How to Build a Learning Community

Dr Pamela Docherty
p.docherty@ed.ac.uk
National Student Survey Results 2017

Learning Community for UUK institutions: Mathematics and Statistics
National Student Survey Results 2017

Overall Satisfaction for UUK institutions: Mathematics and Statistics
Why learning community?

“...participating in a learning community is positively linked to engagement as well as student self-reported outcomes and overall satisfaction...”

Zhao, Kuh (2004)
Shared responsibility

*Engaging students:* what staff and institutions do to engage students in educationally purposeful ways

*Students engaging:* what students do – effort spent studying, their motivation and involvement in the institution

Bryson (2014)
NSS Learning Community Qs

• “I feel part of a community of staff and students”

• “I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course”
Two aspects to learning community

• Feel part of a community

• Able to learn with others
Opportunities to learn with other students

- Within the classroom
- Outwith the classroom
Outwith the classroom

Drop-in help in MathsBase
Study groups: MathPALS

Outwith the classroom
Outwith the classroom

Discussion Forums

- Piazza
Collaborative Workshops in Teaching Studios

Within the classroom
Collaborative Workshops in Teaching Studios

Within the classroom
Active Learning/Peer Instruction in Lectures

Within the classroom
What about assessment?
What about assessment?

• High-stakes vs low-stakes
• Group projects and presentations
• Two-stage tests
Feeling part of a community
Feeling part of a community

• Informal interactions with staff/students
• Informed of the School's activities
• Opportunities to contribute to the School's activities
• Identifying as a mathematics student/professional attitudes towards subject
Feeling part of a community

“..positive student-staff interaction and relationships are key to enhancing student motivation, engagement and academic performance”

Catherine Bovill, engagED in Learning and Teaching Conversations, 2017
Feeling part of a community

- Open days/visit days
- Set expectations about what we offer and what they will contribute
- Robust induction programme (developed with Abby Shovlin and Jenna Mann, IAD)
- Welcome meetings for each year group
- Physical environment important
Study and socialise in MathsHub
Communicating a strong School/professional identity

• Newsletter from Head of School
• Publicity, Engagement and Outreach Committee
• Social Media
• General Interest Seminars
Opportunities for students to contribute to their community

- MathPALS
- Outreach Team
- Student Ambassadors
- MathSoc
- Problem Solving Group
- Young Researchers' Association
Opportunities for students to contribute to change and innovation

- Class Reps
- Student-Staff Liaison Committee
- Student Reps on Committees
- Students on interview panels
- Focus groups on policy changes
Building a learning community - what doesn’t work?
Social events...worth it?

- MathSoc events
- End-of-exam BBQ
- General Interest Seminar & Reception
- Final-year pizza lunch
- Ceilidh
- Welcome Lecture & Reception
Community of Practice

“University departments in research-intensive institutions that have a reputation for excellent teaching.....tend to have strong teaching micro-cultures that involve regular conversations about teaching and learning”

Catherine Bovill, engagED in Learning and Teaching Conversations, 2017
Lessons learned

• Start early in the degree programme - induction is key
• Informal interactions with staff - more emphasis on learning than social
• Build group learning into classroom (but not for assessment!)
• Culture change takes time
What next?

• Engaging the disengaged
• Bringing together diverse student groups
Discussion & Questions

• Does your subject area have a strong learning community? What are the advantages and challenges?

• What good practice can you share/would you like to adopt?
Acknowledgements

• Toby Bailey, Director of Teaching, SoM
• Iain Gordon, Head of SoM and previous HoS’ Harry Braden & Michael Singer
• Ross Galloway, Judy Hardy and the Physics Education Research Group
References

• Bovill, C. (2017) EngagED in Learning and Teaching Conversations. Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh