



## **Working beyond the core – influencing up and out through staff development**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

As learning developers, our professional backgrounds, support for students across disciplinary boundaries, and our ‘third space’ (Whitchurch, 2013) positioning afforded us a unique perspective on approaches to learning and teaching. We had been in a prime position to share this expertise with learning developer peers as well as colleagues in the library, careers and academic departments, helping to inform inclusive curriculum design and delivery and enhance students’ learning experience.

This workshop explored how involvement in staff development could help us bridge disciplinary and professional boundaries and act as an opportunity to extend our impact on students by sharing learning development principles and practice.

In this session, participants had the opportunity to:

- reflect on their collective expertise and how this was relevant to other staff in their institutions.
- review examples of development activities we had used with staff in diverse roles and explore how these might work or be adapted in their contexts.
- discuss some of the potential challenges of being involved in staff development while maintaining a core focus on working with students.

This was a space for us to discuss activities based on our practice and consider their application within the working remits and structures within which we found ourselves

(Webster, 2024). We also explored our potential to push beyond these, break down silos, and promote inclusive learning environments.

**Keywords:** learning development; staff development; inclusive curriculum; disciplinary boundaries; student experience

## ***Community response***

The workshop commenced with a sense of curiosity in the room. Participants were eager to understand what it means to be a learning developer (LD) or an educational developer today. Many participants admitted that their understanding of learning development happens mainly with students. As the session unfolded, it became clear that LD has a much broader reach – it can also empower academic staff, shape curriculum design, and ultimately transform the learning experience for everyone.

One of the first discussions centred on where learning developers sit in the university structure. Working in the ‘third space’ – between student services and academic departments – they often act as connectors. One participant described it as ‘having one foot in two worlds’, which makes them ideally placed to encourage collaboration across disciplines. This idea resonated with the participants, who shared how LD could bridge gaps between academics, librarians, career advisors and other professional staff. The key takeaway was that LD helps create a more inclusive, joined-up approach to teaching and learning by working across boundaries.

The conversation then focused on academic literacies. Rather than treating skills like writing, critical thinking and research as additional considerations, the workshop challenged everyone to think about how these literacies could be woven directly into the curriculum. Participants shared stories of small but effective changes – like embedding reflective writing in first-year modules – that greatly impacted student engagement.

The group also grappled with the challenge of how to keep direct student support at the heart of LD while also enhancing staff development. Several participants admitted this balance is not easy, especially within rigid institutional structures. One attendee said: ‘every time we work with staff, we multiply the impact on students’. The consensus was

that breaking out of silos is hard work, but it is also the only way to embed inclusive learning environments that last.

The feedback at the end captured the spirit of the day. One participant, who had recently moved from learning development into educational development, said the session had ‘completely reshaped’ how they saw their role. Others spoke about how the hands-on activities gave them concrete tools to take back to their colleagues. More than anything, people appreciated that the workshop was both practical and inspirational – it gave them ideas they could use immediately while reminding them why their work matters.

By the close, the room felt energised, collaborative and forward-looking. What started as a conversation about roles and remits became a call to action: to see learning development not just as student support, but as a driving force for staff development, curriculum design and inclusive teaching. Participants left with renewed motivation to innovate, collaborate and keep student learning at the centre.

### ***Authors’ reflection***

Our motivation for facilitating staff development activities stemmed from a desire to both support colleagues in our immediate teams with their teaching and to expand the impact of our LD work in institutional teaching schemes. By formalising our practice and offering a theoretical underpinning for a non-LD audience within our institution, we were able to articulate the value and expertise of our day-to-day LD practice in a way which went beyond signposting.

We were curious to explore the extent to which our efforts to bridge the gap between LD and other teaching staff would resonate with colleagues in other institutional contexts. We noted the links to educational development within the conference keynote and were pleased to be able to align some of our key points to keynote themes such as supporting institutions in creating effective learning environments and inclusive teaching practices. The rich variety of backgrounds and expertise of attendees in the workshop meant the staff development activities we shared acted as a jumping-off point for productive wider discussions, for example around LD embedding strategies across institutions. Despite different institutional contexts, we noted some shared challenges, specifically time and

resource constraints. It was useful to have a frank discussion around these limitations but also heartening to hear from colleagues about their motivations.

It was particularly affirming to receive feedback that our session had empowered others and built confidence in seeing parallels and opportunities between LD and educational development. As well as reinforcing the crossover between these, the workshop also made us reflect on the influence of organisational structures in shaping our work and the perception of our roles. Engaging with the collaborative proceedings has allowed us to see the value of our work through others' eyes and given us more motivation to continue with this.

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