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Academic literacies: learning developers' perspectives on informing the curriculum

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Presentation abstract

This paper sets out the findings of a research project that explores how learning developers (LDers) translate academic literacies (AL) into practice for student learning (Lea and Street, 1998; Hilsdon, 2011; Hilsdon et al., 2019; Bassett and McNaught, 2024) through curriculum design and content creation. The findings reveal varied practice informed by each LDer's theoretical foundations, wider debates within learning development, and local conditions within each participant's university.

A key emergent theme is that participants seek to influence the design of new and existing curriculum and resources by actively reaching out to colleagues, often from the 'ground up'. Through interactions of sharing, persuasion, and collaboration, LDers are attempting

to integrate multiple forms of academic knowledge and skills into wide-ranging courses so all students can fully participate and succeed in their disciplines. However, the participants' reflections reveal structural and individual factors within higher education that manifest as challenges and affordances for informing curricula, content, and resources. The research reveals some unexpected results about how LDers engage with AL in their own practice and their relationships with discipline-based colleagues to promote and develop inclusive curricula (OfS, 2024).

This paper uses the words of LDers across multiple disciplines and universities to share insights into how we seek to influence accessibility, equity, and inclusivity throughout students' learning journeys. Participants will be invited to reflect on the findings and consider how they might inform their own strategies for their contexts.

Keywords: academic literacies; learning developers; curricula; collaboration.

Community response

This session offered an opportunity for participants to critically explore the professional duality of the third space practitioner, and how often the role of learning developers can be misunderstood or undervalued. Discussion explored mutable LD practitioner identities and roles, and how multi-dimensional and varied contributions to student learning might influence a range of (potentially contesting) perspectives on their place, and that of academic literacies, within academia.

This opened wider questions of the value and impact of a learning developer's role. Presenters discussed how the remit of the profession has broadened in scope over the past decade, in response to wider recognition of the value of embedding academic literacies within curricula and the need for learners to be digitally confident. Yet career pathways and routes to recognition for those who identify as LD practitioners can often remain non-linear at an institutional level, despite admirable and valued efforts of professional bodies such as ALDinHE and ICALLD to elevate community distinctiveness, values, and professionalism.

Participants discussed how learning development practitioners can be a vital bridge between students' learning gaps and academic expectations. However, perceptions shared in this session highlighted that colleagues with more subject-specific-focused teaching roles can lack an appreciation of the impact LDers can have on the curriculum and on student self-efficacy. Opportunities for collaboration between those designing and delivering disciplinary curricula and those working in more co- and extracurricular roles might lead to not just impactful learning for students, but informative practice sharing for staff. Suggestions on ways in which LDers might collaborate with academic colleagues in more meaningful, impactful ways were highlighted as a point of interest for many attending this session.

Next steps

- Further developing and refining the data analysis, and deriving implications for LD practice for the research undertaken to inform wider understanding of impact and contribution.
- Disseminating final project considerations via academic publication for broader reach and impact.
- Sharing research challenges and lessons learned via the ALDinHE Research Community of Practice.

Authors' reflection

As one participant observed during the online presentation: 'Not that this is an output of your work, but some guidance on how to systematise the building of individual relationships across faculties, to get away from it being "accidental" would be beneficial!'. Reflecting on this comment, it appears, from our own experience too, that so much of the success of learning development initiatives depends on somewhat ad-hoc relationship building with academic staff. We therefore welcome the call for suggestions on how the relationship-building can become more systemised and look forward to interrogating what our substantial dataset has to say on the matter. We certainly regard such relationships as key to the impact that an academic literacies approach can have.

The session was our first chance to share some results from the study, and it was helpful to see how the interviewees' responses struck a chord with attendees. For example, one attendee remarked on the varying practical conceptions of the term 'academic literacies' in relation to Lea and Street's (1998) three-part model, and another noted differences in subject lecturers' own understandings and implementation of academic practices. This led me to think about the liminality in our practices and, sometimes, in our positions in our institutions.

Sharing the project findings with an audience of LD professionals made me reflect in more depth on the practical implications of the study, and how it can be of benefit to new as well as established practitioners in the field. It is interesting to note how even in cases where AL does not provide a platform for pedagogical LD practice, it has come to be recognised as the 'norm' or theoretical foundation of the discipline. That most practitioners are prepared to challenge the AL approach seems to me an indication that LD has reached maturity as a field of practice, as it has the confidence to critically scrutinise its own roots. Our presentation was a great way to not only share our findings with colleagues but also to add 'real life' context to the findings and the individual pieces of data that we have been working to categorise and curate for the last four months. The comments from the chat and the related discussion helped me to start thinking about the data I have been concentrating on in a different way.

Acknowledgements

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Victoria Rafferty is currently Lecturer in Business and Management at the University of Sunderland. Victoria has worked in the field of learning development for over 15 years. She is an experienced researcher in students' learning experiences, and her Professional Doctorate was based on her research around students' experiences of one-to-one learning tutorials.

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