

The Impact of a Faculty Learning Community on the Academic Identity of a Group of University Teachers

Anne Tierney*

Faculty of Biomedical & Life Sciences, University of Glasgow

*a.tierney@bio.gla.ac.uk

In 2006, a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) was set up at the University of Glasgow (Bell et al, 2006). Using the Miami model proposed by Cox (2004), the purpose of the FLC was two-fold; to bring together a group of University Teachers (UT), a new academic position at the University of Glasgow, introduced in 2002 to incorporate the merger of the university with St. Andrews College of Education, and to allow the UTs to develop their knowledge of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL), which was itself a requirement of progression and promotion within the institution. Twelve UTs from six faculties were chosen to form the FLC. Invitations were sent out to all UTs in the institution (137 in 10 faculties), and 22 applications from UTs in 7 faculties were received. Members of the FLC were selected on the basis of application statement and availability. Starting with a residential retreat which began the process of community building, and following with monthly meetings, each with a particular SoTL theme, the FLC flourished for the twelve months of its existence, and offered the members a community which offered support to them in their struggle with academic identity. The UTLC was the subject of two papers, Bell et al, 2006, which described the origins of the Learning Community, and a second paper (MacKenzie et al, in press) which sought to identify the benefits that came from the twelve months that the UTs spent together. Through interviews and focus groups it became apparent that the UTLC fostered a sense of community for the UTs, and helped them to define an academic identity for themselves, through mutual support and trust within the group. On a practical level, the UTLC also allowed the UTs the opportunity to work together with colleagues outwith their disciplines, and form relationships across faculties, which rarely happen in other situations. This has led to further academic collaborations between subgroups of the UTs that formed the UTLC. This presentation will look at the effect that the UTLC had on the individuals, and, in addition, will offer a personal reflection of the perception of teaching-only academics in a research-intensive institution.

Background

Learning communities

Learning communities are important in all areas of life. In an academic sense, the formation of communities of practice have been seen to benefit students as they negotiate their learning (Wenger, 1999). However, learning communities may also benefit staff, especially staff who may find themselves 'affected by the isolation, fragmentation, stress, neglect, or chilly climate in the academy' (Cox, 2004). Cox proposes the 'Miami Model' of Faculty Learning Communities, in which a group of 6-15 faculty staff come together for a period of a year, with a programme of seminars and events intended to enhance some aspect of their learning and teaching. FLCs

address a specific issue or opportunity, which is relevant to the members of that FLC. Following this model, an FLC was set up at the University of Glasgow. The purpose of this UTLC was twofold, to bring together a new category of academic ‘teaching-only’ staff: the University Teacher, a category which had been in existence since the amalgamation of St Andrews College of Education into the university in 2002, and to address the concept of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL) which was, and is, a requirement of University Teachers, but which lacked a definition within the institution.

There are qualities which are necessary for the sense of community in FLCs (see Table 1). These qualities were apparent during the UTLC.

Table 1. *Qualities Necessary for Community in FLCs (Cox, 2004)*

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Safety and trust | 6. Relevance |
| 2. Openness | 7. Challenge |
| 3. Respect | 8. Enjoyment |
| 4. Responsiveness | 9. Esprit de corps |
| 5. Collaboration | 10. Empowerment |

This feeling of “belonging” to the community was reported repeatedly by members of the UTLC, both in the sense of building personal relationships and in professional collaboration.

“comfortable with my new circle of colleagues”

“The word “community” cannot be overstated in this case”

“developing the cross-university collaborative activity”

The feeling of community expressed by the members of the LC was responsible for increased feelings of confidence within the group. Members reported feeling more confident and enthusiastic about their jobs and believed it will have long-term positive benefits in their future career. Specific examples have been the confidence to “put pen to paper” and write papers and funding applications; the sharing of knowledge on pedagogical practice, sources of funding, appropriate outlets for disseminating knowledge; the importance of defining scholarship and legitimate outputs; importantly, the social impact has been vital in developing the professional identity of what it means to be a university teacher.

“...importantly, boosted my confidence”

“more confident in what I am doing”

[without the LC] “I suspect that I wouldn’t have had the confidence to apply”

Evidencing scholarship

At the end of the UTLC, the members were surveyed as to their scholarly output over the period. At the outset, scholarly outputs were identified as publications in peer-

reviewed journals, grant applications, presentation (and attendance) at conference, informed teaching practice and discussion with colleagues. The survey indicated that the UTLC members had been successful in this regard, and also that they had widened their definition of scholarship as their experience had increased. Table 2. summarises the scholarly activities acknowledged by the members of the UTLC, indicating those which had been influenced by the LC itself.

Traditional activities include written and oral academic outputs with presentations and peer-reviewed paper the most popular in this category. A second important theme was teaching development, seen in the application for research grants and development of teaching materials. The other themes identified reflect a wider concept of scholarly behaviour and was evidenced in organisational roles, personal development, and wider professional roles. These outputs only reflect scholarly activity related to teaching and learning and within the 12 month period of being a member of the community, there were a 110 outputs reported by the group, 52 of which were attributable to the UTLC (47%).

Evidence of scholarship was most obvious in publications. During the period of the UTLC, members were research active and publishing work either within their own academic field or within the realm of education and educational practice. It is in respect of educational practice that the influence of the LC can be seen most clearly. The LC produced one joint paper based on the learning community membership (Bell et al, 2006) during the life of the UTLC. Members reported that they published 21 peer-reviewed papers whilst being members of the community, 3 of which were cited as being directly attributable to the UTLC's influence. The topics covered assessing innovative teaching ideas, evaluating teaching practices and ways of tackling plagiarism. The influence of the UTLC in these regards appeared to be in providing a forum for discussing ideas, encouragement and confidence-boosting from colleagues, and increased knowledge in terms of where to publish material.

Another way of evidencing scholarship was in the form of grants. Three LTDF¹ grants, one from teaching and learning support, and one from REAP² were successful. The topics ranged from the influence Peer Assisted Learning on effective teaching, the development of innovative teaching practices such as Personal Development Planning and the relationship between lecture attendance and student performance. In total the members submitted 8 successful grants, 6 of which were attributable to the UTLC. The role that the UTLC seemed to provide in this regard was in the provision of knowledge, advice, support and encouragement.

¹

Table 2. Scholarly output by members of the UTLC during its lifetime (Bohan & Tierney, unpublished)

Traditional outputs	Total No. of SoTL Outputs	Total No. attributed to Learning Community	% attributed to Learning Community
Peer reviewed papers	21	3	14%
Joint peer-reviewed paper (Bell et al)	12	12	100%
Chapter in a book	3	1	33%
Case studies	5	4	80%
Posters	1	1	100%
Other written output	3	1	33%
Presentations	24	7	29%
Attendance at conference	13	5	39%
Research grants (successful)	8	6	75%
Research grants (under review)	3	3	100%
Teaching development			
Teaching evaluation	1	1	100%
Teaching material development	6	3	50%
Personal development			
Further study outwith the LC (leading to qualification)	3	1	33%
Wider professional role			
Journal refereeing	1	-	-
Research grant refereeing	1	-	-
External examiner	1	-	-
Joining professional bodies	2	2	100%
Organisational role			
Conference organisation	1	1	100%
Admissions committee	1	1	100%
TOTAL	110	52	47%

After the Learning Community – a personal reflection

It is apparent that during the lifetime of the UTLC, the members were encouraged to be 'SoTL active'. The UTLC was in existence in 2006. In 2009, a second group-authored paper was written (MacKenzie et al, *in press*), which detailed the positive effects on the members of the LC. On reading the paper, there is a feeling of nostalgia for the comradeship and feeling of community that existed in 2006. It is disappointing that there have been no further learning communities at the University of Glasgow. Despite the success of the UTLC, it has not been repeated, and the sustainable model proposed by Cox, which is highly successful at Miami University, has not been adopted. However, the members of the UTLC have been active within the realms of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning. The online resource BeSoTLed (2008) was started by three of the members of the UTLC. There are two parts to the resource; a website and a Moodle (VLE) resource. At the moment, the website is open to all, but the Moodle-based resource is available only to staff from the University of Glasgow, and it is equivalent to an online learning community. Several members of the UTLC are also active in a SoTL initiative with the University of Wisconsin system, where academics from Glasgow and Wisconsin are paired, and exchange examples of practice. Members of the UTLC have studied for higher degrees and continue to explore issues of SoTL relevant to their teaching.

The worth of teaching

The question remains why Learning Communities have not been as enthusiastically embraced at the University of Glasgow as in Miami University. There may be several reasons for this, and it is necessary to look beyond institutional boundaries. The current climate in UK HEIs is to favour research excellence. This is understandable, as research is seen to attract large amounts of money, has associated kudos, and is measurable by the RAE (and subsequent REF). How, then can teaching be measured and compared to research? This is a complex issue, and the suggestions here are from different contexts.

“The Academy of Excellence”

The University of Lund has developed an Academy of Excellence (Olsson & Roxå, 2008; Roxå, Olsson & Mårtensson, 2008), in response to the inequality of opportunity perceived between research and teaching academics. Academics, both research oriented, and teaching oriented, are encouraged to apply to the Academy, and provide portfolio evidence of their excellence in teaching. The criteria for excellence are clear, and are judged by a committee made up of Academy members. Competition for membership of the Academy is fierce, and successful candidates receive a promotion. The notion of an Academy of Excellence in Teaching is an interesting one as it turns teaching into the object of desire, and invites academics to prove their expertise in teaching. In addition, the recognition, both academic and financial, raises the standing of teaching. Similarly, the National Teaching Fellow Scheme (NTFS), which runs in England, recognises the excellence of individuals in teaching in Higher Education (HEA).

Continuing and professional development

Elton (1998, 2008) proposes that for teaching to be taken seriously, continuing and professional development has to be formalised. He suggests that for a career in teaching within higher education, an individual should undertake study synonymous to that of the academic training a research academic undergoes. Therefore, the postgraduate certificate taken by most academics at the start of their career, is only the first stepping stone, and that subsequently, the diploma, Masters degree and doctorate in education should reflect the stage that a teacher is in their career. This parallel training raises the profile of teaching to a professional level, if it is expected that years of training have to be pursued in order to become an excellent teacher.

In the end, it all comes down to...

...money. Money is power. It is not unusual for research academics in biosciences and medicine to command six and seven figure sums for their research. When compared to the modest sums available to most academics for teaching development, it is unlikely that there will be much change in attitude towards individuals engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning. However, the NTFS offers six figure sums to National Teaching Fellows to pursue educational developments over extended periods, and is starting to create a higher level of engagement of SoTL.

Was it worth it?

Looking back over the life of the UTLC, it was the start of something special for those involved. For those individuals it changed the way that we viewed teaching and set us on a road of reflective practice and a desire to improve things for our students. The impact has been lasting, and three years after the end of the UTLC, members of the community are still engaged in SoTL at a national and international level. Would I recommend that you start a learning community? Yes, because I would not be writing this if it had not been for twelve months surrounded by the support and backing of my colleagues.

Notes

1 University of Glasgow Learning & Teaching Development Fund

2 Re-Engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education, University of Strathclyde

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jason Bohan, Department of Psychology, University of Glasgow, who worked with me on the initial data gathering exercise at the end of the UTLC, and to the members of the University of Glasgow University Teachers' Learning Community.

References

Bell, S., Bohan, J., Brown, A., Burke, J., Cogdell, B., Jamieson, S., MacKenzie, J., McAdam, J., McKerlie, R., Morrow, L., Pashke, B., Tierney, A. (2006) University of Glasgow University Teachers' Learning Community. *Practice & Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education*, 1 (1), 3-12

- BeSoTLed (2008) Available from <http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/sotl/> [Last accessed 18/04/2010]
- Cox, M. (2004) Introductions to faculty learning communities. *New Directions for Learning & Teaching*, 97, 5-23
- Elton, L. (1998) Dimensions of excellence in university teaching, *International Journal for Academic Development*, 3(1) 3-11
- Elton, L. (2008) Continuing Professional Development in Higher Education – the role of the scholarship of teaching and learning, *Practice and evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 3(2), 193-208
- HEA (no date) National Teaching Fellows Scheme. Available from <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/supportingindividuals/ntfs> [Last accessed 18/04/2010]
- MacKenzie, J., Bell, S., Bohan, J., Brown, A., Burke, J., Cogdell, B., Jamieson, S., McAdam, J., McKerlie, R., Morrow, L., Paschke, B., Rea, P. & Tierney, A. (*in press*) RESEARCH ARTICLE From anxiety to empowerment: a learning community of University Teachers, *Teaching in Higher Education*
- Olsson, T. & Roxå, T. (2008) Evaluating rewards for excellent teaching – a cultural approach, *HEDRA Conference*, Rotorua, New Zealand. Available from <http://www.herdsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/conference/2008/papers/Olsson.pdf> [Last accessed 19/04/2010]
- Roxå, T., Olsson, T. & Mårtensson, K. (2008) Appropriate use of theory in the scholarship of teaching and learning as a strategy for institutional development, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 7, 276-294
- Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning & Identity*. Cambridge University Press