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Learning developers as third space academics: a personal view

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Abstract

Professional identity is an important concept within academia. However, in the complex, blurred environment of modern universities, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define. The concept of third space professionals may be seen as useful for theorising the practice of those who at least partly identify as learning developers. Having previously written in the journal about promoting learning development as an academic discipline, the purpose of this opinion piece is to reflect on how my personal experiences have reshaped my views since this article was published. This article draws on my personal professional journey from an academic researcher to a learning developer, to a faculty-based senior lecturer in a different discipline to my academic qualifications. I make eight claims relating to my experience, especially as an unofficial embedded learning developer. I then conclude that, firstly, third space professionals is a more useful concept for explaining the professional identity of unofficial learning developers; secondly, that learning development cannot yet be considered a fully-fledged academic discipline because there is no specific qualification or career path relating to its practice; and thirdly, that universities are still struggling to decide where best to position learning developers.

Keywords: third space professionals; embedded learning development; multiple academic identities; academic disciplines; vocational transitions; academic journey.

Introduction

Like many learning developers, I drifted in and out of the learning development (LD) community of practice. I was transferred from a LD centre to an academic college six years ago. Although I do not have a business qualification, I am not alone as some of my

colleagues have also followed non-traditional career paths, ending up here with academic qualifications from different disciplines.

Although I now work as an academic within an academic college, my role involves a considerable amount of administration. Thus, the notion of third space academics (Whitchurch, 2008) is relevant to my experience and identity.

In this opinion piece, I reflect on and generalise from my personal journey and experiences as a third space professional now working within an academic college. In particular, I explore the relationship between my personal experience and publication in this Journal on promoting LD as an academic discipline (Samuels, 2013).

To this end, I seek to answer two questions:

- In what ways have my experiences over the 11 years since my article was published reshaped my views on whether LD should be viewed as an academic discipline?
- How does this reshaping relate to the notion of third space academics?

I begin with a brief literature review. This is followed by several abductive claims based on my experience. Finally, I draw my article together into conclusions by re-evaluating these questions.

Literature review

Multiple academic identities

The concept of single discipline academics can be traced back to the 18th century European Enlightenment, which encouraged the division of universities into discipline-based departments (Gurukkal, 2018). These silo-based disciplinary boundaries and their associated subcultures still strongly influence modern Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) (Becher and Trowler, 2001). However, increasing social, political, and economic requirements for interdisciplinary collaboration have not only led to academics valuing interdisciplinary team working, but also an increasing proportion of university employees to no longer perceive themselves as aligning with a single academic discipline. Nevertheless,

the concept of multiple academic identities remains largely under-theorised and under-researched (Bentley et al., 2019).

Third space professionals and LD

One specific aspect of multiple academic identities is the experience of third space professionals. Soja (1996) originally introduced the concept of *third spaces*. Whitchurch (2008) used this metaphor to coin the concept of *third space professionals* as a blurred boundary between academics and professional services identities. Whitchurch later articulated this role more deeply in her book *Reconstructing identities in higher education* (2012). However, a keyword search of this Journal's archives indicates that the term 'third space' did not become used widely within the learning development community's discourse until the 2018 ALDinHE conference (Johnson, 2018; Parkes, 2018). This special edition therefore provides the community an opportunity to further explore the relationship between these concepts.

More recently, two important publications have shed light on this relationship. Firstly, Webster (2022) considered the support, development, recognition, and impact of third space professionals from a LD perspective. She viewed learning developers as 'intermediaries who create and operate in a "safe" third space where the student voice meets the discourse of the curriculum' (p.185). However, I would assert that the contested positioning of LD within universities (Webster, 2022) can make staff employed in this area feel anything but safe and secure.

Secondly, Johnson and Bishopp-Martin (2023) recently discussed the conceptualisation of LD practice as third space professionals. They compared this theoretical perspective with a practice-based abstraction which they referred to as *disciplinary insider-outsider and community builder*, distinguishing insiders as academics directly involved with assessment. However, as an academic within an academic college who still retains a strong learning developer identity, I find this alternative theoretical conception somewhat problematic, as I am heavily involved in summative assessment.

In summary, the concept of the third space professional appears to be both useful and important for theorising the practices of those who at least partly identify as learning developers, irrespective of where they are positioned within their institutions. The purpose

of this article is to attempt to shed additional light on this relationship from my personal perspective.

My experience-based opinions

1. LD can be a precarious profession, partly because it is not fully understood by university executive leadership

At the institutional level, restructures in new universities can occur regularly, in both central services and academic faculties. However, third space academic staff positioned in central services are often more vulnerable because their roles may not be properly understood by those initiating or deciding upon these restructures.

In 2016, our centre was restructured into two halves, with my half joining the Educational Development Department. This was followed by the appointment of a new Dean of Students and Learning who had experience of educational development, but little of LD. Our new dean then initiated a more radical restructuring which included voluntary redundancies and role changes. We were encouraged to apply for new professional service contracts to replace our existing academic contracts, indicating that our new dean did not view us as academics.

However, our vice chancellor kindly provided three years of transition funding for staff who preferred (and had a strong case) to remain on academic contracts, so that they could move into academic departments. Although there were some difficulties and misunderstandings during this process, one of my Educational Development colleagues and I ended up successfully making this transition.

More recently, with several changes in our vice chancellor's office, new LD central staff are being appointed with stronger academic backgrounds, such as doctorates. Existing LD staff are also being encouraged to study for higher academic qualifications, indicating a change in executive leadership thinking about LD back towards an academic function.

2. The contested nature of LD is partly a consequence of the complex, unplanned career paths of its practitioners

Many of the changes in my career path, including transitioning in and out of the LD community of practice, were unplanned. I moved from a LD researcher role into a specialist LD practitioner role, then developed new areas of LD practice, then moved into an academic faculty where I retained part of my LD practice.

I transitioned to the LD community in my current institution in 2010, having previously been employed as a Senior Research Fellow at another institution. My initial role was to support students in developing basic mathematical 'skills', but I soon discovered that there was a greater need to support students in applied statistics. Therefore, I retrained as an applied statistician, and we opened a *Statistics Advisory Service* (Samuels and Gibson, 2013). After a few months, an opportunity arose for me to increase my hours as an academic writing tutor. I was later forced to transition out of our LD department due to a restructure, as mentioned above.

3. Learning developers who transition out of LD departments may partly retain their learning developer identities

In terms of my current role working in an academic college, I strongly retain the identity of a learning developer, but I am also generally recognised and respected as an equal college member by my peers. Although I do not have a qualification in the discipline area of my academic college, I have still been able to make an important contribution. I was therefore put in charge of undergraduate and master's dissertation modules where I had already been providing LD lectures. I also continued to provide developmental seminars and tutorial support in LD to students and staff across my new faculty.

4. Embedded learning developers can be much more effective than those based in LD departments

Learning developers positioned within academic faculties may have more opportunities to influence decisions and have greater impact on students' LD. It is difficult for learning developers in central departments to plan and initiate interventions which are taken seriously by the students who would most benefit from them. Official LD staff are usually dependent upon faculty staff to give them access to their students. This often involves

negotiating short, timetabled interventions or additional sessions which do not appear on students' official timetables.

As an exception to this, one of my colleagues collaborated with our LD department to initiate a very successful timetabled LD intervention with a small cohort of master's students. However, when we tried to replicate this intervention with a much larger master's cohort and gave our LD department ample time to plan this, they eventually decided that they did not have the capacity to support our students apart from a few untimetabled online sessions which appeared to be extracurricular to most students and was therefore not taken seriously.

In contrast, as an unofficial embedded learning developer, I am able to plan and implement embedded LD support directly into timetabled sessions, such as dissertation lectures on academic writing. In my faculty-based role, I have been able to influence many more students than when I worked for a LD department, although there is a limit to what I am able to do as an individual.

5. Unofficial learning developers working within academic faculties are better described as third space professionals

When I transitioned into a Business school, as I did not have a Business degree, I was made responsible for both undergraduate and master's dissertations. This aligned well with my previous work developing undergraduate dissertation lectures for the Business school. I was also seen as a neutral appointment to coordinate up to 90 supervisors from different Business school subject areas. This involved a heavy administrative load.

For example, in the last nine months, I have received and responded to over 6,500 emails related to master's dissertations alone. I often liaise with administrative staff and assist them with tasks which might better be described as administrative, such as maintaining accurate student enrolment records on core dissertation modules which run across different courses.

6. Unofficial learning developers working within academic faculties can progress quite far but need to negotiate limitations

When I moved into an academic faculty, I was surprised by the number of opportunities within my school to apply for greater responsibility. However, I was reluctant to apply to become a course director due to not having relevant academic qualifications. I ended up being accidentally appointed as an associate course director when registering interest in a LD role. This experience assisted me to become the course director of our Doctor of Business Administration programme.

As I did not have a directly relevant qualification, I have found it difficult to initiate and achieve acceptable academic publications, and generally waited to be asked as a second author. I also did not apply to lead doctoral supervisory teams and waited for second supervisor opportunities. However a publisher asked me to write a book on proposal writing for undergraduate and master's business students (Samuels, 2023). This enabled me to obtain a research allowance, and I have just written a second book on doctoral proposal writing (Samuels, 2024).

7. Unofficial learning developers working within academic faculties can struggle with their professional identity

Two important identity issues for me were my departmental membership and job title. When our Business school was restructured, I advocated for not being allocated to one of these departments because of my central role as a dissertation coordinator, which was kindly accepted by my head of school.

After my transition, I accidentally discovered that HR had given me a job title of a senior lecturer in subject areas in which I did not have any qualification. However, after a second restructuring into colleges and considerable effort from my new college head, I was officially given a more appropriate role title of *Senior Lecturer in Research Practice*.

8. The best insurance for learning developers against being dismissed in a restructuring is academic progression

I would strongly encourage other learning developers to develop themselves academically, such as by applying for a promotion or studying for a higher degree, as this can provide a safeguard in the event of unanticipated structural changes in their institutions.

In 2017, I was promoted from a teaching fellow to a senior lecturer based on my academic publications and my design and delivery of professional development courses. This greatly encouraged my colleagues that it was possible to be promoted academically whilst being employed in a LD role. I was later promoted to become a doctoral course director in a subject in which I do not have any qualifications mainly because I had written a pedagogical textbook.

Provided that you have the flexibility to work in other areas, your abilities and experience can be highly valued, especially by the students who could gain the most from your LD support.

Conclusions

Returning to my original questions, I draw the following conclusions:

Firstly, third space professionals is a more useful concept for explaining the professional identity of unofficial learning developers working within academic faculties, as LD can be overly viewed as staff controlled by a separate centre outside of academic faculties, even with embedded staff.

Secondly, LD cannot yet be considered as a fully-fledged academic discipline because there is no specific qualification or career path relating to its practice. It also needs to develop a stronger research community of practice so it can provide more convincing evidence to senior executives of the effectiveness of its interventions.

Thirdly, universities are still struggling to decide where best to position learning developers, how academic their roles should be, and how their roles should relate to those of faculty-based academics. However, in the current UK higher education climate of emphasising access, participation, and equality of opportunities, the need for LD is only set to increase rather than decrease.

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