Learning developers as their own cultural critics?

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Presentation abstract

The values that guide the work of ALDinHE and those associated with us as an organisation include 'making HE inclusive through emancipatory practice, partnership working and collaboration' and 'critical self-reflection, on-going learning and a commitment to professional development' (ALDinHE, 2022). However, considering this from a relational, or systems thinking perspective, how achievable are these values? Can we truly be inclusive to all? Exploring this notion in my doctoral research, using Bourdieu's relational framework (Bourdieu, 1992; 1993; 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) I was confronted with some uncomfortable truths. Education is reproductive in the sense that it selects those with the necessary capital to succeed and nurtures them to develop further. The diversity of students' prior experience, background and capital to succeed is clear, and Learning Developers know how difficult higher education can be to navigate, but how often do we turn the gaze to ourselves and reflexively consider how our work reproduces the cultural system?

Conference attendees, working in small groups, discussed a brief precis of my Doctoral research, a copy of ALDinHE values and a summary of Bourdieu's notion of autonomy (Bourdieu, 1992). The following questions were posed to prompt discussion:

1. How autonomous are we as practitioners and are we able to change the education system that reproduces the inequality of society?
2. Is being positioned by students as part of their curriculum through embedded practice advantageous all of the time?
3. Do we focus on the knowledge and skills students bring, or are we forced to help them adapt to the game?

Community response

Each of these mini keynotes was very discursive and collaborative, as one participant noted 'this session raised a lot of questions for me personally about my own practice'. One issue that emerged from discussion was the observation that 'many of us are well aware that we are not reaching the students we would like to be reaching, and/or that we could do things differently to improve experiences for students.' Similarly, 'sometimes it is hard, we know the assignment is not great, but we are still trying to support the student to write it'. The discussion seemed to tap into the very practical challenges Learning Developers face in enacting values-based education in their work with students (Lovat & Toomey, 2007; Halstead and Taylor, 2000), or 'how we work as Learning Development practitioners in environments that often are not aligned to our values'. This exploration of the tension between values and practices connects with recent scholarship into education for social justice, something Cochran-Smith (2009) presents as relational and participative 'a form of action rather than a state to be achieved' (Griffiths, 2009, cited in Boylan and Woolsey, 2015). This suggests coining a new term that captures the dynamic nature of working towards equity, Learning Development for Social Justice, which actively describes the ongoing process of aligning our goals and vision and our practices with students.

As well as acknowledging the tension within Learning Development, navigating a space with conflicting demands, there was encouragement to examine the role and function of Learning Development more strategically. Colleagues spoke about the constraints of 'not having support from higher ups to implement changes'. There seemed to be an awareness of a need to move Learning Development 'away from a failure-based model to a model that emphasises growth and development' and consider our contribution and impact of Learning Development within current university structures.

One way forward to navigate this poorly defined central space was to simply 'ask for forgiveness not permission' and to act according to your values in spite of lack of structural support. This prompted further questions from participants and resolutions to attempt to act and contribute more strategically:

> How did you get invited to that working group though, we are just seen as skills and not considered in anything more strategic?

> I am going to try knocking on the door of some of the people who oversee these areas [of strategic discussions] and contribute.

These short sessions prompted participants to reflect on our role and purpose as Learning Developers and there was clearly greater appetite for further discussion as to how to act in ways that are both aligned to our values and contribute to the purpose of the university while addressing needs of the student body.

Author's reflection

A repeating theme throughout all three of these mini-keynotes was the idea that those in more senior roles within their Universities do not provide the space to hear the views of Learning Developers. The participants felt they were simply not invited into the conversation because their role was seen differently. Their view on key agendas such as Access and Participation Plans, the Teaching Excellence Framework, or ongoing Education strategies was not often sought. Few participants were directly involved in influencing these, and none were responsible for leading them. However, there was a shared understanding between participants that Learning Developers could help shape these agendas and strategies, if only their expertise, opinion and knowledge was included in committees, discussion groups, task and finish groups and other forums. They want to contribute. They feel they should contribute. Interestingly, I think if we hold the mirror up to ourselves as a profession, the question changes and becomes, why do senior managers not seek our insights, or perhaps even why are we not considered to bring knowledge and expertise that is valuable to this discussion? How can we develop the language around our insight to 'work' for senior agendas? I tried to articulate Bourdieu's notion of the game at play (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and how as a community as a whole there is further work that needs to be done to bring the worlds of Learning Developers and Senior Education Leaders together. The ALDinHE community needs to further understand the demands on senior managers, and ask themselves 'what can Learning Developers do to address these demands'? However, this requires Learning Developers to work in a different way. Rather than conversations around being frustrated and their insights not being listened to, these need to shift to articulating and demonstrating their value and practical and pedagogical knowledge they can bring to the table.

Conversations also turned to Learning Developers' direct work alongside students, supporting them to develop and understand the hidden curriculum. Most of the participants agreed and recognised their roles, at times, did reinforce the doxa of students needing to develop the skills for higher education as a separate activity to engage with their programme of study or curricula. In Bourdieu's words, we are helping students to understand and adapt to the game. We help them to understand the expectations of an assignment, what academic writing looks like, and how to demonstrate critical thinking. However, our power to change the game, change the assessment type, or include more structured learning around the skills needed to succeed was often beyond our control. Changing 'the game' seemed a much harder challenge. This sits at odds with the values of ALDinHE and if we are to truly try to make the higher education system change I would encourage the community to collectively think about how we solve this 'problem'. Much more discussion and sharing is needed in order to articulate and demonstrate the value that our insights bring to curriculum design, for instance. As a community, I think we need to be clearer on what capital we have that allows us to contribute to strategic change, not just at our own institutions, but to the sector through policy changes.

Next steps

This session, alongside my more recent change in role within my University made me reflect on my own career and experience and how that seemed quite different to others around the table. It is something I have spoken about with a small number of other Heads of Departments and we seem to have found a way to raise the profile of Learning Development within our institutions. We have found a way to have a seat at the table in more senior meetings, where our advice, insight and expertise is considered valuable and helpful in shaping the future direction. The work now needs to turn to sharing how we achieved that in order to support others in the community. We need to demonstrate this by sharing our own journeys of influence.

Acknowledgements

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