

‘Learning so much...’: exploring the student perspective on the impact of attending optional LD workshops

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Presentation abstract

Lack of confidence, in particular with regards to writing, study and information literacy skills (Bailey et al., 2007) has been identified as a key barrier to students’ transition, and subsequent attainment, in higher education. This is particularly relevant for students with ‘marginal learner identities’ (McIntosh and Barden, 2019, p.4), such as those with disabilities, or from minority ethnic and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Learning Development (LD) professionals are often engaged in supporting learners to negotiate such barriers, with one of the most common interventions being self-selecting, small to medium-size group workshops.

This presentation explored the student perspective on the impact of attending a programme of co-curricular workshops at a UK university with a significant intake of students whose learner identities may be categorised as ‘marginal’. Whilst the core topics of the programme fall within the more established domains of LD (Gibbs, 2009), several workshops also cover related disciplinary areas (Samuels, 2013), such as information literacy and Maths and Statistics. The presentation relied on quantitative and qualitative feedback data collected via an online survey, emailed to all participants who registered for a workshop. Key impacts identified include enhanced understanding of skill or topic, improved confidence, and benefiting from a supportive environment. Main barriers to learning refer to challenges in accessing the sessions, timing in relation to student journey and approaches to delivery.

Throughout the presentation, participants were invited to compare and contrast these findings to potential insights gathered in their own contexts. They were also encouraged to reflect on how these data can be used to more clearly articulate the role of LD within institutional teaching and learning strategies.

Keywords: co-curricular workshops; LD feedback; self-selecting provision; central LD provision.

Community response

The presentation elicited positive and thoughtful responses from the attendees, who appreciated the insights and data shared by the presenter. One of the attendees commented on the idea of positive bias in immediate feedback, and how it could enhance students' confidence and engagement. They agreed with the presenter's view that a temporary boost in confidence from a session could be valuable and may encourage further engagement:

I am glad you focussed on the central, 'generic' workshop, as properly understanding the role of these sessions is neglected. They are often shrugged off as just something we do as standard, usually justified as plugging a resourcing gap as we aren't staffed to embed in all programmes, to act as a catch-all. I am glad that here they are taken seriously so we can start to theorise what these sessions are pedagogically best placed to do within the context of our other provision, and how that might best be done. Teaching to a mix of disciplines and stages while making it relevant is very skilled, yet it's often dismissed as ineffective and generic. They can be done badly, of course, but I do not think that is what a good learning developer is doing in these sessions is dispensing one size fits all tips. Rather, it is about asking students to think about their discipline and stage by juxtaposing it with others, bringing them into relief, and getting them to reflect in a space that helps them step outside the discipline to see it more clearly. That's what I was seeing in your feedback examples, and I wonder if we could dig deeper into students' responses. I really hope we see more research into this area of our work, exploring it as a valid form of provision rather than seeing it as the poor cousin.

Editorial comment

The presentation explored the impact of co-curricular workshops on students' transition and attainment in higher education, especially for those with 'marginal learner identities'. The presenter shared the feedback data from the students who participated in the workshops, which covered various topics such as writing, study and information literacy skills, as well as related disciplinary areas. The main findings were that the workshops helped the students to improve their understanding, confidence and sense of support. However, some challenges were also identified, such as the accessibility, timing and delivery of the sessions. The presenter invited the audience to reflect on how these insights could inform their own practice and how to demonstrate the value of LD within their institutions. The presentation was relevant and timely, as many students face difficulties in adjusting to the academic expectations and demands of higher education. The attendees' responses showed that they were engaged and interested in the presentation, and that they took away some valuable insights and questions from it. They also demonstrated their appreciation and respect for the presenter's work and contribution to the field of LD. The presentation was successful in stimulating discussion and reflection among the attendees, as well as showcasing the impact and value of co-curricular workshops for students' transition and attainment in higher education.

Author's reflection

It was such a joy to be able to share a little fragment of my practice with the lively and supportive ALDinHE community. In particular, comments and questions were a welcome reminder of the ways in which I, as an individual, as well as the team of workshop presenters I liaise with, could incorporate the student voice in our annual review. Having spent some time doing a bit of a literature scoping in preparation for this presentation, to an extent I felt as if the dialogue I had started with the various article authors continued through the engagement with the live audience. It was reassuring to see that some of my concerns related to student feedback, and its problematic relation to LD impact, resonate with those of other practitioners. Heartfelt thanks for all of your thoughts and comments!

Next steps

In response to Helen's suggestion, I would really be interested in pursuing this topic further through a systematic review of literature, as I agree there is limited research on this type of provision.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Katie Winter (University of Surrey) and Helen Webster (Oxford University).

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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