

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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The Lived Experience of Learning Development Practitioners: Being, Thinking, Doing, and Reflecting

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Abstract: Whilst Learning Development (LD) has firmly established itself as a discipline within the UK tertiary education sector, questions remain about what it means to 'be' a learning developer. Existing research suggests a wide range of roles and meanings are attached to the understandings of the practice of the learning developer.

By using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a means of exploring the lived experiences of LD practitioners, the aim of this study is to gain a richer and deeper understanding of ourselves as practitioners to directly impact, in a positive manner, our students' experiences of Higher Education. The primary research question is: what does it feel like to be a learning developer?

In viewing the research as a form of 'self-study' will help learning developers to understand different forms of practice, which will create new meanings of LD and provide the opportunity for more informed teaching and practice in the future.

Paper: The field of Learning Development (LD) has become firmly established as a discipline to support students in their learning and academic development, within the UK tertiary education sector. However, whilst there is an abundance of research looking at the value of different pedagogic approaches to LD, and the impacts that these have upon the student experience (e.g. Buckley et al. 2021; Maharaj et al. 2021) questions remain as to what it actually means to be a professional learning developer (Johnson 2018). This is emphasised through multi-dimensional practice in which learning developers work within a wide range of roles and departments, some in academic positions, some embedded in faculties, some working centrally, whilst others are not formally recognised as professional practitioners of LD. An analysis of six months of conversation within the Learning Development in Higher Education Network forum suggested that the culture of LD encompassed a variety of values around collegiality, social justice, trust, and a collective knowledge base (Stapleford 2019). Samuels (2013) also offers several perspectives as to the role of LD, ranging from a positive

perspective, one that fosters and nurtures participation, to a more negative perspective in which LD is seen “only as relevant as students perceive it to be” (p.13). This all suggests that the role of the learning developer is varied and hard to define, the result of which may be a level of ambiguity around the title of learning developer, potentially undermining the professional status of LD practitioners (Briggs 2018).

Given the disparate roles of learning developers, this paper will outline the author's proposed research that will expand on the existing evidence base and gain a deeper understanding of LD by answering its key research question: what does it feel like to be a learning developer? This will help to go some way in answering Jonson's (2018) question as to what it means to be a learning developer. The aim is to get a better understanding of ourselves as professionals to directly impact, in a positive way, our students' experiences of Higher Education.

To answer the research question, a phenomenological approach will be applied to produce knowledge about the subjective experiences of participants (Willig 2013). Willig suggests that doing this enables the research to focus on the quality and texture of experience, to understand ‘what it is like’. Specifically, the paper will outline how the study will use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to better understand the lived experience of LD practitioners. Whilst its origins lay in health psychology (Smith 1996), recent years has seen a rapid rise in IPA studies within the education sphere, with studies by Lech et al. (2018), Kettell (2020), and Saddler and Sundin (2020) focusing specifically on the higher education sector. The overall aim of IPA can be described as:

“to understand the lived experience of a conscious, situated, embodied being in the world, where the ‘world’ is understood through a respondent's involvement in it (Larkin et al. 2011, p.330).

The paper will provide the theoretical underpinnings to IPA and demonstrate how by using IPA, the research will be adopting a novel methodological approach to LD research, one that will build upon existing research by offering previously unseen or unexplored insights. Approximately ten participants, working within UK Higher Education institutions, will be recruited with a requirement that participants have received professional recognition (Certified Practitioner/Certified Leading Practitioner) as learning developers. Each participant will be invited to attend an online semi-structured interview lasting between 60-90 minutes. Interview questions will focus on the day-to-day experiences of participants in their roles as learning developers, particularly around their interactions and relationships with both students and other staff within their institution. Interview data will be transcribed and analysed using the process set out by Smith et al. (2009). This will lead to the creation of super and sub-ordinate themes that will provide original insight into the lives and experiences of learning developers.

In undertaking this research as a form of ‘self-study’, drawing upon alternative interpretations of practice, will help learning developers to understand different forms of practice and to create new meanings from it, which will offer opportunities for more informed teaching and practice (Berry 2009). This is of particular relevance given the global pandemic and the move to online teaching and learning, and the need for the sector to adapt in an uncertain education ecosystem. Thus, the study will be of interest to anyone working within a LD role and the wider higher education sector, both within the UK and further afield.

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