

Building relationships in the ‘cyber abyss’: learning from engagement failures

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Keywords: collaboration; pedagogy of care; belonging; Covid-19.

The challenge

Establishing constructive and collaborative relationships with subject teaching staff and students is a key element of learning development (LD) practice, but became hugely challenging when starting in a newly-created LD post on the cusp of the first UK lockdown.

Working primarily with one-year, part-time, Access to HE students, in a department that had not previously had internal LD input, awareness-raising and relationship-building were initially my key priorities. However, the shift online meant navigating this tricky professional ‘third space’ (Whitchurch, 2008; Johnson, 2018) of LD from the static isolation of my makeshift home-office. This stifled my capacity for enthusiastic networking, compounded by subject-teaching staff’s saturation with the challenges of the online pivot that left them little room to contemplate other innovations.

My challenge, therefore, was not so much adapting to online delivery as attempting to establish LD provision in a context focused on technical solutions, tutor online training, and assessment review. Achieving the all-important collaboration and buy-in from subject teaching staff (Thies, 2012; McWilliams and Allan, 2014) was challenging in this crisis situation. How, then, could I get support to students? How could I communicate and build relationships with students when forging the staff relationships that would enable me to be present in their classes was not a departmental priority?

The response

Despite believing that integrating and embedding LD into subject teaching is most effective for students (Harris and Ashton, 2011; Macwilliams and Allan, 2014), these circumstances pushed me to attempt constructing relationships with students outside the classroom. Influenced by ideas of playfulness in learning (Tanis, 2012; Whitton, 2018) I decided I would light-heartedly promote myself to students online, thereby becoming familiar and opening opportunities to engage informally and non-hierarchically with them. This starting-point would, I hoped, address student anxiety over entering the 'cyber abyss' of online learning (St Clair, 2015), which remains an issue even as many more interactions occur online (Lischer, Safi and Dickson, 2021). It would also encourage the sense of belonging required for student success (Strayhorn, 2012). From this foundation, I would then run a series of synchronous academic literacy workshops that students would attend on the basis of an established relationship of trust (Morris, 2018).

To this end, I set up a Padlet board where I introduced myself with 'fun facts' that changed weekly, and invited students to introduce themselves too. I added a photograph that I judged would be disarming and increase the sense that I was an approachable human being (Bali, 2020). We are, after all, called upon as educators and mediators to show up as fully human ourselves, to engage not only in a pedagogy of care for our students (Bali, 2020) but one of vulnerability (Mershon, 2018) whereby we risk revealing ourselves as flawed and messy beings. The Padlet was augmented by regular messages on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), adopting a light, friendly, and supportive tone to encourage students to engage or seek support. Projecting an authentic self online is difficult, however, and encouraging others to engage with that self is even harder: my efforts fell flat, with just one student out of 250 posting their own introduction and none responding to my VLE messages. It came as no surprise given this lack of engagement that my mini-series of in-house LD sessions had a very low uptake, despite many students expressing a desire for academic writing support, both anecdotally at the time and in end-of-year surveys.

Naively, I had taken the advice that 'you cannot downplay the impact of a friendly face!' (Burns and Sinfield, 2004, p.49) in LD interactions to apply even where that face is encountered in an impersonal, asynchronous online setting. Instead, I learned that engaging students in a personable, playful way might not work without a prior relationship,

even a minimal one: visibility and trust are not achieved through online posts or opportunities alone. These do not replicate a learning developer entering a class as an embodied person in relation to others, who, by their presence within the discipline, is afforded contextual, rather than generic or remedial, relevance (Cairns, Hervey and Johnson, 2018). From this dual standpoint of embodiment and legitimacy within the curriculum, the learning developer is better able to open up an emancipatory third space (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2019) for students.

Students must be viewed 'as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalised bits of knowledge' (hooks, 1994, p.15). This rejection of compartmentalisation includes the overlap of student and home identities (that has been particularly great in the last year), but also the integration of subject knowledge and LD. My response to the challenge of relationship-building focused on forging those personal links with the classroom, trying to bypass the need for collaboration with subject teaching staff which could be perceived as a burden on them. In so doing, it failed to meet the LD needs of students (confirmed by students' course feedback), to represent the integral value of LD in the classroom, or to demonstrate the potential for collaboration to *unburden* subject staff (Harris and Ashton, 2011).

Recommendations

From these experiences, I draw two recommendations. One is to have the courage to enter the spaces where students already are, despite local and institutional conceptions of where learning developers 'should' be or fears that teaching staff are too busy to contemplate our presence. Being visible there enables us to open the emancipatory third space of LD and facilitate student growth in a way that we cannot from the outside. Inside/outside need not be binary options, however. Even if LD is not fully integrated or embedded, brief appearances of a learning developer in classes can help bridge the gap between subject teaching and LD provision, especially if set alongside active promotion by subject staff.

The second, longer term, recommendation is that if well-intentioned LD activities on the margins fail to engage students effectively, this failure can be repurposed as local evidence for the need to integrate academic literacies in subject teaching. As long as

learning developer identities remain misunderstood and contested, how our failures are presented to resource-allocators and departmental decision-makers truly matters.

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