

Quality Enhancement and Prospective Quality Assurance through Teaching Exchange Workshops in Media and Communications

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Theme:

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Abstract

The project aims to generate a workshop model that contributes to teaching quality enhancement and quality assurance through ‘Teaching Exchange’ (TE) workshops focused on enhancing the student experience. These workshops respond to the need for a proactive, collaborative and reflexive ‘ground-up’ approach to quality enhancement and quality assurance. In addition to providing a forum for exchange and discussion amongst teaching staff at various career and experience levels, the workshops themselves will generate two tangible outputs: (1) a school/department specific best-practices summary sheet for each participating institution and (2) a Teaching Exchange handbook for broader institutional use with information on the process of implementing the workshop and its contributions to quality assurance and quality enhancement. Successfully piloted in the LSE’s Media and Communications department in May 2009, with further enrichment the ‘Teaching Exchange Workshop’ has the potential to become a key tool for departmental management, curriculum development, the cultivation of a ‘quality culture’ and the enhancement of student experience. Toward this aim we will host a series of ‘Teaching Exchange Workshops’ at six diverse institutions in the UK. The transcripts and outcomes of these workshops will then be critically evaluated toward the production of a TE handbook and dissemination of findings.

Report

Background

Many academic practitioners suffer from what has been described as ‘pedagogical solitude’ (Shulman, 1993). We design and teach courses alone, and due to the pressure of teaching loads, administrative duties, student pastoral care and generating research output, higher education professionals rarely have the opportunity to think about or discuss what teaching quality means, and how to contribute to that ideal.

Our project, *Quality Enhancement and Prospective Quality Assurance through Teaching Exchange Workshops in Media and Communications*, funded by the ADM-HEA (March 2010-March 2011) was rooted in a desire to find an alternative approach to improving the quality of teaching in media, communications, cultural studies and related disciplines. It was based on a commitment to the idea that teaching practice can be nurtured and improved, making it more rewarding for both teachers and students. By creating a space for collegiate interaction and sharing experiences of the challenges and opportunities involved in teaching within these (inter)disciplinary areas, our project directly addresses what Gray et al (2007, p.23) correctly identify as a lack of ‘opportunity for University teachers to share knowledge and experience gained through their educational practice.’

Renegotiating the ontology of quality enhancement

A starting point of this project was the need to question the underlying values that shape quality assurance (QA) practice as it stands. Typically, the quality of teaching performance is retrospectively reviewed and assessed through student surveys, meetings with student representatives and the mentoring of new teaching staff. These models arguably take a top-down, retrospective approach that potentially alienates new teachers (when for example, 'mentoring' becomes a paperwork exercise rather than an opportunity for skill-sharing and reflection) and isolates the act of teaching from the broader pedagogical life of an institution and its student community (Yorke, 2000; Biggs 2001). Furthermore, few discipline-specific models exist for teacher development and pedagogical exchange across experience levels (Biggs, p.2001).

In addition, while most institutions offer teaching enhancement and quality assurance opportunities at the institutional level, department-developed and -led training lags behind. Hendry and Dean (2002, p.75) outline three levels at which quality assurance must take place: the individual, departmental and institutional. An understanding of the specific challenges of teaching in media and communications and related disciplines can help better align teachers' individual practices and departmental practices with more widely agreed notions about quality in teaching.

Table 1

Problems with QE & QA approaches	Ways the TE can respond
Quantitative	Qualitative
Retrospective	Prospective
External standards	Internal standards
Top-down	Bottom-up
Only looks at one element of quality	Systematic approach to teaching as part of institutional life
Individual feedback to teachers (surveys)	Collectively defined 'feedback loops'
Focus on individual teachers	Focus on teaching in general
Can alienate new teachers	Inclusive of new teachers
Only acknowledges academic teaching	Inclusive of a variety of types of teaching experience, not only academic

Table 1 summarises the first finding of our project, based on a literature review of limitations in existing quality enhancement and quality assurance as they affect the HE sector.

Developing the tools for a change of mindset

The survey of the limitations of the current QA approach, and the opportunities offered by its alternative suggests that a change of mindset is required, a move away from the top-down and retrospective and toward attempts to build new resources that support a prospective approach to developing a culture of sustainable best-practice pedagogy for the long-term.

Our Teaching Exchange (TE) Workshops project aimed to develop a blueprint for one of these resources. It addressed two key research questions:

- How can TE workshops contribute to a prospective culture of teaching and learning in a department?
- What are some of the recurring challenges and opportunities that come up in teaching practice in media, communications, cultural studies and related disciplines? And, how might educators respond to these in a prospective way?

In order to address these questions, we hosted a series of five TE workshops in diverse UK HE institutions teaching in the subject area. We sourced our host institutions through personal contacts with colleagues as well as through an open call for participation distributed through the MeCCSA mailing list. Although we originally intended to source six hosting institutions, ultimately we were only able to secure five. This did not pose a problem, as we felt that we had gathered enough data by the fourth workshop, and any additional workshops over and above that we considered helpful but not necessary to achieve the goals of the project. All institutions, departments and individuals who attended the workshop were guaranteed anonymity. The research aims were clearly explained and consent forms were provided to and signed by all participants.

All of the workshops were jointly facilitated by the researchers. During each workshop, three of the activities described in the 'Teaching Exchange Model' took place. This allowed us not only to test out how well each activity worked in achieving its aim of facilitating discussion and exchange about one element of teaching quality, but also to gather qualitative information about experiences of individual staff members in teaching media, communications and cultural studies material. Discussions were audio-recorded and one of the researchers took notes throughout each workshop session.

We were satisfied that the cross section we managed to achieve in our sample represented the great diversity of HE institutions in the UK teaching in the area of media, communications, cultural studies and related areas. Table 2 (*see page 5*) provides an anonymised summary of the workshop hosts. Our sample of workshop hosts included institutions that are considered research-led and teaching-led, those offering undergraduate, postgraduate and both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, those with a majority of international and home students, and those that taught theoretically and practically oriented courses.

Table 2

Institution	Description	No. Participants
A	Prestigious research led institution, teaching multidisciplinary postgraduate programme.	7
B	Teaching institution offering a variety of vocational and theory-driven courses to primarily undergraduates.	12
C	Teaching institution offering a variety of vocational and theory-driven courses to primarily undergraduates.	7
D	Prestigious research led institution, teaching multidisciplinary postgraduate programme.	12
E	Well-respected research and teaching institution teaching critical and applied media courses to both undergraduates and postgraduates.	5

The data gathered in these workshops, both in terms of records of the discussions that took place and the lessons learned in facilitating and running each workshop, allowed us to develop two project outputs:

- A primary output of a 'Teaching Exchange Workshop Model' as summarized in *A Handbook for Teaching Exchange Workshops*. This will outline the benefits that the TE workshop can provide for prospective, bottom-up quality assurance measures and provide a model for how departments can organize their own workshops so as to contribute to achieving this ideal. An overview of the model is provided below. The full handbook will be made widely available by Summer 2011.
- A secondary output of critical discussions of the key challenges and opportunities unique to teaching in the subject area, in the form of scholarly articles and conference papers (currently in preparation and which we expect to be published within the next two to three years). In this report we elaborate some preliminary findings of the targeted 'trouble areas' that require further critical reflection, and elaborate some of the key themes that we expect our analyses to take.

Each of these outputs is discussed in turn.

A summary of the Teaching Exchange Workshop Model

The Teaching Exchange Workshop model that we generated is available in a document titled *A Handbook for Teaching Exchange Workshops*. This is available from <http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/networks/networks-autumn-2011/projects/quality->

[enhancement-and-prospective-quality-assurance-through-teaching-exchange-workshops-in-media-and-communications](#) and directly from the researchers. This document provides a detailed account of how departments can go about hosting a TE workshop, and why hosting one is worthwhile. It gives an account of the modules that can be arranged and tailored by workshop organizers to best suit the needs of their faculty and department, and provides practical advice about how to get the most out of them. For the purposes of this report, we provide an outline of the modular elements of the TE Workshop.

Insights Exchange

A chance to hear colleagues share their views on what works and doesn't in the classroom, as well as challenges and opportunities associated with teaching in our subject area.

This activity sets up a panel of colleagues from very different experience levels – a professor, a lecturer or senior lecturer, and a teaching assistant. Each member of the teaching staff is asked to prepare a 5 minute talk putting forward their views on challenges and opportunities associated with teaching in the field, institution and department. These presentations form the basis for group discussion amongst all workshop participants.

Theory Slam

Thinking on your feet crossed with a poetry slam – an activity designed to build our ability to engage difficult questions posed at inopportune times.

This activity puts workshop participants in groups of 2-4 and assigns each group the task of coming up with a response to a challenging theoretical question posed by a student, either in the seminar situation or in the corridor situation. Groups have five minutes to come up with their response, and three minutes to deliver it. Other groups listen to the answer and provide feedback about how they think it would have helped the student to understand the challenging concept. Alternatively, the task can be adapted to be a 'case-study' slam, where a student asks for an example of a theoretical paradigm.

The Difficult Hat

Throw your difficulties into the hat - an activity that asks everyone to problem-solve challenges in learning environments.

At the beginning of the workshop, participants are asked to write on a slip of paper a challenging classroom situation that they have experienced, or that they have heard about a colleague experiencing. These are then folded and put into a hat, which is then passed around the room. Participants choose a random 'problem' from the hat and read it to a colleague on the other side of the room, who gives advice on how to deal with the situation.

Feedback Loops

That time you were called a 'lefty hippie brainwasher'- an activity about how we can best respond to and incorporate feedback on our teaching and facilitation.

A number of slips of paper asking 'Can you recall student feedback that was ... surprising / undermining / off the mark / etc)' are folded and put into a hat. This is passed around the room, and participants have the chance to select a slip and speak to it. This facilitates an open discussion about how to work constructively with student feedback, what to take on board and what to leave on the survey form.

A preliminary sketch of challenges in ADM-pedagogy

Based on the rich and fruitful discussions in the workshops that we have facilitated so far, several pedagogical challenges have been highlighted. Here we discuss three. The latter two challenges are unique to, or at least have a particular resonance within, media, communications, cultural studies and related emerging subject areas, such as the creative industries. The first characterizes the challenges arising in the higher education sector as a whole as a result of massive changes in government funding and the marketisation of universities in the UK. We discuss these broad structural changes with reference to the particularities of its impacts on the media, communications and cultural studies subject area.

Negotiating Structural Constraints

A recurring theme in the TE workshop discussions was the ramifications that current changes in the higher education landscape are having on teaching practice at a departmental and individual level. The impact of wide-reaching policy changes on morale is noticeable, as many faculty members question how teaching practice might need to change in order to justify massive increases in fees. As budgets for teaching staff are cut, individual staff members find themselves shouldering heavier teaching loads and higher staff-student ratios, a point which causes some anxiety when the topic of teaching quality is considered. Furthermore, the pressures placed on departments by institutions to guarantee a certain level of student recruitment (especially for disciplines in the broader arts, design and media areas which are considered particularly attractive to students at present) highlights questions of how such courses are marketed to prospective students and whether this squares with the content that students are then expected to undertake. As well as this, there is a clear pattern of concerns expressed about the unique pedagogical needs of international students, on which several institutions increasingly rely for recruitment, and how these differ from the learning needs of home students.

Interdisciplinarity

There is a profound awareness of the extent to which departments' teaching courses in the broad ambit of the ADM subject area are, perhaps more so than any other teaching area in the social sciences and humanities, extremely interdisciplinary. Not only is the subject matter being taught often drawn from several disciplines, but staff and often students (especially postgraduates) also come from multiple disciplinary backgrounds. Our workshop participants expressed the need to constantly reflect on the epistemological foundations upon which they base their teaching practices and acknowledge that their approach is one among many. This shared sentiment amongst workshop participants brings up the question: if in the interdisciplinary teaching environment 'nothing can be taken for granted', as one participant described it, how can increased communication and exchange between teachers help to build more stable foundations for learning?

Theory/Practice

In every institution we visited, teaching staff reported hearing complaints from students that courses are either 'too theoretical' or 'too practical'. This highlights how difficult it is to find the right balance between concept and application in how we teach material and match it to learning outcomes –

both of which need to be tailored to the level and needs of particular groups of students, institutional missions, and programme goals. Often particular institutions are assumed to be either ‘theoretical’ or ‘vocational’, but our workshops so far have shown that this simplistic categorization is problematic. Many students are attracted to ADM subject courses in prestigious universities precisely because of their perceived ‘theoretical weight’, but then struggle to access ‘high theory’ elements of their courses, as well as to build bridges between them and practical applications. In a related vein, institutions offering more practice based programmes sometimes approach their students as though they are uninterested in, or even incapable of, ‘doing theory.’ However, in both types of institutions, students often struggle with the role of theory in applied research and practice. They face challenges with how to integrate theoretical and practical approaches. Our series of TE workshops so far have highlighted that more reflection is required on the complexities of the theory/practice continuum as it manifests in pedagogical practice, and importantly, that this topic should form a basis for ongoing discussion about teaching quality.

Project sustainability

Our two project outputs – the *TE Handbook* and the ongoing critical analyses of challenges in pedagogy in media, communications and cultural studies – indicate significant avenues for ongoing discussion and debate resulting from the project. We hope that the wide and free availability of the *Handbook* (and our active dissemination of it to participants in the project and beyond) will encourage many departments to use the TE workshop as a tool for prospective quality assurance and to develop more collegiate and collaborative teaching cultures. Furthermore, because we have designed the TE model in such a way as to encourage HE professionals to adapt and tailor it to best suit the unique needs of their departments, we envision that it will continue to evolve and integrate new components in order to encourage a bottom-up approach to quality assurance.

In efforts to continue to reflect on these issues, the authors of this report are working on research papers that analyse in depth these critical questions related to pedagogy in media and communications. This work will contribute to ongoing debates about challenges regarding structural constraints, interdisciplinarity and the relationship between theory and practice in our subject area.

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