



## Advocating learning development

**Sheryl Mansfield**

University of Northampton, UK

**Emma Kimberley**

University of Northampton, UK

### ***Presentation abstract***

Learning Development (LD) is positioned in different locations dependent on the institution. LD at the University of Northampton (UON) is part of the Learning Teaching Enhancement team within Library, Learning, and Student Services. Embedding academic skills into programmes seems to be a common practice and has demonstrated impact on student confidence, belonging, and retention (Minogue et al., 2018).

Being within a Professional Services department, our team aligns with specific programmes within Faculties. In most cases, the LD tutor who liaises with the programme team has no expertise in the subject-specific aspects of the programme. We seem to thrive in some departments, with our colleagues enthusiastic about our endeavours. Yet, we struggle in others to establish meaningful collaboration despite continuous and persistent efforts.

This mini keynote outlined how UON advocates and negotiates our service and the positives and challenges of this work. The following questions were discussed:

- 1) Where does your institution position Learning Development?
- 2) What strategies are effective in advocating your provision to colleagues and students?
- 3) How do you overcome challenges you face?

**Keywords:** learning development; professional identity; embedding academic literacies; organisational structures.

## ***Community response***

In this mini-keynote session, colleagues were invited to reflect on the relational and negotiated nature of LD practice and the multiplicity of ways in which our professional values are endorsed and operationalised organisationally within and across institutions. Fluidity and mutability – whilst often challenging – also enable LD practitioners to shape their roles through strategic relationship-building and collaborative influence, and in sometimes subtle and subversive ways. In this way (and in many others), LD is a unique field; its priorities are clear, though not fixed, and its very purpose and function continues to evolve with the nature and our shared understanding of learning itself.

Given the wide (and acknowledged) disparity in how LD is positioned and understood from institution to institution, it is perhaps not surprising that its practical manifestation can similarly vary. However, what is apparent, defining, and distinctive, no matter how LD provision is institutionally articulated or expressed, is the central role of relationship building. Sonia Hood's chapter in *How to be a Learning Developer in higher education* (Hood, 2023) discusses the vital importance of influence and conversations to Learning Developers in building institutional visibility and credibility. Buckley (2024) has similarly and influentially highlighted that collaboration and knowledge exchange are central to the exercise of influence with colleagues.

Attendees at the session were heartened to see LD as a profession being established and sustained on such principles of relativity and agreement. These defining features of our community might well be made more prominent in our collaborative efforts to add capacity to and recognition of our impact and essential role in supporting lifelong learning.

### **Next steps and additional questions**

We were struck by the very different experiences that participants shared within the session around where LD is positioned in their institution, with some in the library, some faculty-based, and some falling under the remit of widening participation schemes. Especially for new LDers, it can be important to understand how LD is positioned differently in different institutions, and it was good to hear experiences of curiosity and

sharing within the session. Our reflections on next steps within this context is that it is important to keep sharing these operational elements of our practice within the community, allowing members to keep up to date with changing contexts and practices within LD nationally.

### ***Authors' reflection***

Participants generously shared conversations around a wide range of liaison strategies and each group summarised these on paper. We have grouped our reflections on their comments under three categories: being visible, evidencing impact, and prioritising relationships.

Participants felt that it was important to increase visibility within the institution on a number of levels. For visibility among staff, suggestions included: attending university-wide or faculty meetings and boards; attending staff networking events and inductions; being present at forums for influencing policy. This might also include using staff voices or testimonials to advertise LD to other staff.

Participants also discussed a range of strategies for being visible to students: using student reps and student union advisers; attending induction sessions; and collaborating with cognate services such as EAP, library, careers services, and specialist study skills tutors (SpLD). Collaboration was seen as one way to increase the visibility of LD to both staff and students.

Evidencing impact was the second consideration widely discussed in the participant activity. LDers make a case for the importance and impact of their service in a number of ways, from finding measurables and using data, to using professional qualifications such as FHES, CeP/CeLP, PG cert, and PhDs to demonstrate expertise in HE. One way of showing relevance was to align with university policies, but this discussion came with the caveat of making sure this does not draw us away from our values or lead to perceptions of LD as remedial.

As mentioned above, much of the discussion was around relational liaison strategies. Colleagues considered how to work on relationships, including thinking about the timing

and complexity of communications, the politics of chasing up, and alternative routes to providing sessions when embedding cannot be negotiated.

We enjoyed the lively discussions and shared conversations around these fundamental areas of LD practice.

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## ***Author details***

Emma Kimberley is a Learning Development Tutor at the University of Northampton. She started teaching in HE in 2005 and has been in LD since 2017. She holds Advance HE Fellowship and is a Fellow in Learning Development. Her research interests are in neurodivergent academic literacies.

Sheryl Mansfield is Head of Learning Development at the University of Northampton and Secretary of ALDinHE and has been a member of the steering group since 2020. The LD Team at UON was awarded Team of the Year by ALDinHE in 2024 and in 2025 received a Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) for their innovative and impactful work in enhancing student learning. Sheryl is an experienced teacher and holds an Advance HE Senior Fellow and Senior Fellow in Learning Development. Her background teaching Sport Science in further and higher education institutions has offered a plethora of experience actively engaging learners.

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