Development of the ALDinHE recognition scheme: certifying the 'learning developer' title

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Abstract

Over the last fifteen years, the pedagogy of learning development has become increasingly established within UK universities (Hilsdon, 2018). As such, there have never been more individuals who professionally identify with the 'learning developer' title. Self-identification with a professional title is always going to be problematic as there will be significant variation in background, experience, qualifications and values amongst practitioners. This will result in confusion and ambiguity around the meaning of a title (such as learning developer), which in turn can undermine practitioners' professional status and career development opportunities. It is therefore unsurprising that over the last five years there has been a growing call amongst the learning development community to introduce greater consistency around how the learning developer title is used (Webster, 2015; Webster, 2017; Johnson, 2018).

The Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) has responded to this call to action by developing a recognition scheme for learning developers. This has two levels - certified practitioner (CeP) and certified leading practitioner (CeLP). Unlike other educational development recognition schemes - for example, Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowships or Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) fellowships) - the CeP/CeLP scheme involves evidencing core values associated with practicing learning development. As such, it provides the first bespoke recognition opportunity for the learning development community. This article outlines how the ALDinHE recognition scheme was conceived, piloted and launched at the 2018 Learning Development Conference.

Keywords: Recognition scheme; learning development; values; professional development.

A time for recognition

Although learning development as a field of practice has matured in the UK since the beginning of the century (Hilsdon, 2018), when one reviews the further/higher education landscape there is significant variation in how different institutions operationalise and deliver this provision (Pritchard, 2018). For example, learning development could be based within a faculty/school or aligned to a centralised service such as the library, careers, teaching and learning or student support. Individuals working in a learning development capacity are employed on different contracts (academic/academic-related/professional services) and are diverse in terms of educational background, professional experience and qualifications. Furthermore, learning development practitioners have different job titles throughout the sector such as tutor, trainer, lecturer, advisor or coach.

As such, there are growing numbers of higher education professionals who describe themselves as being a 'learning developer'. Is this a good thing? Yes, obviously in the sense that a learning development pedagogy is becoming increasingly prominent. However, encouraging the widespread use of the title 'learning developer' is not necessarily in the interest of individuals who are invested in a learning developer career path. Established learning development practitioners might question if it is appropriate that individuals non-engaged, peripheral to or very new to the learning development community can, should they wish, call themselves a 'learning developer'? Does this not de-skill the practice of learning development and fundamentally undervalue the specialist expertise that can only be acquired through working as a learning developer over a period of time?

In the absence of a defined learning developer career pathway, it is unsurprising that there is inconsistency in how the 'learning developer' title is used. A long running theme at the ALDinHE Learning Development Conference has been the notion of professional status and identify (see for example, Webster, 2015; Webster, 2017; Johnson, 2018). Similarly the professional status of learning developers has been a recurrent theme on the Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN) JISC list for over ten years (see, for example, Ridley, 2006). Typically, community responses to 'calls to action' for greater recognition have been overwhelmingly positive; suggesting the aforementioned issues are a real concern for many within the learning development community.

Sector recognition

When one compares learning development with other teaching and learning roles in the higher education sector a very different picture emerges in terms of professional standing and title use. Elsewhere career pathways are mapped and it is commonplace for individuals to obtain a dedicated qualification and/or demonstrate good standing before using professional titles. For example:

- Individuals involved in teaching and learning applying for a Higher Education Academy fellowship (HEA, no date).
- Librarians undertaking accredited librarianship qualifications: Charted Institute of Library and Information Professional (CILIP, no date a) and/or seeking professional registration (CILIP, no date b).
- Education developers applying for a Staff and Educational Development Association fellowship (SEDA, 2018).
- Learning technologists applying to become a certified member of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT, 2018).

Given the diversity of learning development many practitioners will already hold qualifications/recognitions related to teaching and learning and one might argue that such indicators are sufficient to demonstrate learning development expertise. However, this stance is contrary to Shahabudin and Coonan (2015) who cited fundamental 'meta-professional' and cultural differences between librarians and learning developers suggesting that (whilst relevant) a librarianship qualification would not universally prepare individuals to work as a learning developer. As such, whilst proxy teaching and learning qualifications/recognition/training would undoubtedly enhance a practitioner's capacity to adopt a learning development pedagogy, it does not automatically make an individual a 'learning developer'.

Identifying principles

At the 2016 summer residential, the ALDinHE steering group discussed the growing community desire for recognition within the learning development community and agreed to develop a recognition scheme for learning developers. It was seen as paramount that

our scheme should involve engagement with the learning development community to inform appropriate expectations and standards.

At the national ALDinHE 2017 Learning Development Conference, the ALDinHE co-chairs delivered a community keynote exploring the future of learning development (Buckley and Briggs, 2017). This session was attended by circa 120 delegates and included a group exercise exploring the characteristics that made an individual a 'learning developer'. It quickly became apparent that within the learning development community there was no consensus in terms of pre-requisites required to work as a learning developer. Essential requirements (such as having a degree or a teaching qualification) were proposed. However, attendees argued against such a formulaic approach and cited colleagues who worked effectively in a learning development context without such pre-requisites. In contrast, consensus emerged in terms of how learning developers work, with a focus on: student centred delivery; partnership working and collaboration; evidence-based practice; critical self-reflection and a commitment to personal development. It was therefore concluded that a set of core learning development values shared by learning developers could form the basis for a recognition scheme. Such a scheme would be inclusive of individuals from academic, academic-related and professional backgrounds (representing the diversity of our community) but be exclusive in the sense that successful applicants would all demonstrate and promote the same core values in their practice.

Using session feedback, the ALDinHE steering group agreed five core values (see Briggs, 2018a):

ALDinHE values

1. Working alongside students to make sense of and get the most out of higher education (HE) learning.
2. Making HE inclusive through emancipatory practice, partnership working and collaboration.
3. Adopting and sharing effective learning development (LD) practice with the HE community.
4. Commitment to scholarly approach and research related to LD.
5. Critical self-reflection, on-going learning and a commitment to professional development.

Pilot 1

The ALDinHE professional development working group (PDWG) identified potential ways to demonstrate the ALDinHE values and made recommendations to the ALDinHE steering group (who agreed application requirements). The first iteration of the scheme was piloted in spring 2017 and included the following tasks to demonstrate commitment to the ALDinHE values:

Experience	Career history - including qualifications and work experience.
	Evidence dimensions in ALDinHE LDMaps resource (2015).
	Detail two personal development goals.
Internal LD engagement	A 750-word case study detailing a specific project / initiative that demonstrates a contribution to effective LD practice.
External LD engagement	Two examples of engaging with the wider LD community.
Testimonials	Two supporting statements from further education (FE) or higher education (HE) education practitioners.

Seven experienced learning development practitioners piloted the scheme. Each application was reviewed by two members of the ALDinHE steering group. Feedback from both applicants and reviewers indicated that requirements encompassed too much and would be unobtainable for many practitioners. A primary concern being that it could exclude practitioners who were not be in a position to actively engage with the wider community but nonetheless routinely championed learning development values within their institution.

Consequently, this version of the scheme was judged unfit for purpose. Instead, it was agreed that the scheme would be recast to include two distinct levels of value engagement:

1) Institutional commitment
2) Community commitment

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Refocusing the scheme

During summer 2017 the scheme was refocused around the two recognition levels. Again the ALDinHE professional development working group assumed project oversight. The following outlines how each dimension was operationalised:

Certified Practitioner (CeP) – Institutional commitment

Roles and responsibilities	Career history - including qualifications and work experience.
	For each value a statement citing relevant LD work experience.
LD case study	A 750-word case study detailing a specific project / initiative that demonstrates a contribution to effective LD practice.
Supporting statements	Details of two FE or HE education practitioners who support your application.

Certified Leading Practitioner (CeLP) – Community commitment

Roles and responsibilities	Career history - including qualifications and work experience.
	A 1000-word statement reflecting on how learning development work experience demonstrates commitment to values.
Community engagement	Two examples of work that demonstrates a sustained commitment to disseminating best practice to the LD community.
Testimonials	Two supporting statements from FE or HE education practitioners.

Pilot 2

The CeP/CeLP scheme was piloted in autumn 2017. Five experienced learning development practitioners piloted the CeLP version and five practitioners piloted the CeP version. Again, all applications were double-reviewed by members of the ALDinHE steering group who made outcome recommendations.

Applicant feedback indicated that CeP/CeLP scheme format worked well. Specifically, feedback about the design of application forms and applicant guides indicated an improvement on pilot 1 in that applicants now clearly understood what was required for each level. Applicants reported that the application felt achievable, personally relevant and prompted critical reflection on their learning development practice. Notably a number of applicants stated that they found the application to have greater personal relevance than a HEA fellowship application.

All reviewers were able to make recommendations about applicants' learning developer status based on provided evidence. Further, reviewers were largely consistent in terms of initial outcome recommendations. In the small number instances where reviewers disagreed a panel reviewed applications and made a final decision. The only notable issue around reviewing was some variation around how much feedback was provided by reviewers – this will be addressed in future training.

Launch

The recognition scheme was officially launched at the 2018 ALDinHE Learning Development Conference in Leicester. Two workshops provided an overview of each strand (Briggs, 2018a, 2018b). In total, circa 50 practitioners attended the sessions. Attendees were asked to provide feedback on the scheme and the extent to which it represented their work as learning developers. Gratifyingly, responses strongly endorsed the structure of the CeP/CeLP format and the suitability of required evidence.

Individuals who had participated in pilot 2 were awarded CeP/CeLP status at the conference (it is planned that this will become an annual highlight of the conference).

Following the conference an email was sent to the learning development community via LDHEN promoting the scheme. At the time of writing there are six weeks left of the CeP/CeLP application window for 2018, based on initial expressions of interest I anticipate that there will be at least 25 applications.

There is a long way to go in terms of the ALDinHE recognition scheme reaching a status comparable to more established educational support schemes run by SEDA (2018a)

(current holders circa - 35 senior fellows, 80 fellows and 20 associate fellows) or ALT (2018a) (circa 200). However, given the growth of the learning development community, I believe that, longer-term, ALDinHE should aspire for comparable numbers of CeP/CeLP recognitions.

Future

The introduction of CeP and CeLP is an exciting milestone for learning developers and recognises the significant contribution that they make. I hope that as the scheme becomes more established we will start to see greater consistency into how the 'learning developer' title is used within the UK higher education sector.

Given the growth in the field of learning development, I suspect it is a matter of time until other learning developer career pathways start to emerge (potentially via a teaching qualification/undergraduate course/postgraduate course/higher apprenticeship). I would welcome such developments but urge caution. It would be a retrograde step to introduce formal career pathways into learning development that do not adhere to consistent standards and principles. As such, I believe that professional bodies, such as ALDinHE, should play an important role in the design, validation and re-validation of learning developer training routes.

If you are interested in applying to become a CeP or CeLP details are available on the ALDinHE website: http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk

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