



engag**Ed** in...

learning and teaching
conversations

The Evidence...

University departments in research-intensive institutions that have a reputation for excellent teaching, demonstrate some common characteristics that include: building a community of practice; involving students; and supporting change and innovation (Gibbs et al 2009). These departments also tend to have strong teaching micro-cultures that involve regular conversations about teaching and learning (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009), they take teaching seriously, they have high ambitions for teaching, and student concerns are listened to and responded to (Mårtensson, Roxå & Stenseker 2014). There is also compelling evidence from longitudinal studies that positive student-staff interaction and relationships are key to enhancing student motivation, engagement and academic performance (see for example, Chickering & Gamson 1986; Cuseo 2007; Kuh & Hu 2001; Lampport 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini 1978). Research highlights the importance of staff being warm, approachable, accessible, empathetic, genuine, respectful, understanding and honest (Lampport 1993).



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



Our aims...

To encourage staff and students to meet and have meaningful conversations about teaching and learning, in order to:

- 1 strengthen students' and staff sense of belonging to an academic community;
- 2 understand and respond to students' perspectives of their learning experience; and
- 3 enhance our reputation for teaching excellence across the University.

Ideas for setting up conversations...

The following are examples of ways in which you could set up conversations, and suggestions for themes you might wish to explore, but each School is different, so use approaches that suit your existing priorities, themes and conversations. A meeting could include one or more of these activities along with a short introduction from the Head of School or equivalent picking out some highlights for the School or key topics in teaching and learning and some closing comments.



Aim 1: Strengthen the sense of academic community

Suggested topics/themes to explore:

- What interests you at the moment in geology/philosophy/health?
- What do you enjoy most about being an engineer/historian?
- What part of your work are you most proud of and why?
- What have you read/seen/heard about recently that got you excited about your discipline?



Speed networking

Staff and students are given a specific topic to discuss in pairs for three minutes e.g. Why do students come to study maths/art/biology at the University of Edinburgh? Then form new pairs and repeat. This creates a lively, positive atmosphere and ensures everyone gets to talk to new people. Ensure that students are not just talking to students, and staff are not just talking to staff. Optional: participants write a note of two key words from each conversation and use this to generate a word cloud to give an immediate visualisation, that can then be used in future communications/posters.



Nurturing a disciplinary identity

This activity can include students from different years, staff, tutors, demonstrators, and alumni. Start by asking what it means to be a physicist/medic/historian... Then ask for adjectives/phrases written on sticky notes/a sheet/outline of a person so all contribute to a visual representation of disciplinary identity. Discuss ideas and themes. Focus on key topics to explore/understand by graduation. Optional: Using these key topics, ask groups how these characteristics are best nurtured by individuals and the School, in approaches to teaching, facilities, student societies etc.



Sharing research in progress

This can give students a sense of the research activities of staff, including relevance to their programme and opportunities for students to develop research skills and experience. Options:

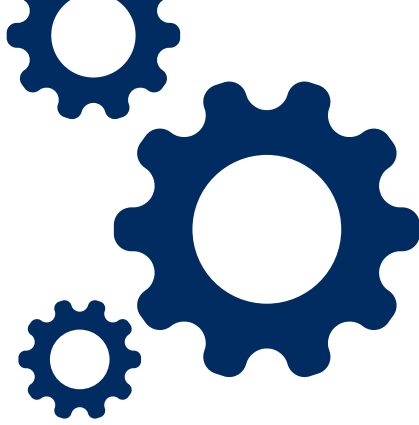
- Three to five short, punchy presentations from staff and PhD students focussed on the what, how and why of their research. Encourage presenters to make links between research and teaching.
- Outline opportunities available to students to undertake research as part of their degree (including but not limited to capstone projects). There is potential to ask some senior students to highlight their experience of research as an undergraduate and what they gained from it.
- Networking, for students to be able to talk with staff about opportunities for research (e.g capstone projects, research-based courses, summer internships in Edinburgh or elsewhere).



Networking bingo

Students and staff are given cards with specific topics/experiences/skills on them. Some of these are related to the discipline and some can be general. Participants have to find others who have that knowledge/experience/skills – discuss it with them for two minutes, get them to sign their bingo card and move on. You can offer prizes for the first completed cards¹.

¹ IAD use this approach for some PhD induction events and have a template that can be used to generate tailored bingo cards.



EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE 1

'Meet the Faculty'

In psychology, staff have held an event to invite students to get to know the staff. Staff each present a short profile of the research they do, and this helps to underline the research-led teaching within the School. Students can ask questions and there is some discussion. The event is followed by cheese and wine.

EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE 2

Learning and Teaching Journal club

At the vet school, they organise a journal club focused on learning and teaching in vet medicine for staff and students. Some of the sessions are led by students who select an article that they are interested in discussing. Discussion about relevant articles is encouraged in a forum where both staff and students can learn from one another. Some of the students involved are undertaking a Certificate in Veterinary Medical Education, while others are just students who are interested in learning and teaching issues.

Aim 2: Understand and respond to the student learning experience

Activity related to the aim of understanding and responding to the student learning experience could be introduced by highlighting any successes and work in progress. This might include for example, mid-course feedback plans, the importance of gathering student feedback on courses (Evasys) and overall educational experience (NSS), including opportunities for students to celebrate and recognise great teaching (Students' Association Awards). Conversations between students and staff provide a great opportunity for a collaborative approach and a more in-depth understanding than is available from survey results. It is very important that the outcomes of discussions are followed up and communicated effectively to all involved.

Suggested topics/themes to explore:

- How can we make teaching more engaging in nursing/informatics/law?
- What have you heard takes place in learning and teaching elsewhere in the University that you think we should explore in economics/psychology?
- What are the troublesome/threshold concepts in our discipline and how could we enhance learning and teaching to support better understanding in these areas?
- What assessments do you think you have learned the most from in the last year? Why?



What works and why?

Start by asking students to think of a really good learning experience and write some notes individually about why it was so good (ask staff to identify a really good teaching experience). Then ask the students to share their ideas in pairs and then fours (staff to also work in pairs and then fours). Each group of four students (and four staff) is then asked to fill out two index cards with constructive clearly written suggestions about what makes for good learning (teaching) experiences. Key points are then shared across the group. Optional: Use these outcomes to undertake a planning and priority setting activity (see below).



Sharing challenges and solutions

Ask small groups of four to six similar individuals (e.g. students in same year of study; tutors & demonstrators; academics; support staff), to spend five to ten minutes identifying some of the common challenges they face, picking one key challenge. Then, two members of the group should remain at the table while others move onto a new group. The two original group members introduce their challenge to their guests who in turn act as consultants, suggesting a range of possible solutions (five to ten minutes). The original two stay where they are and other participants move on again. Repeat this several times so that each group has three or four alternative perspectives and solutions. All participants return to their original group to discuss solutions offered, presenting their favourite back in a plenary.



Planning and priority setting – 2 possible approaches

a) Pin-pointing/Clustering

People individually note ideas on separate sticky notes, these are all brought together, and either the group clusters them, or the facilitator takes them one at a time and asks the group whether each one belongs to an existing or new cluster. Sometimes rules are introduced, e.g. where the author of the sticky notes has the final say where it should be allocated. This can be used to surface core ideas, e.g. actions that need to take place over the next X months/years to achieve a goal.

b) Force field analysis

Once a particular goal has been identified (e.g. a plenary-defined goal, or a goal from a previous session), force field analysis can be a simple but collaborative way of discussing barriers and supporters of change. Participants (individually or as a group) identify the forces acting in support of, or against, the proposed change. These are each scored on one to five strength scale (one sticky note for each factor) and displayed together on a flipchart or whiteboard. This gives a visual summary of the key factors and an opportunity to discuss and identify steps to manage forces against and build on forces in favour².

² See: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_06.htm for a summary of the process.



EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE 3

Creating a programme hashtag

Colleagues at Moray House School of Education created a Twitter hashtag for the MSc in Digital Education. This Twitter hashtag enables programme participants across all the courses, tutors and external people to engage in a range of discussions and ongoing conversations related to the programme. It has been used for resource sharing, information about events and talks and for clarification of ideas. It has encouraged tutor-student interaction as well as student-student interaction.



EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE 4

History Teaching Circle

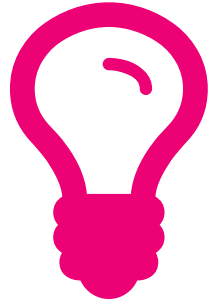
Staff and PhD students who teach in History get together regularly to share 'best practice' in teaching at the 'History Teaching Circle'. They hold seminars and informal discussions about what works well and how to enhance teaching approaches. The discussions are considered particularly useful for new colleagues and graduate teaching assistants as a way of offering support to those who are new to teaching and as a way of creating a community of teaching practice.



EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE 5

Mid-course feedback

Staff at the vet school have carried out mid-course feedback using The TopHat audience response system. They have then had discussions with students there and then about the outcomes of the feedback and what can be done to address some of the issues raised.



Key considerations...



Engaging the disengaged

Occasionally you can plan what seems like a great event for staff and students and some students do not turn up. So what can you do? You could consider:

- asking student representatives, or another group of students to help advertise events – often events that are shared by students with other students are more likely to be attended;
- asking students who attend why they think other students are not attending. Asking those who don't attend whether there is anything you could do to make events more appealing;
- co-designing the event with students – this can make an event more relevant for students. What staff think is engaging is not always the same as what students think is engaging;
- consider offering refreshments as this can sometimes make an event more attractive.

Sometimes it can be difficult to attract some staff to attend events too. Ensuring there is a clear focus for discussions or the offer of practical ideas and solutions for making changes to practice can make the event more attractive. It can be worth emphasising the importance of staff being engaged if we want students to engage and the importance of building student-staff relationships in a School.



Tone

NSS comments and Edinburgh University Students' Association analysis of Teaching Award nominations emphasise the value that students place on building positive links with academic and other staff. This includes opportunities for informal discussion. It is important that the staff participating in meetings are equally positive about the purpose of meetings and the opportunity they have to get to know their students better.



Facilitation

Try to ensure you plan sessions carefully and have them led by one or more experienced facilitators so they involve colleagues in sensitive ways that all are comfortable with. In addition to academic staff and those leading teaching in the School, consider involving student support staff, peer support leaders, learning technologists, experienced postgraduate tutors and demonstrators and student representatives. The IAD and other University Support Services may also be able to assist.



Venue

The venue for holding learning and teaching conversations matters. It is hard to run informal, interactive, conversational events in tiered lecture theatres. It is important to book a space suitable for the number of expected participants and the type of activity you plan to run. Extra planning may be needed if using spaces not normally used for teaching (e.g. microphones & speakers).



Alignment with University level communication and engagement activities

A key objective for these meetings is to build an atmosphere of positive, reflective and ambitious dialogue around learning and teaching. You might want to include some of the following key messages when introducing these events:

- We value students and students' contribution to the School and want you to have a challenging and stimulating educational experience, preparing you for whatever you do beyond graduation.
- We want you to feel part of an academic community, in your programme, School and discipline.
- We are interested in your perspectives on learning and teaching. Hearing different viewpoints can help us to enhance learning and teaching for everyone.
- We are committed to teaching and to using a wide range of evidence (including external examiner reports, course evaluations, NSS and Edinburgh University Students' Association Teaching Awards) to understand your experience and continue to improve the education we offer. There is lots of evidence of a high quality of teaching and we are focussed on how to make it even better (see 'Sources of further help and information' below for useful supporting information).



Manage the risk of unintended negative consequences

If the meeting is used to identify specific challenges or problems with the student experience, make sure that there is capacity and commitment to address these challenges, and make sure that the next steps are shared with students and updates are provided. If, for example, a meeting generates negative feedback that students feel they have shared before and they then see no sign of action or communication of plans, it is likely to have a negative impact on how they view their experience.



Coherence with existing activity

In many Schools there will be an overlap between these suggested learning and teaching conversations and other planned activities with students (e.g course/programme level; peer support; personal tutor and student support teams; planned mid-course honours feedback events). NSS comments often highlight a lack of coherence and connection between different aspects of the student experience. It is important to ensure that these meetings complement and reinforce, rather than duplicate or confuse, other activities in your School.



Sources of further help and information...

Please do not hesitate to contact Dr Catherine Bovill in the Institute for Academic Development (IAD) catherine.bovill@ed.ac.uk if you would like help in planning or facilitating teaching and learning conversations in your School. If you think you have a particularly good idea for learning and teaching conversations, please share it with us in the IAD – your work might help others. In addition to course evaluation and university level surveys, there are many other sources of teaching and learning evidence at Edinburgh and examples of innovative and effective practices.

These include:

- **Students' Association Teaching Award nominations:** please email class.reps@eusa.ed.ac.uk for copies of the nominations for colleagues and courses in your School
- **External Examiners reports:** with potential to use EERS system reporting tools <http://edin.ac/2rd7G7U>
- **Teaching Programme and Postgraduate Programme Reviews:** reports available online via <http://edin.ac/2pRLdck>
- **Teaching Matters Website and Blog**
 - Monthly focus on a School: <http://edin.ac/1s7bMLf>
 - Blog posts (search by School) <http://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/>
- **Case studies** collected by the IAD, Information Services and Enhancement Themes team for practice sharing
 - <http://edin.ac/2pRu4Q5> (search by School)
 - <http://edin.ac/1VtWZCR>
 - <http://edin.ac/1NH0DVw>
- **Principal's Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS):** for projects listed by College and theme: <http://edin.ac/2pRxmTs>



References

- Chickering, A.W. & Gamson, Z.F. (1987) Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin* March, pp3–7.
- Cuseo, J. (2007) The empirical case against large class size: adverse effects on teaching, learning and retention of first years. *Journal of Faculty Development* 21 (1) 5–21.
- Gibbs, G., Knapper, C. & Piccinin, S. (2009) *Departmental leadership of teaching in research-intensive environments*. Final Report. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education/Higher Education Academy.
- Kuh, G.D. & Hu, S. (2001) The effects of student-faculty interactions in the 1990s. *The Review of Higher Education* 24 (3) 309–332.
- Lampton, M. A. (1993) Student-faculty informal interaction and the effect on college student outcomes: a review of the literature. *Adolescence* 28 (112) 971–990.
- Mårtensson, K. & Roxå, T. & Stensaker, B. (2014) From quality assurance to quality practices: an investigation of strong microcultures in teaching and learning, *Studies in Higher Education*, 39 (4) 534–545.
- Pascarella, E.T. & Terenzini, P.T. (1978) Student faculty informal relationships and freshman year educational outcomes. *Journal of Educational Research* 71, 183–189.
- Roxå, T. & Mårtensson, K. (2009): Significant conversations and significant networks – exploring the backstage of the teaching arena *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (5) 547–559.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following people for contributions to this guidance:

Adam Bunni (Academic Services), Gavin McCabe (Careers), Velda McCune (IAD), Esther Mijers (History), Alexa Morcom (Psychology), Clara O'Shea (School of Education), Jessie Patterson (Vet School), Jo Spiller (Information Services), Jon Turner (IAD).

Thanks also to Hookson for all the design work for this publication:
<http://www.hookson.com/>



© Catherine Bovill, University of Edinburgh 2017 CC BY

Published by the University of Edinburgh under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)