

Ripping up the keynote rulebook: ALDCon23 guest editorial

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Championing change

The annual ALDinHE conference (ALDCon) is hosted at a different institution each year and provides Learning Developers the opportunity to showcase their practice, learn from other practitioners, and network with colleagues. When we were asked to host the 2023 ALDCon at the University of Portsmouth, we were both delighted and somewhat apprehensive. Our university delivers Learning Development (LD) through a mix of provision offered centrally, at Faculty level, and, at the time of the conference, at School (Department) level. Therefore, there are many pockets of excellent yet perhaps inconsistent practice, rendering it difficult to identify the local 'institutional champion' whom Verity and Trowler (2011) deem necessary to the unified progress of LD across a university.

So, breaking with the tradition of recent ALDinHE conferences to put an institutional LD champion up to speak as the keynote, the two of us asked ourselves what guided *our own* philosophy: how we view and 'do' LD. This process led to our version of the ALDCon keynotes being guided by our commitments to:

- Students being at the centre.
- Playfulness.
- Working to unmask events that are tacit and seldom-discussed, yet strongly affect both the student experience and our LD practice.

We worked with these tenets while being mindful of the conference theme 'The Impact of Learning Development'. If anyone is in the best place to explain our impact to us, it is our students.

Commitment 1: students at the centre

We wanted to use the keynote sessions – both online and in-person – as an opportunity to centre the student voice. We reached out to students who had presented at the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) and others that we had worked with personally.

For the online keynote there were two solo presentations and one group presentation, all delivered by University of Portsmouth students. Although the three presentations were different in terms of focus, subject area and the students' experience of working with LD, they were united by the importance of the relational aspect of LD work. Without trust between learner and LD practitioner, each of the students felt that their subsequent academic gains would not have been possible.

This led the students to propose the following principles of good practice, each squarely located in the idea of establishing trust-based relationships:

You [the student] should feel comfortable enough with them [the LD practitioner] to fully open up and not hold anything back with them. Make yourself [the LD practitioner] openly available to speak to the students and show that you are actively interested in their work (Cerys).

[The LD practitioner was] someone to speak to who understood and was able to talk about the emotional and educational elements (Luke).

You [the LD practitioner] get the opportunity to change everything about the way traditional education works ... you can change the room layout, teach what the students want and make it an engaging and friendly environment (Ramisa, Safa, Sabrina and Ellie).

Our students spoke from the perspectives both of being recipients of Learning Development, and in the case of Ramisa, Safa, Sabrina and Ellie, having harnessed those experiences to offer mentorship to students. The message from all of them was crystal

clear: make the human side work, and the rest will follow. We should not ignore this message. The challenge is how to make it stand out in an era where 'The Impact of Learning Development' was so important as to be the theme of the whole conference. We would conclude that whilst such humane impact will always be harder to prove than with any simple metric, LD must continue to be a space in which to nurture it. This form of LD impact will only become more important in an era where we have been, and continue to be, increasingly starved of the time and space for meaningful human interaction.

Commitment 2: playful

To further challenge the traditional keynote, we decided to create an in-person keynote that mirrored a panel game show with a team of students playing against (or with) a team of staff. Thankfully, we had some willing volunteers from the delegates to compete against six students from across the University.

The first round – a quick-fire quiz – was designed to start with straightforward responses and then unfold into more ambiguous and open-ended discussion. We hoped that this mirrored conversations in LD around our hope to move away from the deficit 'fix it' model to a pedagogy that invites discussion and encourages students to develop their own study practice.

The second and third rounds were designed so that each team could only earn points by predicting how the other would answer. Our audience voted how many points to give each response and with both teams scoring maximum points, it was clear that there was synergy between the student and LD practitioner perspectives on key aspects of LD provision.

In the fourth and final round, we invited questions from the audience. This activity allowed us to develop some of the themes from earlier rounds, such as how LD should best foster belonging and encourage more students to feel we are speaking to them. We revisit and summarise this discussion in the 'highlighting the unseen' section below.

The use of playfulness within the conference keynote environment was, for one of us (Ian) at least, something of a leap of faith. Laura's beliefs in the merits of the approach, and

determination to harness play as 'legitimate academic practice' (James, 2022, p.327), persuaded Ian to come along on the journey. It is important to remember, when there is so much to learn, that we all first learned through play, and that it has a big role, even within environments such as higher education which might instinctively be perceived as 'serious'/'grown-up'.

The quiz component relaxed the panellists and the audience to such an extent that the panel conversation afterwards was productive and honest. Feedback from the audience was that they appreciated the break with tradition and that the short discussions and opportunities to award points to the panellists acted as an (unintended) icebreaker.

Commitment 3: highlighting the unseen

As a profession, discipline, or field – however Learning Development is defined – there has been a lot of discussion about our visibility within our institutions and the wider academic landscape (Johnson, 2018; Bickle et al., 2021; Webster, 2022). Our day-to-day work supports students to make sense of what can otherwise be hidden in the curriculum and assessments. The conference, however, surfaced other elements of university life that have low visibility. For that reason, we want to take this opportunity to thank those whose work often flies under the radar and yet is so incredibly valuable to us.

Without the support from the local caretakers who helped us find suitable venue spaces on campus (crucially, at the last minute), the catering staff who looked after our refreshment area (and the ALDinHE 21st birthday cakes!), and the technicians who checked the technology in the rooms, this conference would not have been possible. It is these individuals who were called on last-minute and resolved issues that we did not anticipate, and all with a smile and a shrug of 'just doing my job', but to us, they were the backbone of the whole operation.

These gestures of going above and beyond gave us pause to reflect on how much hidden labour goes on to make these events run smoothly, and how little this is commented upon. Taylor and Fairchild (2020) concluded 'such material moments come and go rapidly, they are often 'felt' and registered bodily rather than rationally apprehended, and their mundane-ness means they often pass unnoticed' (p. 514). In other words, were it *not* for

the work of our caretakers, caterers and technicians, conference delegates may well have sat in cramped discomfort or gone hungry (with tongue-in-cheek apologies to our gluten free delegates).

As Learning Developers, we know that while our work is not 'unseen' to the extent of that of a caterer or caretaker, we often function in the spaces in and around the hidden curriculum of higher education. We work both *with* hidden curriculum, to demystify the vast amount of tacit knowledge that students must decipher to succeed within higher education (Roberts and Reid, 2014), and *as* hidden curriculum, in the sense that our work is rarely well-understood or quantifiable.

Closing thoughts: broadening belonging

We are thankful to the students who gave their time to participate in ALDCon23, to help us to surface the nature of these processes from their perspective. This said, we realise that the voice of those who do *not* engage with LD is still missing from the conversation. In this, we arguably see another manifestation of 'the unseen'. Why are these students not engaging? Do they know who to ask, what to ask them, and can they find the confidence to ask? This point marked a spirited debate amongst the audience, panel and hosts, which has spilled into an ongoing discussion in the pages of *LoveLD* magazine (Basford, 2023; Basford et al., 2023). In these articles, our students highlighted the danger of considering the issue only in terms of specific actions to engage particular groups of students such as those with protected characteristics. Alternatively, as an ALDCon audience member suggested, do we need to be making LD more attractive for *every* student, through building an institutional culture that working with LD is a marker of building belonging, not fixing deficits?

We began by emphasising the importance of institutional champions for LD. Yet perhaps we are sometimes missing what is under our nose: that our first-line champions, and the route to a higher level of championship, are our students. They are our biggest advocates. By raising their voices, we can also raise the profile of LD.

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Acknowledgements

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

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Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).