



Pragmatists or sellouts? The role of middle managers with responsibility for Learning Development

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Presentation abstract

This workshop explored some of the tensions related to the position of Learning Development within higher education institutes, specifically the role of ‘middle managers’ with responsibility for Learning Development. In some cases, these managers will be current or former Learning Developers or they may have a limited grasp of the intentions and principles of Learning Developers.

The impetus for this workshop was thinking about my own role and experiences, discussing issues with colleagues in similar roles elsewhere, and reflecting on whether one has to choose a ‘side’. While many managers find themselves agreeing with critiques of the marketised higher education sector or problematic pedagogic processes, not engaging with institutional priorities is not an option. Moreover, one can find oneself making the case for how Learning Development can contribute to the institution’s success in contentious exercises such as the National Student Survey (NSS) or Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) or engaging with processes and activities that do not fully align with Learning Development principles to ensure that we are involved.

This workshop was not about getting the tiny violins out and talking about how hard it is for managers. Instead, it aimed to encourage mutual understanding and looking at practical ways for managers to navigate institutional demands and Learning Development principles, exploring the intersection of the community’s values, institutional pressures, sectoral issues and discussion of ‘what works’ within different institutions and contexts. At the end of the session, we shared and developed ideas and good practice about how we ‘play the game’ without compromising our principles, including suggestions for how managers can better represent their teams.

Keywords: strategy; politics; values; management; marketisation.

Community response

Alistair's session provided valuable insights into the experience of working as a Learning Development team manager. It shone a spotlight on how governmental and institutional imperatives do not always align with personal values or pedagogical beliefs held by managers, and the internal conflicts this can cause. Those who have not had the opportunity to work in a Learning Development management position may not have previously considered the manifestation of such cognitive dissonance and so would have found that this session provided a helpful insight into the lived reality of being a Learning Development team manager.

Attendee feedback highlighted how the session initially went back to basics in terms of the exploring core values associated with the field of Learning Development:

This was a very interesting talk, which got all participants actively discussing areas which really matter to Learning Development work. I think it is important to continue to create spaces to resist neoliberal practices and discourses which compromise our value-based work.

This was followed by discussion about the marketisation of the higher education sector and the increasing prevalence of metrics (such as B3 indicators, NSS results and graduate outcomes) as a means of measuring or rating higher education provider success. Conversations explored the growing sector focus on student experience and outcome data dashboards, learning analytics and the use of targets and leading indicators. Consideration was given to the implications for Learning Development team managers and the challenges associated with working to establish the right balance between being able to 'play the game' in terms of meeting institutional expectations alongside staying true to personal values and beliefs:

I felt that there was a feeling in the room that ‘we have to do what we have to do’ (measuring, metrics analysis, data gathering) in order to survive, which is a rather hopeless way of understanding education. I am an eternal optimist and I believe higher education will always offer spaces for criticality and resistance, if we are brave (and strategic) enough to put our foot down and practise following our values (not just delivering what we can measure). If there was no hope left at university, education would find itself in a very dark place, and I do not believe we are there yet.

Next steps and additional questions

This session raised a number of important questions related to the support and developmental needs of Learning Development team managers:

- How can Learning Development team managers experiencing cognitive dissonance be best supported?
- How can aspiring Learning Development team managers develop the required literacy of sector and institutional expectations/requirements to be able to effectively lead a Learning Development team?
- How can new Learning Development team managers be supported to establish a professional network with contemporaries in other institutions?

Author’s reflection

I was very happy that the topic generated so much interest, both in terms of attendees but also the amount of discussion generated; in hindsight, I should have allowed even more time for discussion.

I think what became apparent was that this is potentially a huge topic, that is ripe for further consideration and discussion. I had deliberately tried to be provocative, asking

whether what I characterised as the shibboleths of the Learning Development community, as articulated in the recently published *How to be a Learning Developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practices* (Syska and Buckley, 2004), were compatible with the 'realities' of higher education in the UK (or certainly England) in 2024. As I had hoped, there were staunch defences of a more 'idealist' view of Learning Development as being able to make a substantial difference. There was also thoughtful engagement with the position I was putting forward and I was relieved (and a tiny bit disappointed) that it did not get more heated and I was not accused of being a sellout.

I think there is scope for further investigation, and I do think that for Learning Development to have the impact it craves, the Learning Development community is not just providing a critique of current practices but also acknowledges, engages with and offers viable answers to some of the issues faced by institutional leaders and the sector as a whole.

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References

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