Why and how you matter: learning development as everyday leadership

Maria Kukhareva
University of Bedfordshire, UK

Carina Buckley
Solent University, UK

Presentation abstract

For learning developers, operating within the third space in higher education (between academic-faculty positions, and professional/learning services and administration) brings its rewards through supporting students and staff to succeed. However, there are well-documented challenges, such as uncertainty around professional identity; their place in the institutional culture and infrastructure; entitlement to CPD; and career progression trajectory (Silvey, Pejcinovic and Snowball, 2018; Obexer, 2020; Clark, 2021). Learning Developers, who often are employed as both academics and professional services, may find themselves grappling with finding ways to capture and evidence impact of their activity on their students' academic and broader experience and proving their worth to their institution and the sector on the whole (Riggio, 2020). Our institutions may feel like worlds of academic standards and managerial constraints, neither of which helps reinforce the feeling of empowerment and belonging among learning developers.

Everyday leadership, as a position and behaviour of choice, can help navigate these challenges, at individual, institutional and LD community levels. Everyday leadership has links with a stronger sense of empowerment, self-fulfilment and belonging – to the collective LD community, and to the institution (Drury, Evripidou, and Van Zomeren, 2015). Everyday leadership implies influence, and therefore, impact. In this session, we applied thinking from Cashman (2017) and Whitelaw (2020) and define leadership as extending your energy into "things that matter" (Whitelaw, 2020, no pagination), to create value for others. Everyday leaders are all individuals, notwithstanding their status, who "influence others to achieve shared objectives for the good of the collective" (Riggio, 2020, NP). Our participants also explored, and reframed their activity from the angle of everyday

leadership – such as influencing peers and students, mentoring peers, initiating or leading a project, speaking up, acting as an active bystander. Finally, we referred to broad themes from the ALDinHE Leadership Community of Practice. Participants shared practice and came up with a range of everyday leadership 'expressions' which are meaningful to them within the context of their value and purpose: empowerment and belonging; influence and impact. Participants were encouraged to commit to one new everyday leadership action/ behaviour.

Keywords: leadership, tertiary, everyday leadership, citizenship, values-based, ALDinHE

Community response

Welcome thoughts during turbulent times
The participants were full of praise for this session for situating the difficult environment Learning Developers navigate in their institutions, between teaching and student support activities. By situating Learning Developers as leaders, Maria and Carina brought significance to the challenges faced with support learning change whilst wrestling with the third space.

"I thoroughly enjoyed this workshop and found it to be a great mix of presenting, discussion and scary breakout room tasks!"

"I was really inspired by this session. I have always said I would never want to enter a leadership role, but Carina's notion of 'accidental' leadership really struck me."
"Despite the pitfalls and risks, which we mustn't downplay from a 'low-status' 3rd space profession like LD, this felt like a very optimistic session. Onwards and upwards!"

"This session really gave me goosebumps and resonated with me in so many ways. I wouldn't personally go for a leadership role within HE (not in the foreseeable, at least) but have been working on myself through many different modalities for the past year both within and without HE, and it's made a huge difference to my confidence and impact."

Changing thinking through empowering identity

Colleagues related to Learning Developers' mixed impressions across the modern academy, where the session enabled colleagues to connect with one another and share practice for success. It was clear that the session had a variety of stakeholders present, from experienced long service Learning Developers to those new to Higher Education. The session facilitated connection and mutual pride-building.

"One question I reflected on: if we don't think LD as a profession is currently well understood, what is??!! I've always found most academics do understand what LDers are, but perhaps I've only met enlightened ones…"

"We had a good discussion about our various titles as 'Academic Skills Advisors', 'Study Skills Advisors', and 'Learner Development Advisors' - something we have also discussed in my institution and perhaps warrants more conversation. Thank you, Maria and Carina!"

"I was reassured to see this in the slides - united we stand, etc., etc. - building a strong network around you, above and below, I believe gives you a stronger base from which to 'stick your neck out'."
"In our breakout room, we talked about imposter syndrome, and I'd like to encourage everyone to try and shake that off, because our strength comes from our struggle."

Learning Developers make change
Colleagues outlined that the session was empowering, through recognising how the Learning Development profession contributed to wider student and university success. Colleagues discussed their impact on strategy, influencing change and impact beyond the intervention on university metrics.

"When influencing others to make changes, I've always found it helpful to refer to the institution's objectives / 5 year plan etc., and the student experience. As someone said, referring to what other institutions are doing also makes people sit up and listen!"

"Hence, I've been 'lazily' advocating for big changes within my institution, such as audiobook subscriptions, facilitating student projects to create guides on accessible resources such as text-to-speech and other digital tools to support assessment." "Regarding a fellow delegate's apprehensions about having less contact with students, I find that this 'big picture' work gives me inspiration and fuel to support students by showing them how academic literacy helps them align their curriculum to their values, and how academic practice is a stepping stone to developing the skills needed to fulfil their long term goals."

"For me, this resonates with what we are trying to achieve as learning developers. Looking again at the ALDinHE manifesto, I'm certainly struck by words such as 'politicized', 'trouble', 'infiltrate', and 'challenge' that point to the disruptive, slightly subversive identity of the profession."

Next steps and additional questions

We want to continue exploring ways in which learning developers can influence and impact change in Higher Education. We invite all interested colleagues to join the conversation facilitated by the [ALDinHE Leadership Community of Practice](#).

Authors' reflection

Carina Buckley:

I'm gratified this session was so well received; as one of the attendees commented above, it's clear that the idea of leadership in Learning Development has moved on significantly from when I first started talking about it, albeit more indirectly, in 2019. For me, leadership is about a set of behaviours that, in a particular context, help to move on conversations, inspire thinking, and bring about change, whether that is big or small. While those things can absolutely be deliberate, strategic and a formal part of a role, they can also be things that we just happen to do, or that we are good at, or that we see a need for. The accidental part comes when others look to us for those qualities, to make decisions, to have ideas, without us having necessarily planned to be in that position, or even realised we were.

That's what I mean by 'accidental leadership': the recognition that the things we do are more than simply 'the things we do'; they can act as a signpost to others and their small scale retains a sense of achievability. If leadership is behaviour rather than position, attitude rather than personality, networked-based rather than the preserve of an individual, then I truly believe it is within the bounds and capabilities of any Learning Developer role. I fully take on board Arina's perceptive comment that not having access to all information or relevant responsibilities can impinge upon our ability to get things done, but then again we never operate with perfect information, and leadership at a local, team level is just as vital as the more formalised, managerialised variety. This ties in well, I think, with the Zone of Genius idea that was shared above - find what you're good at, and collaborate with people who can fill in the gaps. I love this model and there is nothing lazy about it at all! The idea of bravery has come through strongly in the delegates' comments, which suggests to me that leadership and Learning Development are still seeking common ground. Courage must be sought firstly in sharing ideas and experiences, in the breakout rooms (and believe me, I know how that feels!) as much as in the workplace; bravery and determination are required in building a secure networked base around us, and then in being a 'tall poppy'; and perhaps most importantly, in being someone with something not just worth saying, but worth listening to. I'm grateful to all these contributors for their suggestions and advice for how to be brave in these ways, and hope that others may find some inspiration and recognition for themselves!

Maria Kukhareva:

I am delighted to see that everyday leadership is a conversation that's very much needed.

When I first came across Ginny Whitelaw's work, and her very inclusive and developmental approach to leadership, it resonated strongly with my thoughts on citizenship and accountability - as a value and as a behaviour which can create impact beyond formal structures and roles. Moreover, these values and behaviours can bring us great satisfaction and a sense of self-fulfilment. There is often a lack of clear shared understanding of what we mean by 'management', and what we mean by 'leadership'. Frequently, leadership and management are understood as synonymous, which then creates an intangible perception that leadership behaviour and leadership impact are reserved for and can be exercised only by those in formal positions of power (managers).

It does not have to be so. I have observed individuals in formal management positions feeling powerless; and individuals outside formal leadership hierarchies creating profound and long-lasting impact - on their students, peers, environment and organisational culture. Having been a part of the Learning Development and third space discourse for a long time, I have observed that some of us can interpret the tertiary, undefined space as inhibiting our sense of empowerment and our potential to create impact. At the same time, lack of established definitions can be a great source of opportunity for leadership - in the classroom, in our institutions, and across the ALDinHE community. I really wanted to start a conversation around leadership as impact, leadership as influence, and leadership as an ideological position of choice. Perhaps even leadership as identity. It seems that it really resonated - I really hope we can continue this conversation within the LD community.

Lastly, I believe that there is a growing need to explore, and combine a range of approaches and disciplines, for us to fully grasp what type of leadership is needed in 21st century Higher Education. Times of uncertainty, complexity and change call for a collaborative cross- and multi-disciplinary view. Learning development may have an advantage here, as a less defined, more fluid field, that exists in-between, and across more established (and therefore less agile) spaces.

Acknowledgments

References

Cashman, K. (2017) *Leadership from the Inside Out: Becoming a Leader For Life*, 3nd Edition, Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Clark, D. (2021) Third space professionals and the challenge of CPD. Advance HE [Online], 12 May 2021. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/third-space-professionals-and-challenge-cpd (Accessed: 1 January 2023).

Drury, J., Evripidou, A., and van Zomeren, M. (2015). Empowerment: The intersection of identity and power in collective action. In D. Sindic, M. Barreto, & R. Costa-Lopes (Eds.), *Power and identity* (pp. 94–116). Psychology Press.

Obexer, R. (2022). "Lost in third space: Identity work of a "blended professional" in higher education". *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, 2(3).

Riggio, R.E. (2020) What Is Everyday Leadership and Why Does It Matter? How each and every one of us can lead in our jobs and communities. Psychology Today[Online] September 5, 2020. Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/202009/what-is-everyday-leadership-and-why-does-it-matter (Accessed: 1 September 2022).

Silvey, V., Pejcinovic, L., and Snowball, T. (2018). Crossing Divides: Professional Development for Third Space Professionals. In: Bossu, C., Brown, N. (eds) *Professional and Support Staff in Higher Education*. University Development and Administration. Springer.

Whitelaw, G. (2020) The Zen Of Leadership – And How It Can Save You In These Wild Times. Forbes [Online], Oct 2, 2020. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/ginnywhitelaw/2020/10/02/the-zen-of-leadership–and-how-it-can-save-you-in-these-wild-times/?sh=a68e3ed711e9 (Accessed: 1 January 2023).

Author details

Dr Maria Kukhareva is a resilience expert, author, mentor and coach - but always a learning developer at heart! With over twenty years in the UK Higher Education sector, Maria has enjoyed a variety of academic, professional and research roles.
Maria's cross-disciplinary collaborations have inspired her current interest in new models of leadership, emerging from a space where leadership theory and practice meet neuroscience, anthropology, ecology and Eastern philosophy – among others.

Previously a learning developer, Maria currently focuses on staff development in her role as Head of People Development at the University of Bedfordshire. Maria is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE Academy and Aurora Advisory Group member; she is also a Women-Space associate. Maria also chairs the SDF Special Interest group, Emerging Leadership models.

Dr Carina Buckley is the Instructional Design Manager at Solent University, UK. She is an Advance HE Principal Fellow and a researcher in the field of Learning Development. Carina is also Co-host of the Learning Development Project podcast and the Treasurer for the Association for Learning and Development in Higher Education. She is the co-editor of the book: *How to Be a Learning Developer in Higher Education. Critical Perspectives, Community and Practice*.

Licence