

# Empowering and enabling: leveraging technology for a student-centred future

## Abstract

Notions of a digital future frame this chapter, and from this starting point the affordances of technology in a higher education environment are discussed. The tensions that limit or constrain technologies and their possible leverage for beneficial student outcomes are signposted through the lens of inequality, constraints and the student voice. The vital role that Learning Developers (LD) have in influencing the actualisation of the affordances and negating or minimising the potential challenges by using their knowledge, skills and behaviour forms the central tenet of the work. We argue Learning Developers populate a hybridity of spaces in universities, and draw across professional and academic staff in developing emancipatory practice to inform and enhance the student experience. By drawing upon and sharing best practices, they can be termed third space professionals and colonise these third spaces with fluidity and flexibility, and (co)-create new spaces and places to engage with students. Thus, LDs have a pivotal role to play in realising the affordances of technology.

Key words: Socio-digital inequity, learning development, digital futures, co-creation, third space

## Epigraph

In a research study looking at attitudes to embedding TEL, it was clear that technology was very much about person centred approaches:

*“We are not pushing shiny technology! We are working with the staff to make sure the students have the best learning experience possible” (Holley, Biggins and Supa 2022)*

Instead of being on different sides of the student support divide, Learning Developers can find advocates and supporters within the TEL communities.

## Introduction

Learning Developers populate a hybridity of spaces in universities and draw across professional and academic staff in developing emancipatory practice to inform and enhance the student experience (Abegglen et al 2019). Whitchurch in her seminal work on third space professionals identifies:

*“Learning development and academic practice in support of the student experience, such as tutoring, programme design, study skills and academic literacy.” (Whitchurch 2018 p 1)*

With LD colonisation of third spaces, the fluidity and flexibility can be seen in the new opportunities of space and place to engage with students, their role creates myriad opportunities and challenges.

This chapter is structured around the conceptual model in Figure 1. First, we discuss what a digital future may look like and from this distil the affordances of technology. Next, we address the challenges that constrain how the affordances can be leveraged for beneficial student outcomes, through the lens of inequality, constraints and the student voice. The vital role that Learning Developers have in influencing the actualisation of the affordances and minimising the potential challenges by using their knowledge, skills and behaviour forms the central tenet of the work.

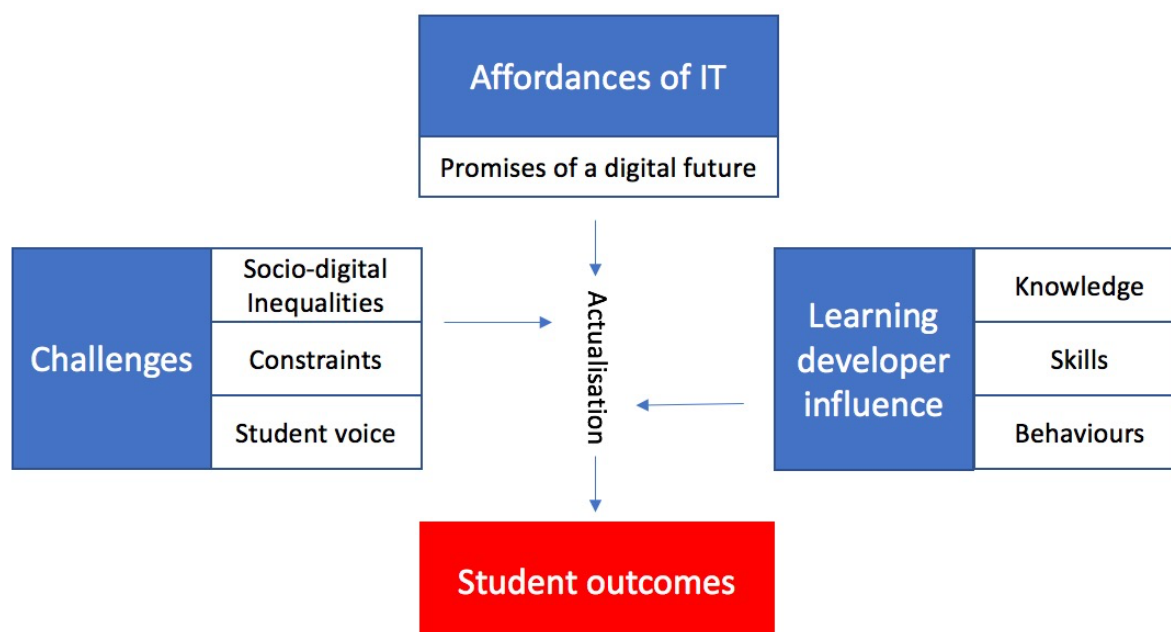


Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing the key role of Learning Developers (created by the authors)

## The affordances of technology and promises of a digital future

The promises of a digital future are portrayed with images of smiling students, engaged staff and seamless hybrid deliveries, beamed out from numerous university websites by those selling these promises. The lens of the Educause Horizon Report™ (2022) focuses on the impact of Learning Analytics and Big Data, the post-Covid return to the classroom and challenges of hybrid/online delivery to generation alpha students, expecting the best of both, and framing the debate in the wider context of the digital economy. The student view at national (Higher Education England) level can be assessed through the JISC Student Digital Experiences Insights report (2022b); this shows students wishing to have access to engaging, well designed materials that support and enhance their learning. However, 43% report low quality materials and despite many (68%) agreeing that online learning was convenient, it was the lack of community (41%) that was the key issue for many. Students turned to each other for support with digital skills, and under half (47%) approached staff. Only 33% had a formal digital skills training needs analysis. The ways in which our students access materials are changing, the OFCOM Online Nation Report (2022) points to increasing online access via smartphones with young adults (90%); and younger adults are also more likely to only use a smartphone to go online, with a third of 25-34s reporting this as the only way they go online.

Interestingly, the latest Jisc Teaching Insights Survey (2022a) reports 89% of teaching staff delivering at least some of their teaching from home, expressing similar difficulties as students relating to access. More than half of respondents experienced problems teaching online and 42% cited poor WIFI connection. Only 55% of teaching staff said they were supported to access online platforms and services off site, and the major platform all use is the Virtual Learning Environment (91%). The use of the VLE as a portal to authentic teaching, learning and assessment experiences such as Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and Extended Reality is limited, and with the metaverse being anticipated to become the next generation of the internet, there is a disjunct between student expectations and staff offerings. The metaverse can be defined as:

*“...persistent 3D virtual space in which users can interact with computer-generated environments and other users. They can be viewed through conventional interfaces such as mobile phones, TVs and monitors, but also through immersive technologies such as augmented and virtual reality.” (OFCOM 2022 p49)*

Until staff develop a skill set in teaching through these fast-emerging technologies, it is difficult to see any significant break through, according to Delphi Panel of experts contributing to the State of XR and Immersive Learning Outlook Report (2021).

## Challenges to realising the affordances of technology

Digital inclusion is defined by the United Nations (UN) as “Equitable, meaningful, and safe access to use, lead, and design of digital technologies, services, and associated opportunities for everyone, everywhere” (UN Round Table).

In the UK, structural inequalities in access to higher education have been identified by the Office for Students in their Digital Poverty Report (2020). This cites disadvantage for those from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME), low income backgrounds and students with a disability. Of particular concern was 4% of students who reported no internet access was possible; this equates to 104,000 students across English Higher Education institutions during the pandemic. Other studies point to education and health inequalities; work by Lui (2021) identifies intersectionality as significant with BAME females with lower social status having the lowest computer/smart phone ownership. Thus inequality of access is complex and societal factors influence across the lives of the excluded.

The framing of inequality ranges from work by Diaz Andrade and Techatassanasoontorn (2020 p185) who call for a deeper critique of moving access online, and their view of digital is that we are becoming an 'enforced' digital society which is "the process of dispossession that reduces choices for individuals who prefer to minimise access to the internet, or even to live offline." These authors point to technology not being benign nor innocent, pointing to national governments and large technology companies displaying what Foucault (1979) would call forms of power that subject human beings to technical control. A more nuanced approach to digital inequality of access is called for by Ragnedda et al (2022); not a dichotomy of access/no access, but a consideration of the degree to which e-inclusion improves wellbeing for individuals, community and society. Helsper (2021) provides Learning Developers with a useful lens to understand the effect of inequalities on student opportunities and engagement. By encompassing inequalities of access, literacy and engagement, Helsper offers contextual factors relating to the economic, social, personal and cultural resources which can benefit/disadvantage the learner. Helsper suggests that small, bottom-up changes can create widespread improvements because all users in that group benefit. As Learning Developers work to identify the challenges faced by particular groups and then design interventions.

The barriers to innovation in the sector are well documented. The future scanning report, the Educause Horizon Report (2019), identified a number of 'wicked' challenges'. These are defined as those that are too complex to even define, much less address. Rethinking the role of educators was identified as a clear barrier to innovation. The Jisc student experience report from 2018 showed only 54% of students surveyed considered technology embedded in their courses suitable to equip them for their future careers. Only 48% rated the overall support for effective online teaching as above average (best imaginable, excellent or good). 44% agreed they were provided with guidance about the digital skills needed in their teaching role and just 14% said they were provided with an assessment of their digital skills and training needs (Jisc 2022b). And post-pandemic, staff did not perceive themselves to be well supported in terms of their digital development.

The changes in the HE sector caused by increased competition, budget constraints and a focus on quality standards have also been fuelled by the growing influence of the student voice in education. Students rightly demand a greater say in their education; and the National Student Survey (England and Wales) additional section with questions on the student voice have added impetus for a more strategic response from HEIs. In response to this, institutions have sought to make the student experience more engaging and collaborative with greater emphasis on activities such as co-creation, partnership and co-production. Student wellbeing is encompassed within the student voice and developing students' skills of becoming mindful practitioners to minimise technostress is advocated by Biggins and Holley (2022).

## The contribution of Learning Developers

In a study at one UK HEI (n=202), it was found that students' knowledge and use of technology exceeded that of many academic staff (Biggins and Holley 2023). However, these findings may exclude some disadvantaged groups, and thus LDs can play an important role as a conduit to facilitating nurturing staff-student partnerships. They are able to select from different pedagogic models available, choosing appropriate approaches, the available technology and contextual information around staff and student capabilities to harness the student voice in a meaningful and effective way (Zaranda et al 2022).

An example of this is the recent growth in the apprenticeships programmes, which have added a new model for the ways institutions interact with students. Institutions need to meet the regulatory

requirements of the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED); and helpfully, this competence-based approach sets out the knowledge, skills and behaviours students are expected to achieve. Institutions are now recognising the different learning needs of these students, in the way that widening participation programmes have done in the past. There is an established knowledge base for Learning Developers, evidenced through a wide range of projects, developed through external funding rounds, community projects and internal resourcing. The commitment to the open is foundational to knowledge generation. UNESCO (2012) defines this as *"teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise ... permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions."* The ALDinHE Professional body is one of the few open access repositories for digital artefacts to be collated, and stored for use and reuse through appropriate Creative Commons licensing (ALDinHE 2023).

LDs have a well-articulated skill set, working in the 'third space' across academic and professional service teams, across disciplines and across institutional boundaries. Drawing upon emancipatory pedagogies and framed by the human-centred work of Friere (1968) who argues that 'education is freedom' and contends that traditional teaching styles keep the poor powerless by treating them as passive, silent recipients of knowledge. Renowned for their creative solutions, Learning Developers are able to facilitate and empower students to learn at a place and time of their own choosing, as outlined in the early work of Sinfield et al (2004).

A seminal work on post-pandemic hybrid learning spaces draws together international perspectives. A key argument points to the blurring of boundaries, and points to new ways of learning that reach beyond physical and social spaces:

*"Students in formal academic programs will fill gaps in their department's curriculum through online courses from other universities, congregating in study groups that bring together local and remote peers alongside 'informal' learners. They will conduct independent research in remote laboratories and collaborate in hackathons and competitions."* (Gil et al 2022, p2)

Such rich and complex technology-mediated modalities of learning, formal, informal and non-formal; individual and collaborative; face-to-face and online, have been growing intensively during the last decade, and have become part of everyday life for young students or lifelong learners.

The notion of hybridity goes far beyond the concept of blending. While the former "considers the introduction of digital elements into non-digital learning contexts (and more recently – the combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction), hybrid learning explores openly broader facets of learning coexistence" (Gil et al 2022, p3).

Behaviours can be viewed as the practical application of one's values. ALDinHE's LD values express the aspiration to gain the most from learning in HE, being inclusive, adapting and sharing practice, pursuing a scholarly approach and being a reflective practitioner (ALDinHE 2023). Applying these values to technology enables the definition of behaviours that include curiosity about how technology can facilitate student learning and staff practice and to be open yet sceptical towards the promises that accompany technological developments. LDs must weigh costs against benefits and consider how technology can promote and expand inclusivity and be equitable to all stakeholders (Donnelly 2022).

The history of technology reminds us that innovation can come from software and hardware developments being used in unexpected ways which prompts us to search out innovative solutions that exploit past investments (Grinbaum Groves 2013). Learning from others and sharing insights

more widely are behaviours that enable all Learning Developers to progress much faster collectively than we could ever do alone.

## Student outcomes

The recent review of blended learning by the Office for Students (OfS 2022) recommended that educational organisations invest in digital training support for staff and students. Less than half (48%) of respondents to the digital experience survey rated their digital support as ‘above average’, down from 54% last year. In addition, only 6% of teaching staff reported being rewarded or recognised for their digital skills. Strategic policy drivers are one way in which technological innovation can occur, and a model that embraces co-creation, digital skill development, lifelong learning and student wellbeing is the Digital Learning Maturity Model (DLMM) proposed by Holley, Biggins, and Supa (2022). Based on three years research with key stakeholders, it comprises a strategic level with policies framing digital learning with the opportunities and challenges this raises; an operational stage that explores the tensions of the operationalisation of strategy; and a level recognising the importance of lifelong learning and digital wellbeing, gaps which both staff and students experience as they struggle with archaic HEI structures and ways of working with technology.

Within the third spaces Learning Developers inhabit; there is what, Gil et al (2022) describe in their as a focus on adaptive/adaptable learning spaces. That is, the flip side of passive, VLE learning spaces, and they see the hybrid blend moving ahead as opportunities for learning to become more active and diverse. Their conclusions suggest space will be utilised in surprising ways, and the authors predict that the space design itself will facilitate students and their freedom to innovate.

A commitment to open education will ensure that digital resources are free to use/reuse for educational purposes, within the constraints of digital equity discussed in this chapter. The United Nations (2022) sustainable development goal for education focuses on ensuring ‘inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all’. This sharing value set, agreed across the globe, matches the ALDinHE values for Learning Developers.

Helsper (2021) in her work on socio-digital equity and potential solutions reflects upon motivations, attitudes and engagement as ways in designing forward to overcome some of the challenges to ensure no student is left behind. It is Learning Developers who possess these in abundance and can lead the way to emancipatory practices within their organisations, to empower and enable students, and to share good practice across their community and networks.

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