

Developing a professional identity: A personal reflection on the 40th anniversary of ATLAANZ

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Every day, learning advisers work alongside students in a myriad of ways, and there is a distinct personal satisfaction for the adviser and a monumental shift in the students' skill set, but beyond that there was often limited wider acknowledgement of that work. ATLAANZ helped shift that thinking and contributed to the establishment, recognition, and development of our work as a profession. Originally, tertiary learning support lived in 'splendid isolation', and it was not always that splendid! When I first began working in this area, our mahi was considered a 'nice to have', primarily to support non-traditional students, students with disabilities, and international students. Working in this environment had its levels of frustration. Location was often in prefab buildings at the edge of campuses, staff were worked hard and not given the recognition for their expertise, and budgets for these services were hard won and often fragile. Each institution did its own thing, and there was little if any professional development.

Pioneers for ATLAANZ such as Margaret Brown, Emmanuel Manalo, and Victoria Trembath set up the opportunity for a conference of learning advisers, and ATLAANZ was officially established via the ATLAANZ constitution. Though at that time I managed a team of initially six, then as many as 12/14 full time equivalent staff, and we had a group cohesion and support within that team as well as being part of a well-funded Student Services group, what became apparent was that there were a number of people working in these areas who were on their own. The key professional concerns of ATLAANZ were:

- gaining professional recognition and acknowledgement for what we did and its contribution to student success

- to ensure a stable, sharing and supportive professional network to support people working in this area
- instigate professional development opportunities

Over the past 40 years, ATLAANZ has done all of these things, extended to the wider global network, and included learning technologies as part of its remit.

From my perspective, I would like to acknowledge the following as key things that ATLAANZ contributed to my management and learning adviser role.

Firstly, **collegiality** is often raised as a critical tertiary attribute, but it is seldom obviously demonstrated by many staff. ATLAANZ members over the years have been the epitome of collegiality, and it is their work ethic, support and humour that has sustained us all, but me especially, through many changes both good and bad. Not only were good friends made, but there is real value in listening to others' experiences and adapting ideas for your own situation.

One example is from my colleagues in the 'one-man bands' or small teams who out of necessity had always had to work alongside teaching staff and build learning support into curriculums. When faced with increasing demand in my university, and with no more funding, we needed to take this approach as well, and the results were amazing. Not only did we reach more students, but teaching staff could see our value and expertise, and students were key beneficiaries. We were no longer used to 'pass the buck' and fix poor outcomes but became part of 'a shared responsibility' for student success and retention.

Secondly, the professional body was able to link into established **research fields and develop research ideas as part of our own professional body of work**, primarily through the ATLAANZ Journal and ATLAANZ conference presentations. Regular sharing of ideas from conferences and academic articles kept us all on our toes and thinking about how we can best work. **Working collaboratively** not just across institutions but across allied areas such as library, technology learning services, recruitment and student services helps us learn that across the globe others have something to contribute, and they want to share those ideas.

Personally, I was driven by first year experience researchers such as Sally Kift, Vince Tinto, and Craig McInnes, and even dipped my toe into Systems Thinking and research on collaboration styles by Consolvo. By far the most pivotal area of research concerned Māori

concepts of learning, and Mason Durie had a profound impact on my thinking about learning to learn in a holistic manner. This filtered into everything I did and thought about as a manager and as a hands-on learning adviser.

Being able to meet online or in person and share research helps us build an effective professional community. We all benefit when fellow ATLAANZ members can share ideas they learn from experiences and pass on the ideas of researchers in allied fields.

I learned very early on the need to align what we do to the institutions' goals and to **find effective ways of measuring what we do** as data speaks to senior management better than anecdote. Justifying and proving what we do is important to give ourselves kudos but also to prove our value to student success and retention. Building on what others do was important in this area. Sharing the ways we collect and manage data has been universally helpful.

Finally, I have been amazed and gratified at the way ATLAANZ people are **focussed on students**. Regardless of who the student might be or what their issue/need might be, they show the value of relationship-based experiences and how they can shift thinking and attitudes, confidence, and competency. Our colleagues' experiences and knowledge of students are a valuable resource for all institutions. Students come to see a learning adviser because they are in a pickle or because they want to learn better or feel less stressed. Students are all different types of people – mature and anxious to do well, troubled and unsure, cocky and defiant – but every one of them takes a huge step to ask for help and the learning adviser respects this step as an important one. That relationship step is at the core of ATLAANZ.

Congratulations on 40 years of operation, ATLAANZ. Thanks to all those who have been a part of this and who gave their time to run the organisation and produce the journal. It has been a journey, but a well worthwhile one.