Enhancing engagement and academic community among colleagues at the Centre for Open Learning

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Rich range of teaching and learning at COL

The Centre for Open Learning (COL) offers a rich and diverse range of courses and programmes, including those in English Language Education, Short Courses, Languages for All, the International Foundation Programme, Seasonal Schools and the new Access Programme.

Coming from a wide variety of teaching backgrounds, from language teaching to continuing education, COL colleagues and our students engage in a rich variety of teaching and learning practices every day throughout the year.

Lack of shared identity and academic community

Whilst there are strong networks and communities between within subject areas and programmes across COL, colleagues within the Centre – which is the result of several mergers – have to date lacked a sense of shared identity. This has meant there been little sense of a shared academic community at COL and, importantly, with no COL-wide CPD programme, little chance to share and celebrate practice across our programmes, courses and pedagogies. This is not aided by the fact that many of our teaching colleagues are currently on guaranteed-hours contracts for a small number of hours, who sometimes find it difficult to engage or even to know where to come to share practice or look for training opportunities.

We have recently turned our building our academic community and building on the 'weak ties' (Roxa et al, 2011) that exist between colleagues across traditional boundaries by implementing a number of new school-wide initiatives. These are intended to encourage colleagues to share practice across traditional disciplinary and pedagogical boundaries and to encourage new networks and ties.

Implementing a school-wide academic CPD programme

We have implemented the beginnings of a School-wide Academic CPD programme, which includes systems-related training as well as a series of Sharing Practice events. These are formal and informal opportunities to meet together and discuss or share an aspect of their practice across disciplinary boundaries.

In January and February 2019, colleagues signed up for training in *Learn,* as well as Media Hopper Replay training for lecture recording. In March, 2019, colleagues attended our first Sharing Practice event, which focused on Peer Observation. We had a talk from Hazel Christie from the IAD on the benefits of peer observation, and reflections by COL colleagues who have previously engaged in peer observation. The event was well-received.

We intend to implement a pilot Academic CPD programme from September 2019.

School-wide Academic Peer Observation Scheme

It was appropriate that our first sharing practice event (see bottom left) focused on Peer Observation, as a component of the new COL Academic CPD programme will be an embedded Peer Observation Scheme. The idea is that colleagues within and across traditional disciplinary boundaries at COL will be come together to learn from one another in their own classrooms to enable them to reflect on their practice. A further benefit for academic community building at COL is that what is learned can be shared widely through future Sharing Practice events. We received some very helpful feedback from colleagues attending the event on the type of Peer Observation Programme they would like to see at COL and are feeding this into the design of the scheme. The intention is implement a pilot scheme from September 2019. For the benefits of peer observation, see:

Blackwell, R. and Machin, M. (1996) Peer observation of teaching and staff development. *Higher Education Quarterly* 50(2): 156-171

Gosling, D. (2005) *Peer observation of teaching: implementing a peer observation of teaching scheme with five case studies*. London: Staff and Educational Development Association.

Peel, D. (2005) Peer observation as a transformatory tool? *Teaching in Higher Education* 10(4): 489-504

Tenenberg, J. (2016) Learning through observing peers in practice. *Studies in Higher Education* 41(4): 756-773

Improving communication about learning and teaching

To complement the Academic CPD programme and Peer Observation Scheme, we are also seeking to improve communication around teaching and learning at COL. As such, we have implemented a number of initiatives, such as a weekly 'Teaching and Learning' slot in the School newsletter where news and excellent teaching and learning practices are shared and a new SharePoint site for Learning and Teaching.
https://uoe.sharepoint.com/sites/hss/oll/COLL&T

Sharing good practice and improving the student experience

Although this is just the beginning, it is hoped that increasing communication and opportunities to share good practice in teaching and learning within the COL and the wider University will stimulate discussion, debate and celebration of good practice. The aim is to encourage and support all COL colleagues to feel a valued part of a vibrant teaching and learning community within COL and the University of Edinburgh. This will hopefully not only improve the staff experience but also the student experience, as COL colleagues reflect on and share their practice, making new connections and trying new things.

Future plans

We hope in the future to expand the pilot programme to involve more collaboration with subject area and programme CPD. Ideally this will involve a number of shorter, more informal events, such as blogs, brown bag lunches or taster sessions.

Contacts

In post since May 2018, Kathryn aims to increase and improve communication around learning and teaching, and to build a stronger sense of academic community within the Centre for Open Learning, particularly in terms of increasing the number of opportunities for colleagues to share good practice within and across disciplinary and pedagogical boundaries.

With a background in wellbeing provision and adult education, Kate is working to build a friendly and open academic community at the Centre for Open Learning. In post since April 2018, her focus has been supporting opportunities for the professional development of teaching staff with the Short Courses programme, a suite of diverse courses open to the public:
www.ed.ac.uk/studying/short-courses

Please get in touch if you have any ideas you'd like to share with us about our Academic CPD programme or on building academic communities. We'd love to hear from you.

Acknowledgements

Links

See our Teaching Matters blog in the Building Academic Communities series at:
- www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/building-a-teaching-and-learning-community-at-the-centre-for-open-learning
- www.ed.ac.uk/lifelong-learning
- twitter.com/UoEOpenLearning

On building weak ties to strengthen and organisation and build community, see keynote speaker Torgny Roxa and related article:
- www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/learning-teaching/practice/ltconf2018/keynotes

Roxa, T., Martensson, K. & Alveteg, M., (2011) Understanding and Influencing Teaching and Learning Cultures at University: A Network Approach. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning*, 62(1): pp.99–111.