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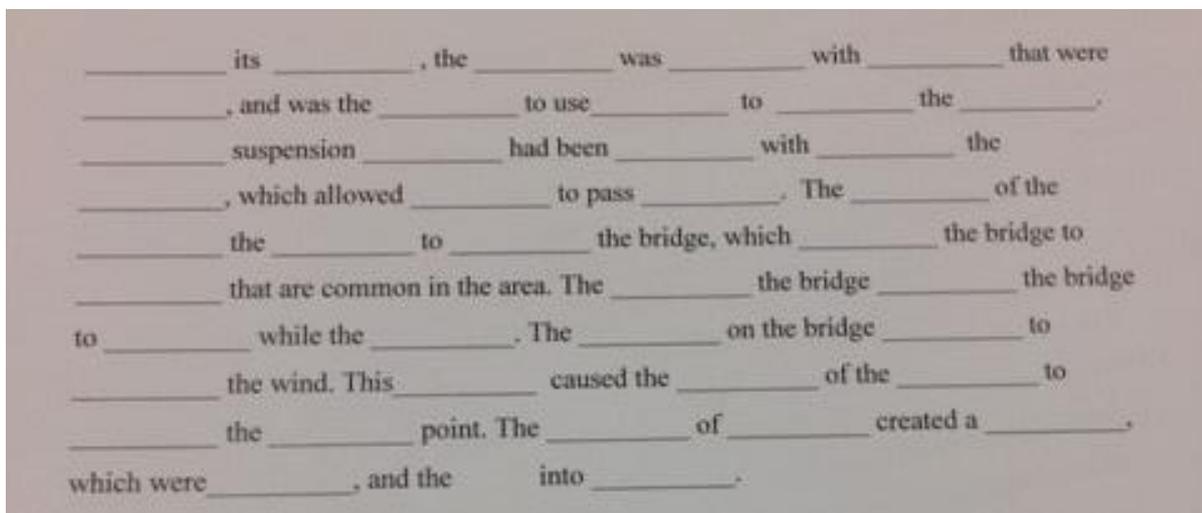
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# ALDinHE 2019: The perfect ice-breaker into the world of learning development

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The [ALDinHE \(Association for Learning Development in Higher Education\) conference](#) was held at the University of Exeter from Monday 15 April to Wednesday 17 April 2019. This is the second time that I have attended ALDinHE, and the most striking thing about this conference is that the organisers and presenters really do practice what they preach. No session is the same, and so much of it centres around active learning and getting the delegates involved.

On Monday we were eased in with a lunch to meet fellow delegates and a choice of parallel sessions. These provided opportunities to learn about research funding for Learning Development, The LearnHigher resource Swap Shop, ALDinHE Professional Recognition Scheme, and Facilitating Learning Development Workshops. The resource swap shop was a great opportunity to share good practice and novel techniques. Ideas included the use of brain teasers to engage students early on in sessions, to use murder mysteries set in a Hollywood production to explain the process of writing assignments, and a novel approach in teaching note taking by removing either important words or unimportant words from a paragraph (Figure 1). Of course as delegates, we had a go at the brainteasers and answering the questions on note-taking, so I can confirm the validity of the techniques!



**Figure 1.** Example of a paragraph with the important words removed © Melanie Crisfield.

Helen Webster then helped us to think about what skills a new Learning Developer would need and asked us to think about what, why, how and where we teach. We were then encouraged to think about how we would manage expectations, address challenges and encourage buy-in from other university staff members and students. This generated a lot of interesting discussion, and demonstrated the variety of roles in the room!

Tuesday began with a welcome and introduction to the conference by Prof Timothy Quine, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education, University of Exeter), and Carina Buckley and Steve

Briggs, Co-chairs of ALDinHE. The keynote was a thought provoking talk from Dr Liz Morrish, 'Pressure vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among academics', who explained the importance of prioritising the mental health of academic staff as well as students because by improving staff wellbeing, we in turn can improve student performance. Liz's suggestions for improving academic staff wellbeing include: more autonomy, space to think, legitimate research time, reducing time pressures, using metrics such as TEF and REF responsibly, setting realistic targets (especially for young researchers), and ending short-term contracts by introducing more tenure track fellowships.

Following the keynote, there were a series of parallel sessions, one of which was delivered by myself. My presentation explained the benefits and lessons learnt from developing a University-wide online Academic Integrity module. Immediately afterwards Sandra Craig (University of Roehampton) explained the benefits of working with students to improve university induction, for example by using appropriate language, (does 'content' mean happy, or the contents of something?). Other sessions on offer included 'Growing pains: challenges of scaling up student support – a case study at LSE', 'The dissertation journey: Thinking out loud' and 'Reaching the hard to reach: a paper presentation exploring issues around student engagement' to name but a few. In the afternoon I attended an interesting session on therapeutic writing by Emma Kimberley (University of Northampton). This session was all about making space for things we don't normally make space for, and had four principles: that the writing was private, non-academic, expressive, and was without rules. Prompts and props were also suggested as ways of helping students to begin the writing process, as seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Empowering Questions cards © Sunny Present. As used by Emma Kimberly to help students begin therapeutic writing.

'Zombie Attacks: A gateway activity for group work skills for undergraduate engineers' was an attention-grabbing session! During the session we were asked to imagine we were in a zombie

apocalypse and that we were on a boat travelling towards a zombie-free tropical island. We had to assign roles to every member of the group, and even decide who would have to go overboard! This acted as an icebreaker for the session which was developed to prepare students for group work using SWOT analysis. I then attended a series of lightning talks which presented on an effective intervention for 1:1 maths support for first years, structured writing retreats for postgraduate students, and the benefits of consolidating multiple mentoring schemes.

Wednesday's keynote was delivered by Professor Shân Wareing from London South Bank University, and was entitled 'Learning development and student narratives'. She began by asking us to think of a word with no translation and one suggestion was 'mudita' from Sanskrit which means to take pleasure in someone else's development. Professor Wareing demonstrated the importance of the words we use and that the word 'student' may encompass the term 'customer', but that the word 'customer' did not encompass the word 'student'. She reminded us all to remain aware of diversity, and that some groups of students may be more disadvantaged than others in higher education.

Ben Martin from Swansea University then delivered a workshop on 'Teaching creative thinking'. This is an area I have wanted to explore for a while, so I was intrigued to see what the session would entail. Again, there was a theme of using brain teasers as ice breakers, and the constant suspense of having four unopened envelopes on the table. Each contained a different activity such as thinking of alternative uses for a coffee filter, like a face mask, or a sleeping bag for a mouse! Ben highlighted the importance of making mistakes, what's the worst that could happen if your presentation goes wrong? Other activities included drawing in as many different circles as possible within two minutes (Figure 3), and solving an everyday problem such as thinking of a name for a sustainable insect café.



**Figure 3.** Creative thinking activity delivered by Ben Martin

Before lunch, a talk from Karen Gravett (University of Surrey) explored transitions throughout university from the students' perspective and identified areas which had the biggest impact on their transition. Following this, Jennie Blake and Nicola Grayson (University of Manchester) presented preliminary findings on ways of measuring the impact of Manchester Learning

Essentials on students within their open programme. They reported on the demographic of students who utilise their programme and trends in final degree results. Other parallel workshops on offer included 'The five Ps of LD: Using formulation in one to one work', 'What is the value and impact for students following the completion of the pre-entry module Stepping Up to Edge Hill University' and 'A literal escape room: escaping from didactic workshops'.

The final session I attended focused on a mature student research project from Teeside University. The purpose of this successful project was to 'develop learners as co-creators, enhance research skills, and to encourage students to consider the option of postgraduate study'. The project involved organising student focus groups to help develop a single point of entry for students to access support and information. Other sessions on offer included 'Dismantling ivory towers – overcoming barriers in using archives for students' research', 'The manager who despised quick wins and other stories: using parables to cultivate critique' and 'Creating an academic literacy framework'.

The ALDinHE conference always has a strong presence on social media, and more information about the conference can be gleaned from the many tweets (@aldinhe\_LH #aldcon). There is a real sense of community with this conference, which I would recommend future delegates take advantage of. The presenters make a real effort to think outside the box and involve participants in activities. I've come away with several new ideas, and my only regret is that I couldn't attend more sessions as the majority were run as parallel workshops. If you're in any way involved in learning development this conference is an absolute must!