

Hey you! They're calling you Tinkerbell! What are you going to do about it?

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Abstract

Critiques and polemics calling for 'doing away with study skills' as an ineffectual 'Tinkerbell' mirage that plays into neoliberal, deficit, anti-academic agendas have appeared both in academic scholarship and the higher education press (see, for example, Wingate, 2006; Richards and Pilcher, 2021, 2023). Often originating from outside the learning development community, misinformed and misdirected, these criticisms gain traction with senior leadership and academic colleagues, and cannot be ignored, avoided, or dismissed if we are to promote our ethos (and preserve our jobs). So nearly right in many ways, but for the wrong reasons, they come too close to the mark to shrug off. Yet there has been very little response—let alone rebuttal—from the learning development community, individually or collectively. Robust critique is fair and demands a reply: 'rising above it' is not a scholarly response. Any reluctance to engage in outward-facing debate is surely a problem given that there is so much at stake for students and for ourselves.

Are we going to let them talk about us like this?

Questions:

- Are they right?
- Can you prove it?
- How will anyone know?

Keywords: learning development pedagogy; professional status; impact; scholarly debate; critique.

Community response

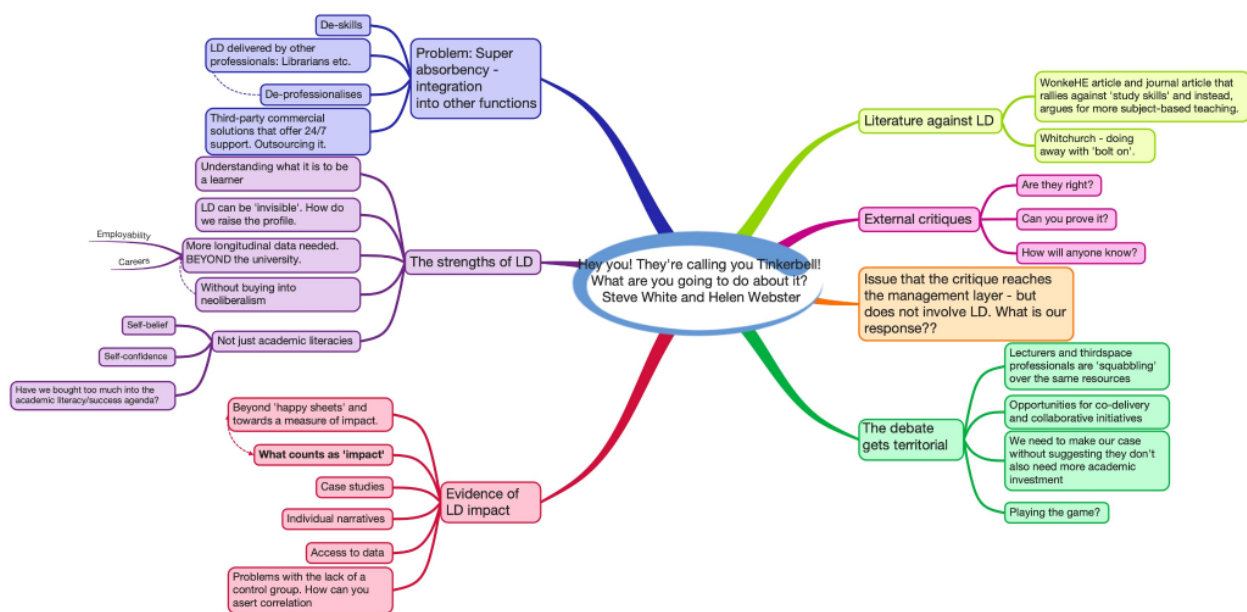
The community's response to these practitioners' keynote repeatedly returned to the concept of time. Participants felt more time was needed—it was an energising conversation that we could all have had for a long time (as demonstrated by Figure 1). The talk offered a timely intervention in response to recent attacks from outside the learning development community that have hit at the very purpose and value of our work. In particular, the community's response focused on Richard and Pilcher's (2021; 2023) research and *WonkHE* article that had previously caused a fair amount of controversy on the LDHEN mailing list in 2023. White and Webster's practitioners' keynote drove the discussion towards the problematic nature of such research. It was a critique of learning development that reached the management and leadership layer of institutions. The disappointment—indeed hurt—caused by recent polemic attacks was summarised by one participant:

It's infuriating to be misrepresented and underestimated. Being criticised by people who see what I do and understand is one thing, but when someone misunderstands me and bases a criticism on that misunderstanding, then I see red!

Given the community's consensus that there appear to be widespread misconceptions surrounding the role and value of learning development, it was felt that time was needed to develop a collective response. Participants did not reach firm conclusions about what a collective response may look like, but they posited several—potentially concurrent—approaches. It was felt that our response would need to clearly articulate the nature of learning development and its place in higher education. Doing so would not be as a direct response to the authors of recent critiques; instead, it would be about further establishing our place in higher education to demonstrate how such critiques have set up strawman arguments that are detached from the realities of learning development practice.

The 'invisibility' of learning development can make it hard to address public critiques. Participants felt there was a fundamental need to articulate our impact on the higher education sector to justify our worth and, in turn, help the wider sector to understand what we do. But, in doing so, participants equally emphasised the importance of not accidentally fuelling the widespread neoliberal agenda that hangs over higher education. One participant, for instance, stressed that we must avoid a zero-sum mentality that pitches lecturers and third space professionals as working against one another, squabbling over the same limited resources in territorial spaces. Such in-fighting goes against the collaborative values of our community and, as with recent critiques, would miss the bigger picture that underpins the ethos of learning development.

Figure 1. Lee Fallin's records of the discussion as a mindmap, demonstrating the wide-ranging energy surrounding White and Webster's practitioners' keynote.



The community's discussion centred on how we can demonstrate that our impact is collaborative rather than created in silos. For example, participants discussed how we could share our experiences of working with our academic colleagues to effectively embed learning development practices into students' degree programmes. In doing so, participants emphasised that we needed to explicitly demonstrate the rationale behind what we do, including through undertaking research that draws together our practice with

appropriate theory. Such work should also build on work from outside learning development to show the long-standing research that underpins the more recent emergence of our profession (see, for example, Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987).

One participant emphasised that this is not just about the expertise that learning developers bring in terms of developing students' academic literacies, but it is also about how we offer unique spaces for students to talk openly and honestly about their concerns. Participants shared anecdotal feedback from students who regularly state that they do not—indeed will not—approach their lecturers with their questions or concerns. No amount of additional training for students or academic staff can change the power dynamics surrounding their relationship. Such findings are echoed in wider research (Gravett and Winstone, 2019). Academics can perhaps develop the skills to make the assumptions of their disciplines explicit, but they cannot engender the lower stakes that spaces offered by learning developers can offer to students. The asymmetry of the power dynamic between academic and student just makes that impossible.

Time ran away at the conference, but there was a consensus that we cannot run away from the profound questions White and Webster raised in their practitioners' keynote. We must keep the conversation going. The clock is ticking.

Next steps and additional questions

The next step must be to set the record straight. There were lots of possible avenues proposed at the conference for how we can build greater awareness of learning development beyond our immediate community. Addressing the widespread misconceptions surrounding our practice will require a multipronged approach. Such work is a big job and, as participants noted at the conference, a wide variety of people will need to be involved to take forward these different ideas and approaches. Beyond the obvious pragmatics, this point also emphasises that the whole community has a collective responsibility to advocate for what we do: we must all shoulder this responsibility together.

In terms of the wider community's response, participants emphasised the value of regional events and online discussions as opportunities to raise the collective consciousness of learning developers to develop a concerted rebuttal to the ongoing misunderstandings surrounding our place and value within higher education. Such a response will need to develop a clear action plan that goes beyond sharing ideas within the echo chamber of our community. There are a growing number of examples of learning developers being recognised more broadly for the impact of their work, such as through the National Teaching Fellowship scheme and Collaborative Awards for Teaching Excellence (CATE) awarded by Advance HE. We need to build time into our work to demonstrate our relevance, value and purpose in ways that speak beyond ourselves.

Such work may appear daunting. Yet, as individual learning developers, we can all take small steps towards addressing the widespread misconceptions. How often do we unintentionally allow ourselves to be de-professionalised? How often do we tell students that we are not subject specialists (rather than just not experts in their specific disciplinary content)? How can we reframe our approach, so that we encourage students' agency without accidentally implying we lack expertise?

In discussing the importance of valuing and recognising successful teaching, bell hooks (2003, p.xi) emphasised that:

it is crucial that we challenge any feeling of shame or embarrassment that teachers who do their job well might be tempted to indulge when praising ourselves or being praised by others for excellent teaching. For when we hide our light we collude in the overall cultural devaluation of our teaching vocation.

The time for invisible labour and quiet brilliance has passed. Learning developers need to act together to combat the misunderstandings that surround our work because, if we are not going to do it this time, will it soon become too late?

Authors' reflections

Steve White

In terms of the session itself, I would like to thank everyone for participating so actively, including through discussion and challenge. I think it is important that we welcome the challenges by Richards and Pilcher, Wingate, and others, respond to what we see as flawed but also look for common ground and where they are correct. This kind of discourse is what marks out a 'real' discipline or profession (or whatever we call it). I feel like there should be a few more academic 'teams' who believe quite different things about how to do, understand, or develop learning development as a field. These 'teams' certainly exist in other disciplines and provide the 'fireworks' for conference sessions (for example, the proponents of phonics versus 'whole language' approaches in child literacy teaching in America—see the Sold a Story podcast). A comment from one participant reminded me personally that we can say 'yes and...' to some of the critiques, rather than just 'no, but...'.

I sincerely welcome the contributions offered by participants at the conference. I hope to have a 'debrief' session with Helen where we think about opportunities to keep a bit of momentum going on things like:

- Collecting relevant evidence of the impact of learning development.
- Collecting ideas or expertise about methods for demonstrating impact.
- Considering a compendium of case studies.
- Building the kind of evidence base which the Office for Students is prepared to accept (one participant noted that they have become more flexible in this respect). We could look to colleagues in widening participation for where they have had success in producing evidence of impact in a similar context where our interactions with students are less direct, and causal claims are difficult to make. They have to provide this evidence of impact for university Access and Participation Plans, so there is ongoing work and lots of people thinking about this. At the University of Southampton, colleagues working in widening participation use a Theory of Change approach that tries to consider intervention attempts in the round, making clear any assumptions, evidence for making interventions, and methods of collecting evidence and showing impact. It is a bit of a laborious process, but it helps

practitioners work through the required thinking to get some kind of evidence in complex contexts where it is hard to show causation.

- Formulating a formal academic response to Richards and Pilcher (2021, 2023), Wingate (2006), and others' critiques.

In terms of the community's specific comments above, it is good to see so many valued the time we had for this discussion, and that they are keen to continue thinking about the issues raised. One thing that strikes me from the comments is that we have a range of ways to respond. This is positive. Personally, I am keen to address academic criticisms (such as from Richards and Pilcher) fairly head on. I want to dig into what we know and find out—to the best of our knowledge—who is right and how we should be doing learning development. However, I can also see the value in a range of other approaches that help build a broader case for the value of learning development in various ways. Taking a multipronged approach seems to be a clear way to demonstrate the value of learning development work to a range of stakeholders, which is important, as I see us as 'third space' practitioners who interact with and impact on, or are impacted by, a wide range of other functions in the higher education sector.

Thanks to the participant above who shared the reference on the link between writing and subject thinking. There is real potential, I think, in looking more widely than learning development literature to support what we do. For example, I recently stumbled across Credé and Kuncel (2008) from the psychological literature. I am not sure how weighty its conception of 'study skills' is, but it might have something useful to say and has distinctively quantitative elements compared to much of the learning development literature that tends to be more qualitative/interpretivist in its approach.

Helen Webster

I was thrilled by the response to our provocation, and how much appetite there was for a stronger communal voice asserting our position in the landscape of higher education. These discussions have been bubbling under the surface for a while, often at the margins. I think perhaps we have shied away in the past from challenging questions, from examining our sometimes fragile communal identity too deeply, trying to be all things to all

people, and from raising our heads 'above the parapet' externally. We have maybe averted our gaze from the very real threat that learning development can then easily be sidelined, watered down, over absorbed, or even deleted.

I believe in holistic inter-professional working and know that learning developers very much complement and enrich the work of colleagues in cognate professions, including librarianship, English for Academic Purposes, educational development, counselling, and subject teaching. Yet, to really step up and take our place in that arena, we need to be able to clearly demarcate our value and our specific remit. This should not need to be a territorial squabble over who covers what and which profession's answer is the best, but we do need to be able to assert what we do more confidently and clearly.

Out of this reflective approach, we may find that different 'schools' or modalities of learning development arise, and that would be a healthy development. I think, however, that we currently have a much less well defined and fuzzy self-concept that tries to accommodate everything whilst being too vague and nebulous to really get a handle on—for ourselves or those outside the community. We may have felt too vulnerable to do so in the past, but I really felt that as a community, our own self-concept and self-confidence is maturing enough for these questions to be addressed robustly amongst ourselves and then articulated beyond our community.

I was encouraged by the enthusiasm for various courses of action proposed by the community, from scholarly responses to literature that overlooks, misrepresents, or is plain wrong about learning development, to being more of a voice in the higher education press, to advocating for a scholarly element within our roles to be formalised, so we have the resourcing to do this work of evidencing and advocating, and ensuring that our own senior leadership is aware of us and accurately understands what we do. Changing mindsets cannot be achieved by individuals working in isolation: ALDinHE's role in bringing us together and curating a united identity and strong communal voice will be critical.

There is much to discuss; we will certainly keep this conversation going. Thank you everyone! I have a real feeling of optimism and energy.

Acknowledgments

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