Developing a community to disseminate good practice
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Abstract
This paper discusses the development, implementation and evaluation of a fellowship scheme to create a community of practice for enhancing learning and teaching set up in February 2010. The decision to use a community of practice approach is outlined along with how the initial scheme and members were chosen. There is then some discussion of a survey undertaken with the first group of fellows and how they would like the scheme to operate, what they feel they have to offer and what they would like to gain from the scheme. There is discussion of the activities undertaken to date and some of those proposed for the future. Further evaluation of the scheme is proposed at the end of the first year with both existing and new fellows.

Introduction
This paper will outline the implementation and ongoing development and evaluation of a community to share good practice across one higher education institution with multiple sites.

There had been a University-wide scheme for learning and teaching awards at the authors' University since 2001. This was introduced following the launch of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme in April 2000 and it was hoped that it would provide recognition for those who promoted excellence in learning and teaching, create a network of practitioners sharing their expertise, raise the profile of teaching and create a development route for practitioners within the institution.

The scheme had been successful in that individuals had felt the benefit of this but institutionally the scheme had not had the impact it was hoped for such as creating a network of practitioners for sharing good practice. Reasons for this vary but are supported by other studies and include award winners seeing their work as only relevant to their discipline, a lack of a clear framework for award winners to mentor new awardees and varied approaches to disseminating good practice (Halse, Deane, Hobson & Jones 2007, Palmer & Collins 2006, Skelton 2004).

In 2008, two existing units that provided support for staff in relation to learning and teaching activities and different parts of the award scheme merged into one Learning Development Centre (LDC). This new Centre was to be the hub for the professional development of learning and teaching activity across the institution. This provided an opportunity to review all the activities both previous units had undertaken and draw upon the best of these.

In the first year of the Centre's creation the learning and teaching award scheme was reviewed and changes were made to this which included individual development awards being provided for each school, learning and teaching recognition prizes and

a student voice award. The Student Voice Award was a scheme that provided an opportunity for students to nominate lecturers and others involved in supporting their learning for an award because of the impact this individual had in enhancing their learning. The scheme was run by the student Union supported by the LDC. The new scheme was successful and with some minor changes ran again in 2009/2010. The new centre also launched an internal annual learning and teaching conference to provide an across institution opportunity to disseminate good practice. This ran for the first time in June 2009 and was well evaluated by staff with comments such *"...best event of the year..."* and *"...great opportunity to hear what colleagues are doing."*

However, despite the success of these two initiatives with an increase in engagement with continuing professional development and greater recognition of examples of "good practice" there continued to be a lack of a network for promoting learning and teaching. The senior staff of the Learning Development Centre felt this needed attention and after considering a range of options felt that the creation of a community of practice for learning and teaching via the creation of a fellowship scheme with a shared vision of enhancing the student experience would be the best approach.

The Community of Practice and the Fellowship Scheme

Communities of practice or learning have been used in a range of settings and for a variety of reasons (Laksov, Mann & Dahlgren 2008, Tight 2004, Wenger 1998). These groups often tend to have a central drive that is common to all related to knowledge, sharing of expertise and encouraging new ideas (Barrett et al 2004, Brown and Duguid 2000 & Nagy and Burch 2009). Membership of communities is therefore often voluntary and through self selection (Nagy and Burch 2009 and Wenger & Snyder 2000). Time had shown that a network or community of the award winners for learning and teaching had not happened through self initiation and Viskovic (2006) recognized that promoting a community to support informal learning and sharing was an important role for Centres such as the LDC.

Whilst it was acknowledged by the staff from the centre that in setting up this community of fellows the members would not be completely self selecting, they still had a choice to join once formally approached to become a member. The three dimensions identified by Wenger (1998) as essential for a supportive, coherent community were also important to the implementation of a community. These included being involved in a joint enterprise, being mutually engaged in interaction on shared issues and having a shared repertoire of words, tools and issues. It was agreed that whatever format this community took these points needed to be taken into account and so the idea of the LDC fellowship scheme evolved with these principles.

The aim of the scheme was to create a network of staff across the University who would promote the development and enhancement of learning and teaching. This could be achieved through providing a link between their school and the LDC, providing feedback on activities to support learning and teaching, contributing to the ongoing implementation and development of the University learning and teaching strategy, promoting good practice across the University and acting as mentors to staff who applied for learning and teaching awards and those who had shown

excellence in this area. An additional aim was to create a pool of staff who could be developed for the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme run by the Higher Education Academy across England and Northern Ireland to recognise individual excellence in Teaching

It was agreed that those who should be invited to be fellows needed to be credible to their colleagues and so needed to have a demonstrated sustained interaction with learning and teaching activities. A set of criteria that demonstrated this credibility was drawn up to determine who should be invited to be a fellow. This included staff who had a strategic leadership role within the institution in relation to learning and teaching (ie those who were appointed as Associate Deans for learning and teaching within schools), staff who had undertaken and successfully completed the Masters degree programme in academic practice which included a small scale study on an aspect of learning and teaching practice for their dissertation (thereby demonstrating commitment to CPD in this area and pedagogic research), staff who had applied for and successfully completed a project of a minimum of one year on an area of enhancing learning and teaching in their school (evidence of innovation and application of new pedagogic techniques) and any member of staff who had either gained a professorship in an area that demonstrates development, research and a reputation for learning and teaching enhancement or who had been given a National award such as the National Teaching Fellowship, Higher Education Academy Senior Fellowship or another allied professional body fellowship award that recognises a national profile. Thought was also given to the many staff who may demonstrate such a commitment daily in their practice but who had not been in a position to apply for an appropriate post or award. For these staff a portfolio route to apply for fellowship has also been developed. The staff, from within the Learning Development Centre were excluded from being fellows as their role was to support this community and continue to promote excellence in Learning and Teaching across the institution.

The launch of the scheme was set for the annual LDC showcase event in February 2010 which provides an opportunity to celebrate staff being awarded their Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice as well as providing an opportunity for those staff who are undertaking their development projects to share with colleagues their work to date as well as gaining feedback from peers. This event has a high profile across the institution with over 120 staff attending this year including senior management. It was therefore felt that this was an appropriate forum for launching such a network and recognizing the ongoing commitment of these staff members.

Through using the agreed criteria sixty-four staff were eligible to be invited to be the first fellows. Each was written to individually and provided with information about the scheme and asked to accept the invitation. It was important that individuals willingly joined because of their shared concerns and/or interests in learning and teaching and that they were not just given this fellowship (Barrett et al 2004). Of the sixty four staff invited thirty six (56%) accepted. Many responded saying how honored they were to accept and we received comments such as *"I am very grateful for your invitation to be among the first to be awarded a Learning Development Fellowship"* and *"I am flattered to be invited and happy to take this on."*

There were three staff who had left the institution due to retirement or change of role and of the remaining twenty five we followed up some said they had *".. meant to reply"* and *"I have no time for extra work"*. Those staff who did not accept in the first instance are being followed up so that they can still join following an individual discussion about the scheme. Some staff simply assumed that the invitation meant that they would automatically become a fellow and did not appreciate that they needed to "opt-into" the scheme.

Survey of the Fellows

Whilst it is hoped that this community will become active themselves it is appreciated that the role of the LDC in these early stages is to support the scheme and encourage participation, so following the implementation an online survey was designed to invite the fellows to identify what they would like from the scheme, how they feel they should contribute to learning and teaching within the University, how many times a year they would like to meet as well as determining what format the activities should take.

Of the thirty-six fellows, fifteen (42%) responded to the survey. The summary of the responses received for each of the question asked are shown below with some quotations.

What would you like to get out of the fellowship scheme from a personal and professional perspective? (this was a free text answer)

Sharing Good practice was regarded as important by three respondents
One comment was *"...the satisfaction that we are working as a team to move the university forward in terms of learning development.*

Three respondents wanted to be more active in helping others to be more engaged in learning and teaching

One respondent would like development towards applying for a national teaching fellow

Three respondents wanted to learn about new developments in learning and teaching responses

The most popular response (with five respondents talking about enhancing learning) was to help enhance my students' experience through developing my practice
One comment to support this was *"get involved in teaching and learning initiatives that might help my students experience.*

One respondent wanted some kind of mentoring for my practice and two others to participate in research for learning and teaching

As can be seen most of the responses were related to enhancing the student experience and, developing their individual practice and that of others and sharing good practice.

The second question asked *what contribution do you think a learning development fellow should make to learning and teaching?”* and many of these responses echoed those given for the first question (again this was a free text answer)

One respondent wanted to mentor more junior members of staff and one other wanted to be an ambassador for learning and teaching

Five respondents wanted to promote learning and teaching development to staff
One comment to that illustrated this was *“Inspire and motivate others...”*

Four respondents saw their contribution as championing and disseminating good practice

Two respondents wanted to maximise the student experience One comment to support this was *“...produce something that improves the student experience”.*

Two respondents saw their role as providing leadership for learning and teaching

The third question asked about *how many times would you like to meet per year?* The survey asked respondents if they would like to meet once a year, twice, three times, four times or more. No one wanted to meet only once a year or more than four times a year. The most popular answer was twice a year with seven indicating this as their choice and then three and four times were equally opted for by four respondents. It was felt that a minimum of twice a year would be needed to enable this network to develop although it is hoped that small groups of members will organise some additional events together around activities of sharing and development. The senior management of the LDC however recognise that investing time in this community is competing with the diverse range of activities these individuals already undertake.

The last question asked *what sort of meetings would you like the LDC fellows meetings to be? Respondents had the opportunity to select more than one option*

Presentations by colleagues and fellows generated nine responses

Workshops on specific themes generated eleven responses

Sharing practice informally elicited eight responses

Actions learning set activities was the least popular with two responses

External speakers was equally most popular with eleven responses

As can be seen from the responses all except the action learning set option were popular and so a mix of activities has been planned for the first year around external and internal presentations. This will be evaluated again one year on with a similar

survey which will include any new fellows appointed in February 2011. One other suggestion made was to have somewhere online to share ideas.

Activities with the Fellows

Following the survey the first event was organised for the fellows which was a lunchtime seminar in the summer term 2010 with members of some of the Higher Education Academy subject centres. The purpose of this was to provide information for the fellows on some of the work of the relevant subject centres but also to commence developing their own networks for learning and teaching. This was attended by a third of the fellows and those who attended found this useful. They had not all known what the subject centre roles were and about the resources they have available for supporting learning and teaching.

The second event was a half day event with an external speaker in November 2010. The focus of this event was on the use of space and creative teaching in spaces. The Autumn term is always the busiest and so attendance was again a third of the Fellows but only four had attended the previous event.

In addition to these events some of the fellows have asked if they could become more involved with the annual learning and teaching conference by undertaking review of some of the abstracts and chairing sessions. This will be included for the conference in 2011. The LDC is also in the process of launching a learning journal and fellows have been approached to peer review articles. Indeed some of the fellows are writing articles for this first edition being launched in January 2011.

The 2010/2011 learning and teaching development projects have now been selected and it is anticipated that some of the fellows will act as mentors for these project holders.

Lastly the LDC has a journal club which commenced in autumn 2009 to provide a forum for staff from the LDC and staff undertaking the MA Academic Practice and the newly approved MPhil/PhD in Professional Education who are involved in pedagogic research to meet once a month to share proposed and ongoing research across the institution and gain feedback from peers about their plans. In addition this forum plans to examine research bid opportunities and collaborate on writing applications. The Fellows therefore could contribute to this journal club both in terms of providing feedback to peers but also in contributing to bids. This has also proved to be a valuable opportunity to some of the Fellows who have been able to make links with others through this club.

The future and Conclusion

The scheme is nearly at the end of the first year and whilst further robust evaluation is needed anecdotally the scheme has been successful in starting to develop this community. It is hoped that through ongoing support of the LDC the community will continue to develop and strengthen. This is an excellent opportunity to continue to raise the profile of learning and teaching, to capacity build for the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme and to create a portfolio of collaborative bids and pedagogic research.

The community will not remain static as new staff through involvement in learning and teaching become eligible to join. However integrating new and existing staff, bring different perspectives and contribute to the ongoing learning of the community (Viskovic 2006).

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