

How to Be a Learning Developer in Higher Education

Critical Perspectives, Community and Practice

Edited by Alicja Syska and Carina Buckley



HOW TO BE A LEARNING DEVELOPER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Filled with practical guidance for those working in and interested in the emergent field of Learning Development, this must-read book encapsulates what it means to be a Learning Developer and how to thrive in this role.

With carefully constructed contributions which explore different aspects of the role, this edited collection is comprehensive in its approach. Alongside practical advice, it is underpinned by theoretical and epistemological insights to provide a bridge between theory and practice.

Organised into five key parts, it is arranged in a way that reflects the journey that practitioners take into and through Learning Development, from their initiation into the field, through professional development, to becoming an established expert. It covers key topics such as:

- the basic principles of working in Learning Development
- the theoretical and practical foundations of the field
- how to engage more critically with the role
- how to become an active contributor to the field through research and publication
- the as-yet unrealised possibilities of Learning Development

Capturing a diverse array of voices, experiences, and perspectives, this book is an essential guide for both new and established practitioners concerned with student Learning and Development.

Alicja Syska is a hybrid academic at the University of Plymouth, UK. She is a Learning Developer for the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business alongside teaching and research roles in Education and History.

Carina Buckley is the Instructional Design Manager at Solent University, UK. She is an AdvanceHE Principal Fellow and a researcher in the field of Learning Development.



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CONTRIBUTORS

Steph Allen is a senior lecturer in Learning Development and Academic Integrity, having worked at Bournemouth University since 2002. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her interests focus on quality education, and reduced inequalities through academic integrity.

Ryan Arthur manages Learning Development at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is a Fellow of Advance HE. His research interests include the BME Award Gap, decolonisation, and disruptive pedagogies.

Gordon Asher is an academic proofreader and editor, independent scholar, and Learning/Researcher Developer. He worked, for over a decade, in Learning Development at UWS and Strathclyde University. Much of his work focuses on UK HE's present and future – within a framing of 'working in, against, and beyond the neoliberal university'.

Ed Bickle is a lecturer in Learning Development at Bournemouth University, a position he has held since 2017. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Certified Learning Development Practitioner (CeP).

David Biggins has a strong interest in technology enhanced learning and led the academic development of a TEL toolkit. He champions the use of TEL amongst colleagues, has led learning analytics projects, and continues to research the positives and negatives of using data for the benefit of staff and students.

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 Advanced HE Fellow.

Kevin Brazant is a Learning Developer at London Metropolitan University. He is a University Teaching Fellow Award recipient, a Senior Fellow with the Higher Education Academy and a Leading Certified Practitioner with the Association of Learning Developers in Higher Education. His research interests include the degree awarding gap, anti-racist practice, decolonisation, and the application of digital content creation as part of an inclusive pedagogy.

Steve Briggs is currently Director of Learning and Teaching Excellence at the University of Bedfordshire. He is a chartered psychologist, National Teaching Fellow (2020), and PFHEA. Steve was previously Co-Chair of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education where he led work related to professional development and recognition.

Carina Buckley is the Instructional Design Manager at Solent University, where she is responsible for ensuring an active and inclusive learning environment. She has a PhD in Archaeology, and is a Principal Fellow of AdvanceHE, a member of the *JLDHE* editorial board, and an ALDinHE Certified Leading Practitioner.

Tom Burns, SFHEA, CeLP, is a member of the ALDinHE Mentoring Working Group, senior lecturer, University Teaching Fellow, and CATE. Together, Burns and Sinfield are co-authors of *Teaching, Learning and Study Skills: A Guide for Tutors* and *Essential Study Skills: The Complete Guide to Success at University* (5th edn 2022).

Ursula Canton is a senior lecturer in Academic Writing at Glasgow Caledonian University and a Learning Developer at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Her teaching is shaped by her research into the evaluation of teaching and writing, the writing process, and academic and professional literacies.

Kate Coulson is the Head of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at the University of Northampton. She is a strong advocate of Learning Development and the impact it can have on student outcomes. Kate was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2022 for her work in developing and championing Learning Development practice.

Emma Davenport is a University Teaching Fellow and Head of Student Experience and Academic Outcomes for the School of Architecture, Art and Design at London Metropolitan University. Emma's research interests include academic writing as social practice, thematic analysis, the material culture of HE, and digital education.

Jennie Dettmer is an academic skills tutor in the Business School at the University of Hertfordshire. She is a qualified dyslexia tutor, holds an MA Education (SEND and Inclusion), is a Senior Fellow of AdvanceHE, and co-chairs LearnHigher and the ALDinHE Neurodiversity/Inclusivity Community of Practice.

Sunny Dhillon is a lecturer in Education Studies at Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU). He previously worked as a Learning Developer at BGU and the University of Leeds (2016–2021). His academic background is in Spanish and Philosophy. His research interests are primarily in Nietzsche and The Frankfurt School.

Jason Eyre is a senior lecturer in Learning Development at De Montfort University, Leicester. He holds a doctorate in philosophy of Education from the UCL Institute of Education.

Lee Fallin works as a Lecturer in Education Studies at the University of Hull. He has ten years of experience working as a Learning Developer for the University Library and is an ALDinHE Certified Learning Practitioner. His interests include learning spaces/communities, inclusive digital practice, research methodologies, and geographies of place.

Louise Frith has been a Learning Developer for over 20 years. She currently works at the University of York teaching academic writing skills to postgraduate students. Louise has published three books: *Professional Writing Skills for Social Workers* (2021); *The Students' Guide to Peer Mentoring* (2017); and *Mindfulness and Wellbeing for Student Learning* (2023).

Nicola Grayson is an academic developer at the University of Salford. She is a Senior Fellow of the HEA and was an editor for the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. Her primary areas of expertise include measuring impact, co-creation, researcher support, and community building.

Debbie Holley is Professor of Learning Innovation at Bournemouth University, where she leads innovation in research, teaching, and professional practice. As a National Teaching Fellow, she is a passionate educator and has research interests in digital frameworks and the affordances of technologies such as augmented reality, virtual/immersive realities, and mobile learning.

Sonia Hood is the Study Advice Manager at the University of Reading. She has worked as a Learning Developer since 2006, after a successful career in Marketing. She completed an EdD in 2019, researching self-efficacy beliefs and academic writing. She has an interest in university transitions and levelling the playing field.

Nahid Huda is a Learning Developer at London Metropolitan University, UK and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her research interests are in academic reading circles and integrating academic literacy practices within the taught curriculum.

Ian Johnson is a Learning Developer of eight years' experience. His doctoral research examines the value of LD work to its stakeholders and its implications for LD professional practice. He has particular interest in LD's dual 'embedded yet third space' function. Ian's educational background is Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching.

Emma Kimberley is a Learning Development tutor at the University of Northampton. She is interested in the affective context of academic literacies.

Georgia Koromila is a study adviser at the University of Reading. She worked at the Graduate School of International Development, Agriculture and Economics in supporting international students' transition to UK higher education. Georgia holds a doctorate in Archaeology (2016, University of Reading) and is a strong proponent of interdisciplinarity.

Aaron Kuskopf Undergraduate student studying Creative Writing and English Literature

Anne-Marie Langford is a Learning Development tutor at the University of Northampton. She joined HE from a career in Heritage Education. She is enthusiastic about creating learning opportunities for a wide range of students, critical thinking, co-creation, and digital learning.

Shelene Macintosh Undergraduate student studying Education

Marian Mayer (she/they) is Principal Lecturer in Learning Development and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She has been an LD practitioner since 2004. Her research areas include transformative education, widening participation, and challenging neo-liberalism in Higher Education.

Chandrika McDonald Undergraduate student studying Education

Edward Powell is a study adviser at the University of Reading, where he also contributes towards the university-wide decolonising of the curriculum working group. He received his PhD in Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Studies from the University of Leeds in 2015.

Christie Pritchard is the Head of Academic Development at the University of Plymouth, a Senior Fellow of Advance HE, and an associate professor of Higher Education. She is also the co-chair of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) and a Certified Leading Practitioner of Learning Development.

Steve Rooney is a Learning Developer at Aston University. He works with students and staff across all programmes, but with a particular responsibility for supporting learning in Health and Life Sciences disciplines. He continues to enjoy a long-standing, active involvement with the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).

Oliver Selic Undergraduate student studying Fashion

Sandra Sinfield, SFHEA, CeLP, is a member of the ALDinHE Steering Group, senior lecturer, University Teaching Fellow, and CATE. Together Burns and Sinfield are co-authors of *Teaching, Learning and Study Skills: A Guide for Tutors* and *Essential Study Skills: The Complete Guide to Success at University* (5th edn 2022).

Tracy Slawson is a senior lecturer in Learning Development at De Montfort University, Leicester.

Jarelle Smith is a Learning Developer at London Metropolitan University. His experience in psychological therapy informs his approach to building cohesive and supportive learning environments in Higher Education. His main areas of interest are in social psychology and social cognition.

Alicja Syska is a hybrid academic, combining the roles of Learning Development Advisor with lecturing posts in Education and History at the University of Plymouth. She has a PhD in American Studies, is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE, a co-lead editor for *JLDHE*, and an ALDinHE Certified Leading Practitioner.

Kirstie Tucker Undergraduate student studying Interior Design

Helen Webster has worked in Learning Development since 2006 and is a National Teaching Fellow, SFHEA and CeLP. She is Academic Skills

Educational Development consultant at Oxford University. Prior to this, she was Head of Learning Development at UEA and Newcastle universities and Senior Consultant at AdvanceHE. She blogs about Learning Development as @Scholastic_Rat.

Karen Welton is a Learning Development Adviser at Arts University Plymouth. Her MA Education research centred on the juxtaposition of dyslexia as a [dis]ability in HE. She facilitates communities of practice for neurodivergent staff and students and also co-chairs the ALDinHE Neurodiversity/Inclusivity Community of Practice.

Maura Burns Zaragoza Postgraduate Biological Sciences

FOREWORD

John Hilsdon

*On a wet, chilly Saturday
I sat down
to tap out patterning
preparation perhaps
and now some hundreds of words are here
not generated by
any AI
or chatter-bot
black box
probabilistic prophet
but rather by
a real being
flesh and blood
a sometime learner-teacher
looking back in wonder
from where they came and how
hoping what they say
will make some sense
to friends at the chalkface
striving still
building, writing
talking, listening
recomposing
dreams of the possible
dramas imagined and calculated states
paving paths and opening gates
aspiring to
university*

The need for this book arises not just from its role in charting the continuing history of Learning Development (LD) or the explication of its origins (some of that was achieved in Hartley et al., 2010) but, more importantly, in exploring further the persistence and powerful influence of the underpinning ideas of LD. This powerful influence is best demonstrated by LD practitioners in their commitment to work *alongside* students to make sense of the academic contexts and tasks facing them on courses of study, and their ingenuity in finding ways to help make success in higher education (HE) a real possibility for learners from all backgrounds.

Thinking back to the early days of LD in the UK, and the excitement surrounding initiatives such as the establishment of the LearnHigher Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, it would be easy to drift into nostalgia. But, despite the dominant forces determining that university contexts and processes continue to be shaped largely in market rather than human terms, the deep sense perceived by many that education is not just a 'service', and still less a commodity, remains a powerful motivating impetus. To be a Learning Developer was, from the outset (and perhaps now is even more so), to envision university education as a social and collective enterprise to equip us and to inspire us, and an engine to drive our efforts in confronting the (literally) burning global problems threatening our very survival.

The idea of a university as a place for the pursuit of universal knowledge, and open to all who are able to study, is a liberal idea often associated with a mid-nineteenth century treatise by Cardinal John Henry Newman, and developed in the 1960s in the UK government's Robbins report proposing a widening of access to, and participation in HE. Leading into the 21st century, the subsequent, massive expansion of HE in the UK and some other countries, was, however, shaped by a neoliberal turn in economic and social policy, enjoining marketisation and commodification of all aspects of teaching and learning. Despite this straitjacket, the liberal idea continues to inspire many of those seeking to participate in learning communities as learners, teachers, and researchers.

The rise and evolution of LD can be attributed to a combination of factors. Firstly, the neoliberal policies and practices in HE which brought such new (and, ironically, usually non-academic) posts into being, and secondly the collective commitment of those employed in such posts to interpret, critique, and reinterpret their remit to 'deliver' their work with students. Unpacking and exploring the complex interrelations between these two strands is a key purpose of this book, along with relating the impact of LD so far and imagining its future in a landscape characterised by increasing complexity and challenge for students.

LD has such an important role to play in this effort to reclaim universities as real-life learning communities because our field has at its heart a focus on learning as a network of social and developmental processes, rather than as a

set of mechanistic or disembodied skills to be transferred from teachers to students. If anything distinguishes an LD approach, it is this insistence on starting out from the position of the learners, involving them and offering them an invitation to join in on their own terms, and to comment in their own language, on where they find themselves. Under these conditions students can engage more fully with the (often mysterious and challenging) language, tasks and practices of their subjects of study, but, more importantly, they have opportunities to critique and recreate such practices for their own use in carrying forward the torch of learning and attending to the urgent practicalities of our times.

The challenges to a commodified and uncritical version of HE are increasingly evident as we enter the third decade of the century and debate grows over the role of Artificial Intelligence and the uses of Large Language Models in education, adding to ambiguities about the notions of authorship and academic integrity or ownership of academic products. Similarly, questions about whether and how to ‘decolonise’ the curriculum combine with a renewed focus on participation amid ‘culture wars’ over what constitutes legitimate and valuable knowledge. The increased indebtedness of students and rising uncertainty about future employment prospects, along with the casualisation of jobs, places further economic pressure on those from less-affluent backgrounds and threatens to undermine the standing (and the implied neoliberal purposes) of university education. Furthermore, the post–Cold War world order seems close to collapse just at a time when international cooperation is needed urgently to address impending human-made environmental catastrophes.

Given such instability and turmoil in our times, there are innumerable trials facing the would-be learning developer, just as there are for all students and education workers. But to work alongside students as they try to make sense of it all, to give them new opportunities to ask questions about what they are doing, and why, and to forge a path together: what a fabulous and uniquely creative way to spend your time!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like most people on this planet, we both always wanted to write a book one day. What we didn't know was that it would be a collective endeavour, edited and nurtured into being by the two of us in a creative collaboration. We now cannot imagine having done it any other way. Curating this collection and writing together was not so much an act of two people working towards a common goal, but an immersive, rewarding, *flow*-imbued act of co-creation that helped us discover the essence of collaboration itself: the doing *with*, *alongside*, and *between* each other.

We could not have accomplished it without all the people who cheered us on and supported this hopeful venture along the way. Firstly, we are grateful to all our contributors who responded with such enthusiasm to our invitations to be part of this collection, and whose voices we gladly created a platform for. Their generosity with both their time and ideas made it a pleasure for us to edit this volume. We might even do it again!

Big thank you to all our colleagues in the global Learning Development community for the support, excitement, and faith in us to deliver a book that they had been hoping for. It would not have come into existence without you.

The Association for Learning Development in Higher Education and our home institutions – the University of Plymouth and Solent University – have nurtured us as scholars and as Learning Developers, which in no small part has laid the foundation on which this book has been built.

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xx Acknowledgements

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The book may now be in existence, but it only comes alive once someone picks it up. We are grateful to you, the reader, for doing so, and would like to encourage you to get in touch with us and share your thoughts on it. This is an open conversation.

INTRODUCTION

Alicja Syska and Carina Buckley

*I love being a Learning Developer.
(This is the first job where I've been able to say that!)*

(Survey participant)

Every day, thousands of students across institutions of higher education find themselves immersed in a conversation about some seemingly impenetrable aspect of their learning, be it writing an essay, understanding an assignment, sitting an exam, or articulating ideas in a presentation. The person they are talking to and seeking guidance on these esoteric academic practices from is a Learning Developer – a practitioner whose role is to help the student unpeel the layers of academic expectations and discourses, develop their skills, and reflect on their learning. There is nothing predictable about that conversation; each Learning Developer will approach it differently, and each student will take away from it what they will. But what connects all these encounters is a love of learning, a deep need for scholarly engagement, and a set of values that foster spaces encouraging students to be the best they can be and to make the most of their learning.

Learning Development (LD) is a unique field of practice. Student-centred and driven by the desire to make higher education (HE) more inclusive and less mystifying, it has grown from a loose collection of dedicated, like-minded practitioners, to an expansive territory that has been relatively successfully charted but not yet fully defined and settled. Partly this is due to the wide array of trajectories into and through LD, via pathways that encompass a variety of job titles, responsibilities, structural positions, and institutional cultures, but which do not necessarily have a clear route of progression or promotion, if any.

As a result, most Learning Developers, including ourselves, learned how to do the job – and even understand what kind of job it was – by trial and error, finding our way eventually to a wider and growing community. There we encountered colleagues and spaces for conversation and collaboration, encouragement for research, conferences at which to share that research, and the confidence to transform our intuitive practice into genuine praxis.

Part of our goal with this book was to explore and map this rugged ecosystem and to provide a platform for a multidirectional articulation of what it means to be a Learning Developer in today's higher education. Thus, the book has been assembled and curated from fragments of experience, an array of concepts, and a slew of practices that form what we know as the Learning Development community. It is a community of practice in Wenger's sense (1998), as it is nurtured by what brings us together rather than what sets us apart. The values that connect Learning Developers allow the community to exist despite the lack of an agreed definition of what LD is. Such a definition was attempted in the first book on Learning Development – Hartley et al.'s *Learning Development in Higher Education* (2011), which brought together the nascent ideas of a fledgling field. Since then, various publications have explored and challenged these original ideas, including lively debates over whether LD is a mindset or a professional practice, what pedagogies it should be guided by and what definitions best capture its ethos. Even though it is not common practice, in response to this continued dialogue in our edited collection, we chose to spell 'Learning Development' in uppercase as a way of inducing a sense of momentary 'oneness' in the midst of these debates, while acknowledging that Learning Development as a field and a practice is constantly in formation, moving with the murmur of its members, ever shifting, caught in the 'not-yet-ness' (Gale and Wyatt, 2022) of being, and always becoming. LD is brought to life by the community, in the process of *sympoiesis*, or 'making with' (Haraway, 2016); the community which – in line with Spinoza's philosophy – is less interested in what it is than what it does and how it is enacted.

The title of the book, *How to Be a Learning Developer in Higher Education*, is therefore a provocation, rather than an invocation; an opening rather than an answer; an invitation to a conversation rather than an edict on how in fact to *be* a Learning Developer. Here, we will lean on Wenger again, whose words resonate with our approach: 'A perspective is not a recipe; it does not tell you just what to do. Rather it acts as a guide about what to pay attention to, what difficulties to expect, and how to approach problems' (1999, p.9). Our goal was to capture – not petrify – the diversity of voices, experiences, and perspectives of those who practise LD at this particular moment in time. To emphasise the importance of the community, most of the authors in this volume (including ourselves) consulted colleagues before writing their chapters. We sent out ethically approved surveys, conducted short interviews, and carried conversations that would allow us to represent the diverse LD voices as best as we can.

We also commented on each other's chapters in the process of internal review, generating a community collaboration where authors' words and ideas intermingle and shape each other's work. In a way, together we took the pulse of LD as it existed in 2023, even if it still provides only a small insight into this rich, vibrant, ever-changing, and eclectic field and community.

In spite of the fluid and emergent nature of the contents of this book, careful thought went into its structure. In an effort to capture the breadth of topics, perspectives, and concerns, we opted for short chapters rather than exhaustive analyses, and gave our authors strict word counts and focal points to convey often very complex processes and ideas. To make space for creativity, reflection, and even provocation, we asked each writer to begin their piece with a sort of epigraph – in the form of a statement, story, or anecdote – that captures the essence of their work and reveals something about the motivation for it, thus helping the reader to register the tenor of each chapter. The book is organised into five parts that reflect a practitioner's journey into and through Learning Development, from their initiation into the field to becoming an established expert in LD. Thus, the first two parts explore the theoretical and practical foundations of the field, addressing the basic principles of working in LD: its theory and praxis. They are followed by two parts that invite practitioners to engage more critically with their work and to explore ways in which they can become active contributors to the field through research and publication. The final part probes more advanced levels of the role including the as-yet unrealised possibilities of LD. While we create no compulsion for completing this journey in a prescribed way, we open up opportunities and offer encouragement to engage with the field on multiple levels and with a wide range of goals in mind.

The book is meant as a companion for the Learning Developer's journey; however, it need not be read in a linear way. We encourage our readers to dip in and out, begin in the middle or end, and be guided by their interests and needs when engaging with the material. While multiple entry points into the book exist, taken together, it proposes a way of thinking about LD and the role of Learning Developers in higher education that reflects the dynamic nature of the field and its inhabitants. Indeed, we do not end with a conclusion but rather an attempt to open up the conversation to yet more voices and perspectives, so we can continue to build the field of Learning Development together.

What we hope our readers will take away from this book is a sense of support – if you are a new practitioner; an inspiration – if you are well established and looking for novel ways to do good work in LD; and inside knowledge and information – if you are curious about this extraordinary field of practice. Regardless of your reasons for picking up the book, by reading it and engaging with its ideas, you are participating in the actualisation of the field and its sympoietic process of becoming. Welcome to LD.

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Introduction

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