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## Who are we? An autoethnographic investigation into professional role identity of the Learning Developer

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### ***Presentation abstract***

This presentation was based on a proposed small-scale research project which aimed to investigate how a small team of Learning Developers (six) feel about their professional identity, and whether the job title of Academic Skills Advisor (ASA) at Edge Hill University has accurately reflected their combined experience and professional standing. This research project was designed to be undertaken within the Student Engagement Team Community of Practice (SETCoP) and had been identified as a useful chance to explore the Learning Development (LD) skills base through the practice of collaborative autoethnography (Chang, 2022). Eyre and Slawson (2018) recognise that self-descriptions enable Learning Developers to maintain control over defining the value of LD practice. This research project employs a qualitative research approach to investigate whether participants' self-identify matches with the given job title. Ethical approval was sought internally within Edge Hill University. Thus, this presentation also highlighted the readiness of the professional role identity of the Learning Developer team and how they managed to build inclusive LD space within their Community of Practice in order to connect socially, emotionally, and physically. They also discussed how they planned for data gathering and evaluating the collective feelings of the ASAs to reflect the impacts of the evolution of the job title as an LD role which enabled them to show their identity, practices, values, and status.

**Keywords:** professional identity; community of practice; values.

## ***Community response***

I really appreciated this session asking us to consider who we think we are. As someone with a meaningless job title, I well understand that titles do matter in how they shape professional identity: they are a 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1998, p.34) between our own sense of who we are and what we do, and other people's perceptions and expectations of us. As Pratt (1998, p.34) says, these two sides 'meet, clash, and grapple with each other' – no peaceful negotiations here, rather a potentially antagonistic disagreement that can only be resolved through some serious wrangling. Your research project will therefore be helpful not for solving this problem once and for all, but for the insights it will undoubtedly give to what it is that we value.

For example, the question arose as to whether we are a field or a Community of Practice (never mind the question of discipline!). My own response is, does it matter? For some people it will do enormously; this is where their professional identity rubs up against the language and recognition of the wider sector. For others (I admit myself of that number), what we call ourselves matters less than what we do and how we achieve our goals. They are both valid perspectives to take on identity, and there are no doubt times when they also clash with each other (for example, the question of ethical approval for research arose in discussion – not always a straightforward institutional process for anyone who is not officially recognised as a 'researcher'). I have written about professional identity myself with Alicja Syska and Lindsay Heggie, in relation to writing specifically (Buckley et al, 2024) and how it can be both a signifier and a mediator of identity. Whether identity is enacted and recognised via scholarship or job titles, I am really excited to see through your collaborative autoethnographic approach how your research participants grapple with all the different facets of identity, and how they interact in their own 'contact zones' (CB).

I did really enjoy the session and I look forward to seeing what the research brings. As the project has not started yet, I would raise a couple of areas that, in my view, require close observation. LD has previously been accused of being quite insular and looking inwards. While issues of identity do matter and are worth exploring, I think it is important to do so looking outwards as well. Positioning LD as third space means that we can relate many of our identity challenges to those experienced by many other higher education professional groups which do not fit neatly in the traditional academic/professional classifications. I think this is worth considering to avoid producing another piece of work which points

towards self-justification, which leads me to my second point. Again, it has been previously pointed out that huge amounts of LD research discuss who we are and what we do, as a means to justify our own existence. There is a risk that not moving the discussion forward from these questions will prevent us from building the theoretical, pedagogical and epistemological grounding of our work, which our discipline so desperately needs. I urge the authors to consider this piece to add to LD scholarship beyond the confines of inward-looking, self-justification discourses.

### **Next steps and additional questions**

How does Learning Development's identity as a field of practice impact on that of its practitioners? Does the influence travel both ways? And if we are in a moment of development as a profession, in which direction should we be guiding that development? In other words, it is not just about asking who we are, collectively, but who do we want to be?

### ***Authors' reflections***

Sharing space with fellow Learning Developers to discuss our role identity proved to be a great opportunity to help focus our research plans more clearly, in particular it made me appreciate even more the strength of our Community of Practice in fostering this. We are in a fortunate position that we can still tinker with our research proposal, and if anything, sharing our plans and listening to others, made me realise there is still more 'tinkering' to be done, so that we are hopefully adding a new critical perspective to the current burgeoning discussion around professional LD identity. I am looking forward to conducting our research and hope to be back with more discussion at next year's conference (CO).

It was also interesting to deliver our session to colleagues in the sector who have experienced similar difficulties in terms of lack of access to research ethics processes. Whilst this remains a contentious issue and links closely to the theme of the professional role identity of a Learning Developer, it was reassuring to know that we are not the only ones experiencing this challenge! We both came away from the conference with a range of

alternative perspectives on how we could potentially adapt our initial proposal and are looking forward to seeing where these new directions could take our research (HB).

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