



## **Agents for curriculum change: the role of Learning Development**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

Learning Development (LD) can rightly see a role as positive institutional change agents. However, this perception can often be frustrated by external interpretations about the value of study skills (Richards and Pilcher, 2023), which could go some way to perpetuating something of an identity disconnect, where others may often continue to perceive LD as remedial (Bishop et al., 2009).

This session aimed to inspire a sense of where opportunities may lie for challenging perceptions with LD as change agents, using our institutional experience of having made some significant headway in influencing wholesale curriculum change. The workshop was an opportunity for exploratory discussions, with participants sharing their experiences of participation in curriculum change initiatives or challenges faced in trying to engineer this role. It considered ways to seize and make the most of other opportunities, such as student guidance on Artificial Intelligence, to be similarly influential.

Based on our experience of a new curriculum framework, discussions explored challenges the LD team faced in seeking, in the first instance, to have a significant role in the process, achieving this and the inherent frustrations nevertheless. With participants, we discovered how LD can seize opportunities through recognising the role LD can play, such as defining pedagogical concepts of resourcefulness and resilience, which was inherent in the curriculum design. Group activities explored the challenges in trying to influence curriculum change, shared successes and considered whether this is an effective use of LD time. Group investigations also looked at the importance of collaborating with academic

developers, and how this can help address and evolve perceptions of LD as change agents, given that staff educational development can be assumed to be the more natural agent for progressing institutional curriculum change and why an LD presence can bring a unique perspective.

**Keywords:** change agents; curriculum change; academic collaborations; role identity; third space.

### ***Community response***

There is something really heartening about seeing a workshop at ALDCon focussing on how Learning Developers can be agents for change. After all, it was only 13 years ago that John Hilsdon (2011) asked in the first book of the field, 'What is Learning Development?' Yet the collective confidence of the field and its practitioners has grown immeasurably in that time so that now 'we have an opportunity to develop our role into one with influence and recognition' (Hood, 2023, p.196), and in this case that has resulted in playing a significant role in curriculum review. For a Learning Developer to embrace the role of 'change agent' is hugely gratifying – and it also makes sense. Learning Developers can have oversight across subjects and departments, a broad range of connections around the institution, and a unique relationship with students, making them valuable additions to any conversation around the curriculum.

But these things are easier said than done; not everyone would feel confident approaching a committee and asking to be involved. So, what I particularly liked about this session is that Robert and Heather provided a step by step guide to becoming an LD change agent: being aware of opportunities; considering how LD might fit; identifying key people to contact; planning for challenges; and connecting ideas to institutional strategy. These are all achievable activities, which in turn makes the whole more achievable. I hope that this helps individuals raise their ambitions for what LD can do for their institutions, and I hope the concept will raise the ambitions of the field more widely.

## **Next steps and additional questions**

How can Learning Developers become more visible in third space environments and claim their expertise?

### ***Authors' reflection***

The opportunity to share this concept of Learning Developer's identity as being both influential and impactful with Learning Development peers has been enlightening and has informed our continued thinking in this area. Feedback from colleagues during the session was very positive, with insights shared into various experiences of opportunities to collaborate, inform and influence from a Learning Development perspective in various institutional settings. However, it is recognised that when, where and how these opportunities materialise is often dependent on factors such as institutional strategy and the configuration of Learning Development teams within organisation structures.

Furthermore, as highlighted in the community response, seeking these opportunities and having the capacity to fully immerse in projects is 'often easier said than done'. Whilst active discussions during the session allowed for further exploration of what opportunities may be available, consideration of how this is approached either through influencing or actively contributing to wider institution objectives was an aspect where there was scope for further consideration.

From the positive response to our presentation, we feel this is a conversation which has wider implications for the LD community, aligning with considerations of role perceptions and identity. We very much enjoyed hearing everyone's contributions in the session and appreciate the further insights from the community response. It is an area we would like to continue to explore as it became apparent that there was an appetite for sharing experiences to help develop a collective understanding, so we proposed forming a Community of Practice to enable these conversations to continue.

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Heather Barker manages the University of Surrey's Academic Skills and Development team comprising Learning Development Advisers and Learning Development Librarians. A key research area is inclusive and holistic Learning Development encompassing cognitive, affective and emotional aspects of a learner's journey. This informed her contributions to developing an institutional approach to 'Resourcefulness and Resilience' (one of five key 'pillars' of Surrey's Curriculum Framework).

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