

Creating a Professional Identity:

Workshop report

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It is important for learning advisors to develop a professional identity, not only to assist us as practitioners, but also to safeguard and promote our status within our institutions. The aim of this 'hands-on' workshop facilitated by members of the Canterbury Tertiary Alliance Learning Advisors group was to provide an opportunity for conference delegates to reflect on and discuss the nature of the tertiary learning development profession; to identify common understandings / beliefs amongst tertiary learning advisors in Aotearoa NZ; and to use these common understandings as a first step towards developing a 'professional practice' document. This paper outlines the workshop and summarises the views of the participants.

The need for a professional identity

The role of learning advisor in Aotearoa New Zealand is a relatively new one and learning advising as a profession is still developing. A key event in that process was the establishment of a professional organisation, ATLAANZ, in 2000, the aims of which include “support[ing] the professional development and practice” and “promot[ing] the professional status” of members (ATLAANZ Constitution, 2.2 & 2.4). However, although the issue of professional practice has been discussed at several previous conferences (e.g. Rimoni & Huddleston, 2000; Brown & Richards, 2002), as members of ATLAANZ we have no clearly articulated common understanding of what is meant by the ‘professional practice and status’ of a learning advisor in Aotearoa New Zealand. The development of a document that encapsulates our professional identity would, we believe, not only define us as practitioners but also safeguard and promote our status within our institutions and the tertiary sector as a whole. This workshop was designed as a first step towards that goal.

The workshop

In developing the workshop, we considered two approaches: inviting participants to adapt an existing professional practice document from a similar organisation, or inviting them to ‘start from scratch’ in creating such a document. The first was an appealing option. In many ways, the evolution of ‘developmental educators’ in the United States and ‘language and academic skills advisors’ in Australia, (Casazza & Silverman, 1996; Crasswell & Bartlett, 2001) parallels that of learning advisors in Aotearoa New Zealand, and professional practice documents such as those by Casazza and Silverman (1996) and van der Wal, Hicks, McGowan & Carmichael (1998) are likely to resonate with learning advisors here. On the other hand, we felt there was value in using a more organic approach to create a truly ‘endemic’ document. Ultimately, we decided the Aotearoa New Zealand experience was sufficiently different from that of other countries to warrant the second option.

The workshop had three objectives:

- To provide an opportunity for reflection & discussion on the nature of the tertiary learning advisors profession
- To identify common understandings / beliefs amongst tertiary learning advisors in Aotearoa NZ
- To use these common understandings as a first step towards developing a ‘professional practice’ document

We began by outlining the rationale for developing a professional practice document and, using Casazza and Silverman's (1996) framework, discussing the criteria for a profession (see Figure 1). We then introduced four elements that might be included in a professional practice document for learning advisors: values and beliefs, practice and role, theoretical frameworks, and qualifications and qualities. These were not intended as a definitive set of elements, but were ones we considered most learning advisors would have already reflected on and would therefore be a useful starting point. For each of these elements, we had devised one or two probe questions to elicit participants' views (see following section).

- A common body of knowledge & skills
- A way to transmit and store knowledge
- Professional associations
- A set of ethical guidelines
- Standards for practice
- An accepted terminology
- Ability to adapt knowledge & practice to novel situations

Figure 1. The common criteria of a profession (Casazza & Silverman, 1996, p.252)

The participants were divided into groups of four or five so that each group contained a mix from universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and private training establishments. In the first phase of the workshop, participants worked on one of the four elements, writing a series of statements in answer to the probe questions. The aim was for the participants to sum up the consensus of the group. In the next three phases, these statements were passed on to other groups to amend or comment on, so that by the end of the workshop each group had been able to contribute to each of the four areas and both the commonalities and the points of difference amongst participants had emerged. The consensus views of the groups are summarised below, along with brief comments from the facilitators.

The workshop participants' views

1. Values & Beliefs

When discussing Language and Academic skills advisors, Cargill, Percy and Bartlett (2003) state that "the range of base disciplines from which we come seems to be extremely wide, and it appears that shared values, rather than a shared base of content knowledge often characterise us most clearly." What are the essential values underpinning our practice and how do these relate to our core objectives?

Learning is a partnership between the learner and learning advisor. Learning Advisors are therefore committed to the principle of equal educational opportunities for all. Learning Advisors support biculturalism in the Aotearoa New Zealand context and the partnership obligations under te Tiriti o Waitangi, Treaty of Waitangi. Learning Advisors promote independence and lifelong learning for the purposes of empowering students to achieve their learning goals and experience success. Learning Advisors have appropriate regard for every student's particular needs and respect for their background and personal experience of learning.

As professionals, Learning Advisors uphold the integrity of their profession by conducting themselves ethically in all aspects of their practice with students and colleagues. They apply academic rigour in a fair, flexible and open minded way in their academic and collegial relationships. To ensure best practice, Learning Advisors value reflective practice within teams.

Comment: Participants agreed that student centred learning was the primary value. Integrity in practice was identified but less easy to define.

2. Practice & Role

If you had to induct a new Learning Advisor in your centre, how would you explain to him/her the role, both in terms of the work with students and the responsibilities towards the institution?

Who does – and should – set our professional practice guidelines?

Learning Advisors have a teaching and learning focus. Their aim is to facilitate the academic achievement of all students. Learning Advisors value students' existing knowledge, skills and experience. They facilitate students' own learning development by helping them to acquire further skills and abilities and by demystifying the academic system. These, in turn, give students the confidence to become independent learners. Rather than being prescriptive and directive, advisors use questioning to encourage the student to take control of their own learning.

The learning advisor both complements the work of other academic and general staff and collaborates with them to achieve better outcomes for students. The form of collaboration differs from institution to institution. The essence of collaboration is good relationships. If these are created then advisors can contribute towards good practice and processes within the institution. They can serve as a source of feedback and feedforward between students and lecturers.

Learning advisors need to work within institutional guidelines and have input into the setting of the guidelines.

Comment: There was consensus on what our practice and role should be within our units. Our role within the institution and our working relationships with other staff were more contentious.

3. Theoretical framework

What are our core beliefs regarding the nature of learning / our work with students?

Which, if any, theoretical framework reflects these?

Students bring with them a diversity of knowledge, backgrounds and learning styles, and it is crucial that these are taken into account in the process of facilitating their development as effective life-long learners. In order to learn effectively, students need to understand their own learning process and become independent learners.

In our work as learning advisors, it is important to be familiar with, and acknowledge, the diverse range of theoretical frameworks that guide our work. The closest theoretical perspective is constructivism. However, there are borrowed elements from a range of disciplines (for instance, Maori pedagogy, educational psychology, language teaching) and models.

Comment: There was a high degree of consensus regarding the first question. There was much more difficulty articulating – and reaching agreement on – the theoretical frameworks that underpin our work.

4. Qualities & qualifications

*Bearing in mind the diversity of our institutions and jobs, what specialist knowledge and skills to underpin our practice do you see as essential for learning advisors?
What qualities & qualifications are essential in our role?*

Professional learning advisors are student focused. They display qualities of empathy, patience and open-mindedness, and non-judgemental attitudes. They demonstrate the necessary skills and knowledge and are committed to life-long learning and professional development. Learning advisors should have knowledge of the metacognitive and learning processes and exemplify effective teaching, writing skills, and oral communication skills such as listening and questioning.

Professional learning advisors in full time continuing positions should hold a postgraduate degree or be working towards such a qualification. An appropriate teaching qualification, and/or relevant experience, could be a clear advantage. The development of a Certificate in Tertiary Teaching and Learning Advising would provide a valuable qualification and both support and enhance the professional status of learning advisors within their institutions.

Comment: There was wide consensus on the qualities of learning advisors. Much greater debate was generated by the level of qualifications required.

Where to now?

The workshop generated enthusiastic discussion. Out of that discussion emerged several recurrent themes, especially those of ‘student centredness’, ‘empowering students to become independent and life-long learners’, and ‘having respect for students’ backgrounds’. At the same time, there was (at times heated) debate over many of the questions and issues posed.

We intended that this workshop be a first step towards developing a professional practice document. We hope that over the next year the workshop participants will continue the discussion in their institutions and bring their ideas back to a follow-up session at the next ATLAANZ conference. Working sessions such as this, however, are constrained by conventional conference formats. In this workshop, the time allocation limited the amount of discussion, and the number of parallel sessions on offer made it difficult to ensure wide representation and to enable all participants to attend the whole session. For this reason, we suggest organising a dedicated half or whole day ‘add on’ to next year’s conference – in essence, an additional ‘working conference’ – to enable members of ATLAANZ to continue the process of developing a document that encapsulates our professional identity.

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