

Title: What works in building a learning community?

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Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Identify a variety of 'types' of learning community
- Identify issues involved in building particular types of learning community
- Engage in constructive dialogue with relevant partners / colleagues
- Employ relevant strategies to build and maintain a selected community 'type'

Session Outline

Key issues to be addressed are:

Enhancing learning experience; professional and personal development issues – priorities, needs, barriers; motivators for change; positive interventions

Where learning communities have been introduced in the U.S., students “show higher rates of faculty and peer interaction, increased critical thinking and writing skills, and higher levels of engagement” (Brownell and Swaner, 2009). Likewise learning communities of staff can bring immense benefits; Levine (co-author of *Creating Learning Communities*) states “More important than the knowledge I have acquired is the support network I have built..... I have learned new ways to talk about teaching and learning. I have learned about evaluation and assessment—most important, how to use it to describe our work and improve our program” (anon. 1999, p. 7).

However, over 50% of collaborations fail. Kezar (2005) suggests a three-stage model of increasing commitment and development of structures, networks, and rewards to support the collaborations. Burgess (1994) identified a number of institutional features that affect teamwork, among them discipline boundaries, administrative obstacles, and dysfunctional reward systems. There may therefore be structural barriers to the creation of communities which cross boundaries, but in addition there are likely to be personal issues around the concept of change.

We generally accept that the knowledge base can be changed and enhanced; the fact that personal / inter-personal skills can *also* be changed is much less appreciated. Yet this is possible. A coaching approach is being used at UCLAN, based on the premise that coaching is about “enhancing and developing the performance of the individual. ...enabling them to cope with managing change, restructuring, technological change” Caplan (2003, p. ix).

This session draws on the author's experience of working with different groups of staff, and of 1:1 coaching to explore with the participants the benefits, challenges and strategies involved in creating and sustaining learning communities in H.E.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

- Scene-setting (PL) and setting of tasks for the session – grouping into temporary 'communities'
- Groups to identify positives / incentives for engaging in a 'learning community', and barriers to achieving these (flip charts)
- Case studies of different 'communities' (real examples from UCLAN, based on authors experience); groups to suggest solutions to barriers encountered
- Within groups, individuals identify their own situations, and group input to suggest solutions (optional, depending on timing of previous exercises)
- Summing up and sharing of learning

References

Anon (1999) *On the Experience of Creating Learning Communities: The Authors Reflect About Campus*, 4(5), p8-10.

Brownell, J. E. and Swaner, L. E. (2009) High-Impact Practices: Applying the Learning Outcomes Literature to the Development of Successful Campus Programs. *Peer Review*, 11(2), p26-30

Burgess, P. "Why Don't We Have More Teamwork in Higher Education?" Paper presented at the AAHE Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards. New Orleans: American Association for Higher Education

Caplan, J. *Coaching for the future* McGraw Hill

Kezar, A. (2005) *Redesigning for Collaboration within Higher Education Institutions: An Exploration into the Developmental Process*. *Research in Higher Education* 46(7), p831-860