The rise of study skills at Strathclyde (and our part in its downfall): a bildungsroman

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Presentation abstract

In 2012, three members of staff were recruited by the University of Strathclyde to sit in a room and talk to students. That was the whole of the plan. That is not how this story ends. The talking was supposed to 'help' students to do things 'right'. That is not what we spoke about. That year, the student-facing part of the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement (CAPLE) established in 1987, which at its height consisted of six permanent academics with varied research interests within the, then emergent, field of Learning Development (LD), was replaced by a generic Study Skills Service, staffed by LD practitioners with a considerable collective experience and who shared a vision that was more critical and looked to a more authentically (learning) developmental approach (Asher, 2024). In so doing, the university had created a service model which we would spend the next nine years dismantling (or, to be more accurate, redeveloping).

What follows is our story. The story of how the Learner Development Service (LDS) came into being, and how the spaces and places we have inhabited (both hostile and hospitable) have shaped our practices (Gravett et al., 2023) and how, in June 2022, we took up residency in a dedicated LDS Centre designed by us for us. To date, we have occupied three physical locations and been positioned under three different university services. These spaces and places have defined what we could do but they have also informed the design of our current physical, virtual and conceptual environment, as this paper details. This session highlighted the need for Learning Development practitioner resilience and perseverance in difficult circumstances. It foregrounds the usefulness of initiating, developing, and nurturing productive and mutually rewarding professional relationships

with academic departments, course leaders and individual academics in order to advance the growth of Learning Development provision in institutions.

Keywords: Learning Development; spaces; places.

Introduction

In order to highlight the need for Learning Development (LD) practitioner resilience and perseverance in difficult circumstances, we proceed from Baldick's (2008) definition of the Bildungsroman: 'the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity' (p.35) to understand our journey from 2012 to the present. Through our journey we have encountered numerous displacements, both physical and figurative, challenges to our practices and identity, and ultimately, we have arrived at a destination unimaginable from our starting point. This is our story.

Raising

We had emerged from the embers of the internationally renowned Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement (CAPLE) 1987-2012, whose success in the vanguard of the nascent field of LD did not prevent its demise. As CAPLE was being wound down, the university, seeking to sustain its student support activities, reached out to LD practitioners and established an ad-hoc Study Skills provision, based in the CAPLE offices, in January 2012. The Study Skills Service was born. The provision established consisted of one full time equivalent Adviser post, shared between three practitioners on hourly paid contracts. And, for 14 months we delivered one-to-one 'study skills' support. In June 2012 we took over the induction element of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) Summer School. And as time went on we developed working relationships with the Researcher Development Programme, became actively involved in induction/orientation and Widening Access activities. In March 2013, two open-ended 0.5 posts were established and we continued to build a modest profile in the university.

During the lifespan of the Study Skills Service, our tiny service hosted 3,000+ individual appointments, more than 450 workshops and presentations, delivered nine STEM Summer School units, and over the course of eight years, developed in excess of 200 working partnerships with teaching colleagues, Professional Services staff, and student representatives, delivering academic literacy and widening access activities. During this time, we have inhabited three physical locations, and have been positioned under four different university service clusters, two different directors, six different area heads – all without a service manager. We frequently conducted our meetings with learners and colleagues in the kind of 'bland' and 'uninspiring' meeting rooms depicted by Gravett et al. (2023, pp.701-2). In these inherited (or borrowed) office spaces, we frequently defended what our service did against the backdrop of pre-existing misconceptions about the over-inflated value of generic study skills as opposed to the subject-focussed, academic literacies informed practices we had developed. The 'messy realities' (Gravett et al., 2023, p.713) of our physical spaces were paralleled by the conceptual barriers we also had to traverse in order to meet academic and professional services colleagues on level ground, diplomatically explaining that we did not use one-size-fits-all, off-the-shelf resources they could simply distribute to students, choosing instead to collaborate with colleagues and learners in the third space we sought to occupy between assessment and advising.

Finding friends

Despite the numerous 'ah, right, thanks, but I was really just looking for something generic' responses, we also gained a growing body of academic and university services partners who found time to help us build in our third space, supporting our growth as practitioners as we did so. The resilience we had been fostering through our repeated (mostly successful) defences of our LD practices, emboldened us with a confidence to work openly and exploratively, collaborating on several on-course initiatives with teaching colleagues delivering professionally accredited and Graduate Apprenticeship courses (where our foci on Communities of Practice and applied subject-related theory seemed to resonate). In addition, the increased demand for hybrid modes of learning and teaching from 2020 onwards, brought about regular co-teaching opportunities (mostly focussing on the information literacy/academic literacies intersect for undergraduate and postgraduate research cohorts) with colleagues from Library Services. Our Faculty Librarian colleagues

(one of whom, Elaine Blair, was a Keynote Speaker at the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education Conference 2024) have continued to help us to sustainably occupy the territory we sought to occupy between our institutional positioning in Professional Services and the more traditional learning and teaching spaces within the faculties.

In addition to local collaborators, patrons, and supportive colleagues, our development as a service, and as practitioners, is informed by the research and practice of peers beyond our institution. Joining the network of Scottish Effective Learning Advisers (Scot-ELAS), now Scottish Higher Education Learning Developers (ScotHELD), and the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) in 2013, we achieved professional accreditation (CeLP and CeP) with the latter in 2019. In 2020 we negotiated ScotHELD's steering group seat on International Consortium of Academic Language and Learning Developers (ICALLD). These national and international communities of practice have proved invaluable in evidencing the legitimacy and necessity of our adoption and adaptation of LD practices and paradigms in our own institution. On a more personal level, they have greatly assisted our feeling of belonging to, and being situated within, something substantial, validating, and safe, despite however precarious our own positions, or the future of the service, has felt at times.

Making space

After years of uncertainty about our long-term future, running concurrently with our own gradual development, things changed rapidly for our service in 2021 when a new, custom designed, Learner Development Centre (LDC) was carved out of Strathclyde's new Learning and Teaching Building. To staff the LDC, the two Study Skills Advisers were made full-time as Learner Development Advisers (LDA). Whilst our practice did not massively change, a job title reflecting what we were about was welcome, albeit overdue (like our full-time status). We were joined by a specialist Maths and Stats LDA and faced the new academic year with energy and renewed optimism.

In designing the LDC we consulted with colleagues in the Disability and Wellbeing Service to ensure an inclusive and accessible space as possible. However, we were very mindful

of former head of CAPLE Ray Land's cautions about the need for learning and teaching spaces in which 'slow time' could be enjoyed, places in which 'reflection and deliberation' (Land 2008, p.15) were valued and creative and divergent thinking nurtured. In taking up residency in such a modern, technologically saturated building, with its numerous open-plan ambiguous spaces, industrial lighting, and busy, noise-washed galleries, we reconsidered the importance of Land's cautions regarding the need to resist the pressures of 'fast time' and its resultant 'digital temporality' (2008). In creating our own place for useful learning, we were informed, as Land was before us, by an appreciation that the pace of university learning can too easily reflect 'a situation where everything threatens to become a hysterical series of saturated moments' as learners attempt to navigate 'the unhindered and massive flow of information (Eriksen 2001, pp.2-3). As a consequence, our centre was designed with both private, silent study booths as well as having its own tutorial and group learning spaces; our intention is to encourage dialogue between learners and staff, to empower the sharing of experiences and thoughts, while also creating spaces for learners to hear themselves think.

Conclusion

Given the current financial situation affecting many UK higher education institutions (mainly due to the impact of the recent fall in levels of international student recruitment), our intended direction of growth has been halted, and our focus has subsequently shifted to one of preservation rather than expansion. Nevertheless, we look to the future with hopeful anticipation, pride in our battle scars, and with a heightened understanding of the important place Learning Development practice occupies within our institution and the higher education landscape. Our story continues.

Community response

The community "sighed with relief" while listening to this presentation as the struggles noted regarding the development of generic study skills services and the removal of student focused Learning Development services resonated across all within the audience.

One participant noted:

> I realised that the struggles I face in institutions I work in are happening elsewhere. More than that though, the session gave me hope that there is a process of change out there that can bring about fundamental changes in the way higher education views Learning Development.

The session was entertaining, informative and sparked lots of 'to dos' for those in the audience. Community members noted they wanted to add student quotes to their study skills services, focus on building a library based on books reviewed, and adding sessions to the postgraduate certificate in academic practice (PGCAP) courses that were run in the university.

It also allowed them to see that different stages described matched with those at their own universities. It allowed recognition of the development process that many have been through and how organisational change management processes can be used to speed up the changes required. While being a change maker is daunting and requires resilience, one participant noted:

> A major takeaway from your success is that there were two of you bringing about this change and that your team work, collaborative spirits and sense of humour were key ingredients to seeing organisational change in this area.

Authors' reflection

We were both glad of the empathetic reception our presentation received and it was heartening to read, in the community response, that our journey into relative maturity as a service, and as a professional partnership, is one that struck a chord with attendees. The discussion in the room certainly gave us a chance to reflect a little more on where we want to take our service, and the points raised about the general misunderstandings that continue to encircle LD paradigms and practice (often resulting in underfunding) spotlighted areas we will seek to address rather more vocally than perhaps we have in the past. Thank you to everyone who attended and who have contributed to the discussion.

Acknowledgments

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