

Chapter I

“Oily Rag” or “Winged Messenger”: The Role of the Developer in Multiprofessional Teams

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ABSTRACT

This chapter has been composed as a piece of reflective practice, and as such traces and researches the development of a new technology-rich first-year module from the point of view of one particular developer, myself. The main emphasis in my role was on advising and assisting with the development of a student learning experience that provided, above all, an inquiry-based learning environment for students to acquire the skills necessary to succeed in their ongoing degree. Technology and e-learning offered a number of interesting options for development and implementation, necessitating the further brokering of technological expertise. The chapter highlights the collaborative issues that occur in a multiprofessional team working in such a developmental environment, and explores the role of the developer and how this role might be interpreted by other staff and institutions. The chapter concludes by offering ideas for future research into what remains an emerging field of scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

The constant development of new technologies over recent years has made it less and less possible for individual lecturers to remain abreast of developments and make informed choices

regarding the use of technologies for new courses and modules without consulting others. At the same time, the creation of specialist technology or pedagogical support units at many institutions has meant that, frequently, more support than ever before is available. The issue is its discovery and

utilisation. As a result, the development of new technologically rich modules is becoming an increasingly collaborative process, requiring not only group work skills, but also advanced project management practices from all involved.

BACKGROUND

The context for this chapter results from a government-funded initiative to establish Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) at higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland. In 2005, 74 such CETLs were established, all building on existing excellence within institutions, and all with a strong remit to support new learning and teaching initiatives. At the University of Sheffield, the Centre for Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS) currently supports 19 departments within three core faculties, namely, the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences, and Law. Two learning development and research associates (LDRA)s, one specialising in information literacy and the other in networked learning, support inquiry-based learning projects within these departments, and also broker support from professional learning services within the institution, such as the library and the Learning Development and Media Unit (LDMU). In searching the literature, it appears that the terminology describing the role of an individual involved in planning, advising on, and developing academic content and pedagogy, which includes the component of technology, is by no means clear (Fraser, 2001; Oliver, 2002; Wright & Miller, 2000). For me, the role of an LDRA for networked learning originally seemed a very specific description, especially within the main remit of inquiry-based learning. There are, however, distinct overlaps with the more traditional roles of learning technologist, educational developer, educational technologist, academic developer, and further variations on the same themes. For this reason, this chapter draws on literature from all

these fields to explore the issues surrounding the collaboration that leads to the implementation of innovative projects in the field of e-learning.

Oliver (2002) identifies the role of educational technologist as being both marginal (in terms of contract and security) and powerful (in terms of remit linked to “strategic priorities,” p. 245). His study, based on six interviews with learning technologists, identifies issues that are mirrored in this study. This included the time commitment a collaborative development requires, tensions between responsibility and marginality, and the way in which the developer or technologist is regarded by senior management and/or collaborating academics. Further issues involved the specific skills required of the role, such as constant repositioning of context from project to project, fast acquisition of knowledge related to such context both at the subject and pedagogical level, and the requirement to stay abreast with technological developments in the field. Hicks (1997) outlines the future of the educational developer with the need to be entrepreneurial about the role and position, to lead the institution in the area of educational technology, and to play an active role in determining strategic directions. Wright and Miller (2000) seek to outline future professional development and accomplishment for the educational developer, a future that includes the “integration of scholarship and practice” (p. 21), a focus that does not feature in Oliver’s paper. However, both Oliver and Wright and Miller describe a role that, potentially more so than others, is fast paced, instrumental for institutional change, and highly demanding, yet not necessarily recognised for its importance. Gosling (2001), in reviewing the work of educational development units in the United Kingdom, draws on work by several authors (e.g., Candy, 1996; Hounsell, 1994; Moses, 1987). He remarks that the work traditionally classified as carried out by educational development units—curriculum design, learning support, staff development, organisational and policy development, and student learning development—overlooks the scholarly

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