The early days in the Dungeon: Reflections of a learning support worker 1990 – 2000

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This reflection is based on working for 35 years in the field of learning support. The reflection will deal with what I can remember over the period around 1990 – 2000 and the many changes that the field has undergone in that time. There will be a hint of humour in some of these pieces as many of the decisions made about the role of learning support were made by people who were new to the field.

I started working as a learning support worker in August of 1990. The first question that needed to be answered was where I was going to have my office. It was decided from the powers that be that we should be in the 'dungeon'. This was a room in the bowels of the old building block with pipes and wiring running around the walls and ceiling. The walls were all thick concrete. I believe some students may have referred to us as the 'prison'. When students could find us, they looked a little bewildered as to our location. During some of our individual sessions, if a toilet was flushed in a certain area of the polytechnic, we could hear a woosh. Anyway, this location gives you some indication as to our status within the organisation during these early days.

Around the same time as we started, we were given a Commodore Amiga computer, which was probably state of art at that time. At that point in time there were some very basic programmes available to use with students in learning support. It is hard to remember exactly but there were some basic spelling and writing programmes. This approach was very ad hoc, I do not recall any of the other learning support people (just a few of us then) using many of these programmes. The programmes tended to be simple regarding graphics, also these may have not

been very age appropriate for adult students. In the next few years, we received a suite of Amiga computers, and these were used with Level 2 and 3 students to teach numeracy and literacy. We used a programme developed by a Canadian company that helped to capture the data for the level the students were functioning at. Besides the computer, the students also had class sessions and some individual support.

In about 1992, we started a programme at the organisation called Peer Tutoring. This role was totally under the auspices of learning support. Students were matched with paid peer tutors who were other students who were well versed with the course content. Once the process was set up, the actual teaching component between the student and peer tutor was overseen by the course tutor. This proved to be successful, and many 'failing' students were helped to carry on with their studies. The programme is still ongoing but has been moved into the faculties.

With the advent of having these computers, there came something new called emails. Emails in some form had been around for some time, but the organisation now was using them as a communication device instead of using internal mail messages. This was a boom to learning support in the early days as it was much easier to contact each other. If I remember, these emails were the basis for communication for the very early workshops and conferences that we attended.

After several years, we were moved from the dungeon to an office in the administrative block. We did ask to become part of the library but to no avail. Then after two years, learning support was finally moved to the library. We were put into a very small room that used to be for resources. Three people was a squeeze in the room. The room was in the very back part of the library, hard for students to find, hot in the summer, and cold in the winter. Again, this showed our perceived value to the organisation.

One thing that should be mentioned, even though learning support was low in status, I was put on an academic contract. I believe that the organisation did not really want this to happen, but by the time they wanted a change, it was too late. With the help of TLCANZ (Tertiary Learning Centres Aotearoa New Zealand), the academic contract was accepted. TLCANZ could be considered a forerunner to ATLAANZ.

Well, moving on into the mid and late 1990s, the field of learning support was starting to gain more acceptance across tertiary institutions. Conferences were more frequent, and more and more staff were being employed. Research in the field was being undertaken, and this is reflected in the journals and articles that started to be published. I personally did my PhD, starting in 1995, on the subject of *An Enhanced Model of Learning Support*. I believe at this point, almost all tertiary institutions had some model of learning support available to students.

It might be worth mentioning here, in the very early days, probably only a few institutions had a learning support environment. I believe many of us worked in the dark, so to speak. New Zealand itself can be quite isolated which may have been reflected in the early developmental days in the field. It took a few individuals to contact others (via email 😊) to say it is probably time to get a unified voice. I remember being at some of those early meetings (no online meetings available) and trying to determine the best way forward. There were many enthusiastic and dedicated people who saw the value in having a unified approach. After much discussion, debate, arguments, and deliberation, it was decided to start an organisation. I am not mentioning those 'early pioneers', but I personally feel we owe all of them a debt of gratitude for pointing us in the right direction to where we are at ATLAANZ today.

The early conferences were a blend of what was happening in the field of learning support and trying to come together as an organised group. One issue that often came up was staff being employed on differing contracts, some allied and some academic. There were also some differences for those working in universities and those in polytechnics. In these early days, these conferences were a great source of support. Many of us were working in isolation, and coming together offered some reassurance that what we were doing individually was somewhat on the right track. I know from my own perspective that going to an 'organised conference' gave some mana to working in learning support.

The cohort of students accessing learning support also started to change. In the early days in polytechnics, there was an emphasis on students at levels 2 and 3. As time went on, we started to see more students who were doing diplomas, bachelor's degrees, and master's study. International students were also arriving in greater numbers to our campus. This meant a change of direction as level 2 and 3 students were less of a presence on campus as level 4 four and above became were more prevalent. Some of the requirements of students accessing learning support

changed from more basic needs (e.g., spelling and grammar) to higher academic demands (e.g., referencing and academic writing). This required a change of skills needed by those in the field.

As time went on, TLCANZ started to gain momentum with regards to research. As the years passed, the then yearly conferences started to reflect more peer reviewed research. This was reflected in conference journals. These 'outputs' were important, especially in the university sector, where published outputs were probably more of an expectation then polytechnics. Staff were also starting to publish in other journals. This may have resulted in institutions and other staff members having a higher regard for staff in learning support as we were probably regarded as more 'academic'.

One issue that was often discussed was the acceptance of learning support as a sustainable entity for tertiary institutions. Members sometimes brought up issues that they were non-teaching staff, begging the question: Are they necessary at an institution? This also goes back to that issue of academic staff versus allied staff, with institutions often paying academic staff a high wage. Often in these earlier days, we would hear anecdotal stories of learning support staff being either restructured or reorganised with positions often being terminated, or staff being asked to take on other responsibilities as part of their roles. Whether this has changed over the years is probably hard to gauge without some type of research, but having ATLAANZ as a foundation body for learning support does give our field some needed credibility.

This reflection has chosen purposely not to mention specific names in those early days in the field in Aotearoa for the reason they would be too numerous to mention. However, it cannot be emphasised enough how these early trend-setters were determined to give learning support the respect it deserved. From personal experience, these members would often expend much time and energy, outside their normal duties, to give the field the recognition the field deserved within the institutions.

Possibly of interest to some readers would be some data from a 1997 survey related to learning support staff. This national survey was carried out as part of my PhD study at the University of Otago. This survey was undertaken by 90 staff members. Some highlights:

- Hours spent in learning support role:

    1. 30% between 1-6 hours

2. 37% between 17-32 hours

3. 33% between 33-40 hours

This could show that about two-thirds in the field could be considered part-time

- Age at time of survey:

    1. 90% between 31-60 years of age

    2. 10% identified as other

Could this be considered an 'older' workforce?

- Gender identified at time of survey:

    1. 85% female

    2. 15% male

Is this about the same ratio today?

- Main activities involved in role:

    1. Teaching one to one study skills (e.g. assignment writing)

    2. Developing material for learning support unit (e.g. handouts)

    3. Teaching study skills classes (e.g. time management)

Is this data the same as today?

- Learning support staff who meet professionally with teaching staff as part of their roles:

1. 92% - yes

2. 8% - no

Is this still happening today?

With regard to the above data, which might be considered 'the early days', the question is what has changed over the last 30 years or so, and who are we today? If we consider that we as a 'field' are more professional: What really are our roles now? My guess would be our roles are more widespread. Probably we are more culturally diverse with perhaps more younger staff in the field. One interesting point from the survey in 1997: At that time, 70% of staff answered that management generally supports learning support, with 20% being undecided, and 10% noting management does not offer support. With all the changes in the tertiary environment over the last 30 years, what would those numbers look like now? Perhaps it is time for ATLAANZ, or someone, to do a comprehensive survey in 2025 to really map out what is the current situation – just an idea.

Just some final thoughts. As noted, this reflection is based on my 35 years in the field of learning support in Aotearoa but has only really covered the years around 1990 – 2000. The big picture shows what the field was like in the very early stages of development, where today we could be considered a professional body, especially with the work currently going on within ATLAANZ. From my own experience of first being in the 'dungeon' in those early days to having an office which considers the needs of students was a big step. Learning support is now embedded in the 'psyche' of my institution in that we are marketed as a service, we are part of a student services team, we are included in all class orientations, and we are listed in the Quality Management System of the institution. Having said that, learning support is only a .5 position in the institution; so, what does that say? Draw your own conclusions.

I hope this reflection has given some context to those early days of learning support and will help readers to better understand where we came from in getting to where we are today.