

Developing teaching expertise through peer support

Dawn Reilly, Liz Warren – Business School, University of Greenwich

This case study is set in the Business School of a UK university which has a teaching focus and is research informed. We discuss two ways in which colleagues are supported by their peers to develop teaching expertise. Both initiatives potentially include all colleagues who teach in the Business School.

First, in 2019-20 the University introduced a new version of our Peer Supported Development (PSD) scheme for the peer observation of teaching. Previously we ran a traditional scheme where colleagues selected their own pairing. Under the old scheme, colleagues almost always selected a peer observer from their discipline. This gave the benefit of reviewing both technical and teaching content in the observations. However, this approach missed the opportunity to consider alternative methods of teaching as demonstrated by colleagues from other disciplines. In contrast, under the new 2019-20 PSD scheme we randomly matched people across Business School departments. We then checked the pairings with the relevant Heads of Department to ensure we observed any relevant sensitivities.

There is a PSD lead for the Business School who informs colleagues about their pairing and sends out information about the scheme. Everyone chooses which session they want to have observed. Pre-observation documentation has been minimised to respect the many demands on colleagues' time (Carbone et al, 2019). The documentation provides the opportunity to give the context for the observation and raise any issues the observee wants feedback on from their observer. After the observations, each pair meet to discuss the teaching sessions. The observations and feedback are confidential, and colleagues are only asked to confirm to the PSD lead the dates that the observations took place and that they have met to discuss feedback. The PSD scheme includes all colleagues who teach and because paired colleagues observe each other, there is no hierarchy involved. For example, in the summer of 2019, the Business School commenced a major initiative to replace its sessional contracts with permanent (mainly part-time) teaching-only posts (Leathwood and Read, 2020). These colleagues are included in our PSD which means they not only receive feedback on their teaching from a colleague to improve their practice, but also give feedback to the same colleague in a two-way exchange (Bell and Mladenovic, 2015). This reinforces their position as valued members of the academic community.

The new PSD scheme was supported by workshops framed as 'Maximising the potential of PSD'. These provided interesting perspectives about staff perceptions of the rationale

behind the scheme showing that despite the information circulated at the start of the year and presented by the PSD lead, there appeared to be staff uncertain of the goals. The workshops proved invaluable in re-assuring those colleagues and, indeed, enthusing them. Feedback from the workshops included:

“the session was very useful; it gave context to PSD and I am now positive about it”

“gave me confidence in my own observation feedback”

“opened my mind and decreased anxiety!”

It is hoped this message will be further disseminated going forward as the total attendance at the workshops was only around 30 colleagues. When it was rolled out, the scheme was very well received. Colleagues liked working with people outside their department and using the experience to think ‘outside the box’ to improve teaching. It also enhanced the notion that this was about sharing practice rather than it being an assessment of a teaching session. However, for anyone wanting to proceed with this type of developmental initiative, we would recommend using a similar approach to our information workshop to address any initial concerns from colleagues.

Second, the University runs its own internal teaching fellowship scheme which is accredited by Advance HE against the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education (UKPSF, 2011). We provide mentors who support colleagues to work toward a fellowship. The scheme recognises colleagues in the associate fellow, fellow and senior fellow categories so the benefits of this type of mentee-mentor relationship have a positive impact on colleagues at all stages of their teaching career. For example, many of our new part-time teaching-only colleagues have professional qualifications and current industry experience in the sectors which our students want to join after graduation. However, they can lack a formal teaching qualification. Here, the appropriate category of fellowship is often associate fellow. Bell and Mladenovic (2015) note how important it is for new teachers to reflect on their practice. Discussing an application, including a teaching observation, with a mentor, facilitates reflection to develop teaching expertise.

The UKPSF points fellowship applicants to scholarship in Teaching and Learning. For a new part-time lecturer, scholarship can be a hitherto unexplored area. However, Shulman (1986) argues that this type of engagement is necessary in the development of teaching expertise. Reflecting on the UKPSF under a mentor’s guidance helps colleagues to engage with scholarship:

“I had not engaged to a great extent with scholarship in Teaching and Learning prior to my appointment ... scholarship provided additional techniques that I intend to use in my teaching in the future. The process has opened my eyes to the relevance and importance of continuing my professional development using scholarship.”

We encourage associate fellows to work toward submitting a fellowship application in the next few years where appropriate. This provides the opportunity to extend the mentoring relationship and promote increasing engagement with scholarship in Teaching and Learning, including as future authors. We also provide mentors to work with colleagues who are completing fellowship and senior fellowship applications. The mentoring process encourages dialogue about teaching, review of scholarship together and, in the case of senior fellowship, how the applicant is supporting others in their development as teaching experts.

Both the PSD scheme and mentoring toward an HEA fellowship are structured ways through which colleagues can develop expertise in teaching through peer support. However, the benefits are ongoing because when the peer observations are complete or fellowship achieved, we have built new relationships with colleagues who can offer advice and support as we develop our teaching practice.

References

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