Learning Development in Higher Education
Peter Hartley, John Hilsdon, Christine Keenan, Sandra Sinfield, Michelle Verity (Eds.)
Palgrave Macmillan (2011)
Review by David Mathew

For the purposes of this book, learning development is ‘typically defined to include areas of practice such as study skills, academic advice, lifelong learning, and learning support’. At first, this definition (on page 1) seems uncontroversial enough; and the scope of the book seems impressive and generous, especially if there will also be discussions on challenges, such as ‘the proposition that in some circumstances learning development may be part of the problem rather than the solution’.

It is structured in five sections. In the first, the contributors’ task is to expatiate on what learning development might be. Not only is it (in the words of John Hilsdon) ‘a complex set of multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary academic roles and functions, involving teaching, tutoring, research, and the design and production of learning materials, as well as involvement in staff development, policy-making and other consultative activities’, it is also misunderstood (and by implication, maligned), according to the chapter by Linda Murray and Bob Glass. Assuming not even an ideal world, but more a well-thought-out industry in which occupation terminology is more or less constant (we can dream), is a learning developer an academic or non-academic position? Murray and Glass (inadvertently, perhaps) call for this debate, while acknowledging that ‘there seems to be some way to go before a full awareness of what [LD services] actually do is reached outside of the learning development community itself.’ While learning developers, for example, see themselves as ‘professionals, specialists, teachers, experts, academics’ etc, the students have different ideas: proof readers and counsellors, for instance.

Ann Barlow, John Acroyd and Alyssa Phillips consider learning development as ‘part of the problem’: ‘How much individual responsibility should university staff
require students to take for their own learning?’ they ask. And it’s a good question. The authors follow it up with a full chapter; but whether we are in the camp that believes that we mollify our students, or the camp that believes that students have earned (or paid for) the right to as much support as they can bear, the ‘problem’ would seem to be divided between the unquantifiable nature of the service itself (i.e. ‘how much?’) and a host of other factors. Undoubtedly it is a chewy subject in an excellent chapter, which also includes retrospective acuity – a passage on approaches to learning in the university’s history – and even a comparison between eighteenth century rationalism and a contemporary study skills manual!

The second section ‘looks at approaches taken by learning developers to improve a range of student transition experiences’. Over the course of five chapters we learn (again) that for want of a name the kingdom was lost (as it were): this time with respect to personal development planning. What is it? How can it be used effectively when ‘Some academic staff take a view that PDP is irrelevant to their subject’? (in a chapter by Christine Keenan). Certainly the notion that PDP involves – no, demands – the engagement of learners and staff is abroad in this section’s chapters, and the opinions on independent learning, expectations, and on student transition itself are usefully explored (by Ed Foster, Sarah Lawther and Jane McNeil).

The development of effective academic practice is the focus in the third section of the book. This contains interesting contributions on the subjects of academic writing, conceptual drawing, multimedia, the possibility of interdependence between learning and research, and the struggle to build student confidence in numeracy. It was heartening to see so much ground covered in fifty-odd pages, a compliment that I would like to extend to the whole book, adding to my comment on generosity in my opening paragraph.

The fourth section – on students and technology – is every bit as thought-provoking as what has preceded it (although not always for the right reasons), and initially every bit as helpfully shameless in its admission as to how little is known about the subject. However, it swiftly becomes apparent that there is something slightly odd here; that we do know more than the book is letting on. Warily nodding in agreement with comments about ‘a new and emergent pedagogy’ (in a chapter by Debbie Holley, Tom Burns, Sandra Sinfield and Bob Glass), or about costs and benefits, your reviewer was struck by how old most of the references were, with very few more recent than 2007. Online learning, a new and emergent pedagogy? Well, yes; but not in the way that this chapter’s authors mean. Undeniably well-written, this chapter is already half a decade out of date, especially given the context of rapid changes in learning in an online milieu.

No doubt it will seem unfair that I would highlight issues that are probably not the editors’ fault. Indeed, it is only when reading about a period of e-learning (and even the term e-learning) that is mostly in the past that one acknowledges the realities and vicissitudes of publishing schedules. I would guess that this book has been in the works for some time, but this does not tarnish its shine. Nor are my comments meant harshly: quite the opposite. The section on technology might have dated faster than the other sections, but it was good to remember Prensky, for example; and credit to all of the authors involved.

Ending with a look at steps for the future, Learning Development in Higher Education is a book that should be of interest to anyone in H.E... in which group I would include students. Although the book was not prepared with a student readership in mind, it occurs while reading that it might be a good idea sometimes to let our learners have a peek behind the curtain and to glimpse the diligence with which we, either directly or indirectly, endeavour to augment their university experience.