

What's in a name? study skills? academic skills? academic literacies? Does it really matter and to whom does it matter?

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Presentation abstract

As a growing and maturing profession, Learning Developers are still crafting their space within their institutions and face constant conversations with academic and professional colleagues, as well as students, as to who we are and what we offer. Whilst we are protective of the terms we use, and resist using 'study skills' to describe our work in favour of the concept of Academic Literacies, it seems that the rest of the academy is slow to follow suit.

Working on a joint project with our Careers service to develop an institutional capabilities framework really highlighted the difference in terminology used, and the sense that, no matter how much I tried, academic and professional colleagues were unwilling or unable to engage with our service offer as delivering anything other than 'study skills', despite our insistence on using Academic Literacies to refer to our embedded teaching. It made me wonder whether the terminology matters or might even be counterproductive. Does the term 'academic literacies' serve as a barrier to staff and students, even when intended to explain the pedagogical approach that informs our practice? Our students won't necessarily understand what academic literacies or Learning Development means, which results in using two names to describe our service – one a student-friendly 'Skills@Library' name, and the other 'Learning Development', intended to demonstrate that we are an academic unit that staff can consider peers in curriculum development and design. Does this approach just serve to dilute our offer to both parties, and cause confusion as to what we actually do?

Through three small open discussions, held as part of the mini keynote session, we explored how LDers refer to their service, why they have chosen those terms, and how they think they are received by their colleagues. With the aim of identifying barriers that

this terminology causes for engagement from both staff and students, the following questions were used as prompts for the discussions.

Questions:

- Is using the term 'study skills' really that problematic? Does it truly challenge our professional identity, and if so, is that challenge significant?
- How do you refer to the service that you run?
- How do your cross-institution colleagues describe your service?
- What have you done to challenge their assumptions?

Keywords: Learning Development; study skills; professional identity; identity.

Community response

The majority of community responses took the opportunity to address the primary question:

What's in a name? Study Skills? Academic Skills? Academic Literacies? Does it really matter and to whom does it matter?

This is a fascinating question! In the discussion I took part in, we considered the power and specificity of the language we use, and its connection with, and impact on, others (primarily students and colleagues). I continued to think about this after the session, and concentrated on ideas around clarity for the students over what we do. What will they connect with best, and how does this align with language we feel best communicates our remit and philosophy?

This was a very interesting debate that got participants really involved. I personally think that language matters, perhaps more for our own identity and how we would like to be addressed by colleagues. When it comes to students, I don't think this matters so much though. I believe, however, that how an institution chooses to operationalise LD (i.e., hub and spoke, centralised or faculty aligned) has a more significant impact on how LD is constructed by colleagues and institutions than a name.

The keynote discussion also provided the opportunity for people to reflect on their own services, with attention drawn to this via the keynote's key questions:

How do you refer to the service that you run? How do your cross-institution colleagues describe your service? What have you done to challenge their assumptions?

I have long worried that our team name 'The Skills Team' gives a limited impression of what we, as Learning Developers, actually do within our institution; perhaps even undermining it. And yet, it is a well-developed brand within the institution and may be more approachable from a student point of view than a 'literacies' approach. I was therefore fascinated to see what Maddy and the others at the table had to say around this issue. I was surprised by the information that, for students, the name is irrelevant. They don't care what we are called as long as we help them. It was acknowledged though, that what we call ourselves may well influence how our colleagues view us and what we do. I don't think we, at our institution, are in a position to change our name at the moment, and perhaps the fact that our job titles, which obviously appear on the bottom of our emails, label us as 'specialists' (and each with a different specialism, mine being 'Academic and Library Specialist: Specialism in Visual Literacy') may be enough to counteract any potential negative connotations that the 'Skills' label may promote. Such an interesting debate though, and I don't think we are in any way at the end of the conversation.

Working at the same institution as the above contributor, I recognise this debate well. I still find 'Skills Team' highly problematic when it comes to our staff-facing brand. It screams 'remedial' and suggests academics can send us their 'broken' students for 'fixing' or 'skilling'. I recognise it is an established brand with students, and always felt there was an alternative way out. Perhaps focus needs to be made on how the team is branded internally, or how it is presented to academic colleagues. There certainly needs to be something to re-frame the service away from skills, and towards a better reflection of what it does – engage with complicated, situated, hidden and messy academic literacies.

I agree with the comments above – what could potentially (and on the face of it) be seen as a somewhat self-referential topic actually gave rise to some fascinating

discussions about LD's own self-understanding and, by implication, how others might perceive, understand and value LD. I especially appreciated Maddy's honesty in maintaining her own ambivalence about the questions framing the discussion – this really helped keep discussion open.

Editorial comment

As the abundance of community responses clearly demonstrates, this is a challenging topic with no straightforward answer. This discussion had some commonality with a separate discussion taking place on another practitioner mini-keynote table 'Hey you! They're calling you Tinkerbell! What are you going to do about it?' facilitated by Steve White and Helen Webster. Both these discussions agree that academic staff and senior leaders do not fully understand the purpose or impact of Learning Developers (or anyone identifying as a Learning Developer).

Next steps and additional questions

Ed Bickle, Steph Allen and Marian Mayer are currently undertaking some research entitled: 'Examining change: the future of Learning Development in higher education'. The aim of their study is to review existing LD provisions across the sector and to begin to map out the future path of the discipline in order to support students in an ever-evolving educational ecospace. This research may provide some of the answers to the questions raised in this, and other, discussions held at this year's ALDinHE conference. Expect to see the results published across the ALDinHE platforms in early 2024.

Author's reflection

Thanks to everyone who contributed to three very interesting discussions.

My reflection from these discussions is that this is a topic which would benefit from further enquiry. There was a general sense that 'skills' is not the right word to use to describe our work when communicating with our academic colleagues and that it might, in some cases, diminish the work that we do. However, there was a consensus that students did not have

the same strength of feeling about whether we use 'skills' or 'support' and indeed, some contributors felt that students' parents preferred to see the word 'support' used in the context of the service we provide to their children.

Regarding the job titles that we use, we discovered that we used a variety of titles ranging from Academic Support Tutor, Learning Development Tutor, Learning Support Advisors, Academic and Library Specialist and Learning Developers. Some colleagues felt that Tutor was a problematic title as this caused confusion with Personal Tutors and in one case, Learning Developer was confusing as in their institution this job title is used by their institution's e-learning technologists who are not student-facing staff. There are such a variety of titles which helps to demonstrate, perhaps, why it is difficult for our academic and professional services colleagues to understand what we do and what our service offer is.

There was also a wide variety of names we used for our services from Study Hub, Skills@Library, Learning Development Team, Centre for Academic Achievement, Centre for Learning Support and Study Advice Team (to name just a few that were shared on the day). We had interesting discussions around the lack of consistency across the sector and whether our inconsistency affects how other colleagues understand what we do, especially if we compare ourselves to other professional services such as Careers Services and Disability Services which are consistently titled across the sector – why are we not able to do the same? My personal view is that our colleagues still don't understand what Learning Development is, and what Learning Developers do and that we as a community need to raise the profile of our roles both within our own institutions and the wider FE/HE sector.

One observation is that where colleagues' teams sat within the organisation of their institution affected how they thought they were perceived by their academic colleagues. Those who were attached to academic schools and faculties and were on academic contracts seemed (albeit this is an anecdotal observation) less concerned about academic perceptions of their role than those that sat in Library and Student Services who were on professional service contracts.

I came to these sessions without an answer to my provocation and I am still unsure whether it really matters what we call our services, although I think it matters more to us

when we consider our service and job titles when talking to our academic and professional colleagues than when talking to our students.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are extended to all members of the community who have engaged with the conference or these proceedings in some way. Thank you to the following community members for their contributions to this particular paper: Jacqui Bartram (University of Hull) and Lee Fallin (University of Hull).

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

Further reading

Hilsdon, J., Malone, C. and Syska, A. (2019) 'Academic literacies twenty years on: a community-sourced literature review', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, Issue 15, November, pp.1-47. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i15.567>.

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