

Getting connected: establishing direct communication between learning developers and PhD Students with teaching responsibilities

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Abstract

Many PhD researchers have the opportunity to take up teaching responsibilities during their doctoral studies to enhance their employability and interest in academia. Aside from their formal teaching training, little is known about the types of resources and support from professional services that PhD students (PhDs) use to fulfil their teaching responsibilities. On the other hand, learning development is a relatively new profession within higher education. As such, there are varied perceptions on the necessity for PhDs with teaching responsibilities to engage with learning development support. This opinion piece shares the experience of a STEM UK PhD student with teaching responsibilities and a learning development practitioner when establishing support for modules taught by PhDs. Through a dialogue, the authors explore the challenges faced in the interaction between learning developers (LDs) and PhDs, in two different UK universities, and recommend how to further develop the relationship. Through this dialogue possible solutions like increasing the visibility of available LD support for PhDs with teaching responsibilities within higher education institutions (HEIs) and including LD support in PhDs teaching training were identified.

Keywords: learning development; doctoral researcher; teaching; higher education; professional services.

Introduction

Traditionally, doctoral researchers have learned to teach through observing or mentorship within their discipline (von Hoene and Mintz, 2002). Nowadays, PhDs have opportunities to take up Graduate Teaching Assistant (or similar) positions to gain access to pedagogical training. Thus, the training enhances their employability and interest in an academic career while they receive recognition for their teaching from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (Barr and Wright, 2019; Shum, Lau and Fryer, 2020; Rao, Hosein, and Raaper, 2021; Smallwood et al., 2022). Aside from the teaching training programmes available through such roles within the disciplines, little is known about the type of resources and, more specifically, support from professional services that doctoral researchers use to fulfil their teaching responsibilities.

Learning development (LD) is a relatively new profession in HE, and its boundaries are still unclear. Many consider LD as a tool to ensure that students from widening participation backgrounds succeed and complete their studies (Stapleford, 2019). Others view LD as a way to enhance and develop lifelong learning strategies to help students become flexible and resilient in an ever-changing job market (Jackson, 2015; Ruge and McCormack, 2017). Due to these variable definitions of the role LD has in a HE institution, the reach of LD practitioners' knowledge and support is uneven across the UK HE sector (Johnson, 2018). Moreover, institutional structures and power-related relationships result in a variable perception of the necessity of engaging with LD services (Ali et al., 2018; Hadisaputra et al., 2020) and embedding such support in the curriculum (Hill and Tinker, 2018; Minogue, Murphy and Salmons, 2018) in UK HE.

This opinion piece shares the experience of a STEM UK PhD student with teaching responsibilities and an LD practitioner when establishing LD support for modules taught by PhDs. The conversational approach of this written dialogue between the two authors uncovers the perceptions and interactions between LDs and PhDs with teaching responsibilities in two different UK HEIs. These two HEIs are situated in different British nations and have very different educational profiles. While one of the HEIs is a well-established research-focused institution the other is a former polytechnic and a current provider of professional degrees.

The presented dialogue reveals unique challenges and identifies a common problem for both sides – having to communicate through layers of hierarchical structures such as through managers and supervisors. Using a written dialogue developed specifically for this publication the authors discuss possible solutions to this common challenge with the aim for LD practitioners to enhance university students' learning experience.

Dialogue

What is our experience of working with LDs/ PhDs with teaching responsibilities?

Doctoral student (DS):

I'm currently a doctoral researcher in nutrition at an UK university. If I'm honest, I have to say I didn't know exactly what or who LDs were when I was doing my undergraduate or master's degree. I always viewed them as people who helped staff run their teaching classes effectively.

When I started my doctorate, I took on some teaching responsibilities within two modules. Having completed the required teaching training module for the Associate Fellowship of the HEA, I was still somewhat nervous about meeting students' expectations in my modules. I was worried about delivering the subject content, ensuring there was a high level of student engagement, and being able to answer students' questions about the modules. As a result, I explored other roles, besides traditional academic ones, including those of librarians, career consultants, and administrative staff in my immediate academic school. I wanted to find new ways to develop my teaching methods to address my nervousness about these modules. Therefore, I joined the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) Research virtual Community of Practice (vCoP) when it was first established in Spring 2020. I probably didn't think much of it when I pressed the 'join' button. Perhaps it was me being naïve, just to find out who and what 'learning development' is all about, but upon reflection I have never yet regretted having been part of this vCoP.

Now, back to my experience of working with LDs. Well, you could say I am still a beginner. But through the ALDinHE Research vCoP, I have learned that not only are LDs a pretty friendly community, but they are also more than just technicians (perhaps a completely

wrong definition in my mind!). Now I see them as practitioners within the institution. They are there to provide advice, to facilitate teaching, and to empower students' learning. Overall, LDs work to support students transitioning from one level to another and can support teaching staff to understand how learners learn in order to best guide their students.

Learning developer (LD):

As a Study Skills Adviser at a UK HEI, I have worked directly with three PhD students with teaching responsibilities over the past six years. I have indirectly contributed to many conferences and training opportunities for PhDs at a UK HEI through its Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL).

There was a distinct difference in working with each individual PhD student, although all of them were involved in STEM disciplines. Two of the students who approached me were doing professional doctorates in Education and were already established lecturers in the School of Education. The third individual was suddenly given a module to run by himself, where my support sessions were already embedded, and he is a subject matter specialist. The approach each individual took to supporting their students was significantly affected by their prior teaching practice and personal student experience. The two lecturers in the School of Education were solely focused on national policy and requirements in their teaching approach. On the other hand, the subject matter specialist was more interested in supporting the students and how confusion can be avoided in the following years of their studies rather than in the requirements of the related subject matter funding council.

What challenges did you face while working with LDs/ PhDs with teaching responsibilities?

DS:

For me, one challenge when working with LDs could be the expectation and understanding of each other's role within the institution. In relation my engagement with LDs directly related to my PhD teaching was very little, in fact, none. Perhaps because I am not a full-time staff member or as I did not carry any heavy teaching responsibilities where I was tasked to design the curriculum but was just delivering the materials to the students, and thus, never thought of working with any LDs as part of my teaching practices. However,

after I joined ALDinHE, I understood the role of LDs, and I got to hear and converse about these roles within HEIs. On the flip side and upon reflection, knowing who the LDs are during my teaching training course earlier in my doctoral journey would have been helpful, so that I could have been equipped with the resources and contacts available within the institution to enhance my confidence when teaching.

LD:

That's interesting to hear. For me, a challenge was that established lecturers just 'requested' the support sessions without discussing how these sessions integrate with the rest of the module or the other modules in that academic year. The communication was more about the need for a service to be provided. Thus, LDs were seen as a way to fill in teaching hours rather than a source of strategies to resolve a teaching challenge.

Another challenge to all three collaborations with the PhDs was the layers of hierarchical structures that our discussion needed to go through. This made the interaction lengthy and cumbersome. The process was characterised by long spells of no communication followed by sudden illogical replies a couple of days before an LD session was scheduled to take place. It would be more helpful for both sides if they communicated directly while informing the related hierarchical structures about their final decision.

What do you think might be the benefits of such direct communication?**DS:**

I think having direct communication between LDs and PhDs with teaching responsibilities would create knowledge on the resources available for those who want to start a career in academia. But also having the confidence and knowing that LDs (perhaps underused or not as visible as they could be) can help prepare effective sessions in content delivery and engaging with students. How about your perspective?

LD:

I think communicating directly will help to demystify for PhDs with teaching responsibilities the essence of LD support and the benefits of having integrated LD support in a teaching

programme. Furthermore, it will support the development of the pedagogical knowledge and understanding of future subject matter specialists. Thus, ensuring those future lecturers will include both subject content and strategies to support their students' learning.

What more can the wider HE community do to make LDs more visible for PhDs with teaching responsibilities to encourage direct communication with one another?

DS:

First and foremost, raising awareness and introducing what LDs do within the institution would be a good start for any conversation, especially for those new to teaching – whether new colleagues are joining, or doctoral students are taking on teaching responsibilities. Knowing where to find the LDs would be beneficial, too, as I now know that LD specialists are there to help facilitate students' learning experience. Simply put, why reinvent the resources when we (hypothetically) should know that there are these resources within an institution that can help to enhance students' learning? Perhaps embedding the awareness of LDs in learning and teaching courses (for example, for HEA fellowships) would be a starting point to ensure that we can sow the seeds of developing a broader awareness of the variety of colleagues supporting teaching and learning, and their roles within an institution.

LD:

Yes. I also think having a clear explanation of what LD support can offer to PhDs with teaching responsibilities, possibly through centralised Graduate school events, will be helpful. Furthermore, LD practitioners could meet PhDs with teaching responsibilities through such events, and valuable contacts could be developed. Moreover, sharing scenarios and case studies of LD support and its impact on the development of the teaching practice of PhDs and the students in these modules will be helpful. Finally, ensuring that PhDs with teaching responsibilities can directly communicate with LD practitioners about any teaching-related challenges before making any changes to the approved teaching programme will foster a stronger relationship.

Conclusion

This short dialogue reveals that experiences vary between the PhD student and the LD practitioner and their two respective HEIs. For example, PhD students' expectations of being a lecturer may contradict the reality of teaching in UK HEIs. The lack of understanding and exposure to the existing LD support in relation to learning and teaching leads to challenges for PhDs with teaching responsibilities and the inability to overcome their teaching-related challenges efficiently. Furthermore, the current ineffective interactions between PhDs with teaching responsibilities and LDs in many existing hierarchical structures could be a barrier to effective communication.

Direct communication between LDs and PhDs with teaching responsibilities was identified as a solution to develop those professional relationships supporting colleagues new to teaching in UK HEIs. As a result, this support can help break the hierarchical layers related to barriers to assist the development of pedagogical knowledge and applications in learning and teaching. More specifically, increasing the visibility of available LD support within the institution could facilitate simple and direct communication with part-time PhDs and teaching staff. Other recommendations could include LD support in teaching training offered by each UK HEI or HEA's training portfolio for a more standardised and consistent approach. Furthermore, embracing the opportunity to support PhDs' and part-time staff's professional development will ensure they have the core competencies needed to become confident future subject lecturers.

Thus, we suggest developing a dialogue between LD practitioners and all aspiring educators, especially PhDs with teaching responsibilities, to address the challenges they face when teaching in UK HEIs. This dialogue should be established through multiple venues like formal HEI-specific events as part of internal teaching training programmes, annual teaching and learning conferences, and Doctoral school seminars.

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