Upon our PGCert LTHE, a learning development program offered to all new academics and those who support learning at an inner-city UK university, we approach pedagogic theory through the lens of collaborative classroom practice. This entails harnessing experiential and immersive arts-based and ludic practices so that our lecturers-as-students experience in embodied ways all that a more active approach to LTHE can facilitate (Active Learning Network, 2022; Oprandi et al., 2022). We act at speed in the classroom, with many collaborative learning tasks and opportunities delivered over a short, intense period of time, and the overall PGCert program might be experienced as a fast-paced event. However, we embrace in practice a hybrid approach with both fast and slow moments - and where the reflection in and on action (Schön, 1983) feeds into dialogic interaction and metareflection - and deep learning for the participants.

Figure 1: Typical PGCert Session



We only have seven half-day sessions per each of the three modules that constitute our PGCert, thus whilst we encourage slow, reflective learning, the PGCert sessions themselves may be experienced as ‘fast-paced jams’ by the participants. A typical three-hour session may include image-, scenario- and topic-mediated dialogue, perhaps coupled with a short writing workshop - all followed by active discussion and de-briefing where the participants engage in focussed exploration of the activities and the applicability of those to their own contexts and students. The wrap-up for the session includes a reminder to the participants to make the learning conscious and accessible: to write and share their learning logs and to extend their learning by reading and commenting fruitfully on the reflective learning logs of their peers. The whole process could be likened to that of Elbow’s (1998) description of fast and slow writing: the journey out - the play, exploration, and emergence - and the journey back - where the participants engage, understand, and shape the experience.

2.1.1. A key jam-within-a-jam

One key moment that always brings the PGCert participants pleasure, creating the space for them to surprise and delight themselves and us, is the Design Sprint (Kennedy, n.d.) Session Planner. Our lecturers-as-students are given an example of an active learning classroom - usually a really interactive role play - and are then put into inter-disciplinary groups to design in 15-minutes an active learning session of their own - problematized by the feeding in of a creative resource and a tricky issue to solve. After those scant jamming minutes, students feedback how they have used: a ball of string - a box of chocolates - a cupboard full of board games - sugar paper and chalk - an ultra-large roll of paper and felt tips - a cache of clean recyclables - collage-making materials - to develop reflection and revision strategies in their own students - to create

dialogic classrooms that build self-efficacy ... whilst also tackling persistent late comers, noisy chatterers, and so forth.

Figure 2: Design Sprint Prompt 01

Group 1

Creative resource: Ball of String

Tricky issue: Students arriving late - quite noisily



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)

Figure 3: Design Sprint Prompt 02

Group 6

Creative resource: Magazines, scissors, glue

Tricky issue: You want to develop active and meaningful reflective practice in the group



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

Every year the responses are innovative and surprising - and we can see that the fast-paced collaborative activity enables them to loosen up their thinking and to come up with ideas that a slower and more 'teacherly' pace would probably censor. The feedback shared over the years by participants that we collected as part of our action-evaluation revealed:

The breakout activity was engaging and enjoyable, emphasizing how collaborative problem-solving can inspire creative and inclusive solutions to common classroom challenges.

Collaborating with peers to create a creative and effective session in a short time felt both challenging and rewarding. It demonstrated the power of innovation and teamwork...

I learned practical strategies for incorporating arts-based practices into lesson design, even with minimal resources.

The breakout room activity fostered collaboration and creativity, demonstrating how seemingly simple tools (like a ball of string) can promote inclusivity and engagement. It modelled how educators can implement adaptable strategies to meet diverse student needs.

Give students permission to play with ideas and make them their own ♡☐

Initially I was very sceptical about the group task but it turned out really well, reiterating to me that interactive and collaborative learning is very beneficial and engaging.

Whilst remaining wedded to the idea of ‘slow learning’ (Berger and Seeber, 2016; Bosanquet, 2024) and making time and space for reflection and meta-reflection (Schön, 1983), we have also come to love the energy and joy of the jam, perhaps especially when it comes to something as daunting as module or curriculum development. In fact, arguably our own slow thinking about this very activity led us to write a piece on the role of fast paced Design Thinking in curriculum design (viz. Sinfield et al., 2023) and to use that to seed innovative thinking in the final of our three-module PGCert: Curriculum Evaluation and Development - precisely to problematize and de-stabilise the notion that ‘academic’ things only come slowly.

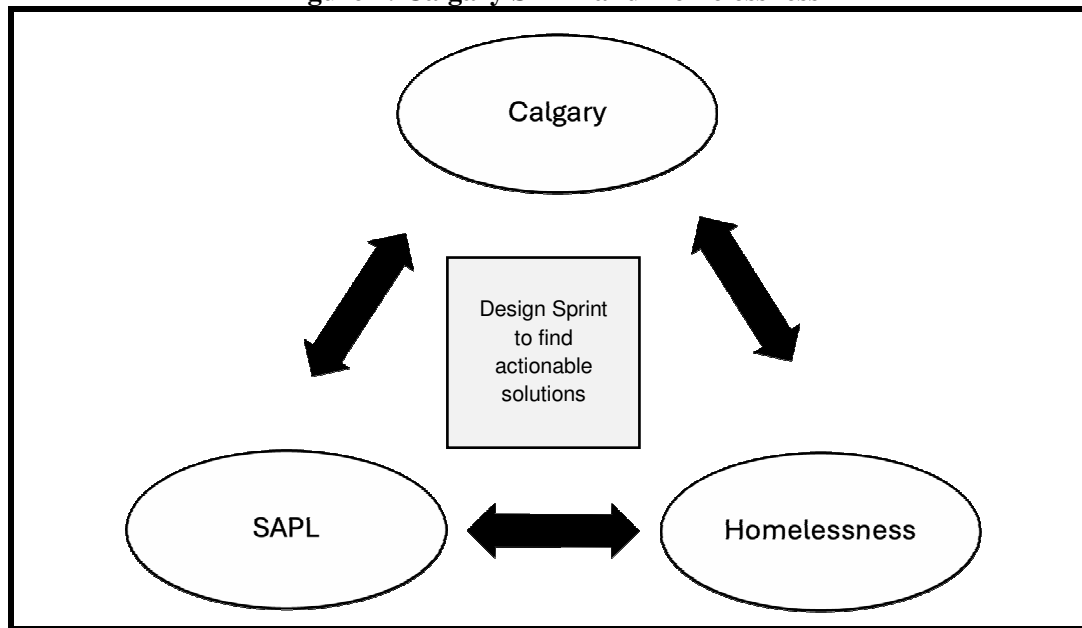
2.2. Example 2: Design Sprints

Calgary, a vibrant North American city known for its towering skyscrapers, owes much of its rapid development to its role as the hub of Canada’s oil industry. However, recent economic downturns have led to increased unemployment, homelessness, and substance abuse. As highlighted in the Downtown Leadership Table's final report, authored by a high-level municipal working group, “there is a need for increased support to address the needs of our community's most at-risk populations and those experiencing homelessness” (Inn From the Cold, 2024).

According to the 2020 census (Calgary Homeless Foundation, n.d.), nearly 3,000 individuals live on Calgary’s streets, while approximately 115,000 are at risk of losing their homes (Kneebone and Wilkins, 2023). Many of these individuals gravitate toward the downtown core, partly because it houses one of North America's largest emergency shelters, the Calgary Drop-In Centre. This facility, located in East Downtown, can accommodate up to 1,000 individuals nightly. Despite its scale, the shelter highlights a complex and often overwhelming dynamic for those seeking and providing support.

Amid this challenging environment stands the School of Architecture, Planning + Landscape (SAPL) building. Its proximity to these realities served as a catalyst for asking critical questions about the School's role in addressing social challenges especially as its students are engaged in the urban design professions (becoming architects, landscape architects and planners). In Spring 2024, the School hosted a two-day Design Sprint involving 100 participants, including students, educators, municipal decision-makers, and frontline workers, to tackle the issue of homelessness in Calgary.

Figure 4: Calgary SAPL and Homelessness



The Design Sprint encouraged participants to move from brainstorming and project planning to actionable solutions, culminating in 10-minute presentations to stakeholders, city, and municipal government officials. The goal was to inspire administrative, political, and business leaders to engage with the issues while demonstrating the School's commitment to supporting frontline workers.

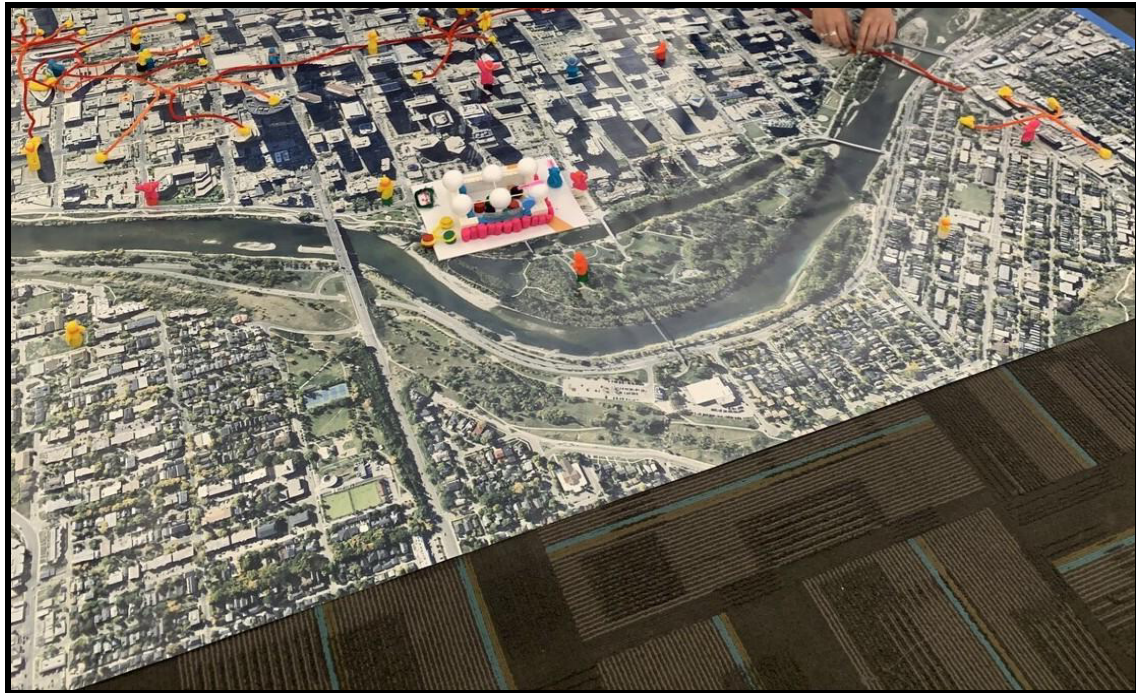
One of the event's first activities was drafting a manifesto, with participants outlining four key demands beginning with, "We want all Calgarians to... ". Teams then developed and refined ideas for a "Frontline+" initiative, including detailed planning and mapping solutions onto downtown Calgary. The physical act of placing ideas on a map brought a crucial focus, forcing teams to answer questions like, "Where should what take place, how, and for whom?"

By the event's conclusion, six well-developed, pragmatic ideas had emerged. Students led the articulation and presentation of proposals, supported by the diverse expertise of participants. The atmosphere of collaboration led to tangible outcomes, with concrete ideas to action. The overall message was clear: education institutions can - and should - play a vital role in fostering community-centered solutions.

The 24-hour Design Sprint event demonstrated the transformative potential of collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts in addressing complex social challenges like

homelessness. By bringing together diverse voices - students, educators, policymakers, frontline workers, and community members - the event showcased how universities can act as catalysts for meaningful change. It proved that pragmatic, localized solutions can emerge from collective creativity and focused dialogue, reaffirming the importance of human-centered, actionable approaches to pressing societal issues.

Figure 5: Design Sprint Mapping



3. Big Jam Discussion

While our jams may go by different names - design sprints, for example - their core remains the same: time-bound collaboration, creativity, action, and reflection. For both us and our students, these events break traditional molds, encourage bold experimentation, and foster meaningful connections. When embedded within curricula, their value transcends immediate outputs, cultivating learner autonomy, diverse partnerships, and even driving social change.

At the same time, the concept of jams provokes critical conversations. Some question whether deep learning can genuinely occur in such fast-paced environments. Paradoxically, it seems that the very nature of collaborative, rapid problem-solving is what makes jams so successful - compelling, liberating, and effective at sparking innovative ideas.

Our approach emphasizes the communal and inclusive nature of jams: the spirit of coming together to share ideas, address challenges, and co-create solutions. This raises the question - should we rethink the terminology? Instead of 'design sprints', what if we called these events Collaboration Circles? This term evokes a sense of equality, dialogue, and interconnectedness among participants, fostering an environment where

diverse voices are valued. It also suggests continuity and the potential for lasting impact, as circles symbolize cycles of growth and renewal, extending the reach of these collaborative efforts well beyond their immediate outcomes.

Ultimately, jams challenge us to rethink learning itself. They invite us to explore the potential of blending fast-paced, action-oriented methods with slower, more deliberate approaches to create inclusive, transformative educational practices. Whether you prefer jams or other learning formats, the ongoing conversation about these dynamic events is one worth joining.

Looking ahead, we wonder what the future holds for this vibrant learning format. Perhaps it's time to expand the concept and the language we use, reflecting the potential for deeper, more sustainable connections and outcomes. A new terminology could not only broaden the appeal of these transformative experiences but also inspire more thoughtful and impactful applications.

4. Reader Provocation

What terms and terminology would capture the meaning and purpose of such a transformative event for you, without losing the notion of 'jamming'? And, what's needed to open the doors to deeper, more sustainable connections and outcomes?

In thinking through these questions, we invite you to reflect not only on the structure of such events but also on the atmospheres they generate, the types of agency they foster, and the ways they might shift both relationships and outcomes. What if jamming wasn't just a method, but a mindset - an approach to learning, designing, and relating that thrives on collective experimentation, improvisation, and emergent knowing, igniting transformation?

5. Acknowledgement

Case Study 01 draws on the work and influence of our dear friend and colleague, Tom Burns (1959-2024), working class academic and Associate Teaching Professor, with whom we have worked over the years to develop a PGCert that is creative, ludic and transformative - just like Tom himself: <https://tomburns.muchloved.com/>

The write-up of Case Study 02 has been inspired by the Frontline Work article written by Prof Matthias Drilling, who was an invited guest speaker at the Homelessness Design Sprint event and who was a Visiting Scholar in the School of Architecture, Planning + Landscape in 2024: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/when-students-design-frontline-workers-matthias-drilling-jnvlf/?trackingId=526ERerZn5ncyraalJYBOQ%3D%3D>

6. References

1. Active Learning Network (2022), *100 Ideas for Active Learning*, Pressbooks, available at: <https://openpress.sussex.ac.uk/ideasforactivelearning/> [Accessed on 2 Dec 2024].

2. Berger, M. and Seeber (2016), *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
3. Bosanquet, A. (2024), *The Slow Academic*, available at: <https://theslowacademic.com/> [Accessed on 2 Dec 2024].
4. Calgary Homeless Foundation (n.d.), *Data Dashboard*, available at: <https://www.calgaryhomeless.com/discover-learn/research-data/data-dashboard/> [Accessed on 2 Dec 2024].
5. Elbow, P. (1998), *Writing Without Teachers*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Holtham, C., Ward, V. and Owens, A. (2010), "Slow Knowledge Work-designing Space and Learning", in: *European Group for Organisational Studies 26th Colloquium*, Lisbon, 28-30th June, 2010.
7. Inn from the Cold (2024, March 06), *Downtown Safety Leadership Table Update*, available at: <https://innfromthecold.org/downtown-safety-leadership-table-update/> [Accessed on 2 Dec 2024].
8. Kennedy, E. (n.d.), *Design Sprints for Development Learning*, #Take5 #63, available at: <https://aldinhe.ac.uk/take5-63-design-sprints-for-developmental-learning/> [Accessed on 2 Dec 2024].
9. Kneebone, R. and Wilkins, M. (2023), *How Many Housed People in Calgary at Risk of Homelessness?*, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary, available at: <https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/HSP116-HousedPeopleCalgaryRisk.Kneebone.pdf> [Accessed on 1 Dec 2024].
10. Kultima, A. (2015), "Defining game games", in: 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games, available at: http://www.fdg2015.org/papers/fdg2015_paper_21.pdf [Accessed on 1 Dec 2024].
11. Merriam Webster (2025), *Jam Session*, available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jam%20session> [Accessed on 1 Dec 2024].
12. Oprandi, P., Ogamba, I. and Middleton, A. (2022), "Introduction to Theory and Curriculum Design", In: *Active Learning Network (Eds.), 100 Ideas for Active Learning*, Pressbooks, available at: <https://openpress.sussex.ac.uk/ideasforactivelearning/chapter/introduction-to-theory-and-curriculum-design/> [Accessed on 1 Dec 2024].
13. Schön, D. (1983), *Professionals The Reflective Practitioner: How Think in Action*, London: Temple Smith.
14. Sinfield, S., Burns, T. and Abegglen, S. (2023), "Design Thinking in Education: Adding Collaboration, Uncertainty, Phronesis and Fairydust to Curriculum Design", *International Journal of Management and Applied Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 263-269. <https://doi.org/10.18646/2056.102.23-020>
15. Tang, T., Vezzani, V. and Eriksson, V. (2020), "Developing Critical Thinking, Collective Creativity Skills and Problem Solving Through Playful Design Jams", *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, Vol. 37, pp. 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2020.100696>