UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING THE ROLE OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGISTS IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

T&L

NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Understanding and Supporting the Role of Learning Technologists in Irish Higher Education

Summary of Main Findings

- Participating learning technologists had varied backgrounds and brought a range of skills and knowledge to the role.

- The role of learning technologist has evolved organically within given institutions in response to changing technological needs.

- The role was seen as ill-defined in all but two of the participating institutions. There was a particular tension between the conception of learning technologists as technical support providers versus as academic experts in digital pedagogy.

- Most learning technologists saw few clear progression routes for their careers.

- The main tasks undertaken by learning technologists centred on staff support and training, technical inputs and content creation.

- The work of learning technologists was influenced by the presence or absence of management support, personnel levels, their level of programmatic/strategic influence, the engagement of academic staff, the nature of their campus profiles, and their work environments.

- The professional development of learning technologists took a largely non-accredited, self-directed form. This included networking with colleagues, attending conferences and browsing online resources such as feeds from forums and social media. Time, budget constraints and lack of encouragement were seen as the main barriers to continuous professional development.

Introduction

This briefing paper presents a summary of findings from a qualitative research project conducted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum) exploring the role of learning technologists in supporting academic staff to enhance teaching and learning in Irish higher education. To date, there have been few studies on the place occupied by learning technologists in the sector. The importance of all who teach in higher education being digitally literate and using the opportunities afforded by technology to enhance learning is prioritised by both the National Forum (National Forum, 2015) and national and international policy documents (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; European Commission, 2014). Equally, the National Forum's *National Professional Development Framework for All Staff who Teach in Higher Education* (National Forum, 2016) stresses the need for a professional development approach to higher education which is inclusive of all staff, including learning technologists. It is therefore timely to add to our knowledge of the role of learning technologist, how this role is experienced and how the work of these professionals might best be supported.

Aims of the Study

- To gain an understanding of the professional identities and professional development needs of learning technologists in Irish higher education

- To explore the nature of, and influences on the work of learning technologists

- To determine how learning technologists might best be supported to facilitate the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education

Methodology

Following pilot phone interviews conducted with a sample of professionals working in the area of learning technology/education development in spring 2014, in-depth individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 learning technologists from 13 higher education institutions in autumn 2014. Key themes and issues arising from the pilot phase were reported in the appendices of the National Forum's *Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-2017* (National Forum, 2015) and formed the basis for the in-depth phase of the study, which is the focus of this briefing paper. The in-depth interviews focused on the backgrounds and professional pathways of learning technologists, the characteristics of their work environments, the nature of their work, barriers and enablers to the enactment of their role, and their professional development practices and needs (see Appendix).

Each interview was conducted by a member of the National Forum, either at the given institution or by phone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) using NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10, 2014).

Findings

The findings of the analysis of the interviews, illustrating the roles, responsibilities, contexts and professional development of learning technologists, are now presented.

Who are Learning Technologists?

We use the term 'learning technologists' even though not all our participants held that title. Participants held various titles such as educational technology officer, programme manager, lecturer, head of e-learning, instructional designer, etc. The background of participants included a range of experience in teaching and learning, information technology (IT) and design. The mixed nature of learning technologists' backgrounds suggests that many brought a variety of skills and expertise to their roles, outside of their technical expertise. They brought disciplinary expertise, research skills and a strong commitment to learning design/pedagogical innovation.

Role Development

The data suggests that the role of the learning technologist has grown organically in higher education institutions. The experiences shared by participants are indicative of a bottom-up approach to role development responding to the evolution of campus-based systems, followed by an increasing requirement for the development of online courses and content.

I was always a techie but not formally trained as one, as in, I would have been one of the people dismantling computers back in the mid-nineties for the lads! . . . I started in digital research, so all of my PhD research is done with digital cameras, laptops and OCR software. Off the back of that then I was using those documents and those kinds of skills and training staff in that already, so there was a kind of a staff development angle which then led to here.

Participant 3

So really my initial role was Moodle support . . . And then as the accredited programmes came on stream with the learning and teaching unit in terms of educational technology I got involved in that, and my timetable then went from just being maybe a couple of hours with the e-learning and teaching into being half and half.

Participant 7

Role Definition

Learning technologists recognised that the space within which they operate sits between the technological world and its culture and identity and the physical space on campus and the many cultures and identities contained therein. The vast majority of learning technologists (11 of 13) characterised their roles as ill-defined or inconsistently defined.

Our roles haven't been properly defined and as such they are widening and they widen to expand to include every bit of waking hour oxygen we have, and someone is going to have to draw a ring around it at some point.

Participant 3

Two learning technologists reported clear and consistent structures within which they performed their roles. Others referred to flux, uncertainty and unclear structures as the norm rather than the exception. The benefits that might arise from having a more clearly defined role were articulated by one participant, as follows:

If I was to capture a typical week and my colleagues, say in other institutes, were to capture their typical week and we were able to develop a framework out of that, just say – well look, this is what the role of learning technologist is, or these are things that they do – this is how we can maybe influence what goes on in the college or how we can contribute to a forum on developing, I suppose, digital skills. That would be something, I suppose, that would help me, you know, that I'm part of a wider network that has a formalised structure.

Participant 7

Role Progression

When asked how they would like to see their role develop, one participant expressed a desire to continue in her current role, retaining her current responsibilities, some wished to progress to more senior or managerial roles, while others struggled to see any natural progression path from their current role.

I don't see a progression path. You get to the top of your grade and there you will sit until the day you walk out the door or you decide to be a sole trader or whatever else. So it's problematic but I don't see any political will to grasp that particular nettle.

Participant 3

What do Learning Technologists do?

The tasks undertaken by learning technologists were diverse; in all, 27 different areas of responsibility were cited. The main responsibility with which participants identified was the provision of staff support and training through both group workshops and one-to-one sessions. How participants defined such work ranged from providing basic support for programmes/projects to enabling staff to develop competencies to become more independent.

Technical inputs and content creation were also seen as a large part of their role. This aspect comprised five key areas: creating online content, technical support, technical consultations, working with campus-based technologies such as video or white boards and working with virtual learning environments such as Moodle or Blackboard. There was clear evidence in the data that, like staff support and training, this facet of the learning technologist role meant different things to each of the participants with some seeing it in terms of performing technical tasks and others in terms of empowering staff to perform such tasks themselves.

Factors Shaping the Work of Learning Technologists

There were a number of factors shaping the nature of the work of learning technologists:

- The **perspectives of management** on the nature and importance of the work of the learning technologist was an influential factor on the enactment of the role.

    I think prioritising it at an institutional level, it does have to come from the top. I think that, when I've looked at other universities that are doing things that I admire, what they've always said is that it came from the top down. So once there was buy-in from the executive, or the president was singing about it at every meeting and talking about what a great success the university was because of it, then it was adopted.

    Participant 12

- Related to management buy-in, **personnel decisions** directly affected the nature, scope and effectiveness of learning technologists' work. The size of the team determined how much time and space learning technologists had to go beyond basic support and operational tasks. Additionally, short term contracts acted as a barrier to long-term development tasks.

Because the amount of administrators is so little and there is such a range of very important features and functions that only the administrator can perform, such as restoring a course that is being backed up . . . you can be very busy sometimes doing I suppose the lower end tasks maybe or the first level tasks. So yeah, that is basically just because of really a lack of personnel.

Participant 5

I am still not on a permanent contract and I have been here seven years . . . Even the tutor would be on a rolling contract, so I can't guarantee that he'll be there next year to deliver [programme name] and it will fall back to me again, where I am doing the one-to-ones, and the groups, which is going to take me away from all the other developments that I see myself working on.

Participant 12

- The degree to which learning technologists were proactive or reactive in their roles depended on various factors including the **level of strategic or programmatic influence** they enjoyed in their respective institutions:

We're kind of very much dealing with reacting to outside forces. So, there's not that huge time for reflection or 'how can we make this better?' . . . Outside forces are courses that have to be developed. So people would have designed and agreed on courses starting at a particular date, academics would be lined up . . . the students know their date, that date is not movable, everything has to be ready for the students, so that's the kind of constraint.

Participant 13

I am now helping the Director of the Centre of Teaching and Learning to draft teaching and learning strategy and policy and within that we will have obviously a blended learning policy. We have done one already but it is yet in draft form for ourselves. We want to really fine tune it a small bit more. So I do that, my new role has that responsibility within it as well.

Participant 5

- There was an acknowledgement that the nature of the work done is significantly dependent on the **engagement of academic staff** and what level of technological independence they obtain. Learning technologists cannot progress beyond basic support work if academics do not engage and become self-sufficient.

I worked with a lecturer for the past couple of months and both me and him collaborated to create three units of content . . . When we finished it we were both delighted with it, it just feels like that's something that they could use for the next 10 years, you know, and it could really help students, even students who have been in the course for like two or three years and they just want to refresh their knowledge on stuff. It felt like something that could be really useful for learning.

Participant 1

Yeah, well, buy in from staff comes when they have the support in place and the motivation and the strategic drive in place. So yeah, there needs to be some strategically clear directions as to what is expected and valued as well, for people to invest their time and their effort in it and they need to be supported.

Participant 8

- The **campus profile and work environments** of learning technologists also affected their ability to optimise the potential of the role. Half of participants enjoyed some level of structure, well-resourced working environments, access to senior management and visibility on campus. However, others had a different experience:

To be honest I think there are still quite a lot of people who don't even know that we are here or that we might be just an extension of computer services. If this office could be different, if it could be in a more accessible place, it is still accessible but it's in a building that people might not necessarily go to quite often . . . if we had a better kind of room specifically for recording and creating content like that with lecturers one-to-one, it would be a nice meeting space as well, because at the moment it might be seen a little bit like 'oh well, let's go visit the dungeons'. So something a bit more friendly, something a bit more open and something more visible.

Participant 1

Professional Development of Learning Technologists

Unstructured, non-accredited professional development was the principal means of continuous professional development cited by the learning technologists (National Forum, 2016). Such professional development involved searching online resources such as feeds from forums and social media to identify and explore new technologies and new ideas concerning the effective use of technology in an educational setting.

Generally, it would be kind of informal training, so it would very much be based off our own backs. I suppose the nature of our background in terms of multimedia would be that you'd be expected to keep up-to-date with new versions of software and so forth . . . So we would generally tend to just train ourselves.

Participant 6

Collaborative, non-accredited professional development, in the form of chatting with colleagues and networking with learning technologists in other institutions, was also seen as a key mechanism for keeping up to date with developments in the field (National Forum, 2016). However, opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration were not always available and this was considered an area where support was needed.

I would have mostly alerts coming to my emails, I subscribe to a lot of different things. Every now and again, you just sort of hear about somebody else who has tried it, because I would have friends who do my job in other institutions as well, and they're trying out something, or they'll put up a presentation that shows the things that they've developed this year, or what they tried out.

Participant 12

Structured, non-accredited professional development, in the form of research and conference attendance, was also favoured (National Forum, 2016).

Well I suppose the key thing is the conference. So I would try and attend EdTech, I'm attending the web summit this year as well, and I would try and attend maybe any kind of educational technology conferences that I'd be able to get to, just to keep up-to-date with what's going on.

Participant 7

Time and budget constraints were seen as the main barriers to professional development.

You are constantly, you know, chasing your tail because there is so much work, you don't have much time for doing research or, you know, just browsing the internet or chatting to colleagues in other industries to find out what's going on. I actually find it very difficult at the moment I would have to say. We could do with more personal development going on because, you know, you learn how to use a particular piece of software and the software moves on but, you know, that continuous development is not there, you are kind of always chasing it, so more time for personal development would be brilliant.

Participant 11

Another barrier perceived by some participants was a lack of encouragement from management for learning technologists to participate in professional development.

Going back five or six years I would have written papers, I would have gone to conferences, I would have tried to publish, now I wouldn't have time to write anything, I wouldn't have time to do any research like that. Yeah. But I mean when I, if I bring that up I'm told it's not really part of my job anyway. It wouldn't be a priority, you know, it wouldn't be a priority.

Participant 11

Recommendations: Supporting Learning Technologists to Facilitate the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Institutional Recognition of the Importance of the Work of Learning Technologists

- The data in this study emphasises the importance of a clear link between the strategic goals of institutions with regard to technology-enhanced learning and the level of support experienced by learning technologists on the ground. If the work of learning technologists is to be optimised, continued consideration of this link is recommended when making decisions with regard to staffing and resources.

- It was equally clear that authentic engagement of academic staff is a prerequisite of the technological enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education. Management can play a key role in raising awareness among academic staff of the benefits that can accrue from co-operating with learning technologists, both in terms of staff professional development and student learning.

Commitment to Non-accredited and Accredited Professional Development

- For a learning technologist, an important part of keeping up to date with technology and related pedagogies is having the time to read blogs, journals and social media, and investigate and try out new applications and software as it becomes available. This unstructured, non-accredited professional development needs to be recognised and accounted for as a fundamental part of the role to allow learning technologists to make well-informed decisions on how best to enhance teaching and learning within their institutions.

- The provision of accredited professional development for learning technologists is also important both from the perspective of enhancing the skills and knowledge on which their work relies and creating a clearer sense of community and professional identity for the profession.

Facilitation of Cross-Institutional Collaboration

- Related to the collaborative professional development of learning technologists is the importance of their exposure to colleagues working in a similar role within other institutions. It would be beneficial for networking with other institutions to be seen as a core rather than a peripheral activity. There is a need for a shared space where learning technologists can upload unbranded standardised content and collaborate in ways which would promote innovation and avoid duplication of efforts across the sector.

The National Forum values the increased understanding gained through this research and will take cognisance of its findings in all relevant future work. Specifically, these findings will inform the ongoing development of the *National Professional Development Framework for All Staff who Teach in Higher Education* (National Forum, 2016). Learning technologists will be one among a number of groups selected to pilot the Framework in 2016/17. This will allow them to further interrogate their professional development opportunities and pathways, more clearly define their role and situate their development needs within those of the sector as a whole.

Acknowledgements

References

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Appendix - Interview Protocol

General

How did you get into this area of work?

Tell me about a typical day.

What is the set-up of your work environment?

Who do you interact with in your role?

How do you keep up to date with new technology for enhanced learning?

Barriers/ Enablers

At what point did you feel you really made a difference in your institution?

What supports enabled you to achieve this?

Describe a time when you felt you couldn't achieve what you wanted to in your institution?

What was preventing you from achieving your goal?

Progression

How would you like your role to develop?

What future/potential roles could you see yourself moving into?

Is there anything more your institution could do to support you in your role?

What can the National Forum do to support you in your role?

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