

Book Review

Hartley, P., Hilsdon, J., Keenan, C., Sinfield, S, and Verity, M. (2011). *Learning Development in Higher Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

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How would you define Learning Development, Study Skills, Learning Support, or similar, within your own context?

It is quite likely that this text will seriously challenge your views – particularly if you opted for a response which included the words “remedial” or “separate service”.

Part of the “Universities into the 21st Century” series edited by Noel Entwistle and Roger King, this book of 19 chapters focuses on the growing field of learning development within HE. According to the Introduction, the book was edited and written by staff (33 in all) who were involved in the UK’s largest collaborative CETL (Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) – LearnHigher, which ran from 2005-2010.

Despite the large number of contributors with varying experiences and perspectives, there is evidence of a cohesive approach in the development of the book. Each chapter follows a similar framework, starting with a summary and introduction, moving on to underpinning theory and, in most cases, specific case studies, followed by a conclusion. The conscientious reviewer who feels the need to read the text from cover to cover may find this a little predictable, but in fact it enhances the accessibility and usefulness of the text, as the casual “dipper” and more serious reader can easily find ideas which they may be able to adapt to their own setting, or arguments which can be used to demonstrate the need for, or indeed challenge, changes in practice. While some of the case studies may not easily transfer elsewhere, there is a “treasure chest” (p. 256) of ideas and resources which learning developers, lecturers and other facilitators of learning would do well to consider.

The book has a variety of commendable aims outlined in the introduction (p. 2), but it is neatly summed up as:

“part of a push by learning developers to move away from 'ad hoc-ery' towards enquiry-based practices...” (p. 242).

In terms of audience, as indicated (p. 2) it would be of interest to learning developers, lecturers, programme leaders and University managers. It may also be relevant to others who facilitate learning in a HE or FE context.

The book is split into 5 sections, which follow a logical order. Section A, “Defining Learning Development”, consists of four chapters attempting different definitions and elaboration of the role of learning development. While such scrutiny and analysis of a specific role is unusual, and verging on over-descriptive in places, in this context it may be appropriate given the contested definitions of learning development. There are many conceptions of the role, illustrated by the survey (chapter two), and misconceptions, such as the “deficit model” (chapter one). Echoing the “social model” versus “medical model” of disability, the writer asserts that it is the learning environment, rather than the student, which is inadequate (p.17), and this case is generally reinforced throughout the book. These chapters seek to reframe learning development as promoting self directed learning (chapter 3) and emancipatory practice in a socio-political context (chapter 4). Given the contested history, development and contemporary views of HE (chapter 3), perhaps other roles within universities would benefit from a similarly critical reflective investigation into their origins, purpose and how they are perceived.

Section B, “Supporting Students in Transition”, focuses on the approaches used by learning developers to improve a range of student transition experiences. While some areas could do with greater explanation, there are useful practical examples within these chapters. Despite adhering to an agreed framework as outlined earlier, a range of perspectives is evident particularly in this section, for example separate one-to-one support is advocated in chapter 7, while integrated approaches are highlighted in chapter 8.

Section C, “Developing Effective Academic Practice”, demonstrates how specific learning development initiatives can enhance students' academic practices in a range of areas such as students' mathematical confidence (chapter 10) and team working (chapter 12). A particular highlight was the chapter on “Visualising Learning” (chapter 14), which demonstrated innovative approaches to engaging a variety of students with visual practices to promote learning – highly relevant given the increasingly visual nature of some assessment practices.

Section D, “Students and Technology” provides a somewhat dark description of the e-learning policy landscape (chapter 15) which is mitigated by more optimistic strategies to move forward. A valuable new typology of digital learners is proposed (chapter 16). Finally strategies to promote effective time management amongst students who paradoxically can be both distracted and supported by technology are suggested (chapter 17).

Section E, “Looking Into the Future”, provides a summary of how learning development has changed and matured, current challenges and possible future directions.

The book focuses on highly relevant and contemporary issues in the changing context of UK higher education, particularly given the current focus on the student experience. Many of the case studies demonstrate the application of innovative practices in HE, often supported by a

clear evidence base. While there may have been scope to enhance the linkages between the chapters, overall the book develops some clear lines of argument for those who choose to read it sequentially. For “skimmers”, the index and contents are accurate and provide clear reference points.

It is to be hoped that this text will further contribute to the case for “a higher education which is accessible and relevant to all with the ability to benefit” (p.257).