## CLT/ SOLSTICE Conference 2021

# Capturing, Curating and Sharing Culture: Teach, Learn, Share (#EHUTLS)

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**ABSTRACT**

At times of crisis staff development can be seen as something of a luxury. Yet it is at precisely these points when it can be a powerful lever to build resilience, provide hope and indeed shape future culture beyond the immediate challenges.

In 2018 against a backdrop of considerable structural upheaval within the Faculty, the presenters chose to use a deliberately ‘appreciative inquiry’ approach to developing teaching and learning practice (Cooperrider, Witney and Stavros, 2008) introducing a ‘Teach, Learn, Share’ staff development model to challenge the perceived deficit culture.  Moreover, an intrinsic intention was to address some of the common concerns of staff training, i.e. overly formalised, time consuming and focused on process issues or with insufficient time for conversations about practice, teaching and learning.

Fastforward to 2020 and once again the Faculty faced considerable upheaval with the shift to remote teaching and then online learning – along with the rest of the sector.  The challenge became one of how the Teach, Learn, Share would adapt to the new environment and how colleagues would respond to this when time seemed to be in even shorter supply.

Teach, Learn, Share adopts the concept of Teachmeets or "Guerilla" CPD (Bennett, 2012), where colleagues are invited to present an aspect of their practice within a very informal and supportive setting.  There is no remit for the presentations beyond being linked to teaching and the learning of students or colleagues. Presentations are deliberately short, in many formats, and with opportunities for discussion to follow.  Moreover, connections are made between staff outside of their formal job roles and siloed departmental domains, the ethos being to poke holes in barriers rather than breaking them down completely.  As such this has continues to be a highly practical solution to encourage conversations about teaching, learning, good practice, risky ideas and contested concepts in a safe, collegiate and fun environment.

**Introduction**

This paper describes the way in which the introduction of a ‘Teach, Learn, Share’ staff development model was used to challenge the insularity and stagnation that can threaten any organisation during periods of significant change, whether the cause of that change is internal or external. The approach taken has the additional benefit of providing an alternative to many of the staff development and staff training events that are delivered to meet the requirements of the organisation rather than the needs of the participants. There have been no quick fixes but we believe we are seeing the equivalent of the marginal gains which fuelled the success of 2012 British Cycling Team, i.e. that there has been a gradual but significant influence on the culture of the Faculty and its receptiveness to change in the learning and teaching spheres.

This paper sits alongside the presentation delivered at the CLT/ SOLSTICE Conference 2021 and includes our top tips for those wanting to follow a similar approach.

**Context**:

In 2017 the Faculty of Education underwent huge structural upheaval including a significant number of redundancies which led to low morale, a marked defensiveness towards change and evidence of colleagues burrowing themselves into their own individual warrens of busyness and avoiding contact even within programme teams as a way of hoping that any subsequent structural change would not include them. It was against this background that the presenters identified the need to take a radically different approach to the traditional deficit model of developing learning and teaching practice and would reflect the good and excellent practice that was known to exist within the Faculty. By doing this, we adopted a deliberately ‘Appreciative Inquiry’ (Cooperrider, Witney and Stavros, 2008) approach to celebrate the individual expertise of colleagues and to allow them to share this in a safe environment.

As the Faculty – and the rest of the world – went into lockdown in March 2020 a different yet no less significant challenge presented itself. In this instance there was some uncertainty as to whether the gains that had been made in developing a supportive learning and teaching culture could maintained or if staff would turn to working in comparative isolation as a way of managing their own personal pressures.

In both situations – and between them - the desire to engender a culture of teaching, learning and sharing was a constant underpinning motivation.

**What’s wrong with CPD?**

As well as dealing with the specific challenges of the Faculty traditional staff development often carries its own issues. Too often staff training is designed to meet the needs identified by management/ the organisation without either recognising or sharing the expertise of staff. As a result, staff training and development is often criticised as being overly formalised, managerial, directed rather than responsive, with the provision of information that is either too general or too specific, compliance focused (e.g., fraud, fire safety) and time bound.

Moreover, initiatives that seek to address some of the issues identified can be too closely associated with other, negative, staff experiences. For example, research such as the Scott, Tucker, Unsworth and Burgum report (2017) indicates that learning and teaching peer review processes can promote cohesion, mutual trust and support amongst staff as well as develop effective practice. In other words, it can engender culture change as well as improving practice. However, the introduction of a peer review process that was deliberately separated from management oversight as well as the formal University quality assurance requirements was still perceived to be a form of management control and led to uneven take-up across the Faculty. (Although those who took advantage of this provided good evidence that all of the benefits identified in the research were achievable).

**Looking for solutions**:

Against this background the need to provide something that was going to be recognised as being different to other approaches, that would be led by colleagues and delivered by colleagues was identified – whilst also recognising that there was no quick fix! In schools a new approach to staff development was being readily adopted, i.e., the TeachMeet. Teachers are able to share ‘just what they do’ and receive ‘profoundly important professional affirmation…it is a wonderful form of learning … because it comes from the heart, it’s targeted on the heart’ (@magsamond@SchoolofEdTCD 2021). As described by Liz Bennett (2012)

*“TeachMeets offer a structure to CPD activities which are informal and led by participants. [the] Principles of building community within formal CPD programmes is not new, but the TeachMeet structure offers one way that it can be organised effectively.”*

There are other, similar, approaches that were investigated, such as the Unconference (Bilsbury, J. et al, 2013; Boule, M. 2011; Terry, N. 2017), Edcamp (Carpenter, J.P. 2015; www.edcamp.org) and Mob Rule (Boule, M. 2011). The common ingredients of these approaches are that teachers present to other teachers whatever they choose and in whatever format they select – as long as it is short – with opportunities for further discussions outside of the presentations. The growth of these events and the levels of engagement by teachers and our own exposure to the teaching world made this an attractive approach to investigate further and led to the introduction of the Teach, Learn, Share events. It also linked to that concept of ‘Appreciative Enquiry’ (Cooperrider, Witney and Stavros, 2008) where change comes from members expertise and professional joy in what they do. A further advantage of the format is that it normalises the idea that everyone has something to share about the teaching and learning domain – not just those who have a substantive presentation that can last an hour. In fact staff members are often surprised that their short presentation of “normal practice” (at least for them), engenders such enthusiasm, praise and debate amongst their peers.

**Changing culture**:

As the Teach, Learn, Share was introduced the key factor that we sought to engender, bearing in mind that we were seeking cultural change, was an inclusive ethos. As indicated earlier, a consciously Appreciative Inquiry approach (Cooperrider, Witney and Stavros, 2008) was adopted whereby colleagues would be able to share their expertise and learning & teaching enthusiasms. Moreover, there are overtures of social justice, i.e. the starting point is that everyone has something to offer, no-one is an expert in all aspects of learning and teaching. This has two dimensions; one is that it is not hierarchical – we have had contributions from Associate Tutors, GTAs (PhD students who are based in departments and teach a few hours per week), Learning Services colleagues (including one of the presenters), Faculty support colleagues, as well as academic colleagues, including Readers and Associate Heads of Departments. Secondly, there is no review process prior to the event; each individual makes their own decision regarding what aspect of practice they will share with the result of significant breadth and depth of contributions and discussions – more than had been envisaged at the start and would have been achieved by other means.

When investigating the ways in which the (teaching and learning) culture could be changed the work of Thorsten Kammer (2019) was influential. His image of culture ambassadors working within and across teams and hierarchies as well as identifying key aspects that influence culture resonated strongly with each of the co-ordinators. In particular, the following key concepts are representative of the ethos that is embedded into both the planning and delivery of the Teach, Learn, Share events:

* *Eye-Level Contact: Approaching everybody as human beings*
* *Fun: encouraging results without highlighting goals every single day*
* *Connections: Fostering the relationships of the people within the workplace*
* *Vulnerability: Telling people you don’t know everything and that you need their help*
* *Corporate Knowledge: introducing values of radical transparency and continuous improvement*

Kammer, T. (2019)

**Teach, Learn, Share**:

From the first event at the end of the 2017/18 academic year until December 2019 the events were held in person and a wide range of creativity was evidenced. The following examples are used to give a flavour of these events: ‘murder mystery’ approaches for the delivery of primary science, the use of beautiful story books to share the importance of cultural capital, the use of sketch-noting to develop student notetaking and engagement, and swinging a phone in a sock to measure centrifugal force (possibly).

Along with so many other things the pandemic forced a pivot to online synchronous meetings, causing a sense of uncertainty as to whether this would aid or diminish engagement by colleagues. Pleasingly, the result has been increased participation both in terms of the numbers attending each event and in the breadth of representation from across the Faculty. Our perception is that this has reflected a hunger for social connection, TEL tips and increased convenience as colleagues dip in and out more easily and without any travel time. Moreover, we have seen more colleagues using the space as an opportunity to try out new things in this environment and a preparedness to be vulnerable with the sharing of online teaching and learning journeys. As expected there are downsides, for example; personality is harder to project, spontaneity is lost and playful interaction occurs in backchannels, and only for those who can type fast enough!

In both the in-person and online environments a question that hovers in the background is whether Teach, Learn, Share events would be technocentric, i.e. about ‘whizzy gadgets’ and apps and would be weak on subject content and pedagogy. According to Mishra and Koehler, (2006) the three dimensions subject knowledge, pedagogy and technology are needed for good teaching and learning. Whilst the events have often included the sharing of technology, particularly since March 2020, the overwhelming evidence is that the focus is on pedagogical knowledge and professional identity. Whilst colleagues want the quick fixes, there is a hunger to discuss deeper understanding of our roles and our culture. Some examples have been the discussions around cultural capital: politics and teacher values, the metaphysics of ‘Wonder as Experience’, a reflection on the near future implications of technology via the Black Mirror TV show - the influence of social media and ‘likes’ in modern culture - and the use of Augmented Reality in our teaching.

**Cake!**

At the introduction of the Teach, Learn, Share initiative and in its ongoing development senior management support has been important. When meeting in-person this was evidenced in the provision of cake alongside the traditional tea and coffee. This alongside the engagement of senior managers in promoting TLS showed that senior management valued the events and its aims as well as providing an incentive for engagement. As events moved online that senior management support continues to be evident in their attendance and engagement, by positive recognition of who contributes and participates, encouraging participation and in their social media promotion of the events.

**Impact**:

Measuring changes in culture is notoriously difficult to do, particularly when such change was not expected to be quick or wholly dependent upon a single initiative. However, there are indicators that can be used as proxies. In the beginning there was a reliance on the sporadic use of surveys gathering qualitative data from participants and their perceptions – which are always positive – plus anecdotes and informal feedback. Whilst this was encouraging, such an approach carries bias as the results come from supportive colleagues.

An approach that is arguably more reliable are that the numbers of those attending the events have gone up in the last year and indicate that Teach, Learn, Share is now part of the landscape. Not only has attendance increased, representation from all four departments and beyond have become an expectation at each event. In addition, the chat function has made conversations that may have been missed previously more overt and more democratic. No longer are comments kept just between (old) friends but is shared with the whole group and anyone can respond – and bless those who can be witty in text!

A sense of belonging – to Teach, Learn, Share or the Faculty – can be inferred in other ways. There are colleagues who clearly prioritise the events in their diaries and come along regularly. Most contributors come due to personal recommendation which, we hope, feeds into their sense of esteem and provides colleagues the opportunity to recognise the good work that is being undertaken. Being recognised by participants from across the Faculty can translate into more conversations in the coffee queue (next year) which again pokes holes in traditional barriers of programme and departmental walls and carry an overture of shifts in the culture.

The range of contributions vary from the profound to the simple and also the unintentional (which can joyfully derail proceedings). For all those contributing there can be a sense of risk taking and vulnerability, but always they and what they bring are well received which makes Teach, Learn, Share a safe place to share practice. This year we have begun to have self-referrals where colleagues are keen to share something that they have introduced and found to be successful. This too points to a change in culture and that this is a safe place in which to share practice.

Impact can also be measured through the metrics that come from the use of social media with impressions, engagements, profile clicks etc. all adding to a picture of a vibrant community that Teach, Learn, Share is a part of. Twitter in particular is used for both the promotion of Teach, Learn, Share (#EHUTLS) and for disseminating a flavour of the content. The image below is an example from one such contribution



**Tensions**:

Whilst Teach, Learn, Share has come a long way since that first event in July 2019 there are still aspects that are questioned. With the move online there is the option to be able to record events to be shared with a wider audience. Whilst this has some obvious benefits the decision has been taken to keep this as a live event; that ‘you have to be there’ to share. If it becomes something that can be consumed passively then it begins to militate against the aim to engender a culture of developing relationships across the Faculty. And arguably may become a less safe space in which to share practice. Overall we would argue that much like any “performance” there is a qualitative difference in the long term impact, influence and perceived value that a “live” event has over a static resource or repository that may or may not be accessed at any time.

There have been frequent attempts to keep the contributions short, about 5 minutes, but this has not always worked and has become more difficult in the online environment (due to the time it takes to upload presentations, technologies etc.) Moreover, even when contributions are short, then colleagues are keen to discuss the content and the implications for practice, to deepen personal pedagogical philosophies.

Ensuring contributions come from across the whole Faculty means that much is still reliant upon the team managing this initiative. As such it is dependent upon the quality of the relationships that we are able to build outside our normal working roles as well as in the range of contacts that are made through our day-to-day work. But more importantly and perhaps significantly is that we are dependent upon the goodwill of our colleagues who have continued to step up, to share their practice, to make themselves vulnerable when so much has been asked of them already. Our heartfelt thanks goes to each colleague enabling this to happen.

**Conclusion**

Teach, Learn, Share has been a way in which three colleagues have sought to influence and shape the culture of a Faculty at times of significant challenge and change. Change is a constant and so the challenge to support colleagues and to enable colleagues to take pleasure in what they do and to share that experience also remains a constant. We believe and are told that this makes a difference to the way that colleagues feel about what they do and their place within the Faculty. And sometimes feeling is more important than metrics.

**Top Tips**:

If you are thinking of setting up your own Teach, Learn, Share events then the following are our top tips:

* Don’t prevaricate: ‘Just do it!’
* Set up regular events at the start of the year – build it and they will come. And don’t think that there is a perfect time to do this; there isn’t. If you have regular events, they will be right for everyone some of the time. We opted for 4-6pm – and still they come!
* Think about the tone. We recommend making it personal and irreverent. Carl always acts as compere for the sessions which provides continuity and often begins with ‘Welcome to the people who care about learning and teaching’
* Make personal approaches. Make them feel special – they are – and management can often forget to let them know this.
* Be relentless in promoting and reminding: As well as social media Faculty wide emails are sent one month, two weeks, two days and the morning before the event.
* Take photos and use social media (note that this is harder with online events)
* Enjoy! We do.
* Follow us on social media #EHUTLS, @Activ8Thinking (Carl Simmons) @HKnapton (Helena Knapton) and SoniaEDEHU

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**Link to googleslides** <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/18NCO6I9k13kwpvnQ0IllP0KlnVrRL1OXd4IWaZanS8c/edit?usp=sharing>