

The role of professional services staff in driving students' AI literacy.

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Panel Session: The role of professional services staff in driving students' AI Literacy

Alison Purvis

Transcript

Hello everyone, I'm an associate dean for learning and teaching in one of the three colleges at Sheffield Hallam University. I work across the 5 departments in our college and I also am the institutional lead for two large all-University projects. My most recent publications are about digital learning and anti-racist practices, and I have just submitted an article about working in the interface between academic and professional services communities. So I'm very pleased and honoured to be invited to speak today!

5-7 min Proposition

My proposition today is that professional services colleagues have a unique perspective and expertise that is often overlooked. In the context of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Literacy, these colleagues may already use and engage with AI in their professional context in a way that academics are not afforded.

So I would like to start by focusing on the context that I think professional services colleagues have that could result in a very positive contribution to students' AI literacy, and how we can leverage that unique position to enable that contribution.

Professional services colleagues are working in the higher education context but also in their professional context. For example, colleagues in digital technology architecture are experts in digital infrastructure and technologies – they work with these technologies every day in a way that the academic teaching in the same discipline is unlikely to be able to. All colleagues are time pressured, but the professional services colleague is much more likely to be able to engage in AI technologies and how they can be used in their profession or discipline.

Academics are more likely to be thinking about AI in multiple contexts – their teaching and learning practice, their research practice, and then possibly their professional, industry or discipline context. Academics may be more likely to focus on the theory of AI in a discipline, but professional services are more likely to use it ‘live’ in that discipline and explore how it is used for efficiency, effectiveness, and impact.

As an academic leader, the conversations I am involved with most regularly are about the challenges that AI brings to assessment, and particularly assessment integrity. Conversations are often based in worry and fear; ‘how do we keep up with AI’, ‘what do we say to students about AI’, and ‘how do we police or prevent students’ use of AI’? Of course there are colleagues who are very keen on using AI and embracing the opportunities that it brings, but these are currently the minority.

PS colleagues can try AI within their work without this basis of fear, without the layers of teaching, learning and assessment expectations, and without historical educational practices that may reduce the willingness to try new things.

Of course, the challenge is how do we bring professional services colleagues into learning and teaching? How do we bring that overlooked expertise into the physical or virtual classroom?

You may or may not be familiar with the term ‘third space professional’ or ‘hybrid professional’. I acknowledge the term ‘third space’ is not universally liked, so if it is a term that you personally don’t like, if I could ask your forgiveness and clarify what I mean by the term. A third space professional is someone that operates within the liminal space between the academic and professional services communities and spaces. They have roles that contractually exist in one of those communities, but they operate within both. One example of a classic hybrid role is that of the learning technologist, but there are others who clearly operate in both spaces.

Third space professionals act as translators, advocates, and negotiators, and they have expertise that benefits both communities. Their expertise then connects into the student experience. It is my position that senior leaders in both the academic and professional communities must see themselves as operating in the third space, in the liminal space between the two communities. Senior leaders have a critical role in standing alongside colleagues in hybrid roles to bridge divides, and, in time, remove the gap between academics and professional services, so that eventually there is no third space and no boundaries that need to be bridged. By visibly valuing the expertise of professional services colleagues and advocating for bringing that expertise closer to the student experience – senior leaders will role model the necessary behaviours for all in the university community to come together.

So, bringing this back into the context of driving students' AI Literacy and supporting our students to have the most innovative and up-to-date experience of how AI can be used in their learning and in their discipline context, academics must look to professional services colleagues for how AI can be used.

Considerations for Professional Services:

For colleagues already using AI: Talk to your academic colleagues about your experiences and what you could share with them and their students. How can you share with all types of colleagues regardless of role? Which senior leaders can act as your advocate? If you are not already familiar with AI, what could you try that would impact positively on your professional area work?

Considerations for Academics:

What AI expertise are you overlooking? Which PS colleagues' interface with your discipline? Who can you bring into the classroom, which expertise would inspire and interest your students?

Both:

How can we work together to drive our own AI literacy and how can we leverage that together for student AI literacy?