Teaching and Learning Conversations (TLC): Flexible bite-size staff development by, with and for academics

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Abstract

This case study presents the new blended Teaching and Learning Conversations (TLC) programme offered by the Academic Development Unit at the University of Salford. The TLC programme is an informal academic development intervention that helps individuals to connect with others from across the university and share good practice. Campus spaces as well as web-conferencing technologies are used to provide more flexible and versatile provision in collaboration with academics and other professionals who support learning and at the same time model the use of such technologies for teaching and learning.

Description and context

This case study presents the new blended Teaching and Learning Conversations (TLC) programme. It has been introduced at the University of Salford by the Academic Development Unit (ADU) in collaboration and partnership with academics and other professionals who support learning.

Academic Development Units play an increasingly important role in initial and continuing professional development within Higher Education and have "moved to central stage in institutional priorities" (Boud, 1995, 203) offering a range of accredited and non-accredited provision.

The ADU's face-to-face open workshop programme attracts a relatively small number of usually the same individuals. The ADU's staff development approach was, therefore, re-addressed to utilise available resources and create alternative opportunities to engage a larger number of staff in Continuing Professional Development (CPD). A variety of approaches is currently considered, such as subject-specific CPD at School and programme level tailored to local needs. Blended provision is included for more flexibility (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007), incorporating self-study resources and the development of toolkits accessible at anytime. Opportunities to engage in peer observations and reviews are also explored. Donnelly (2010) noted that technologies are currently still under-used in Academic Development, despite having the potential to enable academics to experience this mode of teaching as students and model good practice in the Digital Age. The ADU recognises this potential to transform teaching and learning, and promotes it as an enabler based on a pedagogical rationale.

Shortly after successfully piloting online synchronous delivery through Elluminate (web conferencing technology) as part of the blended Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP), the idea of the TLC programme was born. The aim of the TLC programme is to encourage more staff across the university to engage in flexible bite-size CPD activities which fit around academic life and explore teaching and learning at the University. It also provides an opportunity to meet like-minded people and share ideas and challenges; to showcase work and identify opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other in communities of practice (Wenger, 2006); to enhance their own practice and the student experience as a result as well as the overall quality of teaching within the institution.

This study reports on the implementation of the TLC programme, series 1, with a focus on the online dimension, during which Elluminate is utilised as a medium to support media synchronicity (Dennis & Valacich, 1999) for more informal academic development activities, and aims to raise the quality of teaching and transforming learning which is the Strategic Goal 1 of the institution. The initiative was led by an Academic Developer who had the support of an Administrator and a Learning Technologist. It ran between February and June 2011 and consisted of monthly one hour lunchtime face-to-face sessions and evening webinars. The campus-based sessions were organised in different locations and an Elluminate room was used for the webinars. All materials and recorded webinars were made available to all staff on the ADU website. Each TLC event had a teaching and learning theme defined by the interests and expertise of the facilitators.

Evaluation and impact

Overall, the TLC programme was well-received and attended. It enabled flexible participation and facilitation from the academic community in different physical and virtual spaces and everybody found it useful, as feedback suggests. Also, the length of the TLC session, one hour, seems to be just right and enabled focused conversations and exchange. The webinars in particular enabled staff to experience web conferencing as a participant and facilitator before using it with their own students. This was beneficial. One participant said for example: "It was interesting to see the technology in action, and to get some idea of its possibilities and limitations." Generally, staff were interested in using this technology in their own teaching This is encouraging and confirms that the modelling of the technology was effective and made them reflect on their own practice. Elluminate enabled a more natural online interaction and spontaneity between participants and facilitators, as highlighted by Kear (2011). Participants were enthused. One noted "What a great session. I love it!! We need to spread the word." Another one commented "I love Elluminate – can we roll it out across the whole university please – I love it!!" Most facilitators enjoyed it too. One of them stated: "I found delivering a TLC webinar very useful to get views from many people and to be able to record them to listen and read later." But participants also commented that the TLC sessions enabled them to share experiences and good practice with colleagues.

In total, 72 staff participated in all events (face-to-face sessions: 24/per session: 8; webinars: 48/per session: 16). While this might still appear to be a relative small number, increased traffic to the TLC section of the ADU website, where all materials are made available, has been observed suggesting further individuals engaged with some of the resources. Also, closer relationships have arisen between the ADU and the academic community, and there is evidence that academics are keen to engage and lead staff development activities to share their expertise, learn more about technology-enhanced learning and teaching approaches and explore opportunities to enhance their practice and the student experience.

The results of this initiative are very encouraging. There are already plans to widen the offer and seek further internal and external partners to deliver a larger-scale initiative. An investigation linked to the use of an open access web conferencing tool is also under way to identify if it would become a more sustainable solution for university-wide web conferencing implementation.

Academic Development activities have a ripple effect and a small intervention can generate a more significant impact if it triggers re-thinking of practices and transformational change (Mezirow, 1997). To measure the wider impact it will be essential not only to look at the numbers of academics who participated in the TLC initiatives but more importantly focus on how their engagement in such activities is influencing and changing their practice and the student experience as a result.

Problems encountered and lessons learnt

A number of issues, mainly linked to the webinars, were identified:

- Timing: Offering the webinars during evening hours seemed generally unpopular. Only one participant commented positively saying "I really enjoyed being able to connect with colleagues outside of 'office hours'". Due to limited popularity, future TLC sessions will be offered during the day.
- Administration: Planning of all TLC sessions was time consuming and inefficient. Google Docs is now used to enable self-registration for facilitators, making this process more manageable.
- Support: Offering webinars without technical support was risky. However, only minor issues were encountered. Collaboration with a learning technologist has been secured for the next TLC series and the timing of the webinars during working hours will also provide enhanced support.
- Facilitation: While most facilitators enjoyed the webinars, a small number felt uncomfortable. Further staff development is planned in advance of a webinar and face-to-face sessions to provide guidance and advice.
- Participation: Overall interaction and participation was good. Some avoided using the microphone during the webinars. Further opportunities for anonymous participation using the whiteboard feature need to be explored.
- Technology: There were some issues with the technology beyond our control, such as a power cut and the inability to use Elluminate from a mobile device or a Apple Mac. The most common problem was audio ("I couldn't hear" and "my microphone doesn't work").
- Frustration: A small number of participants felt they needed more time to respond or found the technology and mode of delivery frustrating. One webinar facilitator noted "Some good aspects but I found it hard to keep up with the texts coming in at the end and shame people could not use the mic more. Too much of me talking and without people taking the mic there's a limit to the value of it being mainly messaging." This was echoed in a participant's feedback "Too many things going on at once." Participants and facilitators need to be reminded of the available resources, as well as training and staff development opportunities available to them to gain a better understanding of this mode of delivery.

Future developments

The blended TLC programme has been positively received and, increasingly, the ADU is contacted by academics keen to facilitate and participate in a TLC event. There is an increasing sense of shared ownership of this initiative which has strengthened our plans to continue offering the TLC programme in the next academic year and refine the approach further, aiming to create learning partnerships and communities of practice (Wenger, 2006).

The following changes are planned for the next academic year in response to feedback received and own evaluation:

- The TLC offer has been extended by 100% per month.
- All sessions will continue to be offered on Wednesdays. New timing for all sessions is 12-1pm, including the webinars.
- Facilitators are invited from within Salford. External colleagues are also welcome to participate and facilitate, strengthening links between external partners.

- Staff not able to participate synchronously in the TLC Wednesday sessions, face-to-face or online, will have the opportunity to catch up on Twitter asynchronously using a hashtag (#tlcwednesday).
- An opportunity to use more video has been identified and the organisers are re-thinking their approach to the format of the webinars.
- TLC materials used will be made available as OER under a Creative Commons Licence on the ADU website, the institutional repository USIR (https://usir.salford.ac.uk/) and JORUM (http://www.jorum.ac.uk/) to enable re-use, re-mix, re-purposing and re-distributing and sharing with the wider community
- The ADU is piloting Blackboard Collaborate 11, a new product which emerged from the merger of Wimba and Elluminate. The blended TLC approach is used to model technology-enhanced teaching and learning and web conferencing tools to provide food for thought to academics.
- The TLC space on the ADU website is currently under review. The new page will include further self-study resources and troubleshooting guides especially for the use of Blackboard Collaborate 11.
- An alternative web conferencing tool BigBlueButton (http://bigbluebutton.org/) will be trialled for some of the TLC webinars as part of the Elluminate evaluation which might present a more sustainable solution for the institution.
- Resources from TLC series 1 are archived on the ADU website and will remain available to everybody.
- A TLC facilitator development session is planned in advance of every TLC session to help facilitators familiarise themselves with the TLC programme and provide advice on how to plan and deliver highly interactive face-to-face sessions and webinars.
- TLC events will be mapped against the UK PSF and e-certificates of participation. Facilitation will be provided to evidence engagement with CPD activities.

We are interested in finding partner institutions to develop a TLC database which will enable HE institutions across the UK to gain access to CPD provision at another institution, maximising engagement and creating opportunities for networking and collaboration beyond institutional walls through sharing available resources and expertise.

Externally, the attractiveness of the TLC approach has already been recognised a few months after the initial implementation by the Academic Development Unit of the University of Salford. The TLC approach was shared with other institutions during a CPD Framework meeting at the Higher Education Academy in which the ADU participated. As a result, it was recently announced that the TLC approach has been introduced at Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Western Scotland for their staff development and proven to be popular there as well. Other institutions have also shown interest when the TLC programme was presented during a Thunderstorm session at the Media-Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group (MEL SIG) event held at the University of Glamorgan in June 2011.

The current case study will be made available within the Institutional Repository USIR to disseminate findings and engage academics further in a dialogue about this initiative. Additional opportunities to participate in other dissemination workshops and events within and beyond the institution are currently explored; and further research will be conducted in the next academic year, linked to the online dimension of the TLC programme and the wider use of web conferencing technologies for teaching and learning as part of an institution evaluation led by the ADU.

Transferability

The approach used for the blended TLC programme is transferable and such schemes can be set up easily in similar contexts as evidenced above. The TLC approach could also be adapted and used in different teaching and learning situations with students: for example, to deliver peer-to-peer academic study skills workshops and engage students across an institution or a specific School, Discipline, Programme or Module. The opportunities are endless.

The following might be useful to consider before the implementation of similar schemes.

- Mode and location: Try and arrange the face-to-face sessions around the campus. Pick a different location each time to attract different individuals and teams.
- The tool: Check if the institution holds a licence for a web conferencing tool and get in touch with the relevant service to obtain advice and guidance on how to access it and get started. Familiarisation with the technologies in advance of the implementation is vital. If no such tool is available, similar open access technologies such as BigBlueButton could be considered. JISC provide a BigBlueButton installation, see http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/about/march2011.html for more information.
- Staff development: It will be important to gain a good understanding of how web conferencing tools can be used and how they can enhance teaching and learning, and develop a pedagogical rationale for using them. Making self-study guides and tutorials available online and offering one-to-one support in advance of facilitation will be beneficial, for the face-to-face and online sessions.
- Support: It will be vital to gain the support of IT Services, Learning Technologists and Academic Developers who will all help the smooth operation of such initiatives.
- Resources: Making materials and recorded webinars freely available would enable others who missed a session to access these afterwards.
- Offer: Start small! Run a pilot and see how it goes. Do not dictate themes. Let the facilitators decide. Get feedback, evaluate and refine your approach before you continue. Remember that it is about bringing people together, sharing experiences and learning with and from each other. Help facilitators to understand how this could happen in face-to-face and online settings.
- Collaboration: Consider developing similar schemes in collaboration with colleagues from own and other institutions to share resources and expertise and expand the overall offer.

Palmer (2007, 148) stresses that "we must spend more time talking to each other about teaching". The TLC creates flexible bite-size opportunities to make this happen utilising available technologies.

Please get in touch if you require further information or are interested in the development of a multi-institutional TLC model.

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