

Guest Editorial: The Point of Learning Development

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It was an honour to be invited to be a guest editor at the April 2013 Writing Retreat organised by the Centre for Learning Excellence at the University of Bedfordshire. I found the event both enjoyable and stimulating; furthermore, it enabled me to reconnect with myself as a writer in a way that I had not been able to do for some time. The organisers, David Mathew and Andrea Raiker, also asked me to contribute a guest editorial to this journal. After the retreat was over, back at my desk and embroiled in the day-to-day activities of work, I found it very difficult to make space for any writing other than that of the largely functional and 'transactional' kind demanded by my job as Head of Learning Support and Wellbeing at Plymouth University – i.e. the seemingly endless email correspondence; the completion of forms for budgetary or HR-related purposes; the drafting of somewhat formulaic reports, business cases and so on. Despite having moved from teaching to a largely managerial role in recent years, I still think of myself as an academic and an educator – but in particular I identify myself as a 'learning developer' and it is this aspect of my work that I decided to focus on for my guest editorial.

Having time on the retreat to concentrate on more expressive and reflective writing about academic work was, in some ways, an unsettling and disruptive experience. This kind of writing calls for a focus on the expression and articulation of meaning; it requires attempts at self-explanation, interpretation and justification in what feels like a searching internal dialogue. In order to develop writing of this kind it is not enough to be coherent and comprehensible; it is also necessary to have a point to make – a purpose that (at least some) readers will be willing and able to follow. Thrown into the silence of writing time and limited to my internal(ised) resources, I had to come back to fundamental questions about who I am and what I am doing – and why on earth anyone else might be interested in that. Writing and publishing remain important activities for me as I am also a student (in my spare time) undertaking a doctorate in education, and the notion of 'learning development' (LD) and its role in higher education underpins my doctoral study.

Our world is one of constant and rapid change, in which technological developments seem to offer endless new and life-enhancing possibilities whilst, by contrast and simultaneously, threats to our environment from human activities and associated economic upheavals presage a future for today's students and young people with much less certainty about 'progress' than was felt in my generation. Indeed, the threats of environmental degradation, economic inequality and political violence in many parts of the globe seem likely to condemn millions more each year to lives of poverty, unemployment and conflict. Being an academic was ever an occupation whose usefulness is viewed by those

in the 'practical' worlds of commerce and industry with a degree of suspicion or quizzical scepticism, yet we who love and believe in universities understand the vital importance of knowledge-creating communities, where the emphasis is on learning, collegiality and research to make sense of, and participate meaningfully in our worlds – with the aim of sustaining and enhancing human society, despite the enormous challenges referred to above. This takes me back to the notion of 'learning development' and why I am so passionate about this approach to higher education.

The roles fulfilled by those who adopt the term LD are described in a number of ways in universities in the UK and other English speaking countries: study skills; learner support; academic advice; and key skills tutoring among others. The point of the LD model as I see it, however, is that is not just about additional support for struggling students, a 'service' that is a kind of 'side-show' of university life – rather, it is a distinctive, emerging methodology for 'doing' higher education – it describes an approach to working *alongside* students to achieve their best in their university studies. This notion of being alongside, and its implications for HE practice, deserves some more attention.

Traditional views of HE assume the need for students to enter university with a high degree of academic literacy or 'readiness' to study. It was expected that students would be able to engage with essay writing, critical thinking and the rigours of reading and interpreting textbooks and research papers in their subjects of study. The moves to widen access to higher education over the past forty years, and to transform universities from largely elite to more democratic institutions, has naturally resulted in significant challenges to traditional ways of doing things in academic life. The emergence of a field of professional practice concerned specifically with supporting learning – a field that growing numbers of us now call Learning Development – has been one of the responses to these changes.

The roots of this transformation and massive growth of our universities go back to the idea of widening access and participation in HE, from the tiny proportion of school leavers (about 7%) who attended in the 60s, to more than 40% in recent years. The Robbins Report in the 1960s set things moving in that direction – but it was a government paper in the 1980s (UGC, 1984) that came up with the enlightened principle that university should be open to all with *the ability to benefit* from Higher Education.

In the early years of expansion, as the polytechnics became the 'post 92' universities, jobs created in the LD field were often seen as temporary additions to staffing with 'remedial' functions. Such posts were created using funding provided for widening participation initiatives.

Even at that time, however, there were some far-sighted colleagues, such as Stella Cotterell and David Gosling at the University of East London, who recognised that the changes needed in HE were not to remediate deficient students, but rather to address how the whole university system worked. If we were indeed to have an HE sector open to all with the ability to benefit, changes would be required at all levels — we needed to address admissions, induction, progression routes and modes of assessment — but even more fundamentally, approaches to teaching and learning and curriculum development needed attention.

As the social model of disability shows, promoting inclusivity is not about how disabled individuals need to adapt to a society designed for the able-bodied, but how society itself needs to change to meet the needs of all its members. In the same way, promoting widening participation in HE means ensuring that courses, assessment modes and academic practices themselves do not unfairly disadvantage the non-traditional students. This is not a matter of 'dumbing down' or lowering standards but about ensuring standards are appropriate, criteria for assessment and success are transparent, and that support is provided where needed in order that we take advantage of, and receive the social and intellectual benefits from the full participation of all our students. For example, this means enabling those from working-class backgrounds and those for whom English is not a first language to participate in learning activities on a more level playing field. Conventions of academic life that may have seemed clear to traditional HE students, such as notions of academic referencing, critical thinking and formal styles of writing in English, need to be made transparent and/or adapted for the wider range of students attending university in contemporary times.

This is the context in which a group of learning support professionals, of which I was one, began promoting the notion of Learning Development (LD) in the early 'noughties'. First, an email discussion list was set up — the Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN — see <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?AO=LDHEN>), and such was the level of interest generated that an annual conference was soon established, followed in 2007 by the launch of ALDinHE, a professional association for LDers (<http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk>) and the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (the JLDHE — see <http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/ojs>).

Eleven years ago, in 2002, this LD network did not exist. The term 'Learning Development' itself was hardly known. In fact, one of the first people to use the phrase was the aforementioned Stella Cottrell, now at Leeds University. Back in the mid-90s, she and colleagues at the University of East London started talking about Learning Development to indicate an approach that differed from 'study skills' or 'learning support' (where the emphasis was on remediating deficient students) in order to emphasise that learning and development was also needed on the part of HE institutions, teaching

practices and the curriculum — it was a call for changes that we are still working for today. LD professionals therefore need to work with academics as well as with students to promote a more participative HE. In this model students are co-creators of knowledge and their role as researchers, including at undergraduate level, is also supported and promoted.

A recent article in the Times Higher (30th May 2013) by Graham Gibbs, professor of higher education at the University of Winchester, indicates the extent to which these questions remain both live and act as highly relevant reminders of the point of LD. Gibbs asks what 'study skills' consist of and whether they can actually be learned by students. '*Giving students "how-to" guides to learning*' he argues '*does not encourage the kind of flexible thinking that is required to get the most out of higher education*'. Gibbs rightly goes on to point out that learning at university is not about acquiring a set of discrete skills; and that, in fact such skills cannot easily be learned out of context of the discipline, and then transferred to other situations. For this reason he promotes '*metacognitive awareness and control*', for learning about learning as '*...the most influential of all aspects of "study skills"*'. *Improving students appears to involve raising their awareness of what they are doing.*'

Whilst I think he has a good point about the ineffectiveness of much that goes under the banner of study skills, Gibbs' alternative — the concern with metacognition — risks locating the 'problem' at the level of the individual unless it is seen through the lens of the social structure — including the power relations — of university life, as exemplified in the discourses and practices of subject disciplines. It is aspects of academic culture — the 'how we do things around here' of university life — that is most likely to affect inclusion or exclusion, success or failure, or to advantage or disadvantage certain groups of students. An LD approach therefore suggests that we need to concentrate more on the ways in which students can fully participate in university life in the context of their studies than on sending them off to consider their thinking skills as individuals. Wenger's notion of 'legitimate' participation (from his work on Communities of Practice) is vital here. To really *legitimate* (used as a verb here) students' participation — and to move toward genuine partnerships in learning and research — means to offer a 'space' at university (drawing upon Bhaba's (1994) notion of 'Third Space') where the language and social practices of incoming students can be used as a platform for them to examine, learn about, and then progressively take ownership of the language and social practices of the disciplines they are drawn to study. In practical terms this means promoting initiatives such as peer-learning schemes; critical thinking workshops; and language awareness activities within subject groups and contexts as well as in 'standalone' provision — and preferably involving both subject specialist academics as well as LD staff working *alongside* students. This approach presents Learning Development professionals, and any academic who also adopts this approach, with a unique and powerful mediating role — one where we

empower learners from all backgrounds to try out their ability to benefit from HE – and so to research and create new knowledge for the benefit of us all.

In bringing these thoughts to a conclusion I would like to thank the *JPD* editors again for giving me this opportunity to write a reflective piece. The process of writing it has given me a chance to nurture the idea that a Learning Development approach can be summarised by the concept of working *alongside* others. What I will

take away from this writing experience is a new commitment for my own studies, to look into the implications of 'alongsideness' for epistemology, research practice and pedagogy.

References

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Stress levels and their risk/protective factors among MSc Public Health students

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Abstract

There is increasing evidence that university students are particularly susceptible to feelings of stress. Given that many post-graduate healthcare students work with patients, the negative outcomes associated with feelings of stress may also impact upon the patient population. This study investigated the prevalence and risk/protective factors of self-perceived stress among 43 international public health post-graduate students. Results revealed that almost all participants scored in either the moderate or high stress level category, with South-Asian students scoring particularly high stress scores. Headache frequency, sleep duration and feeling the need for a holiday were the explanatory variables most strongly associated with stress. The results support and add to previous literature which suggests that international students are particularly susceptible to feelings of stress. Suggestions on the management and prevention of stress are proposed, while ideas for future research to build upon this study's findings are considered.

Keywords: Stress, mental health, international, post-graduate, public health students

Introduction

There is a growing evidence base which suggests that high levels of stress are particularly prevalent among university students. For example, Adlaf *et al.* (2001) found that the stress levels among Canadian university students significantly exceeded the stress levels among the general Canadian population. Perceived stress has been correlated to a number of unhealthy behaviours among university students, such as substance abuse (Park *et al.* 2004), poor psychological health (Bovier *et al.* 2004; Zhang *et al.* 2012), poor physical health (Bitnner *et al.* 2011), reduced social involvement (O'Brien *et al.* 2008) and poor academic performance (Sanders & Lushington 2002).

Public health students and other healthcare students are susceptible to the same problems that other students face, including burnout, pressure to succeed, financial concerns, and feeling isolated from home. However,

given that many of these students are either currently healthcare professionals or will be at some point in the future, we need to ensure that this workforce is able to practise safely and competently. The existence of mental health problems among healthcare staff jeopardises this and may also lead to risks for their patients.

Therefore, the aim of this small scale study was to measure the levels of perceived stress among MSc Public Health students. A secondary aim was to investigate various potential risk/protective factors of stress in order to form recommendations about coping strategies and to provide a basis for the direction of future research.

Methods

Sample

The sample comprised two MSc Public Health student cohorts who were voluntarily attending an SPSS workshop designed to assist with their dissertation's quantitative data analysis. The workshop was run in July 2011 (for the October 2010 taught student cohort) and again in July 2012 (for the October 2011 taught student cohort). On both occasions the workshops took place in the Psychology Data Analysis Laboratory located at the University of Bedfordshire's Park Square campus.

Measures

The study's outcome measure was the 'Stress Questionnaire' (International Stress Management Association, 2012). This questionnaire consists of 25 statements to which participants can either respond 'yes' or 'no'. By answering 'yes' to a particular statement, one 'stress point' is accrued. The questionnaire classifies participants who accrue a total between 14 and 25 stress points as having entered the 'high stress' threshold. As such, they are particularly prone to stress and stress-related illness, and should seek professional help and/or stress management counselling. Participants who accrue 5-13 stress points fall within the 'moderate stress' threshold and are likely to experience stress-related ill health and would benefit from stress management counselling. Accruing 4 stress