



Existing in hyperliminality: supporting educational developers with complex cross-disciplinary portfolios

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Abstract

This opinion piece discusses educational developer portfolios that have cross-disciplinary or cross-service area reporting structure and responsibilities within an institution. It will outline some of the common barriers for these kinds of portfolios and highlight how often these barriers can be built into the administrative structures that already exist at an institution. It also suggests ways that reporting and administrative structures could help support a more holistic view of pedagogical development with more intentionality in the design of the role, that in turn will support a trauma-informed approach to this work, because without intentional support, cross-disciplinary roles can create trauma responses in educational developers. The piece ends with three recommendations that can be put in place to help support success and mitigate some of the tensions found for those who are in these types of cross-disciplinary roles.

Keywords: educational development; cross-disciplinary; trauma-informed pedagogy; administration; reporting structures.

Introduction: what are hyperliminal and complex-cross disciplinary portfolios?

Whitchurchian (2013) third space in academic development uses Homi Bhabha's third space theory to speak to the tension of the academic and service-type framing of educational developers, academic developers, and faculty developers. These position titles refer to the same types or roles of similar scope depending on one's institutional geography: Canada, United States, Australia, or the United Kingdom. This opinion piece, written by an Educational Developer with a complex cross-disciplinary portfolio in Canada,

will take that third space framing further to discuss portfolios whose job descriptions cross between educational development and accessibility services or educational technology to create a doubly complex hyperliminality. By hyperliminality, I mean a portfolio or position that by the nature of being part of multiple service or department areas must take into account those areas, but also live in between those areas when there may be tension or conflict in goals, values, or outcomes between them.

Complex portfolio educational developers can find themselves administratively housed in one department, but their job description sees them having direct responsibility for or with consistent communicating or reporting structures into other departments because of overlapping workflows or connections with those they are supposed to support, for example if they are faculty-facing, staff-facing, or student-facing. Roles like these mean that there is continual movement often between two completely different administrative and organisational strategies, different groups of disciplinary colleagues, and using sometimes conflicting documentation procedures, where priorities can be in tension. This goes beyond the domains of academic development work, outlined by Fraser and Ling (2014), where there may be very little impact of policy or strategy in these roles, nor any real emphasis on the scholarship of teaching and learning, but rather all emphasis placed on supporting inclusive and quality learning and teaching, along with professional development of faculty and staff. These roles and responsibilities between supporting people and policy may also be called learning development or instructional design depending on where or what type of Higher Education Institution, as Aitchison et al. (2020) note in their work.

In these roles, productivity pressure comes from two distinct areas and in an ideal situation, the bi-departmental model can mean that there will be two sets of support to work together to address barriers in teaching and learning spaces. For example, there could be instructional design support that is both pedagogical and technical, or inclusive pedagogy resources that overlap with student support areas or the library. However, what often happens, especially if each department has different ways of reporting or assigning work, is that complex cross-discipline portfolios can work against each other. For example, one area could be focused on reflective qualitative work and support, whilst the other is more invested in the need for quantitative ticketing systems that read productivity by the amount of consults completed and does not value the need for reflectivity. These tensions and differences in outcomes can also trigger traumatic stress for those in those roles as

supporting educational developers with complex cross-disciplinary portfolios outlined by Mays Imad's (2021) work, because it reinscribes uncertainty, isolation, and a lack of meaning.

Potential to educational practice

Cross-discipline educational developer portfolios provide potential to educational practices both within the institutions that they reside, but also to educational development as a field. These educational developer roles highlight the necessary affinities between the theory and the practice of the fields where they are cross-appointed and may offer an opportunity to draw points of connection for faculty and staff that had not been considered before when it comes to supporting learners, designing curriculum, or assessment strategies.

These kinds of cross-discipline hyperliminal positions necessarily create a space for collaboration and community building outside their home institutions. This is due to the need to find those who share similar priorities or similar experiences when it comes to faculty, graduate student, and staff consultations, and it may be difficult to find others within the institution who can align to those experiences or offer support.

When it comes to career progression, those in cross-disciplinary roles are forced to move to either one area, for example teaching and learning centres or other accessibility services support, if they are looking for more leadership possibilities and responsibilities. This can mean there could be a need for recredentialling or reskilling to support the area the educational developer chooses to pursue further, or even at times a loss of seniority can happen depending on the human resources and union structures in place around collaborative supports and managerial reporting.

Hyperliminal roles and trauma-informed institutions

These types of hyperliminal roles can also create tenuous connections to trust. The fluctuation between educational development, educational technology, or accessible pedagogy support can mean that the instructors and faculty the educational developer is supporting are not sure if the kind of support provided is coming from one side of the desk or the developer wearing one of many complex-role based hats, instead of the holistic

totality that developers embody in roles, experience, and titles. As Little and Green (2022) state, there is a need to build trust in the educational developer space to convey a kind of expertise and knowledge, but what I am arguing in this piece is that it is much harder to build that trust the more hyperliminal the position is within departments and the institution.

As well, this complexity of roles can create trauma responses in the educational developer. It is more important than ever to expand conversations on trauma responses that educational developers encounter, as the pandemic has demonstrated there are insufficient supports around what trauma-informed institutions need to have in place, and that empowerment, another important trauma-informed pillar, can be lost the more multidirectional and hyperliminal the position is or becomes. As Vander Kloet (2024) notes in her recent work, educational developers who support equity in different ways in these roles need institutional and divisional support to do that work in clear ways, for developers are often 'not prevented from doing equity work but did not receive explicit support from leaders or peers' (p.6).

Little and Green (2022) also note that integrity is another consideration that is part of the third space identity of developers, and that often in roles that span different areas like educational development and accessibility services, there may even be different codes of ethics that need to be taken into account in the policies and procedures of work. This can also include different considerations around documentation and privacy, and what aspects of a consultation can be shared with which departmental administration or other colleagues. This can result in moral injury and other aspects of trauma responses where the educational developer is asked to embody responsibilities and, in certain instances, conflicts of interest in relation to the different areas they are responsible for overseeing.

Conclusion: how to support hyperliminal roles

Because of the complex nature of hyperliminal roles that can cross disciplines with their own set of specific high-context terminology and procedures, there needs to be more support for these roles in a collaborative way between institutional areas where these roles may be housed or where they work regularly. In a movement towards more trauma-informed institutions and educational spaces, building community, support, and trust can

help model the care that is needed in creating a hyperliminal role to bring areas together, and thus provide care and connection (Imad, 2021) for the person in that role.

Below are larger recommendations suggested for departments and institutions to lead and support these kinds of innovative roles towards success. There certainly needs to be more of these cross-disciplinary roles that demonstrate the affinities and need for collaboration between groups. Another such example can be educational developers who work in teaching and learning centres, but also are cross-appointed to the library to help training and support for departments.

The three recommendations are provided as a way to start dialogue around what foundational supports need to be in place for any institution thinking of creating such roles, or places that are piloting cross-disciplinary educational development roles like these.

1. Both areas need to be in conversation at the director or managerial level on a regular basis, bi-weekly or no longer than monthly, so that the asks are not competing and contradicting.
2. Clear policies around professional development needs to be outlined and next steps towards leadership and management roles aligned to human resource and union (where applicable) requirements and possibilities. This also includes clear budget lines and funding for different conferences and an acknowledgement that those who are in these kinds of positions may need to attend different types of conferences or more conferences than others in either department/service area.
3. Spaces need to be provided to inspire and support mentorship opportunities for junior educational developers or graduate students who may be interested in a career in one or both of the cross-disciplinary areas.

The need for different kinds of foundational support for these roles will of course be institution and demographic dependent, but having these three recommendations in place can help the administrative barriers that can appear when navigating areas with different scopes of practice and priorities simultaneously.

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