Leadership in learning development: who and how?

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Presentation abstract

Learning Development (LD) as a profession is predicated upon the values of collaboration and partnership, sharing practice and critical self-reflection. Working within this ethos, it can be difficult to recognise ourselves as leaders – particularly when the idea of leadership is often tied to line management, and promotion often results in movement out of learning development altogether. How, then, do we recognise leadership in learning development, much less embrace it for ourselves?

This presentation outlined findings, derived from interviews with 20 self-selecting members of the LD community, about conceptions and perceptions of leadership in LD. It examined what leadership looks like and who can be a leader by exploring learning developers' conceptions of professional identity and networking, and confidence in those areas. The aim was to show delegates that the role of a leader has much in common with the values of LD, making it open to anybody with a purpose, a goal, and values. In so doing I posited that this is connected to the theme of wellbeing, as, if we feel recognised and valued for our work, then we are likely to be happier. I hoped to demonstrate that all learning developers have the capacity to be recognised and valued for their leadership.

Community response

The audience comments in this section show that a major impact of the session was to create confidence amongst the learning developers who attended in their capacity to aspire to leadership. This confidence came partly from the richer understanding of what constitutes leadership in the LD environment which Carina Buckley's presentation opened up, looking beyond a narrow view of leadership as authority and distinguishing it from management. It also arose from the opportunity to take part in a discussion where LD leadership was a focus. That discussion is continued within this community response,

where Carina provides further reflections in response to attendees' comments. The overall impression throughout this dialogue is that we are taking part in the kind of facilitatory conversation that learning developers strive for in their encounters with students and that is an object lesson in how LD values and approaches can be seen as leadership in action. (Initials are used to identify participants' contributions below.)

Anon

The session provided useful insight into what leadership looks like in the LD profession. It was interesting to think about how this model of leadership differs from other, arguably, more conventional forms of leadership, particularly in its emphasis on facilitating collaboration and a sense of partnership between colleagues. This contrast has been described in terms of a distinction between 'leadership' and 'management'; with the latter being more associated with containment and control than with growth. By providing a valuable summary of how to lead in this profession, the research offers pointers for career planning for anyone hoping to move towards a leadership role. Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge about the profession of LD and the professionalisation process, which will help to further establish LD as a mainstay of UK higher education. It will be exciting to see additional findings emerge from further explorations of the data.

CB responds:

The idea of management as containment and leadership as growth certainly came out in the interview data. There were two senses of the term 'growth': one related to networks and connections, and the other to personal development – of self, and of others. A leader – in LD, if not elsewhere – is someone who seeks to grow collaborations and partnerships and also looks to help others grow similarly. This form of leadership can be confidently regarded as a defining feature of LD.

CP

The session provided valuable insights into how LD teams can collaborate in building their leadership skills. At the heart of these insights was the vision of leadership as a lateral trajectory that spreads (like a spider web) rather than an upwards trajectory that climbs (like a triangle). This 'spider web model' of leadership could be used by managers, leaders or colleagues to support those who are new to LD to understand that they have the agency to demonstrate leadership.

The spider web model raises interesting questions about what a leadership programme based on this approach would look like, and even, how far leadership can be taught. It seems quite possible that intrinsic factors like confidence and motivation would influence leadership practices. If so, can everyone aspire to being an effective leader, or are some people naturally more inclined to being exceptional leaders than others?

My own understanding of leadership has been greatly enhanced by being part of a community group which has been exploring the meaning of leadership in LD. A comparable approach by ALDinHE fostering dialogue and understanding across the wider LD community could involve the highlighting of examples of leadership within the community. This could include the nomination of people for their leadership practices and the showcasing of their work. These exemplars might demonstrate to other LD practitioners that one does not necessarily have to be in a position of power in order to be a leader.

CB responds:

These are such interesting ideas. I think opening people up to the idea of their own agency, and their capacity for leadership, is crucial in the development of a confident profession, and a leadership programme that would support this would make a major contribution. I have no doubt that confidence – to reach out and speak up – and motivation – to go beyond, perhaps, what is expected – are vital factors in the pursuit (whether directed or more unintentional) of leadership practices. So, it is possible that not everyone can be an effective leader because not everyone would want to be. I do know for sure how much I have benefitted from the conversations and experiences shared by the members of ALDinHE's relatively new [Leadership Community of Practice](#) and am definitely keen for them to continue. I am always keen to welcome new voices too, so anyone interested in joining us is welcome to contact me for more information - no leadership or management experience required or expected. Alongside these conversations, I would be very interested in taking forward the idea of a more formal showcasing of leadership in the community. This could inspire others to see what is possible and what is achievable.

JB

Figure 1. JB - visual summary and reflection.
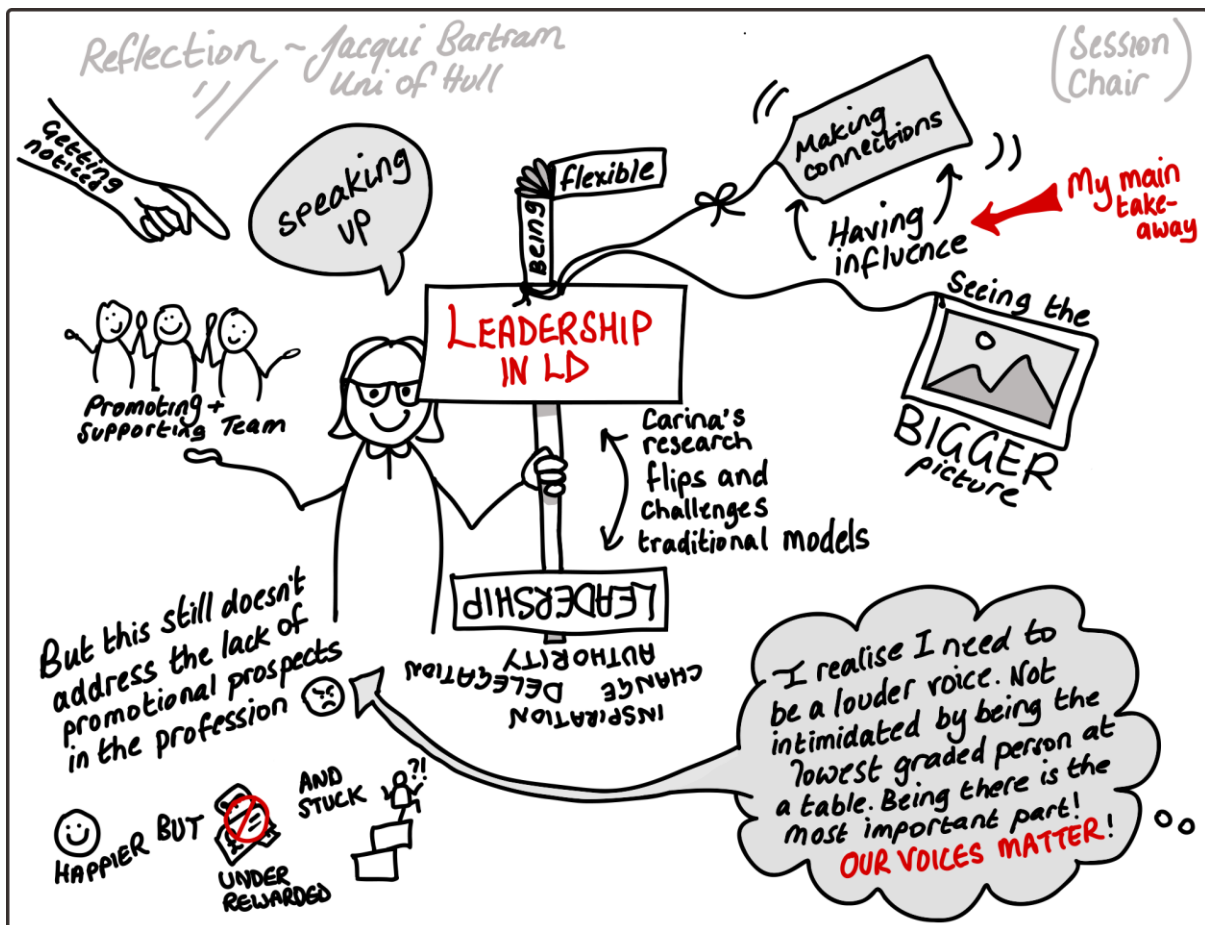
CB responds:

Quite apart from the honour of getting the Bartram treatment this year, what I love about this visual is that the person (yes, me, but I take it as representing all learning developers) is at the centre of their professional activity. I see the LD leader as being in the middle of a network of connections, actions and outputs, through which her voice can be carried further and more effectively. I also appreciate that it is not an easy position to take, particularly when the most obvious promotion routes are those out of the field. However, I believe that our voices do matter, and the more loudly they are heard, and the more confident we are in what we have to say, the more that situation is likely to change. As they say: watch this space!

SH

Leadership has always been of interest to me. This session (and associated work) has made me consider key questions around leadership: for example, what is a leader and how do we demonstrate leadership? These questions have long been debated, in

conjunction with questions about the differences between leadership and management. As someone who feels I am both a leader and a manager, I often find management tasks take priority but fail to move us forwards. Leadership, in my view, is more forward looking: having a vision, acting as a role model and advocating for the service. In this way anyone within a team can show leadership but the vision needs to be clear and shared for it to be effective. I agree with the advice that we need to do more to ensure people know what we are doing, make key connections and get noticed. Some of these behaviours are perhaps challenging (self-promotion, for example, sits uneasily with many of us) but as a profession we do need to do more of this and see this form of 'promotion' as key to our professional development and the profession itself. Central to this is the 'evidence' of impact; a difficult challenge we have often grappled with. The session provided lots of food for thought. Leadership is a key area for our profession going forwards, and I look forward to hearing more, and being involved, if possible.

CB responds:

The idea of putting ourselves forward and talking about our work is one that makes many people feel uncomfortable, almost like we are showing off, or suggesting we know best in a way that sits at odds with our values. From conversations at previous conferences I know many learning developers are uncomfortable with being called 'experts', whilst acknowledging they do indeed have expertise. Yet if no one knows about that expertise, we will never be called upon to share it – we have to take responsibility ourselves. So perhaps reframing it, not as self-promotion but as making connections, is the best way forward. It is about meeting new people, and sharing ideas and experiences. In that way, naturally and organically (even if somewhat strategically), we can get to know colleagues and they can get to know us and, more importantly, what we know and what we can offer.

SR

I really appreciated how this session laid out the tensions between more established views of leadership (and what 'leaders' are typically believed to spend their time doing) and the character and ethos of LD, which tends towards collaboration and a certain suspicion of fixed hierarchies. The session provided some fascinating, and frequently very resonant, insights into how learning developers themselves conceptualise and practise leadership within their respective roles and institutional contexts.

Particularly interesting was the notion which came out in both the discussion and the presentation of carrying the ethos and agenda of LD into more formal senior roles which do not necessarily have a predominantly LD remit. It would be fascinating to hear more about this phenomenon, which I suspect – given the professional and promotional structure of higher education – is quite common. Relatedly, and given the implicit (and sometimes explicit) critique of dominant models of leadership that often runs through discussions of leadership within the LD community, it would be interesting to explore relationships between the outcomes of this project and the field of critical leadership studies. Although I know little about critical leadership or management studies, a Google search confirms that these are both emerging fields gaining more adherents and an enhanced profile.

CB responds:

Critical leadership studies would be a fascinating comparison and certainly one I would be keen to pursue. I found it helpful to read the overview to critical leadership in the SAGE Handbook of Leadership (Bryman et al., 2011), which outlines its driving principle of challenging the norms and dynamics of 'traditional' leadership roles, and even how leadership can be conceived, with the reminder that all such norms and dynamics are socially constructed. It might also be a useful tool for helping leaders in LD to speak the 'language' of those more formal, senior roles, and thus help us carry forward our practices more effectively.

HB

This session had a real impact upon my own confidence as a learning developer. Recognising the possibility (and importance) of being a leader in small areas of practice (which makes success more achievable), rather than considering role progression as the only way to become a leader, was invaluable. A lightbulb moment came when I realised the distinction between leadership and management within the LD role; these were elements I had previously conflated in my mind.

The session provided powerful reminders of the value of regular, achievable ways to demonstrate leadership (such as speaking up, joining in, making connections, achieving post-nominals). The session inspired me to feel much more confident and enthusiastic about actively seeking to share innovative projects and good practice I am involved in. And I will definitely be seeking to achieve more post-nominals!

I think imposter syndrome plays a major role in learning developers feeling that they are not or cannot be leaders. The confidence I gained from the session has changed my perception of being a leader from something I would rather avoid, to something I would be proud to be recognised for. Perceptions of leadership in LD is an important area of research and I very much look forward to reading more of Carina's findings.

CB responds

Thank you so much for this huge boost to my own confidence! I am so glad you left the session feeling this way. For me, that says so much more about success in research than any number of publications (although they are of course very nice). In the [Leadership Community of Practice](#) we did touch on imposter syndrome, and wondered whether or not it was simply the discomfort that comes with learning and the unfamiliarity of a new role. I would be really happy if this research can start opening up possibilities for people in their own minds. That would be a fantastic achievement.

Author's reflections

This was my first in-person presentation for three years, and it made me realise how much I have missed the buzz that comes from sharing ideas with others, especially ideas that I have come to care so much about, as well as being able to pick up and act on the nuanced responses that are often obscured behind a screen. Making connections with people and building on those connections is not just what my research is about – it is how I prefer to operate as well, which might be another reason I have enjoyed this so much.

I also got to experience the amazing flash of insight that comes when you begin a sentence without quite knowing how it will end – always an exciting moment! Suddenly, a line formed itself in my mind and I knew it not only had to be the last line I spoke of my presentation, but it also captured perfectly how I envisaged leadership in learning development. The very act of talking created meaning for me, and, as soon as I sat down, I drew two small shapes: a triangle, to represent traditional views of leadership, and a pentagonal spider's web with a dot inside, which better encapsulates how I see leadership in LD: a network of relations between equals. The first is probably best exemplified in Ulrich et al (2008), which equates leadership with strategic vision, executing change,

building an effective team, developing a career and, contributed by Koestenbaum (2002), 'greatness'. This view is oriented towards climbing up a hierarchy and pulling others up with you, and frankly sounds like a lot of lonely work. I discovered Yukl's (2013) ideas around distributed and participative leadership in conversation with one of this workshop's attendees, when she was carrying out research for her PhD, and it opened my eyes to the possibilities of what leadership could be. Suddenly there was a different model for thinking about what I did and how I did it, and those ideas have evolved since then into what I presented at this conference.

As much as I enjoyed the act of presenting, therefore, it was one small moment in a whole process of discovery that has not yet ended. I have more data to explore, more of other people's experiences and perspectives to make sense of, and more threads to follow. I cannot help but feel that this is almost a metaphor of leadership itself – always more places to go, and always more to create, develop, integrate and transform. The questions I was asked during the session showed that this feeling is not unique to me. People are inherently interested in other people, and those questions were all essentially about the kind of person that could be a leader, and their connections and relations with others. There is still so much to do and I have no concerns about drawing a line under any of it; as far as I am concerned, this is a conversation that could run and run and run.

Next steps and additional questions

This presentation gave me the opportunity to present my initial findings from my research. I still have a little more thematic analysis to undertake; I do not anticipate that changing my findings radically but then again, I do not want to make any assumptions about that. My next step will then be to write this up for publication, once I have decided where to publish. I think as this is so obviously talking to learning developers I will submit to *JLDHE*, but I am conscious also of the need to expand the conversation beyond the immediate community. It will be a good challenge to develop these ideas in a way that will be of use and interest to those outside of LD. Perhaps this is where critical leadership theory could come in.

I would also like to collate some stories of leadership, to illustrate all the possible ways in which it can be enacted within LD. What does leadership really look like in this kind of role? Are you doing it already, without realising? I think this could be a valuable resource

and perhaps there is a space for it on the ALDinHE website. The first CoP meeting of the new year is booked in too, so I am looking forward to more conversations around what leadership means.

Acknowledgements

References

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Author details

Carina Buckley is currently Instructional Design Manager at Solent University, responsible for the ongoing development of the VLE as a student-centred, active and inclusive learning space. Her research interests broadly connect to collaboration and community, and have evolved recently to explore ideas around leadership and professional identity, particularly

within Learning Development. She is an advocate for the power of writing and collaboration, and co-hosts The Learning Development Project podcast with Alicja Syska. She serves as the Treasurer for ALDinHE and also sits on the steering group for the International Consortium of Academic Language and Learning Developers (ICALLD). Following a PhD in Archaeology in 2006, she has since added Advance HE Principal Fellow and Certified Leading Practitioner in Learning Development to her post-nominals.