The role of the developer in institutional change: Tales from the edge

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Abstract

This paper seeks to fill a gap in viewing ways in which institutional change is brought about by adopting a grassroots perspective, following one educational developer with a special remit for networked learning, to see how their work impacts on the departments and individuals with whom they collaborate The role has been established by one particular CETL (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning), established by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as part of the largest national drive for learning and teaching enhancement as yet. All CETLs have the remit to reward excellence in teaching and learning and to drive forward institutional change. The CETL within which the study took place is tightly focused on a pedagogic approach that seeks to empower learners to conduct their own inquiries, either independently or in groups, and to gain the skills necessary for inquiry-based learning, including information literacy, reflection, learner independence, and self-management. Supporting 19 departments and approximately 80 projects, two learning development and research associates share the pedagogical and development support, which often involves the use of networked learning technologies. The paper draws on existing literature that seeks to illustrate the role of learning technologists and educational developers (Fraser, 2001; Oliver, 2002; Wright and Miller, 2000) in order to review the wider context within which the study is located.

Keywords

Inquiry-based learning, learning development, institutional support, CETL, CILASS

Introduction and background

Oliver (2002) found that educational technologists see themselves as an important part of strategic change within the institution. At the same time, however, there is a perception of marginality and lack of recognition. A shortage of practitioner-led research means that detailed information about the impact of the role can be difficult to obtain, leading to a 'blind spot' in the exploration of a community of practice that includes learning developers, academics and support staff, all collaborating to improve students' learning experiences in education.

CILASS (the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences) was established in 2005 at the University of Sheffield as a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), one of 74 such centres supported and funded by HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England). An academically-led unit, CILASS invites departments on a rotational basis to bid for money to fund inquiry-based learning (IBL) initiatives for students, as well as recurring open bid rounds for individuals. This has led to, at the time of writing, approximately 80 projects within 19 departments. These projects are supported by two learning development and research associates (LDRAs), who collaborate with staff on planning and implementing IBL in the various departments and share the facilitation of the evaluation of projects with a research associate. Within the context of IBL, each LDRA has one specific specialty, with one focusing on information literacy, brokering support and collaborating with the institution's Library, the other focusing on networked learning, brokering support and collaborating with Learning and Teaching Services (LeTS), which includes media- and technology-related support.

Several authors have explored the job descriptions of learning developers, pedagogical support staff, educational technologists, etc. (Fraser, 2001; Oliver, 2002; Wright and Miller, 2000). Oliver (2002) identifies a role that is at the same time undervalued and of strategic importance to the institution. Wright and Miller (2000), in analysing job advertisements for educational developers, have identified the profession to be extremely multi-faceted, including staff development, teaching, research, development of materials, and consultancy. This paper argues that the tight pedagogical focus on inquiry-based learning, as well as the brokering of expertise from specialised support units help the LDRAs to maintain a high quality level of support. At the same time, however, the process is labour-intensive, involving several university departments and co-ordinating larger groups of staff.

Both LDRAs are encouraged as part of the CETL's research programme to conduct research on their role and how it impacts on the development of IBL within the institution. Their work actively encourages a community of practice, through the organisation of workshops and discussions for staff, but also through facilitating connections between the various departments, helping to link project leaders with similar interests to support interdisciplinary discussions, projects, and research. This endeavour includes regular sessions, such as an IBL Café, which supports topical discussion, often lead by project leaders themselves, special interest groups (e.g. the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning group) and one-off workshops (e.g. 'Exploring IBL' and 'Collaborative Inquiry').

As the CETL is aiming to embed IBL within the institution, the LDRAs' work is directly linked to institutional change, including the use of networked learning technologies for IBL. But what does this mean on a daily basis, and how do academic staff experience the work of the LDRAs? Whilst this paper will not go in depth into the concept of communities of practice (CoP, Wenger, 1998; Oliver, 2003), it is important to explore ways in which learning developers might link academic staff with similar interests working in isolation or small groups within their own departments, to share good practice around the institution and support a holistic approach to institutional change.

Research approach

The study itself adopts an action research/reflective practice approach. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) outline the cycle of action research as

- Planning a change
- Acting and observing the consequences of the change
- Reflecting of the processes and consequences of the change and then
- Re-planning, and so forth (p. 21).

Whilst this process is mainly reflected in the overall evaluation approach of the CETL, it also – in a less structured way – feeds into the community-related role the LDRAs fulfil. CILASS uses a combination of Theory of Change (Connell and Kubisch, 1998) and EPO (Enabling/Process/Outcome) performance indicators for evaluation for each project as well as for evaluating the whole CETL. Processes which will lead to desired outcomes are formulated as part of backward-mapping, which further identifies the enabling factors which are necessary to put these processes in place. The CILASS ToC is a document that is heavily used on a regular basis, and it forms the over-arching theme for all project evaluations. The narrative that is identified in the ToC is evaluated at each stage, i.e. evaluation focuses on enabling factors and processes as well as whether intended outcomes were achieved. The CETL's role in creating a community for IBL is well-documented in the Centre's Theory of Change document (Levy, Reilly, Oliver and Hart, 2007):

> Facilitation of networking and development activity
> 23. Co-ordination of IBL interest and network groups
> 24. Provision of relevant development/social networking opportunities
> *CILASS Theory of Change, Enabling Factors*
>
> Staff and students participate in networking and development activities, and build new partnerships

 ISBN No: 978-1-86220-206-1

> […]
> 40. Staff and students participate in pedagogical debate and development activities for IBL.
> 41. Academic and professional services staff work together in new partnerships and collaboration.
> *CILASS Theory of Change, Process Indicators*
>
> A vibrant community/networks of practice exist at [the University of Sheffield], with strong links to wider networks
> 56. Students and staff experience shared ownership of the CETL and its networks and activities, and have benefited from new collaborations and partnerships.
> 57. Students and staff feel part of a community of practice for IBL and are contributing actively to on-going IBL networks in the wider sector.
> *CILASS Theory of Change, Outcome Indicators*

As part of the Centre's Theory of Change approach, data is gathered in order to evaluate whether the relevant EPOs have been achieved, which is, in part, the purpose of this paper. The approach means there is a plethora of data available, ranging from interviews with project leaders and focus groups with students to documentary data. These data are supported by a reflective blog kept by the LDRAs of CILASS in order to provide mutual support and trace their role throughout the CETL development. The LDRAs' reflective activities correspond to Steier's (1991) definition of constructionist inquiry:

> Constructionist inquiry, as a human activity, must concern itself with a knowing process as embedded in a reflexive loop that includes the inquirer who is at once a reflective observer. Reflexivity, or a turning back onto a self, is a way in which circularity and self-reference appear in inquiry, as we contextually recognize the various mutual relationships in which our knowing activities are embedded. (p. 163)

The process of research is made more complex through the many layers of evaluation the CETL engages in, and the interests of the various individuals involved. Thus, project leaders will often be more interested in the student-facing outcomes of a project, rather than the underlying collaboration. Similarly, the role of the LDRA is not the same in all projects – some staff see it very much as a supporting mechanism, to be called upon in times of crisis and to engage in background research and preparation related to the project, others see the project as a team effort with all staff as equal players with an interest in enhancing the students' learning experience. The role of the LDRA thus, and rightfully, remains for the LDRA to be explored, bearing in mind that participating in this research is not necessarily at the forefront of academic staff. Coupled with the already intensive evaluation approach the CETL employs, it was of importance for the purposes of this paper to gather data in a way that was as unobtrusive as possible. For this reason, the specific research questions pertaining to this paper were covered in an email sent to the project leaders of four projects in December 2007, inviting academic staff to 'tell the story' of their collaborative experiences. This personalised email lead to six detailed responses, whilst a more generic email sent to all project leaders lead to two short replies. The three questions specifically asked were as follows:

- Has a meeting with an LDRA resulted in you making contacts with other members of staff across the institution?
- As part of your involvement with CILASS, have you come across a new piece of technology that you now use (in communicating with staff/students, preparation, or teaching)?
- Do you read the CILASS blog? And if so, why do you read it? Have you ever adopted an idea/followed a link/posted yourself?

Individuals were followed up either via email or Facebook to clarify and/or expand their responses, leading to a number of exchanges and discussions around the LDRAs' role. The findings related to the questions above will be further outlined below.

Findings

Beetham and Bailey (2002) identify that, no matter how much time and effort is put into the development of e-learning resources, 'the most highly valued form of support was he one-to-one 'tutorial' or 'consultancy' session with an expert member of the programme team' (p. 171). This model has also been adopted by CILASS, recognising that this 'labour-intensive scenario (ibid.) will be most likely to result in lasting change towards inquiry-based learning in the institution. The CETL is therefore encouraging project leaders to meet with LDRAs even at planning stage, before submitting a bid. Where necessary, this also includes meetings with those services that might be further involved, such as the Library and Learning and Teaching Services (LeTS), who support the institutional virtual l;earning environment (VLE) and provide multi-media support. The purpose of this high-level involvement and brokering of support is to ensure that projects are sustainable beyond the current funding period and beyond the lifecycle of CILASS (i.e. 2010). Where resources are created, they are brokered across to other departments as appropriate, and often explored in groups, workshops, or in detailed discussions with the LDRA. For the academic, this leads to a plethora of options to engage with the CETL, ranging from minimal one-to-one meetings with the LDRA only, over departmental meetings, to regular attendance at workshops and other cross-curricular opportunities for discussion. The ways in which academics experience these options, and how they might lead to or include the use of networked learning technologies, are further explored in this section of the paper.

The LDRA as a 'connector'

One role of the LDRA is to explicitly make connections among like-minded staff within the institution, and to point project leaders with similar concerns and interests towards each other. This is most often done by citing and explaining similar projects during one-to-one development meetings, followed up with introductory emails where requested. The LDRAs' reflective blog on one occasion counts ten specific examples which were used in one project meeting alone, bringing together various Arts and Social Sciences departments in the process. The LDRAs' detailed knowledge of all projects is vital here. Out of the six detailed responses, four point out connections that have been made, although staff distinguish between connections physically set up by the LDRA and names mentioned which were then followed up by staff themselves. One member of staff points out 'You didn't introduce us to A, B, C, D but you helped encourage us to make these links and to make them productive'.

Two of the project leaders make specific reference to the events organised and facilitated by the CETL:

> [I have] not specifically [made contacts] as a result of an one-off meeting with an LDRA ... but via their facilitation of IBL cafes etc. then certainly yes - I am on nodding (nay speaking and corresponding) terms with at least half a dozen people (probably more like a dozen) in other depts/areas of the Uni who'd otherwise not have known me from Adam.

In one case, connections that began in a CETL-facilitated workshop are in the process of leading to cross-disciplinary research. As becomes apparent in all areas of engagement, though, time available for such commitment is of a premium. As one respondent explains, the lack of contact with other members of staff 'is probably more due to the fact that other commitments preclude this, as opposed to there being a lack of opportunities'.

The fact that those members of staff who regularly attend workshops and other sessions are those who have made the most connections has a number of potential explanations. Dedicating time to discussions and seeing this as professional development assumes that learning and teaching issues are placed particularly high on these individuals' agenda. In general, the CETL has had good attendance from members of staff in the Education department, where research and learning and teaching issues potentially fall under the same category. Other staff with a high attendance rate or specific interest in inquiry-based learning are often 'leaning and teaching advocates' in their specific departments, with a role for disseminating good practice and a pre-existing interest in learning and teaching issues. Inquiry-based learning here is perceived as a useful pedagogical focus:

> I think it does matter that there's a common framework for discussing teaching and learning, otherwise we end up in the unfocused, messy discussions that have characterised some previous [attempts to unite staff in discussions around teaching and learning]. Indeed, one of the strengths of IBL as a concept is that it's focused enough to allow particular things to happen, yet loose enough to incorporate a range of viewpoints; hence the varying adoptions and adaptations in different departments. The concept of IBL provides a peg on which to hang inquiry by different practitioners, and while that peg might easily have been something else - student-centred learning, or (lord help us) research-led teaching - for what it is, it works remarkably well.

As this respondent points out, whilst there are several potential pedagogical foci that would be suitable, it is important to find a common denominator that allows staff to pursue their own goals and ideas within it. The common focus means the CETL – and the LDRAs – due to its central position can help facilitate connections among staff with similar interests. In more than one case, this also includes the use of networked learning technology for learning and teaching.

The LDRA as facilitator for new technologies

As outlined above, each of the two LDRAs has the specific role to broker support from the Library and the University's Learning and Teaching Services (LeTS) respectively. Pedagogic support thus occurs via the LDRA at initial planning stages, but furthermore from the unit who may take over the support and help make it sustainable. This, plus any departmental technicians involved, can significantly increase the number of people involved in a project development team, in one case to seven 'core team members' (three academic members of staff, one subject technician, two members of staff from LeTS (one producer and one graphic designer), and the LDRA for networked learning, plus (in this case) more marginal participation from the subject librarian and support from other members of staff in the department. Once such a substantial project team has developed an approach and/or resource, it is vital that the concept can be disseminated, so that other departments do not have to retrace the same developmental steps, and dissemination can occur at several levels – departmental support staff are likely to outline the concept or resource to other modules they support within the department, academic staff might disseminate either at departmental or national subject level, and the over-arching units, such as LeTS and CILASS, can carry the resource forward to other departments within the institution.

Ensuring that dissemination involves not just what technologies are available, but also how they might be best used from a pedagogical point of view, is vital here. For the members of staff who responded to the research questions above, familiarity with technology was the main point of interest – whilst they might already have heard of the technology in question, having the space and time to use them to the point they felt confident to use them in their teaching was where the LDRA's work had most impact:

> I would never have gone near a video camera without the CILASS project - and I picked up a sympodium pen for the first time this morning after being at the CILASS tech-y training on Friday. It's a drip feed process - time is so short that it's hard to be strategic about new stuff - more a thing about being exposed and then picking up and using ideas as opportunity presents/suggests itself.

Confidence to use technology also translated itself into allowing students to use these same technologies:

> I would also be much more comfortable using digital video cameras, and particularly encouraging students to make their own films, after the short training session yourself and [the member of staff from LeTS] did over the summer.

Finally, gaining knowledge of several technologies allowed staff to make informed choices as to which technologies were best suited to what they wanted to achieve. As one member of staff explains, 'you introduced us to Wikis, blogs and helped us explore social networking ideas.'

At an anecdotal level, communication between staff and the LDRA has helped to de-bunk some myths surrounding social networking sites and to explore their suitability for teaching. Some members of staff connect and communicate via Facebook, both with each other and with their students, exploring the

technology as a way to discuss learning and teaching issues, to contact students before they register with the institution, or simply for personal communication, which nonetheless helps to stimulate a sense of community. One member of staff is using Flickr as a community-based project to explore Sheffield from a photographic perspective, and several members of staff are using blogs in their teaching. One member of staff points out that 'the CILASS blog was the first [blog] I really engaged with'. The following section will explore the usefulness of an institutional blog for inquiry-based learning further.

The CILASS blog

The IBL blog was launched by CILASS in December 2005 as a vehicle for staff to find out about the day-to-day business of the CETL, and to have a central resource for dissemination and discussion. 65 members of staff from various departments across the institution have registered as authors, eight of whom have posted a message. Others use the comments function to respond to posts and interact in this manner. The blog regularly receives over 200 visits a day and is heavily promoted by the LDRAs as part of their work. Out of the seven respondents, one was not aware of the existence of the blog, and one read and contributed regularly. For all others, it was clear the blog was recognised as a useful tool, but time was once more an issue. Responses such as 'to my shame I don't [read the blog]', 'time, he pleaded, time' and 'will hopefully develop good habit of [reading it] when back off research leave' illustrate the pressures staff are under. One member of staff elaborates 'there's no way I could make time to [read the blog] routinely, whereas a meeting works as a way of making time/space'. This response echoes Beetham and Bailey's (2002) finding that one-to-one support meetings were the tool perceived as most useful by staff to initiate and support learning development. Beetham and Bailey comment on this 'labour intensive scenario' (p. 171)

> In future the situation may improve as [project] graduates become sources of expertise in their own right, and as institutions recognize the value of setting aside staff time for personal and professional development (ibid).

The one respondent who contributes regularly to the blog has begun to fulfil that role: 'I've followed more links than I care to remember, and shared them with non-bloggers across the university.' As for the reasons for reading the blog, they state:

> I read it because it 1. keeps me vaguely up-to-date with what's happening in CILASS and with IBL; 2. it builds on and reinforces the sense of community that is one of the nicest things about CILASS; and 3. it's the right level of information - enough to identify future directions, without swamping you in the detail. So I think it's fab.

This statement reinforces the need for 'bite-size' information even for those with a high level of engagement. Although all members of staff state that they enjoy and benefit from opportunities to discuss learning and teaching issues, time pressures mean that the daily requirements of the job are often given precedence. The reference to the sense of community CILASS fosters is an interesting one – as outlined above, this paper is not about communities of practice, yet a community is exactly what the CETL seeks to promote – a singular pedagogical focus helps here to both keep the community manageable and to facilitate those aspects that are traditionally linked to a community of practice, i.e. mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998). The focus on IBL allows staff to share a common approach to teaching and learning issues, and a language to discuss these. Part of the LDRAs' job is to create the space – spatially, temporally and intellectually – to allow all staff within the institution to partake in these discussions.

Conclusion

This paper presents only a brief exploration of how the LDRAs' role is perceived by staff across one institution. Whilst the role itself is comparable with others in various support departments, two aspects of the role are distinct, namely the tight pedagogical focus on inquiry-based learning and the explicit remit to broker and facilitate support from other institutional units. Furthermore, the CETL's efforts to establish a community around inquiry-based learning means contacts across departments are actively encouraged and supported through meetings, discussions and other communication. These efforts are obviously valued by staff, even though time to commit to this kind of development is at a premium. The multi-faceted

approach of 'consultancy-type' sessions, group discussions, drop-in sessions and the use of technology such as the blog, obviously helps to 'catch' as many staff as possible, facilitating the development of a community as specified in the CETL's Theory of Change document. At the same time, though, it could be seen as too overwhelming for one member of staff if they aim to engage with all activities the CETL offers, potentially leading to disillusion and non-engagement. This, however, did not appear to be a problem for the respondents, who, although they might express guilt regarding lack of engagement in certain areas, still feel supported in their endeavours to use technology for inquiry-based learning.

Institutional support to facilitate an increased focus on learning and teaching can be a double-edged sword in today's research-focused higher education environment. Working within the CETL context, however, pre-supposes an institutional commitment to change, as well as existing excellence in the CETL's specific focus, i.e. inquiry-based learning. This makes it easier for the LDRAs to find common ground among practitioners, who, through bidding for CETL funds, declare an interest in the pedagogical focus and the CETL's ethos. At the same time, networked learning technologies have opened many more avenues to facilitate discussions and disseminate information. The blog's daily readership of 200 is encouraging despite the relative shortage of staff-generated posts – turning this passive readership into active engagement is a continuing focus for the CETL. Other technologies, such as Facebook, are offering new opportunities – part of the data for this paper were gathered on Facebook, and links are being made across the institution and beyond. CILASS's focus on inquiry-based learning helps make this both more manageable and more sustainable – although the CILASS community is large, it is by no means the equivalent of the entire institution. A community this size could not be supported by the CETL's limited staff and would require more developmental input and expertise at departmental level.

In line with Beetham and Bailey's (2002) hope for this development of departmental expertise, some staff engaging in CILASS projects are contributing to the dissemination and discussion of inquiry-based learning across the institution, using new technologies as a vehicle where appropriate. This is supported by the CETL's requirement that all project leaders engage in departmental dissemination, and supported by anecdotal evidence that the round of planning following a successful project will include ideas from the same department which build on this project. Again, the CETL actively supports this, but there are concerns to ensure that new projects further develop past concepts and ideas, rather than repeating them in a different context. Networked learning technologies as a tool for discussion and dissemination appear to be most useful for those already engaged, for others, it might be a useful exercise for a limited timespan (e.g. as part of an online workshop), but lack of time precludes any serious ongoing commitment from most staff.

With new technologies continually feeding into both teaching and ways to support development, further research is needed into the most suitable ways to support inquiry-based learning using technology. Institutions are historically slow to respond to change, and the speed with which technology develops and is adopted by students, there is a continued need to find a balance between jumping on the bandwagon of any technological advancement and being left behind and being seen as archaic by students. At the same time, however, responding to students' needs and feelings regarding the use of technology is important, this involving them in research and development holds a vital clue to improving learning and teaching in this area.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Philippa Levy, Academic Director of CILASS, for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.