

Learning Innovation in Higher Education: Understanding the Contributions of Learning Professionals Across the Institution

Dr. Patrick Howard, Robyn Neal, Meghan Schaller
Department of Education, Cape Breton University

Abstract

This paper explores the emergent field of learning innovation. Drawing on the work of Kim and Maloney (2020), learning innovation is understood as the interplay between a complex set of practices, methods, and designs as attempts by higher education to improve teaching and learning. The term *innovation* speaks to the intentional investment in change to improve practice. Recently, there has been “a turn to learning” in higher education that was accelerated in 2020 with the move to online learning in response to the Covid pandemic that required an intense focus on designing for student learning (Kim & Maloney, 2020, p. 4). In this research we inquire into the contributions of learning professionals at one university. The work of these professionals is undertaken outside the traditional delineation of teaching and learning as being the sole responsibility of faculty in the classroom. One early research focus to emerge has been the changing roles and identity of professional staff in higher education. Early findings build on earlier research by Whitchurch (2008, 2012) and point to new directions for research into the ways learning innovation is predicated on how universities make space for scholar-practitioners within campus organizations and service units to improve the learning experience for all students.

Key words: learning innovation; professional identity; non-faculty learning professionals; turn to learning

Introduction

This research was inspired by the work of Kim and Maloney (2020) whose book *Learning Innovation and the Future of Higher Education* challenges those in higher education to look within to critically take stock of how post-secondary institutions are evolving to reflect innovative pedagogical approaches and learning strategies. Traditional delivery models and the predominantly one-way, transmissive pedagogical approaches that have been the staple of university teaching have been disrupted with the expectation by students for more inclusive, personalized, active, and engaging teaching and learning.

The single faculty member as the primary conduit for all things related to teaching is fading fast in universities. The lines between those whose focus is pedagogy, learning, instructional design, and providing student teaching and learning supports are blurring. This shift has not been well documented. At Cape Breton University (CBU), like most other post-secondary institutions, over the past five years there has been incredible growth in the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the services the unit provides. In addition, student services have grown exponentially to meet student learning needs, to provide remedial assistance in math, science, writing, classroom supports and learning strategies, technology assistance, experiential learning placements, and

career counselling. In life skills and mental health services, teaching and learning is a central focus.

In the development of new course and program proposals, attention to pedagogy, teaching, learning, and technology integration are showing up as elements to be evaluated before new programs are approved. University service units are growing and staffed with people whose everyday concern is teaching and learning. They engage with students and/or faculty either individually or in small groups to share important information and develop new skills. These changes are indicative of a “turn to learning” that has accelerated throughout the higher education sector (Kim & Maloney, 2020, p. 23). As never before, non-faculty learning professionals work alongside faculty experts in a range of positions in which teaching and learning is central to the role. These positions will continue to be instrumental in higher education as universities continue to challenge traditional learning models and adapt to changing social and cultural expectations that have disrupted teaching and learning in higher education over the past decade.

This response to change is characterized by a growing commitment to learning innovation. Kim and Maloney (2020) define learning innovation as “the complex interplay of ideas, methods, and theories that underpin and explain how our universities structure the learning experience” (p. #). This research is focused specifically on the rise of the non-faculty learning professional at Cape Breton University. Through an initial case study approach, we ask: Who are these learning professionals? What are their roles? How do they support students and faculty? What is the nature of the interaction between learning professionals, faculty, and students? How do these scholar-practitioners identify within the academy? How do they understand their roles? What are their supports? What is the nature of the relationship where faculty and professional staff inform the work of each other to strengthen the entire learning experience for students? These are some of the questions that were the focus for this inquiry.

Background

The past two decades have seen disruptions in traditional post-secondary models of teaching and learning. Kim and Maloney (2020) point to the American experience and the seismic disruption to higher education that manifested in a few ways. First, they point to the year 2012 and the advent of the massive online open courses (MOOCs) as a clarion call for universities. Critics of post-secondary education and the university model, specifically Silicon Valley and tech entrepreneurs, vowed that the MOOC would spell the demise of traditional post-secondary institutions as they promoted alternative models for upskilling, credential-ing and training dependent on technology and online learning. Kim and Maloney (2020) remind the reader of the prediction by Sebastian Thrun, founder of Udacity, who imagined a world fifty years in the future in which there were only ten institutions of higher education. Institutions of higher education were paying close attention.

Kim and Maloney published their book in 2020 just prior to what is now considered a second seismic shock to how post-secondary institutions have traditionally delivered education over centuries. COVID-19 precipitated a wholesale shift in learning and delivery models. In a matter

of weeks and months universities scrambled to meet new realities of the crisis as courses were re-configured and re-designed to be offered online synchronously or asynchronously. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across all continents were forced to transition to online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The accelerated transition to online learning prompted scholars to quickly investigate factors regarding the design, delivery and evaluation of pandemic-imposed teaching and learning. These quick responses by the global research and practice communities helped generate a large corpus of knowledge about online learning (Zhang et al., 2022). This investigation of factors also led to an in-depth focus on teaching and learning that was unprecedented in the history of post-secondary institutions including many old and venerable schools.

Kim and Maloney (2020) call this shift “a turn to learning” as a revolution in higher education with a long tail (p. 23). Teaching and learning have shifted dramatically in the last two decades due to a few additional factors. First, learning science has influenced our understanding of how people learn. There have been several influential books published recently that make the findings of cognitive science accessible to a wide audience of eager practitioners (Nowak, 2019). In Canada, landmark court cases, the adoption of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and Canada’s signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities have re-shaped education, initially at the k-12 level, and incrementally at the post-secondary level as students who have been taught using inclusive and differentiated methods to accommodate for individual learning needs expect the same from their higher education learning experience (Khouri et al., 2022; Watts et al., 2023).

Post-secondary education institutions are evolving to meet the new teaching and learning demands of students. The one-way transmissive, “banking” model as described by Freire (1970) of teaching that has been the staple of university learning for centuries is giving way to student centered, engaging, active and personalized approaches (p. 72). According to Kim and Maloney (2020) the turn to learning and how institutions go about understanding and designing for student learning is little understood and documented. They write, “Little work has been done... to examine how advances in the science of learning translate into organizational changes across higher education” (p. 5). It is also not clear how the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is helping to inform and change higher education writ large. Nor is it clear how societal changes and the expectation of a new generation of students for individualized, inclusive education approaches are being factored into systematic organizational approaches and initiatives (Brewer, Urwin, & Witham, 2023).

Learning Innovation

By bringing “learning” and “innovation” together Kim and Maloney (2020) are proposing no less than an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to fully understanding the complex interplay of learning science, applied educational technologies and commensurate learning design nested within higher education organizational structures, policies, investments, academic strategic planning and leadership and unique institutional cultures and contexts. The scholarship of learning innovation “relocates the unit of analyses of the conditions that support or inhibit student learning from that of the individual student to the scale of the institution and to

everywhere in between” (Kim & Maloney, p. 7). The research we are undertaking here is motivated by understanding the innovation we (as faculty and non-faculty learning professionals) observe happening at our institution. The confluence of factors like those mentioned above combined with advances in learning strategies and design, the emergence of recent technologies, and learning models has precipitated unprecedented changes in the higher education classroom. The increase in new roles leading learning initiatives and programs across diverse service units in the institution creates challenges as the pace of innovation and demands for educator development can quickly outpace the demands created by institution-wide learning innovation efforts. The learning innovation community can be fragmented across the institution and those leading learning initiatives can feel adrift without coherent policies, frameworks, and connection to other professionals engaged in similar work.

Earlier work has been done in the expansion of academic identities in higher education. Whitchurch (2008, 2012) whose work largely reflects the higher education context in the United Kingdom has researched the increasing role of professional staff in learning support and community partnerships and the impact on academic identities. Whitchurch (2012) says of what she calls *third space professionals* “... the binary distinction between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ roles and activities is no longer clear cut” (p. 99). Australian research has also explored the contributions of professional staff to student academic learning journeys “as part of whole of institution responses to student retention” (Roberts, 2018, p. 140). Swedish researchers have been interested in how professional support staff at higher education institutions “make sense of their roles” (Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2019, p. 1059). Canadian scholarship of teaching and learning research has taken up the question of identity of “expanding one’s disciplinary boundaries and ...traversing the liminal space between disciplines...” (Mathany, Clow, & Aspenlieder, 2017, abstract, para. 1; Simmons, 2016). This previous research points to a reconceptualization of the work of the learning professional as it is related to institutional commitments to learning innovation that calls for a “breaching of the barriers that separate higher education services and operations from the scholarship of teaching and learning” (Kim & Maloney, 2020, p. 11).

Our goal in this research is to understand how learning professionals in non-faculty roles engage in a mix of service, support, scholarship, and teaching in the name of enriching the student learning experience. Whitchurch (2012) reminds us that the separation of the intellectual work from the administrative/support work of the university is deeply ingrained and reflected in the organizational structures of our institutions. Faculty work in departments and schools. Staff for the most part work in centers and units. However, we are seeing professional staff embedded in academic departments and schools and the experience of these professionals is heavily influenced by power relations, cultural orientations, and organizational structures. Our research seeks to better understand this experience, how it relates to professional identity and how the dynamic at the intersection of the relationship between faculty and professional staff can inform each other to strengthen or hinder the entire learning experience for students.

Methodology

The questions related to an emerging field of inquiry like learning innovation outside of an established discipline are by their very nature interdisciplinary. More deeply understanding the role of learning professionals outside the traditional faculty/staff dichotomy requires a multi-pronged, creative approach to determining the most suitable methods that will help identify coherence in frameworks and methods to describe the experiences of those engaged in the work of leading and carrying out institutional learning innovation.

The first methodology with which we engaged was case study. We began a reflexive, small-scale qualitative case study to explore non-faculty roles in the institution as a mix of service, support, scholarship, and teaching - most of which goes unrecognized in determining career progression and professional achievements of non-faculty educators. We identified non-faculty learning professionals at Cape Breton University through exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling. The first subjects were recruited to the sample and provided multiple referrals. Each new referral then provided the researchers with more potential research subjects (Simkus, 2023). The dynamic explored in this early phase exists at the intersection of the relationship between faculty and professional staff and how that relationship informs the work of the other to strengthen the entire student learning experience.

We have drawn from the ideas of Merriam (1988) to characterize our work where she described a case study as, "...an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 21). The case study approach will be informed by the "community of inquiry" framework that seeks to initiate dialogue and inquiry across respective communities (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger-Traynor, et al., 2022). The goal is to demonstrate the potential of practitioner research within and across professional communities at CBU to inform our understanding of the teaching and learning support for faculty and students, for pedagogy and instructional design in its many forms, that are occurring with increasing frequency as universities adapt to the fast pace of change in evolving learning environments.

Critical reflection and reflexivity are where assumptions are challenged and confronted. Loughran (2014) states the process of reflection and reflexivity is ultimately tied to "understandings of identity... and the place of scholarship as an important maker of knowledge, skill, and ability in the academy" (p. 2). Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined a set of theme-building procedures for the social sciences that we utilized as they are applicable across a "range of theoretical and epistemological approaches," such as case study and ethnography (p. 6). Though some researchers argue that thematic analysis is a method in its own right, others consider thematic analysis a practice or a tool (Morse, 2021).

Findings and Discussion

Conversations with non-faculty learning professionals throughout Cape Breton University provided a comprehensive understanding of their identity, roles, and intricacies, encompassing the breadth and depth of their involvement in learning support and instructional activities. Most participants engaged in direct instruction with faculty primarily in the areas of technology integration, cultural competence and inclusive pedagogies and assessments. Additionally, approximately half of the professional staff were also involved in student-directed instruction and support. These professionals operate within diverse academic realms, including departments, schools, teaching and learning centers, and student services. In these domains, they wield direct influence on the student experience, providing crucial support in academics and student life. Collaborating with faculty counterparts, they play a pivotal role in data gathering and analysis to address student needs, shape departmental and school strategic directions, and innovate new programming. These non-faculty learning professionals occupy the third space of higher education institutions discussed by Whitchurch (2012, p.99).

In addition to our exploration of the types of roles and responsibilities of non-faculty learning professionals at our institution, we also examined their experience of collaboration with faculty to support student learning and academic success. A key theme that surfaced often in our discussions was the lack of comprehension among faculty regarding the roles, responsibilities, qualifications, and experiences of non-faculty learning professionals. This deficit was not merely acknowledged, but starkly characterized as a point of tension, with professional staff articulating sentiments of being consistently "misunderstood" and "othered," much like the perspectives presented in the work of Whitchurch (2008, 2012). One non-faculty participant underscored that recognition and respect heightened within academic departments and schools only after faculty colleagues became aware of their advanced graduate credentials.

Another theme came from a professional staff participant who detailed a significant recent shift in their role from task-based to more generative and transmissive functions. As the scope of learning professional roles expands in both reach and practice, the imperative of fostering cross-role understanding and cultivating trust between faculty and non-faculty learning professionals was underscored as critical. A successful community of practice and support, it was emphasized, hinges on an understanding that professional learning staff predominantly operate in service of faculty and students. Participants highlighted the strategic cultivation of relationships, social capital, and goodwill over time to navigate this service relationship and dispel any perception of encroachment on faculty responsibilities.

Navigating the labyrinth of faculty collective agreements and the non-union status of non-faculty learning professionals emerged as additional friction points, particularly concerning access to teaching, research, and professional development opportunities. Professional staff we interviewed detailed their proactive engagement in supporting faculty during the shift to online learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating readiness to adapt and assist. However, despite the acknowledged importance of their contributions, non-faculty learning professionals lamented the lack of commensurate compensation, professional development and research opportunities, as well as avenues for career advancement compared to their faculty

counterparts. This has fostered a pervasive sense of insecurity and frustration amongst non-faculty learning professionals warranting a concern for employee retention. These are sentiments echoed in the writing of Mathany, Clow, and Aspenlieder (2017) who note that opportunities for non-faculty learning professionals to engage in research and teaching can provide validity and legitimacy to these roles as key members of the SoTL landscape (p.13).

In our discussions, a critical and pervasive theme emerged, illustrating a stark power imbalance between faculty and non-faculty learning professionals. Participants painted a picture of reliance on their superiors, metaphorically coined as the "sword and shield." This vivid metaphor underscores the pivotal role these figures play, acting as guardians of the interests and champions in the battle for necessary resources. This reliance on protection takes on a heightened significance due to the perceived absence of both academic and personal safeguards for non-faculty learning professionals, a vulnerability exacerbated by the often-lacking union representation. The poignant admission from one participant encapsulates this reality, acknowledging, "We do have to hold our tongue," underscoring the necessity of self-censorship in navigating the intricate power dynamics.

Moreover, participants unanimously expressed a sense of support from their direct administrators, who not only acknowledge but actively respect the wealth of expertise and experience that learning professionals bring to the team. This support is pivotal, serving as a beacon of strength amidst the challenges faced by non-faculty learning professionals. Additionally, positive working relationships with faculty colleagues were frequently cited, especially in environments where relationships of trust and respect were cultivated. These affirmative dynamics with administrators and faculty colleagues represent not just areas of strength but potential catalysts for collaboration and the creation of a more nurturing and supportive environment for non-faculty learning professionals.

In another dimension, a distinctive strength emerged in the realms of planning, development, and student experience when faculty and professional staff engage in relationships characterized by mutual respect and reciprocity. Notably, two participants highlighted their enriching experiences as integral members of an academic department's leadership team, where learning professionals worked seamlessly alongside faculty colleagues. This was not merely a cooperative effort; it was a validating experience fostering empowerment and embracing a community of practice approach to student success. These instances serve as compelling examples of how collaborative efforts can transcend challenges, contributing to effective planning, development, and an elevated student experience within academic institutions, leading to true learning innovation as envisioned by Kim and Maloney (2020).

In the synthesis of our initial findings, the narrative becomes clear – the collaboration between faculty and non-faculty learning professionals is not just nuanced but is a terrain marked by intricate dynamics and formidable challenges. The identified issues—ranging from a fundamental lack of understanding, through power imbalances, to disparities in recognition and compensation—underscore the imperative for proactive and strategic measures to bridge these divides. A comprehensive resolution requires not just heightened awareness among faculty but

an intentional cultivation of collaborative relationships and advocacy for equitable compensation and professional development opportunities for non-faculty learning professionals. The promise of a more equitable and efficacious collaboration lies not just in the establishment of supportive structures but in the earnest recognition and facilitation of avenues for career advancement, weaving a narrative that reshapes the dynamics among diverse roles within academic institutions.

Conclusion

Our research is ongoing, and we will engage in additional dialogue with non-faculty learning professionals to continue to better understand the types of roles they are in, their interactions with students and faculty as they relate to teaching and learning, and the challenges associated with supporting teaching and learning related endeavours beyond the traditional classroom. As is not uncommon for case study research, the research findings may not be generalized across other post-secondary contexts, but the complete analysis should give a robust understanding of the contributions of non-faculty learning professionals within the context of Cape Breton University (Stake, 1995).

The results of this research will lead to recommendations within the institution to foster the areas of strength identified by participants and will open the door for reflection on the challenges to provide insight on how we can promote a culture of collaboration with a common goal of improving teaching and learning. Discussions around future possibilities have been prompted organically after engaging in initial discussions with the participants thus far, and the emergence of interest in continuing to embrace collaboration has been positive.

Opportunities for future research have emerged as being worthwhile avenues for potential study, but outside the scope of this research. Inclusion of faculty voice is a logical next step, and a comparison of the successes and challenges would be one way to develop a comprehensive representation of the topic within the same institutional context.

In conclusion, while the trends outlined in the findings and discussion section represent only the initial interviews completed, we recognize that the remainder of this project will lead to a deeper understanding of the roles and identities of non-faculty learning professionals and their impact on teaching and learning. As we continue, we aim to enrich our understanding of this topic to continue to fill a gap in previous literature that seldom addresses these types of third space roles.

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