



Learning Developers as scholars: raising our voice

Ian Johnson

University of Portsmouth, UK

Silvina Bishopp-Martin

University of Portsmouth, UK

Presentation abstract

This mini-keynote encouraged attendees to consider their stance towards LD scholarship, including current enablers and barriers to engagement. Like many other third space professionals, Learning Developers' participation in scholarship is somewhat constrained, due to the lack of contractual requirements to engage in such endeavours. Despite this, we view the development of LD's pedagogical and theoretical knowledge base as a vehicle which will allow LD to disseminate its values and principles, beyond the confines of Learning Developers' individual practice. Thus, this mini-keynote drew on key principles from the LD Scholarship Manifesto recently published (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2023), a manifesto which has captured the voices of the LD community. The following questions acted as provocations for participants to consider what encourages or prevents them from joining the call to expand this growing field's knowledge base:

1. As learning developers, we are committed to student education and disseminating best practice beyond our field. How can scholarship support this commitment?
2. Engagement with scholarship is endemic to the ALDinHE values, which have come to help us identify as a professional group. Thus, do you believe that practising according to those values, including an on-going commitment to our professional development is essential? If so, what may be holding you back?
3. If Learning Developers sit alongside students and other HE colleagues invested in academic literacies development, arguably our praxis can only be truly enacted if we are ourselves immersed in such development. To what extent is LD scholarship rooted in Academic Literacies? If not, what else underpins it and why?

Keywords: scholarship; academic literacies; professional development; third-space professionals.

Community response

This was a lively and thought-provoking session which drew interest from those in attendance. Practical discussions within the session focused on the different types of barriers experienced by Learning Developers and how these might be removed.

Time, confidence, and support available were common themes highlighted by participants. Feedback indicated the importance of scholarship to the work of Learning Developers, particularly in helping to build identity and share practice:

The keynote rightly positions praxis-driven scholarship as essential for Learning Developers (LD) to develop a robust and coherent knowledge base. By rooting LD research in the real-world theories, frameworks, and interventions employed by practitioners, the field can build a stronger disciplinary identity and enable more effective dissemination of LD principles beyond individual institutions. Importantly, the keynote frames this scholarship-practice connection as vital not just for advancing the field, but also for the ongoing professional development of Learning Developers themselves.

Embedding research as part of LD responsibilities was provided as a suggestion to help strengthen scholarship activity:

Engaging in research that is tightly coupled with LD work reinforces the notion that scholarship is a core part of the LD professional identity, rather than a separate academic pursuit.

Although it was recognised by participants that there is still much work to be done in this area, discussing practical examples and suggestions assisted in identifying more ways Learning Developers can contribute to and engage in scholarship activity.

Next steps and additional questions

This was a topical session that encouraged debate: it is clear that more Learning Developers would like to be raising their professional profile. What recommendations can you provide for those looking to undertake more scholarship activity?

Participants discussed several challenge areas for conducting scholarship activity, how would you advise overcoming challenges relating to available time and not having support available?

Authors' reflection

We are grateful for both the packed attendance at each of the three iterations of the mini-keynote, and for the feedback we received. The fact that several people joined us who are not yet established LD scholars reinforces the wider appetite for scholarship amongst Learning Developers that we have been looking to both tap into and build through our recent publications (Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2023; Bishopp-Martin and Johnson, 2024 [accepted and forthcoming]).

We are well versed with the barriers to LD scholarship of time, contractual obligations, and institutional support raised by one of the respondents. We would love to inhabit a world in which scholarship could become a contractual element of the job of any Learning Developer who wanted it to. In fact, we see it as almost essential to effective LD practice. Sadly, this world still seems a long way off, but it does not mean we cannot aspire. We believe that would-be scholars need to work *with* the constraints they have, and work to change those constraints slowly. This is more of a realist position than one that we idolise because, as one participant mentioned during the session, with it comes the potential pitfalls of using our spare time for unpaid 'hobby research' – which does not give everyone an equal playing field.

A suggestion to circumnavigate this issue that was raised in one of our sessions was that collaboration with an academic colleague with a research brief – for example to do a research project investigating some aspect of their teaching collaborations – might well be a useful first step. Such collaboration has the potential to get the Learning Developer past the sticky first hurdles of getting ethical approval and management permission to conduct research, and an opportunity to 'learn the trade' with someone more experienced. We are seeing increasing examples of these collaborations in the LD literature of recent years.

Perhaps more of an unexpected insight to us both from the session was the extent to which Learning Developers (especially so, given that we had an audience who chose a session on scholarship from among several alternatives) often lack the knowhow and confidence to conduct research. This knowledge gap in us may be because we have moved a long way (a combined 21 years) as individuals from the first days of doing the LD role and trying to fathom what it involved. It is good to reconnect with how those early days feel through the ALDinHE community. Our aim within our stewardship of the Research and Scholarship Development Working Group is to provide the mechanisms to let more LD scholars loose to flourish. A realisation from what was said in the mini keynote sessions is that these mechanisms may need increasing emphasis on elements which promote knowledge and confidence. As a result, we have thought about trying to incorporate a scholarship element to the LD training programme currently in development by ALDinHE. We will look to take this idea forward into the future. The responses to our mini-keynote sessions really solidified the need for it, so they will help to give us direction.

In the meantime, readers in this position are encouraged to consider ALDinHE's [Research Community of Practice \(CoP\)](#) if they would like a supportive environment in which to get started. The two authors were founder members of the CoP and see it as a very key stepping stone on our journey to becoming LD scholars. The CoP helped us find collaborators, gain confidence, and really start writing, among its many other benefits. The CoP takes new members at intervals – contact details are available from the link above if you would like to be added to the waiting list.

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Author details

Ian Johnson has been a Learning Developer at University of Portsmouth since 2015 and is now a Teaching Fellow in LD. Ian recently completed his Professional Doctorate on the framing and value of LD in British Higher Education and has research interests in how embedded and individualised LD practices contribute to students' learning. He has led ALDinHE's Research and Scholarship Development Working Group since August 2023, having previously established and led the Research Community of Practice from 2020-2023. He is also an ALDinHE Steering Group member.

Silvina Bishopp-Martin has been a Learning Developer at Canterbury Christ Church University since 2012. She is currently aligned to the education courses of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education. Her research interests include professional identity, critical discourse studies, critical pedagogies and academic literacies. She is an ALDinHE Certified Leading Practitioner and an Advance HE Fellow. She has been the vice-chair of the ALDinHE's Research and Scholarship Development Working Group since August 2023.

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