

The L2L Story

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Abstract

In 2016, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education produced a Professional Development Framework for all staff who teach in Higher Education. Over a two-year period, three Libraries i.e. Dundalk Institute of Technology (lead), Institute of Technology Carlow and Dublin Institute of Technology (since January 1st 2019 DIT is part of Technological University Dublin) reviewed this Professional Development Framework. This chapter presents an overview of the project and sets the scene for the reflections that follow in the book.

Introduction

Human beings have and continue to draw on stories as a way to share and to understand who we are, who we have been and who we are becoming (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013, p. 214)

Stories help us to understand, to share meaning and to build a collective experience and identity. The chapters in this book present a collection of reflections and stories. In capturing them, we present the story of a project from three Irish academic libraries. *Library Staff Learning to Support Learners Learning* (L2L) was a two-year Irish academic library project funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum). The National

Forum is Ireland's advisory body for teaching and learning in Irish Higher Education. It works in partnership with representative bodies, policy partners and the wider student, academic and professional services communities, to enhance teaching and learning for real impact on the learning experiences and outcomes of students. In 2016, it produced Ireland's first National Professional Development Framework for all Staff Who Teach in Higher Education, or PDF (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, 2016). Supporting the enhancement and transformation agenda, the National Forum called for funding applications from those interested in reviewing the PDF. Based on this call, three Irish Higher Education libraries came together and were successful in their application to review the framework through a library lens. The L2L project (l2l.ie) involved staff from the libraries of Dundalk Institute of Technology (lead partner), Institute of Technology Carlow and Dublin Institute of Technology (since January 1st 2019 DIT is part of Technological University Dublin). This book presents reflections and stories from staff on the project team and from others associated with L2L.

The book explores how this project presented opportunities for the three libraries to come together to review the PDF and considers how it informs our practice and continuing professional development activities. As library staff, we are part of a wider complex Higher Education environment. We carry out a range of activities both collaborating in and supporting teaching, learning and research. Through a collection of stories or chapters and shorter 'cameo' pieces, L2L captured reflections. The cameos capture brief reflections and observations from library staff who were involved with the project and from others who were interested in the project. The chapters are reflections from those who engaged directly with the PDF throughout the lifetime of the project and their reflections describe how the PDF not only changed their practice but will also continue to change library practice in the years to come. The chapters and cameos explore themes that arose from our project and may be read independently or collectively as one narrative. They vary in their approach and they capture a snapshot moment in time. Each chapter tells its own story and interprets the PDF in its own distinct and unique way. This is evident in how each chapter raises different and at times contrasting viewpoints and acknowledges the framework in different ways.

A variety of questions arose throughout the project. These include what is the role of library staff in Higher Education, how does library practice evolve over the course of a library career, what is the role of library staff as teachers, how do we as library staff engage with our learners, how do libraries capture their impact and value and how is library practice evolving in a digital environment? These questions came from a range of library staff, some of whom have been working in libraries for a long time; others who are at earlier stages in their career. All are working in different roles with differing responsibilities. By considering these questions and using the PDF to find answers, this book presents insights and advice for other library staff also considering similar issues. By combining cameos and stories in this book, L2L presents a shared experience, a collective account and a unified approach to our professional development, our purpose and our identity.

Professional Development Framework (PDF)

The five Domains of the PDF are (1) The Self (2) Professional Identity, Values and Development (3) Professional Communications and Dialogue (4) Professional Knowledge and Skills (5) Personal and Professional Digital Capacity. The PDF acknowledges that everyone is at different starting points in their professional development and that it means different things to different individuals. It acknowledges that professional development can occur in numerous ways, including those that are collaborative non-accredited e.g. conversations, networking discussion forums, as well as unstructured non-accredited e.g. reading, writing articles, following social media.

The PDF is clear about its values: Inclusivity, Authenticity, Scholarship, Learner-Centredness and Collaboration. These values underpin the five Domains of the framework. Its inclusivity and its approach to values and philosophy, while also acknowledging the importance of specific skills and skills based approaches, are something that the project team felt were unique and distinctive. In our experience, professional development regularly focuses on skills acquisition but the opportunity to consider all aspects contained in the PDF was something that the team appreciated. Furthermore, the PDF intends to support ongoing engagement rather than once-off interventions or a single exploration of its themes. It means to be a life-long career tool. By its very nature, therefore, the framework focuses on the big picture.

Process

Throughout the first year of the project, the project fully explored the PDF, and the focus was on acquiring skills to engage meaningfully in reflective practice, action research and academic writing. This was achieved through seminars and workshops facilitated by experienced practitioners, as well as through peer-assisted learning and individual study. With the successful acquisition of the necessary skills and an increase in self-confidence more generally, the second year saw the project hosting an increased number of seminars focused on different areas of the framework. These seminars were open to the wider academic library community and featured a mix of contributions from external speakers, members of the project team and others – all sharing experiences and learning from each other. Seminar topics included the importance of professional development, a review of professional identity, library staff as ‘third space’ professionals, informal learning spaces, the student experience of libraries, publishing tips for library staff and effective mentoring.

Reflections

How do we see ourselves? Are we primarily library staff with roles unique to libraries? Do we identify as teachers? Are we both? Library staff spend increasing amounts of time supporting teaching, learning and research – both formally and informally. Although feeling welcome in this environment, many staff regularly report they do not see themselves as teachers and feel they are imposters in the process. This was a significant point of debate and considered thoroughly throughout the project. The literature acknowledges terms such as ‘para academic roles’, ‘hybrid librarians’, and ‘blended professionals’ to flag the broad span of academic library work (Corrall, 2010). Indeed, the L2L project was initially titled *Librarians Learning to Support Learners Learning* and changed over time to *Library Staff Learning to Support Learners Learning*, to recognise the valuable work of everyone working in libraries and not just the traditionally qualified librarian.

Work by Celia Whitchurch (2006, 2008) reveals other professional services staff similarly question their role, identity, status and boundaries. Her work highlights the concept of the ‘third space’ professional generally in Higher Education. She remarks that due to expansion and diversification in Higher Education “boundaries are being

breached between, for instance, functional areas, professional and academic activity, and internal and external constituencies” (Whitchurch, 2008, p.1). This has created a third space, a space in which partnerships are now occurring, “partnership with academic colleagues and the multiple constituencies with whom institutions interact” (Whitchurch, 2008, p.1). She discusses emerging spaces and cross boundary roles. The inclusive nature of the PDF and the excitement about the cross boundary roles played by library staff provided great opportunity for L2L participants to reflect on library practice and in doing so to consider the wider Higher Education environment in which libraries operate.

Without doubt, the project was both challenging and rewarding for the participants. Its collaborative nature facilitated valuable exchanges of experience between similar but different institutions, as well as imposing a formal scheduled structure that ensured active engagement. Participants learnt much about the pedagogical process and useful skills to assist teaching and learning (their own and that of others). They also acquired a better understanding of informal learning, its value and the vital role played by all library staff in its delivery.

Although those taking part may have had some prior awareness of action research and reflective practice, the formal L2L sessions delivered during the first 12 months introduced many new concepts and approaches which were essential for the success of the project as a whole and which will be used for years to come. Finally, the self-confidence of many of the team members increased as they gained greater legitimacy and parity of esteem from academic colleagues who viewed their work in a new light. As one of the current authors noted:

The impact of L2L has been enormous. [It] has really helped to change perceptions - amongst library staff themselves and perceptions amongst academic colleagues . . .

I have worked in libraries for 38 years and I am Head of Library Services. I have always seen myself apart from the academic process. Ironically, as I come to the end of my career, it has taken this project to make me recognise that I am a full participant in the academic process and that library staff and libraries are not in a

supporting role but are central to the pedagogical process. I think that has come specifically from participation in this project (Cohen, n.d.).

Outputs

The clearest output from L2L, of course, is this book. The fact that each of the authors felt they had something of value to record, then had the confidence to both write and publish it, is testimony itself to the success of the project.

Equally significant, is the dedicated website (l2l.ie). This hosts a wealth of resources such as videos, reusable learning objects and lists of readings that relate to various themes within the PDF and are intended to support individuals' skill acquisition and their learning more generally. Sustainability is assured beyond the life of the project by each of the three-partner institutions' commitment to maintaining and updating the website into the future.

Other outputs include the seminars referred to above and presentations at professional conferences. A less tangible output has been the formation of an informal Community of Practice including members of the project team and others. Together, this Community of Practice is working towards a greater understanding of the many different approaches to professional development and the techniques available to maximise their benefits. Additionally, this Community of Practice is raising awareness throughout the sector about the importance, not only of professional development, but also about the importance of supporting and recognising it.

In addition, an accredited professional development module for library staff who support learning (to be taught by library staff themselves) is under active consideration and discussions are taking place with the Library Association of Ireland aimed at enhancing formal recognition of professional development through Digital Badges and other means.

Conclusion

In October 2018, the National Forum published its own findings from the initial implementation of the PDF. These findings mirrored closely those of the L2L project:

- The positive impact of the professional development process on individual participants
- The transformative potential on teaching and learning practice of engaging with the PDF
- Individuals who engage with the PDF can gain confidence in their teaching
- The PDF can build strong, inclusive learning communities across all professional identities
- The PDF can be effective across a wide range of professional identities of those who teach in higher education
- The shared understanding of different types of professional development, the values that underpin the PDF and the domains that give it structure can work in practice

(National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, 2018, p. 3).

The National Forum concluded its report with a number of recommendations. They included the need to do the following:

- Elicit support from senior managers for personal and professional development
- Provide time and space for individuals to engage in CPD [Continuing Professional Development] activities
- Seek to accredit CPD within formal programmes of study or professional body awards
- Showcase CPD achievements as part of overall institutional achievements

(National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, 2018, p. 21).

This book captures reflections from contributors on the shared collective experience from the L2L project. That experience would endorse the National Forum recommendations. Indeed, such recommendations are essential in any organisation aiming to inculcate a culture of ongoing personal and professional development amongst its members. Without them, such an aim will be impossible to achieve.

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