

Reasons to be cheerful?

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This second edition of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education arrives at a time of paradox. As we begin the second decade of the 21st century, there is uncertainty and pessimism in the world of higher education as in society more widely. In the UK we face budget cuts and the non-continuation of project funding which has underpinned many innovative activities in learning development (LD) over the last decade. Uncertainties over fees and students' ability to afford higher education, capped by worries about unemployment and the real 'value' of a degree, all make for discomfort and feelings of insecurity for staff and students alike.

There are however many reasons for optimism and good cheer. More students than ever continue to choose higher education and the importance of university life, as part of the wider community and society's life, continues to grow. I am reminded of Ron Barnett's argument when speaking at the LDHEN conference in Bournemouth back in 2007, that, although both ontology (factors related to 'being') and epistemology (how we construct knowledge) are vital, ontology trumps epistemology. Learning arises from communication and from interaction – and it is the quality of the relationships associated with these that will determine levels of success in learning.

This insight points to the heart of what we mean by learning development. It is reflected in the contributions to this journal that are indicative of the evolution of our field of practice, and the emergence within it of some of the characteristics of a discipline. The theme of the 2010 LDHEN conference – that of 'partnerships' in learning – is addressed by Marcia Baxter Magolda using the metaphor of a tandem bicycle. Marcia's work has always stressed the importance of learning partnerships and of the key role of educators in taking the 'rear' seat rather than attempting to steer on behalf of the learner. We must strive to encourage students' voices to be heard, and to be 'good company' for them on their journeys in order that they progress towards increasingly reflective ways of constructing knowledge.

A radical notion of partnership is developed by Tom Burns and his fellow authors. For them, learning development, with its stress on active learning and of setting out from the position of the participant, is an empowering and emancipatory endeavour which complements Marcia's concept of self-authorship as a sophisticated way of knowing, which is not dependent on merely seeking or following the views of others. They remind us that our work is not only about socialising students into accepted practices in disciplinary communities. Using models of active notemaking they illustrate how both questioning and ownership of knowledge can be promoted as students' voices are given legitimacy and are seen to make real and significant contributions to academic practice.

Glynis Cousin urges educational and learning developers to make use of 'Threshold Concepts' as a research methodology for planning our interventions in work with subject specialists. This calls for academics to use their own subject expertise as the basis for initiating communication with students about learning, as they negotiate journeys through liminal territory. This makes it possible to avoid a false binary opposition between approaches which are teacher or learner centred, and focuses instead upon engagement with key and transformative ideas in specific academic practice. Academics are likely to be more highly motivated to begin examining the challenges for learning for their students when the approach arises from their knowledge, rather than being dependent upon the kinds of pedagogic knowledge familiar to those in educational development. These ideas are widely applicable and directly address the continuing preoccupation of learning developers of how to 'embed' within the curriculum (and the everyday practices of university courses) activities designed to promote learning. Several papers in this edition of JLDHE seek to explore further our understanding of this area.

Robert Blake and Jacqueline Pates, for example, emphasise the varying ways that knowledge is constructed in writing in different subject areas. They argue that the teaching of writing cannot be separated from practice, and that partnerships between academics and developers are needed, as Glynis also suggests, drawing upon academics' own writing expertise to elicit relevant learning activities for their students. Their use of genre analysis as a way to help academics and students explore how writing works by means of various 'moves', has echoes of a Threshold Concepts approach. Michelle Reid also highlights the importance of genre in her description of research with academics at the University of Reading, which was designed to inform guidance for students on report writing. Her findings illustrate complex variations relating to the specific purposes and

expectations of reports in different disciplines, leading to the conclusion that generic advice around the surface features of these texts may not always be helpful.

Frances Gibson and Janette Myers also argue for an integrated model for learning development. However, recognising that in reality we have a long way to go, their paper describes how a 'fragmented route', which is the norm given patchy funding and varying levels of strategic support for LD, can nonetheless feed progress towards institution-wide initiatives. Small projects, with striking results for learning can act as case studies and enhance the reputation of LD as well as justification for an embedding approach. Steve Briggs and Norma Pritchett add weight to this argument. Their study of the difficulties reported by students in their learning, and of perceptions of these by academic staff, serve to illustrate the importance of building the case for embedding through internal consultation and communication between staff groups, in order to take account of multiple perspectives. However, embedding does suggest a strategic vision: an institution-wide approach to the use of e-portfolio at the University of Wolverhampton, described by Megan Lawton and Emma Purnell, illustrates that much progress can be made when LD initiatives are linked to institutional strategies which are strongly promoted and supported.

In their case study describing an online resource for bibliographical referencing, Roisin Gwyer and her colleagues demonstrate an important element of LD work – that of demystification and of bringing clarity to the often muddy waters of academic convention. Judy Cohen develops this theme in relation to the formative and developmental uses of the software package 'Turnitin'. Rather than seeing it as punitive, or as a weapon against plagiarism, this resource can then be a powerful tool for learning about academic integrity and the development of scholarly writing.

The internet, and increasingly mobile and accessible forms of communication, make it possible for learning developers to work with academics and students to use resources such as this, and to share information and experiences as never before. The development of social and interactive 'Web 2.0' technologies is described by Amanda Tinker, Gillian Byrne and Christine Cattermole in a case study looking at three particular social software tools, and offering some insightful comments about their potential for promoting collaborative and creative learning communities. Importantly, however, as Susan Wilkinson points out, the massive rise in the amount of information available has implications for how we use and structure our use of time. This, in turn, can influence our

approaches to learning. In her paper, Susan draws upon the notion of 'satisficing' in human behaviour and makes connections with reading strategies such as skimming in modelling information search behaviour. She points to factors which can militate against deep learning and concludes that we could learn from the characteristics of humans as foraging 'informavores', and use insights into how we interact with information online to design better learning materials and resources for students.

As a mechanism to enhance the sharing of good LD practice among subject teachers, Rebecca Bell and colleagues at Nottingham Trent University offer a 'community of practice' model, in the form of an Academic Writing Readers Group. Participants were motivated by their concerns about student writing – which made them receptive to ideas from an academic literacies perspective and gave them inspiration to participate in the development of reusable learning resources. This case study is another good example of how we can encourage academics to build upon their subject-focused expertise to feed into their teaching skills.

Peter Samuels and Chetna Patel also draw upon a 'community of practice' model. Their study considers the importance of networking across institutions when building the case for mathematics support. Mirroring the evolution of LD more broadly, Peter and Chetna report that staff providing extracurricular mathematics and statistics teaching and learning services have benefited greatly from initiatives which put them in contact with others. They describe the recent history of the community of practice, the role of the subject network, and the work of a Centre for Excellence in this area in developing and sharing approaches and resources. Their paper gives evidence of scholarship in Mathematics Support in UK HE and identifies how a LD approach has been adopted in the use of teaching logs for reflection on learning and teaching processes.

Richard Bailey conducted a small study to examine the beliefs and attitudes of academic staff towards support for learning. He found a great deal of enthusiasm for the notion of embedding but points out that perceptions such as that of an overloaded curriculum, and a lack of confidence on the part of some academics to engage with learning development activities, remain important barriers to be surmounted. The University of Huddersfield has responded to precisely these kinds of issues by developing a 'devolved model' for the provision of academic skills. Since 2002, one academic skills tutor has been located in each of the University's schools. In their paper about this experience, Pat Hill, Amanda

Tinker and Stephen Catterall describe considerable success in the embedding of skills for learning in the curriculum and in moving away from a 'deficit' model. Their example is one which could usefully be shared more widely, illustrating as it does the evolution of a significant role for learning developers within academic and course structures rather than being in separate units and relatively unconnected to much of university life.

If the content of this journal can be seen as good evidence of the current state of learning development in the UK, it would suggest that this commitment to embedding, and our search for successful models of how to do that, remains a key area of focus. The journal certainly shows evidence of the enthusiasm for scholarship in the field. As with issue one, it has been produced as a team project, with Andy Hagyard, joint editor, undertaking a very large amount of the work; along with our many diligent reviewers; and Natalie Bates, from Bournemouth University, playing a significant proofreading and editing role.

It is the depth of commitment to understanding learning and how it is experienced which strikes one most forcefully in these papers and case studies – and this bodes well for the ongoing drive to maintain universities as genuine learning organisations. It also confirms that a learning development approach is about so much more than a bolt-on safety net for learners experiencing difficulties; rather it is work driven by the idea of universities as places open to all with the ability to benefit – places that provide opportunities for students to explore, create and contribute to their disciplinary communities, and to society, to their fullest.

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