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Talking ourselves up: reframing learning development to reflect our expertise

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Presentation abstract

The way universities frame Learning Development (LD) has profound implications for the field's pedagogy, status, autonomy and evolution. These variables affect the value that LD releases to staff and students. Framing involves 'foregrounding certain perspectives and ruling out others' to characterise a phenomenon (Jones, 2010, p.242). Learning developers' 'palpable reluctance' to advocate for their expertise (Webster, 2022, p.181) contributes to the field often being framed externally. This session guided attendees on how to constructively challenge and redefine the framings at university level, using my doctoral data (Johnson, 2023). It included analysis of framing discourse about LD on UK universities' websites, of the value of LD to students and staff in one university, and of how the two related.

LD can be framed as a combination of skills development, human development and subject-embedded instruction (Hallett, 2010). The university website discourse lacked quantity and detail about the embedded framing, while strongly representing the skills framing. The skills framing correlated with stakeholders perceiving LD as delivering *functional* (financial) value, while the humanistic framing added *social* and *emotional* value. Only the embedded framing encouraged perceptions of LD as adding knowledge – a.k.a. *epistemic* value (terminology from Sheth et al., 1991, adapted for higher education [HE] by LeBlanc and Nguyen, 1999).

I therefore argued LD teams should advocate for a reframing of their work which better calibrates and explains all three discourses. As the stakeholder data illustrated, this enhanced perception increases students' and staff's inclination to engage with LD (*conditional* value), leading to greater value release.

Session overview

In the session, I discussed the differences that my research found between the experiences of doing LD work (as reported by British-based practitioners) and the way the work was framed in statements from 131 British universities' websites. I explained what the two datasets had in common (acknowledgement of skills development and person development as core pillars of LD) but also what the differences were, to show what the framings missed. The key missed elements were the subject-embedded and scholarly nature of LD work, and that it has a distinct but overlapping identity with other third-space professions.

I then discussed the impact of the framings on the value that LD can release, presenting a model that represented my doctoral thesis. The model, grounded in my data, showed that only where all three framings are present can the full potential of LD's value (as material, emotional, social and knowledge gains) be realised. Furthermore, only at that point do universities maximise students' proclivities to engage with and gain from LD. This led to a set of recommendations being presented, covering *how* and *with whom* learning developers can work to raise their profiles within their institutions and ensure a more accurate framing of their work.

Community response

What was instantly seen from the participants' responses to this session was their interest in the notion of framing, and how for something to be 'reframed', we first need to understand its starting point and our own perspective. For Sandra Sinfield and Tom Burns, the curiosity in how higher education might be conceived by using this lens was enriched by the message of an earlier presentation:

> We'd just arrived from Amy West's metaphor session – and had not realised
> before that 'framing' was also a metaphor! We particularly liked the way Ian started
> by unpacking 'framing' itself as the way into exploring what *we* the community
> think versus what *they* the managers think about learning development itself.
> What has become more conscious to us over this day – is how we have perhaps

not taken the time to update our schema with respect to how 'education' and 'higher education' are now framed by very reductive governmental and social discourses. HE really is now being re-framed as training for employability - and in that particular landscape the aspirations, values and practices of LD appear particularly anachronistic! It's never been more difficult to have people hear our values and value our practices.

However, this framing is not unproblematic. While framing can be a useful tool for us to understand a phenomenon or a position in greater depth, it is not exclusively a one-way process; through the roles we perform or the job titles we carry, we are also subject to framing by others, and Sonia Hood explores some of the risks inherent in that:

> This was really interesting research looking at how we are framed and the more skills focused it is the more deficit it becomes. This was also linked to how we measure the value we bring – which we can also think about in terms of impact. What is difficult though is that we don't always 'control' how we are framed – we may be able to change how our service is described in handbooks and on webpages but we cannot control for how academics may 'promote' our services. And hence a challenge. Perhaps the more consistent we are in what we do, and who we are as a profession, the less 'miss-framing' (is this a word?) will happen. We also need to consider the audience – perhaps there is room to frame ourselves in slightly different ways depending on who we intend to communicate with?

Responding directly to the previous comment, Alice Stinetorf observed:

> It's interesting to note the implications of this phrasing: 'we cannot control for how academics may "promote" our services'. I'm returning to this collaborative piece having now attended the in-person days as well – where I met several academics/lecturers who presented on their (very much 'LD') projects! Back to the pulled quote: I don't think this is an intentional 'us/them' dichotomy, but I suppose I find myself wondering whether we inadvertently limit or skew the nature of LD when academics/lecturers are presumed to be 'outside the LD bubble' by default. In my idealistic heart, I picture this future in which academics with teaching responsibility understand LD to be central to their own practices – which isn't to say LD wouldn't stand on its own as an occupation and an expertise, but that academics would evolve to view our profession as a boon to them just as much as to their students. Wishful thinking, I know!

With university education changing focus to employability and the training needed to ensure that those leaving higher education are 'graduate job ready' the political and social landscape means that the aspirations, values and practices of learning developers appear particularly anachronistic.

In the skills-focused higher education environment it has become difficult to identify how to measure the value, worth or impact created by learning development professionals. Yet controlling how the value of learning development is framed may require changing the narrative on how services are promoted and described in materials rather than changing the product being delivered.

The learning development 'bubble' also needs to be considered. The divide between academic staff and learning developers has blurred with a number of academic staff presenting at this conference. These individuals could potentially be considered to be outside of the learning development community yet their presentations and underlying projects focused on learning development activities.

Author's reflection

The responses I have received from the community are a mixed bag, but I am grateful to receive all of them. Those which may seem more contentious to me nonetheless clearly reflect the feelings 'out there' (it has been a long stretch since 2019 to complete the doctorate, in which time much has changed). Therefore, I will address some of those responses here and locate how I would view them on the 2024 landscape.

I would first like to turn to these two comments:

> With university education changing focus to employability and the training needed to ensure that those leaving higher education are 'graduate job ready' the political and social landscape means that the aspirations, values and practices of learning developers appear particularly anachronistic!

> In the skills-focused higher education environment it has become difficult to identify how to measure the value, worth or impact created by learning development professionals.

In my view, just because the climate is employability-focused and skills-focused, it does not dampen the need for a different, more humanistic form of pedagogy in university (such as LD) – in fact it increases the need. I have witnessed the need for human interaction in students unfold across my professional LD experience through the pandemic, cost of living crisis and rise of AI. Now, students need learning developers more than ever. Yes, we

must evolve, but this does not mean that our aims as an LD field and association are anachronistic or that we should give up on them.

Likewise, the quest to measure the value and impact of LD is acknowledged as challenging but is not one we should neglect. This presentation offered suggestions around how the more qualitative dimension of value could be investigated in evaluations. The process of completing the doctoral thesis led me to two important shifts in thinking, however. One is that such evaluations need to sit alongside, not instead of, more quantitative evaluations of impact, to reach the stakeholders with decision-making power. The second shift speaks to the first quote above. I once had an aversion to LD work being framed as 'skills' work. I learned through the doctorate that instead, we need to speak the language of people who need us. That means not side-lining the concept of skills, but expanding it out into a framing of lifelong skills which will help students in life and at work, not only within the academy walls. I dealt with this issue in Slide 12 of the presentation at ALDCON24 if readers would like to refer to it (Johnson, 2024).

Two other community respondents made the following interesting and linked points:

> The learning development "bubble" also needs to be considered. The divide between academic staff and learning developers has blurred with a number of academic staff presenting at this conference. These individuals could potentially be considered to be outside of the learning development community yet their presentations and underlying projects focused on learning development activities.
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> In my idealistic heart, I picture this future in which academics with teaching responsibility understand LD to be central to their own practices.

I too think that a world in which all teaching academics have learning development as part of their toolbox and mindset is a desirable one. In mine and Bishopp-Martin's work (Johnson and Bishopp-Martin, 2023), we call this mindset 'small ld' learning development, contrasting that with 'capital LD' Learning Development to mean the professional field. I think this field, and its principles, are what the community respondent means by the 'bubble'. What my thesis and subsequent writing have taught me is that much as ld (the mindset) across the board is desirable, LD (the profession) is also its own helpful and distinct entity. The one will not supersede the other. 'Small ld' will only grow with 'Capital' LD' driving it. The purpose of my thesis, presentation at ALDCON, recent publications and work with ALDinHE has been to investigate how and with whom the LD field can play that driving role. With the help of the ALDinHE community, I will look to soon turn this into more

concrete practical recommendations (of the sort on Slides 11 and 12 of my ALDCON presentation, but fleshed out further) (Johnson, 2024). For this reason, it is great to know that people from a breadth of professional backgrounds, with an interest in ld as much as LD, attended my session. It is good to have both perspectives.

However, personally speaking the quest kickstarted by my doctorate rolls on – that of understanding LD as a distinct and valuable professional field, framed more accurately. It was challenging to distil the nuances of a thesis into a 15-minute presentation, but I look forward to disseminating it by other methods in the coming year and being a continuing part of this important debate.

Acknowledgements

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