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To embed, not to embed, how to embed

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Presentation abstract

The embeddedness of learning development (LD) within the delivery of academic courses is emerging in my doctoral research as a key mediator of how the value of LD work is perceived by its stakeholders. Embedding might be best thought of as 'epistemological alignment' between learning developers and academic disciplines: that is, working with the lecturers longitudinally to co-design and co-deliver. Maldoni and Lear (2016) describe this model as 'embedded, integrated and co-taught'. Learning developers may be embedded in other ways (e.g., physical location, operational or line management) but this does not necessarily equate to embedded provision; it could still operate in practice as a 'bolt-on' rather than an integrated element of students' learning. In my research, embeddedness is discussed highly positively by learning developers across the UK, as well as other stakeholders, yet is grossly undersold in the terms through which universities publicly frame their LD provision on their websites. This mini-keynote, and the discussions that followed, explored practitioners' experiences of embedding work at their higher education institutions to work towards a richer understanding of good practice.

The three discussion prompts were:

1. To what extent is LD work embedded at your workplace?
2. What benefits and challenges (including surprising ones) have you encountered around embedding?
3. Based on your experiences, what good practice advice would you give about embedding LD work?

Community response

While the subject of embedding learning development has been widely debated, Ian Johnson's session provided a welcome opportunity for attendees to discuss their own understanding, experiences and challenges with learning developers from other universities.

1)   Sharing terminology, experience and practice

First of all, I could have discussed this topic for hours! I am the lead on embedded teaching in my team and it is an area we are currently developing. Hearing the different stages colleagues and institutions are at with this was fascinating and comforting – to know we are all on this journey together. That Ian provided definitions of relevant terms such as 'embedded' and 'integrated' was really useful, enabling me to reflect on how much of our 'embedded' offer is in truth embedded or whether we are using the label to think more broadly.

Some attendees reflected upon why it might be that universities tend not to publicly promote that learning development is embedded in their courses. One argued that the lack of public promotion of embedded learning development did not necessarily indicate that universities do not see it as integral to LD, but might rather be because 'embedding is intended to make LD an integral and seamless – and therefore unpublicised – element of a student's academic experience'. Another observed:

It was really helpful to hear how different practitioners were approaching embedding learning development, and to learn more about various models for this. One of the reasons embedding may not be prominently displayed on websites and promotional materials is because of concerns about over-promising provision; our team, for instance, can't deliver embedded learning development content to every department, as our team simply isn't big enough. We are instead prioritising specific departments, targeting students who repeatedly visit the Academic Skills Hub and need more specialist intervention.

Examples of challenges experienced by attendees – posing questions that the LD community can respond to with the generosity regularly evident on the LDHEN jiscmail list

– highlighted the complexity of implementing effective embedded LD approaches within widely differing learning environments:

> In Libraries & Collections at King's College London we have worked with a number of ways of embedding learning development into student modules. For example, we include direct and targeted access to e-learning at a relevant point in the module's online teaching materials. Another approach we have taken more recently is to embed a Library-run forum into a taught module, to act as a support for students at a specific point in their learning. The students are instructed that the forum will be running during a set time period during which librarian-instructors will be available to respond to questions. The librarians and module tutor all saw this as a good thing, of clear benefit to the students, and a valuable element of the learning development for that module. The students thought otherwise. We have tried this twice and each time, despite cajoling from the tutor, we did not receive a single query. Where are we going wrong?
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> - Is it an activity that isn't wanted or needed?
> - Is it coming at the wrong time in the module?
> - Is it the wrong kind of support?
> - Is it too public?
> - Have we failed to communicate its benefits?
> - Are we mistaken about its benefits?
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> These and other questions are something we must consider before embarking on further embedded learning of this kind. Perhaps the issue is that this is an approach one could call 'embedded-lite', more 'bolt-on' than 'built-in' as mentioned above. If the librarians had a more substantial presence in the module a forum might work as a supplement to a more developed relationship between students, tutors and librarian-instructors.

2)   Recommendations for further discussion

The session highlighted a demand for more community discussions and exchanges on the topic of embedding learning development:

A really useful session addressing what I see as something of vital importance to learning development: how to embed effectively? I found it useful to hear how others address it. The discussion is something that needs to be an ongoing process. I would have welcomed the session being a full paper or a workshop as I think there was certainly enough content.

I would have liked more time in this session as well; it seemed as though relationship-building was a significant factor for many participants, and I would have liked to hear more about how others have overcome this barrier, as it is something we struggle with too.

In his reflections on the session, Ian Johnson goes on to identify how such productive discussions might be facilitated through the ALDinHE network.

Author's reflection

Giving this session as a mini-keynote proved very worthwhile. It was well attended on all three iterations, indicating there is extensive interest in embedding in the LD profession. This is despite the fact that it seems to be an almost interminable debate on which our progress is quite slow. Similar conversations may well have been happening 15 years ago.

While many of the attendees to my sessions were relatively new learning developers, who appeared to value the opportunity to discuss and discover more about embedding, it also attracted delegates who are strategically responsible for embedding in their institutions. These mainly came from the LD side, but in some cases were academic colleagues who said they went away from the sessions with fresh ideas about how a properly embedded learning developer could help them.

This mix of participants led to rich collaborative discussions within the groups. They seemed to draw out that the more a learning developer is truly embedded (in the sense in which Maldoni and Lear (2016) define it), the more effective the work is. Many of the delegates felt they were embedded on others' terms and in an ad-hoc way, leading sometimes to a feeling of being built-in in name, bolt-on in nature. This resonated with me, as someone who has experienced this situation and gradually developed the confidence to

say, 'no, not like that, but yes, if it's like this ….'. Indeed, an interesting debate point that emerged was whether the interim stage of having to embed on others' terms is a necessary step to something better afterwards, or whether bad embedding is worse than no embedding. What came through clearly was that meaningful embedding requires departmental and/or institutional commitment, time, resource and willpower, and it can be hard to achieve this combination.

In the discussions, embedding also meant different things to different people. To some, it was about being physically located and managed within an academic department. For others, none of that applied, yet they achieved a form of embedding by thinking and working with their disciplines, even without being located there. The second form seemed to appeal to several of the delegates, perhaps because it allowed them to maintain roles which were clearly distinct from disciplinary 'teaching', whilst still achieving a sense of relevance to staff and students within disciplinary departments.

What also emerged is that the picture across the UK is mixed. Since the survey documented by Murray and Glass (2011), it seems there is a move towards LD being embedded, yet at different rates in different places. Wherever it happens, after trialling and reflecting on the more embedded approach, it is largely seen as a positive step by all parties. Yet it does not seem to be something that universities shout about or regard as integral to the work of a learning developer. The extent to which it occurs is still very much dependent on the local relationships between the people involved.

Next steps

In line with several attendees' comments, I too would have liked the mini-keynotes to be longer, or to have delivered the session as a longer workshop, as fruitful discussions had to be cut off early. I will think about developing the session into a longer ALDinHE [LD@3](#) webinar to meet that demand and further foster community discussions on these questions and I welcome collaborations, through that or other forums, with others who have a keen interest.

I plan to publish more work on embedding LD within the next couple of years, including the results of a survey conducted as part of my doctoral research. Giving this mini-keynote

was invaluable in crystallising some of my thinking about how I want to write about the topic within the context of my PhD thesis, currently in its late stages of development. I hope to continue the work of harnessing the collective hive-mind of ALDinHE around these ideas, so that this mini-keynote hopefully represents the beginnings of an open and continuing dialogue between us.

Acknowledgments

References

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Author details

Ian Johnson is a learning developer of seven years in Education and Sociology at University of Portsmouth. He established ALDinHE's research community of practice in Spring 2020 and has coordinated and grown it since. Ian's research interests include academic literacies, collaborative writing, feedback on assessments, and embedding of LD work. His doctoral thesis (in progress) spotlights how various stakeholders articulate the value of LD work. From the findings, Ian seeks to suggest how the LD profession can

frame itself coherently and resonantly, and thus advocate for an understanding of the work which increases its credibility and sustainability within academia.