Title: The role of Peer-Supported Development within the changing face of Higher Education teaching and learning

Category: Learning, Teaching and Assessment
Type: Discussion workshop

Part 2; Outline

The purpose of this discussion workshop will be to explore:
- What constitutes "peer-support" within a changing higher education environment?
- How can a "peer supported development scheme" be implemented within HE?
- What are the challenges faced in embedding a "peer-supported development scheme" within a changing HE environment?

With funding cuts, many workplaces are turning to peer-support systems in order to reduce training budgets. Within a rapidly changing learning environment, it is important for colleagues to share their skills and knowledge to keep abreast of pedagogic and learning debates in order to enhance the student learning experience. Traditionally, many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within the UK established Peer Observation of Teaching (PoT) schemes in order to encourage reflective practice of teaching (Purnell and Monk, 2012; Shortland 2004). Such practice is not effective or productive as collegial dialogue is not prolonged in order to achieve sustained professional learning (Schuck et al 2008). In order to improve this, some institutions are moving away from PoT in order to develop "peer-supported" schemes instead, which also include wider academic-related activities

One key difference within any peer-supported scheme is that participation is driven by the staff members themselves. Indeed, Adam Smith's (1790/2009) philosophy was that individuals will pursue self-interest, whilst Kant (1785/2009) pursues the notion of individuals being free and autonomous, acting in one's own mind and rationality rather than through pressure from external factors. Similarly, Shortland (2004) noted that identifying one's own need for development is more self-motivating than being subjected to external requirements for observation. Such peer-supported schemes (unlike PoT), therefore, are focused on enabling reflective dialogue between colleagues and promoting the professional development of peers. Beaty (1997) highlights that peer support enables the professional to learn more than simply reflecting alone, on their own practice. Furthermore, she advances this argument to explore the benefits for students, noting 'students rely on many lecturers and other staff for their learning and it is therefore important that we work together with our colleagues to facilitate that learning' (Beaty, 1997 p9). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) as cited by Schuck et al (2008 p216) note that 'teachers and other professionals negotiate their understandings of practice through reflection and learning conversations'. Key words to draw on are 'work together', 'negotiate' and 'learning conversations'. Such words infer a two-way dialogue between equal partners.

Drawing these findings together, Pro-social behaviour is an important element of "peer-supported" schemes. Pro-social behaviour is voluntary action which may altruistically benefit another person or community, whether it is also beneficial for oneself or not (Wardle, 2011). Empathy is a key component in pro-social behaviour, however, it can also

be explained by examining close relationship and identity between those involved in a given activity. Where there is a sense of shared professional identity, the altruist is likely to assist the fellow member of a given community who requires support. As Smith (1790/2009) notes individuals are more likely to assist each other if they are in a similar emotional state. Such support and assistance leads to feelings of inclusivity within a community and feelings of mutual responsibility for welfare which increases levels of pro-social behaviour (Farsides, 2007).

Implementing and Embedding the Scheme

This workshop will discuss the experience of one HE institution in the West Midlands (UK) in developing a Peer Supported Development Scheme (PSDS). In September 2010, the HEI appointed two academic fellows to implement, develop and embed the PSD-scheme. There are two partners within PSDS (the Developer – the person initiating the partnership and the Supporter – the person agreeing to collaborate on this activity). Peers may explore any activity which relates to learning and teaching with a view to enhancing the student experience. To date, there have been 36 colleagues who have participated in PSD-scheme either as a developer or supporter.

Analysis and Reflections

The scheme started slowly, with more activity being undertaken in the second year than in the first. The greatest issue facing the Fellows was the lack of participation from the School of Human Sciences. A key reason noted was that during the first year of implementing the scheme the school faced some structural and staffing changes which disrupted levels of partnership working and collegiality usually positively experienced within the School.

In terms of generating participants, whether as 'supporters' or 'developers', a key aspect is the individual approach. Blanket marketing via newsletters or emails generated little, if any, interest. However, a more targeted, individual approach gained responses. Not all responses were positive. Likewise meeting individuals face to face was also important and discussion could be tailored to meet the needs of the individual or the team. This also enabled confidential matters to be discussed with team managers where individual team members needed discreet support.

The virtual space given to PSDS has proved problematic. The VLE was not an appropriate forum because colleagues needed to already be involved in order to be added to the website, thus those interested simply in finding out more about the scheme prior to committing any type of participation could not see the information uploaded. This proved problematic when heads of subject were trying to encourage team members to get involved.

Conclusions

In order to develop an institution with genuine and real "peer-support", colleagues need to be willing to participate. An environment of pro-social behaviour needs to be fostered whereby colleagues are altruistic, nurturing inclusive-practice. Several challenges arose in relation to establishing a new peer-supported scheme; some of which were beyond the control of the Academic Fellows (i.e. School restructuring and IT infrastructure). Despite these challenges, the Fellows have received many positive comments in relation to

establishing a new Scheme, even from colleagues who found they did not have time to participate at the present time. PSDS encourages cross-institutional collaboration as many participants worked with colleagues in other teams and across schools. Support has also been gained from Senior Management and this has had some impact on levels of participation. Feedback from staff in the School of Education, in particular, indicates that PSDS has been very worthwhile.

References

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