

Succeeding at learning development

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HOW TO BE A LEARNING DEVELOPER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Critical Perspectives, Community and Practice

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Chapter 21

SUCCEEDING AT LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

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SUCCEEDING AT LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

Sonia Hood

A few years ago, if you asked me to deliver a 'skills session', no matter the notice period or perceived efficacy, I would gratefully accept. Now I have the confidence to challenge a session's benefit to students, to be certain in Learning Development values and to say 'no' when appropriate. Being committed to our values, recognising the expertise we bring and developing effective relationships has led to a greater understanding and appreciation for what we do. In turn, this has led to more effective embedded teaching requests. And hence the paradox: saying 'no' (when appropriate) has led to me saying 'yes' more. An important lesson, and one I wish I had learned years ago.

Introduction

Carving out a career in Learning Development (LD) is possible but only if we are confident in the knowledge, perspectives, and expertise we bring. Central to this is the unique insight that we, as Learning Developers, offer. Through our interactions with students, we obtain honest accounts as to how students are approaching study, the support they need, and challenges they face. We are, perhaps, not seen as part of their academic team, not responsible for marking their work and act as a bridge between the student body and academics. But our role is often misunderstood and our expertise undervalued. This *third space* (Whitchurch, 2008) in which many of us operate has its challenges, but there is much we can do to make the most of the opportunities it affords us. This chapter focuses on how we, as Learning Developers, can develop our roles and remain committed to our core values (ALDinHE, 2023). It reflects on my experience of being a Learning Developer for over 15 years and shares approaches that I have taken to navigate this third space. It begins by highlighting the unique perspective we offer and the strategies we can use to demonstrate

our expertise and relevance to our academic colleagues. It argues that we should make full use of university structures, working groups, and funding opportunities to promote our values. It raises the need for us to demonstrate and defend our professional expertise. Finally, it discusses the importance of enhancing and promoting our own professional development. Navigating this third space can be challenging, but by being nimble, tailoring our approaches, evidencing our expertise, and using informal and formal structures, we have an opportunity to develop our role into one with influence and recognition.

Our Unique Perspective

It was back in 2008 that Celia Whitchurch explored what she believed was the blurring of structural and institutional boundaries within our HEIs and conceptualised ‘third space’, at the interface between the academic and professional activity (Whitchurch, 2008). Since then, work has focused on what this means for those of us working in this space, with the addition of terms such as blended professionals, integrated practitioners, dual professionals, or pracademics (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). As Learning Developers, many of us can recognise ourselves within these descriptions. Existing outside the traditional structures of academic or professional services can have its issues, but with the right approach we can harness the opportunities that this positioning affords us. It requires us to be cognisant of the strategic objectives of those we work with, to speak their language and build effective relationships with a wide range of colleagues. It sounds like challenging work, but it is rewarding, not only for our own development and sense of achievement but also for the students we all aim to support.

At the heart of what we do is the student, and being outside of academic structures allows us to have a unique insight. Such insight is valuable to the university: our currency that we must learn to sell. If we are to effectively support students, we need them to be honest with us. The lack of any repercussions to this honesty can allow for more fruitful discussions. As Learning Developers, we occupy a distinct professional space, as Johnson (2018) puts it, to demystify and mediate, acting as a bridge between students and the wider university. Such work requires us to use a complex skillset (Webster, 2022) and offers us a valuable and unique insight. We often get to know what lectures they find challenging, what assignment briefs they struggle to decipher, and the real study practices they employ. All of this helps us to create effective resources to support our students. In our institution, we write blog posts that react to current issues and speak to students’ concerns in a language that they would use. But also, this insight allows us to have fruitful discussions with our academic colleagues, feeding back the honest accounts of their students and helping to improve student outcomes with clearer assignment briefs and expectations. We must learn to harness this knowledge, not only to support our students but demonstrate our relevance and ‘usefulness’ to our academic colleagues.

Harnessing the Power of Third Space

There is much to be gained by working with other third space professionals. As Hall (2022) highlighted, COVID-19 offered us opportunities to showcase our agility and ability to work across departments. The need to work quickly and bring together a range of expertise and knowledge gave rise to some of our best initiatives (see, for example, McDonald and Parry, 2021; Aston, et al., 2021). During the initial months of lockdown and the switch to online learning, a number of us within the University were calling for support for students. As a Learning Developer, this was an initiative I felt our team could own. There were, of course, other interested third space professionals, all with their own areas of expertise: the technology enhanced learning team who were leading the way with the systems students would be using; the international team who were supporting students facing quarantine; and the central communications team who were responsible for liaising with students. As a newly formed working group, we worked collaboratively with our Online Course Team to create an online course, *Back to university*. Designed for all our students, it explained the new ways they would be learning, the systems that would be used and study tips to learning effectively in the online environment. The need to act quickly during the pandemic enabled us all to circumnavigate any boundaries and evidence the benefits in working in agile and unbounded ways (Whitchurch, 2009) that many of us working in third space are comfortable with (Quinsee, 2022). The fast-changing education environment requires more agile working (Menon and Suresh, 2022), and we must continue to demonstrate our willingness and ability to work in this way.

Having other third space allies also reaps rewards. Universities operate as very large organisations. There is so much to consider when implementing new strategies, so many stakeholders offering their perspective and a range of competing objectives to juggle. What may seem like a straightforward policy decision may, inadvertently, have an impact on what we do and how we operate. Being a lone voice can be both ineffective and exhausting, so finding allies in other support services such as counselling and wellbeing, careers and international student support can not only offer emotional support but also can help our voice to be heard. So, if we feel a policy decision has an impact on our service, we should consider who else may be affected, forge alliances, and make a joint case. There are also allies outside our own universities. The LDHEN email exchanges and discussions with other Learning Developers have often offered me valuable insight into how other institutions are dealing with common issues. This can present us with possible solutions or alternative approaches to propose in our own settings. There is strength in numbers and considering others' perspectives helps to support arguments; at least, that is what we tell our students.

Using University Structures

Using the university formal structures enables us, as Learning Developers, to evidence our expertise and relevance to the wider university. Within my institution we have standing invitations to all our School Boards for Teaching and Learning. Whilst there are too many meetings for us to attend them all, taking a strategic approach to such meetings can lead to some beneficial outcomes. But we must be prepared to speak out. Rather than simply a chance for us to speak to a standing item and update on our service offering, such meetings can offer the opportunity to evidence our expertise and relevance. Bringing our unique perspective of students' study experiences, we can not only offer insight as to why students might be behaving in certain ways but also offer solutions in the way of resources which could be embedded. To be effective, though, we must keep in mind that good communication requires an understanding of the audience. We need to consider the academics' aims and speak their language. This can only be achieved through an understanding of the issues they face, the culture within the School and the strategic aims. Within our University, for instance, Schools are required to write an annual teaching enhanced action plan, highlighting their priorities and actions they plan to take to meet these. Working with our academic librarian colleagues, we responded to these by offering our expertise and resources to support specific goals. Starting a dialogue and evidencing our relevance to Schools' strategic plans has allowed us to become involved in more strategic work. In addition, it has opened up conversations with academics who, perhaps, were less aware of our service, leading to exciting new collaborations. Whenever we are invited to such meetings, preparation is key. Reading the papers in advance and identifying opportunities to offer our thoughts or solutions allows us to showcase our unique insight. Such meetings are also a gateway into building those informal relationships which can lead to some rewarding collaborations and deeper understanding of each other's roles and perspectives.

As well as School meetings, there is much to be gained by joining university-wide working groups. Again, not only do these offer opportunities for us to influence strategy and offer an LD lens but the connections that are made can lead to greater understanding of our role and future collaborations. I am fortunate enough to sit on one of the university-wide teaching and learning boards where many such working groups are usually initiated, but Learning Developers without such opportunities could appeal to their department heads regarding strategic work. I have found these working groups (such as group work, academic integrity, and academic transitions) to be very rewarding. We have an invite to the table, a chance to influence policy and evidence our professional expertise, key to our long-term survival (Webster, 2022). They often lead to published documents or showcases that raise our profile

and that of our service to the wider university community. Increasing the awareness and understanding of what we offer is also, of course, of benefit to the students, whom we all aim to support.

Learning Developers should not be afraid to pursue opportunities that they may feel are for the privilege of academic colleagues alone. Within our university, for instance, there are numerous funding opportunities, from small amounts given for collaborative team awards to larger amounts for innovative teaching approaches or research into teaching and learning. Applying for such funds not only affords us the opportunities to create innovative resources or deepen our research understanding in our field, but also helps us to further raise the profile of ourselves, our profession, and our service. Such funds often come with the stipulation that findings must be written up in a paper or presented at a showcase event. Such exposure, once again, evidences our expertise in a particular area of skills development and helps to initiate and develop those all-important informal relationships.

Influencing Strategy

Adapting Our Message to the Audience

If we aim to influence strategy, we must first learn to adapt our message to our audience and be cognisant of the wider strategic issues. We must consider what concerns they have, what objectives they are trying to reach, and how we can support that. Aligning the support we can offer to Schools' strategic objectives not only shows our relevance but also helps us to be part of the conversation – a team member, so to speak. And we cannot talk about strategy without discussing measurable outcomes. Whether we agree with it or not, we cannot ignore the need to demonstrate impact. I am not sure we have yet cracked this nut, but I would argue that we need to offer data to evidence our contribution to student success, retention, and progression. Our roles have clear links to these but 'proving' this remains elusive.

We may also need to consider how we 'sell' the need to be involved in strategic work and professional development opportunities to our managers. The legitimate fear is that this takes our time away from operational concerns, but being involved in strategy development can have a wider impact and return long-term benefits. We may be faced with questions as to whether we have the time to be involved in projects, so it is important to see this issue from our department's perspective. Arguably, such activity helps to raise the profile of our area, increasing understanding and awareness of not only LD but the function in which it sits. We could, for instance, offer to represent the function in meetings, feedback in meetings and ensure we bring their perspective to the table. This may also be the case with the request to attend conferences, with

financial as well as time implications. Offering to present papers at conferences helps to raise the profile of our own institutions, and we can offer this benefit to support our case to attend.

Defending Our Professional Expertise

Secondly, we need to be able to evidence and defend our professional expertise. Occupying this third space can raise questions of legitimacy (Whitchurch, 2009) and we need to ‘own’ our area of expertise and professional identity. In this vein, we must continue to fight against the notion that we are teaching ‘study skills’ in a deficit way. Instead, we take an academic literacies approach, supporting students to navigate the often complex and conflicting discourses within their discipline(s) and help them to employ a range of literacy practices (Lea and Street, 1998). This latter approach requires skill and expertise. While we may wish to accept opportunities to teach new cohorts and build relationships with our academic colleagues, it is important that we maintain sound principles of embedding skills into the curriculum (Wingate, 2012, 2018; Wingate et al., 2011). Sessions should be tailored to the discipline, timely, designed in collaboration with the academic concerned, timetabled, and delivered ideally with the academic present. To this end, our team, much like London South Bank University (Thomas et al., 2022), created a staff guide on embedding academic skills. As well as hosting a series of resources which academics can embed, and teaching materials they can adapt, it also contains the principles of effective embedded teaching sessions. It clearly lays out what our academic colleagues can expect from us but also what we ask of them, such as a notice period of three weeks. We must learn to say ‘no’ when requests do not meet these principles and requirements. Such initiatives not only help to demonstrate our expertise but also reflect a professional service, based on sound pedagogic principles.

Self-promotion

We need to promote ourselves and our expertise. Accessing funding opportunities, which lead to the writing of reports and articles, helps to demonstrate our knowledge. Gaining academic credentials like HEA fellowship status and ALDinHE professional accreditation (Briggs, 2018) help, but there is also an element of self-promotion that is needed. Adding these to our email signatures, alongside our qualifications, publications, and awards that we have received, is one way to do this; and while we may feel uncomfortable with such self-promotion, it mirrors that of our academic counterparts. On the subject of publications, we should take up opportunities to write articles for specialised journals, like the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, or present at the annual ALDinHE conference. Not only does this help our

own professional development but also supports the fight to establish LD as a profession with its own pedagogical principles.

Use Our Connections

Finally, we must harness the power of the connections we make. As well as making use of the formal structures, attending networking events, and joining working groups, we can also invite colleagues for informal catch ups, where deeper connections often form. We can work with academic, professional, and third space allies, and use these collaborations to showcase our expertise and impact. Understanding the language that they speak, their perspectives, and strategic aims and challenges will help us to find a way in to progress discussions. Getting to know other Learning Development professionals can help too. Forming alliances over common issues helps to raise not only our profile but our voice, as we share the same goal in supporting students.

Conclusion

Being a Learning Developer and operating in this third space is not without its challenges – unclear boundaries, lack of clear career progression, the potential to be undervalued and misunderstood – but we can take some benefit in being ‘outsiders’. This chapter has argued that we should be confident in the expertise that we bring and say ‘no’ to requests for teaching that we consider would not be effective. Making use of formal and informal structures, tailoring our messages, and prioritising our own professional development are also key. These approaches have enabled me to carve out a career that embodies the LD values. It is a continual fight but one made easier by bringing people with you on the journey.

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