

Learning Development as a collaborative discipline

Book review: Syska, A. and Buckley, C. (eds.) (2023) *How to be a Learning Developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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Navigating the Higher Education (HE) space is complex and messy for everyone within the educational system (Lock et al., 2018). Educators find it complex to define their role in sustaining the system. On the one hand, they must assess and support students in acquiring twenty-first-century competencies. On the other hand, they are tasked with advocating for accountability and showcasing the skills that make graduates proficient professionals who set high standards for post-graduation practice (Lock et al., 2018). Consequently, deciphering academic contexts, unravelling the intricate relationships between policies and practices in HE, and adapting content to meet students' needs remain persistent challenges for educators.

One example of messiness is the concept of the 'third space', as elucidated by Whitchurch (2008, 2013, 2018, 2023), highlighting the challenges HE professional staff confront. It emphasises the necessity to transcend conventional academic and non-academic domains, operating within a 'no man's land' to address the complex demands of the sector. In this context, 'blended professionals' challenge the navigation of both domains, consistently traversing boundaries without being confined by structures that might impede those exclusively on one side. This approach recognises that staff identities in HE, particularly in this third space, play a crucial role in bridging skills, knowledge, support, and collaboration gaps essential for addressing the escalating complexities and challenges the student population faces.

Syska and Buckley's book examines the role of Learning Developers (LD/LDs) as professionals working in the third space and how they influence practice across the wider HE sector. It explores a paradox of questions, mapping the challenges students and staff experience and argues for the essentiality of Learning Development's place in contemporary HE spaces. This book highlights that Learning Development is a community of practice based on Wenger's concept (1999). It serves as a provocation, aiming to foster open conversations about the role of LDs, acting as a guide rather than a prescriptive recipe. Considering the broad nature of Learning Development and colleagues working in this space with diverse occupation titles, the editors intentionally structured the book to provide 'space for creativity and reflection' (p.3), capturing the breadth of challenges and offering the reader different lenses. With contributions from 41 authors, the book is split into five parts. It provides a theoretical foundation, practical examples from the field, critical discussions of Learning Development positions, and an exploration of opportunities and possibilities for Learning Development as a collaborative discipline that encourages colleagues from the academic and the non-academic dichotomies to engage and reflect. Through incorporating a polyphonic range of voices, the book highlights the authors' and the readers' motivation to understand the meaning and place of Learning Development, especially in the context of the disruptive HE landscape experienced during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

This book adopts a distinctive approach by anchoring each chapter with an epigraph, inviting readers not only to navigate the journey of becoming a LD but also to understand each chapter's purpose. The recurrent theme throughout the book goes beyond delineating how to be a LD, encouraging continuous reflection and questioning regarding one's evolving role within the broader HE community. The identity of being a LD is examined from multiple lenses, recognising how Gale and Wyatt's 'fluidity of becoming' applies to the Learning Development profession (2022). For example, in parts one and two of the book, Rooney (p.25) challenges the role of LDs and their daily tasks, asserting that fostering agency and building relationships within a messy environment compels Learning Development colleagues to engage in diverse 'critical practice'. This approach creates open conversational spaces, facilitating dialogue among colleagues and students. Subsequently, Buckley and Frith (chapter 4) delve into expressing Learning Development's identity through a fluid and dynamic approach, emphasising networking, peer learning, and collaborative work to support LDs' professional development. An example of this was

developing Learning Development colleagues as hybrid professionals, as discussed by Grayson and Syska (chapter 5), navigating between academic and professional spheres without rigid boundaries.

Parts three and four of the book incorporate colleagues' reflections to critically examine strategies for bridging the gap between colleagues working in academic and non-academic roles (chapter 14) and what additional steps LDs can take to foster a community for critical being and becoming (chapter 16). The focus on supporting LDs as researchers is prominently featured, with four chapters highlighting the significance of research and scholarship for professional colleagues. For example, Bishopp-Martin and Johnson highlight that distinctive features of Learning Development scholarship can enhance LDs' knowledge and pedagogical practices, acknowledging the diverse challenges Learning Development colleagues face in their professional endeavours. Fallin (p.165) introduces 'the research onion', a need for a robust methodological approach to support Learning Development research. Perhaps for more practical elements, chapters 19 and 20, both authored by Syska and Buckley, focus on developing LDs as writers and address the emotional challenges of fear, failure, rejection, and criticism. Thus, these chapters offer constructive support to individuals seeking guidance on writing with clear goals to support strategic developments. Considering the diverse nature of the Learning Development profession (chapters 21-26), the book's chapters address the ongoing challenges of establishing Learning Development as a distinctive field. As emphasised in Webster's contribution (chapter 25), the book recognises the under-represented value of what Learning Development brings to students, colleagues, and the broader HE ecosystem.

Syska and Buckley have skilfully curated a valuable resource, pulling fragments of expertise from the Learning Development field to articulate something often blurry and undervalued by the wider HE sector. Contributions from colleagues demonstrate the value of Learning Development and its integration regardless of their professional role, spanning academic and professional services, to the HE sector. The book's critical discussions and reflections have, crucially, highlighted the value of openness, integration, and connection for LDs with wider dialogues. As a result, this book extends its relevance beyond those directly involved in the Learning Development space; it serves as a valuable resource for readers to engage with the challenges faced by our Learning Development colleagues and supports their growth and impact in our institutions. In recognising the importance of

navigating the blurry intersections and fostering connections in the third space, the book encourages collaboration on a fluid, non-linear journey to re-evaluate, interrogate, and question how we can be more inclusive in a shared space, thereby bridging the academic and non-academic domains.

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