

# WESTMINSTER LEARNING COMMUNITIES

## Guidance for community facilitators and members on the establishment and management of learning communities

## UNDERSTANDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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### Underpinning principles

Academics will increasingly be expected to operate as 'dual professionals'. Firstly they must be experts in their discipline and therefore undertake research and scholarly activity in their field. Alongside this role, they must also be concerned with the practice of teaching and they must develop a deep understanding of how students learn.

Westminster Learning Communities are founded on the twin concepts of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and Communities of Practice

### *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)*

SoTL is a term used to refer to a wide range of concepts in different contexts. A study published by the Higher Education Academy (Fanghanel et al, 2016) set out the characteristics of SoTL in the following terms:

- SoTL is about practice development, curriculum enhancement and student learning
- SoTL involves dissemination and impact
- SoTL is associated with change and boundary-crossing
- SoTL requires the engagement of students

### *Communities of Practice (CoPs)*

CoPs are defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). According to Smith (2009) there are three features which distinguish communities of practice from other communities or groups:

- There is a shared domain of interest and a commitment to that domain on the part of the members. It is not just a network or a group of friends
- There is a genuine community in which members help each other, engage in joint discussions and build relationships.
- Members of the community cultivate a shared practice, through which they share resources, experiences, tools and ways of solving problems.

### Benefits of learning communities

The communities were conceived with the following benefits anticipated:

- To provide a means by which the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning can be embedded in academic practice.
- To provide forums for the exchange of ideas and the sharing of effective practice.
- To provide a 'safe space' which acts as an incubator for innovation.

- To improve the sense of collegiality amongst staff by providing opportunities for working across faculties.
- To provide a visible signal and clear evidence of the University's commitment to valuing teaching excellence and to ensuring that practice is informed by scholarship, as indicated in the Learning and Teaching Strategy.
- To provide forums which will promote staff engagement.
- To involve students and thereby embed the principle of working with students as partners

It is expected that the communities will have the scholarship of teaching and learning at their core and will facilitate critical reflection, scholarship and pedagogic research in relation to learning and teaching. It is also expected that the themes identified in the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy should provide a framework for aligning the domains of the communities with the priorities of the university.

## Issues to consider

As you develop your initial ideas for a learning community you might consider the following questions. These should also form part of the initial discussions amongst community members once the community has been established.

- How does your community align with the principles outlined above?
- What benefits will your community produce for individuals, for departments/faculties (Schools/Colleges), for the institution?
- What is the 'domain' of the community (i.e. the knowledge base)? What does the community want to be able to do better (i.e. the shared practice)? Who is the community for?

## ESTABLISHING AND BUILDING THE COMMUNITY

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Whilst the university has committed to supporting communities and fostering an infrastructure to sustain communities, the responsibility for establishing and building the community must lie with the community members themselves. If the community is perceived as being 'managed' by the institution, there will inevitably be scepticism as to the motives of the community. There is an expectation that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is at the core of each community, and the community domain should align with at least one of the themes of the Learning and Teaching Strategy. Naturally, the objectives of the community should also align with the University's strategy and transformation plan, and contribute to Westminster's distinctiveness. Ultimately though, the specific goals and agenda of the community must be determined by the members.

### Membership

Westminster Learning Communities have always been envisioned as open communities which will welcome participation from the widest possible range of members within the university and externally. Naturally there will be a core group of members that effectively lead the community and organise the activities of the community. There is also likely to be a second group of community members who are active participants in the community, but not at the same level of commitment as the core group. Thirdly there are likely to be peripheral participants who may tend to linger at the edge of group activities, observing proceedings and only occasionally making contributions. It is important that this third group are made to feel welcome in the community and that undue pressure is not placed on them to make a more significant commitment than they feel comfortable with. Such participants can be valuable to the

community in the medium and longer term as they gradually grow in confidence and increase their levels of participation. There is a fine balance to be struck between encouraging them to get involved and scaring them off by expecting too much of them.

Westminster Learning Communities should be inclusive and cross-disciplinary. One of the driving principles behind the communities is the benefit that can be derived from dialogue and collaboration between members from different backgrounds, with different disciplinary traditions and different perspectives. If the community is comprised only of members who already know each other, and who share similar values and experiences, then it is less likely that new ideas and innovations will emerge. Communities should therefore endeavour to recruit members from staff and students across the university and externally, from all faculties (colleges) and from professional support staff. Furthermore, the membership of the community should reflect the university's diverse population.

## Marketing the community and growing the membership

It is by no means a given that, having established a community, the membership will automatically grow. Firstly, colleagues across the university need to be aware of the existence of the community, so some marketing activities will be necessary. This may involve a formal launch event or a communications campaign to raise awareness.

Some colleagues may already be known to have an interest in the domain, so they could be targeted and specifically invited to participate. However, it is important to ensure that the principles of inclusivity and cross-disciplinarity (as noted above) are adhered to. Some more widespread marketing of the community will inevitably be necessary to grow the membership.

It can be difficult to generate enthusiasm for participation in the community when most colleagues are already extremely busy and have very limited time to spare for activities beyond their core responsibilities. The key question which many prospective members of the community will require an answer to is "What's in it for me?". In order to be successful in building membership of the community, it is important that the potential benefits of membership can be clearly and concisely articulated. See the CTI website page entitled "What's in it for me?" <http://cti.westminster.ac.uk/westminster-learning-communities-whats-in-it-for-me/>

Another potential challenge is that academic colleagues may be concerned whether their participation in the community will be recognised under the 'work allocation model' (WAM). This challenge can be addressed in two ways. Firstly, it should be stressed that all academic contracts include provision for scholarly activity (an allowance of 238 hours out of a total 1504 for a full time academic post). Secondly, it would be beneficial to garner support for the community amongst Heads of Department (Schools) and others with line management responsibility, by promoting the benefits that participation in the community could produce for the department. Colleagues could then incorporate participation in the community when they are agreeing PPDR objectives with their line manager.

## Student involvement

In line with the University's commitment to working with students as partners, all learning communities will be expected to have some input from students. Ideally, this should involve having students as full members of the community, but at the very least plans should be developed to collaborate with students. Consideration needs to be given to the mechanisms by which student members can be recruited, or the channels which can be used to collaborate with students.

It is important that the commitment to working with students is genuine. It is too easy to pay 'lip service' to the concept of student partnerships by adopting a tokenistic approach to consulting students. Communities should consider specific roles for student members, or specific types of input.

## MANAGING THE COMMUNITY

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### Basics

Assuming that the goals and the agenda for the community have been identified, it will be important at an early stage in the life of the community to agree some basic norms of behaviour. These do not necessarily have to be strict rules, but the community is likely to function more effectively when expectations are clear. Some questions to consider could include the following:

- What sort of identity does the community want to project?
- How can the community articulate its goals clearly?
- How is the community to be led?
- How will decisions be made?
- Should specific roles within the community be identified?
- What behavioural rules or conventions (if any) need to be defined? These might relate to issues such as confidentiality, respect, frequency of activities, timekeeping, communication, scope of the community's domain, etc.

The job of managing the community is primarily one of facilitation rather than authoritarian leadership. Successful communities depend on trust between members and it is important to ensure a balance between benefits for individual members and the collective benefit through improvements in the University.

### Activities

If the community is to be worthy of the name, it cannot simply exist. The community needs activities to engage members, generate interest, and widen participation. Decisions will need to be made at an early stage as to the nature and extent of those activities.

Communities must develop formal plans with clearly identified objectives, milestones and expected outputs. Those plans need to be regularly reviewed to ensure that the community remains active.

Some particular issues to consider:

- How often will activities take place?
- Should activities be formal or informal gatherings, or a mixture of both?
- Will the community publish a calendar of events? (This can be published on the CTI website)
- What is the purpose of the activities: interaction, knowledge-sharing, discussion, problem-solving or what? (See next section)
- What specialist techniques might be helpful in running events? For example: world café; open space; action learning sets.
- How will activities be coordinated and facilitated? Will specially trained facilitators be required?
- How will activities be publicised?
- Where will activities take place? Should it be a regular venue, or could events rotate around various locations?
- How will the proceedings be recorded or captured?

## Activity objectives

Each activity that is planned should have clear objectives. There is no point in bringing people together (either face-to-face or online) and simply expecting things to happen. The table below (adapted from Parboosingh, 2010) provides a framework for focusing our conversations on three different aspects of practice, each of which can provide a different lens through which to view our practice:

How do we do what we do?	What works? How do you function successfully? What keeps you going? What provides you with satisfaction? <i>Focusing on these questions helps members to learn about each other's values, and provides opportunities to share success stories.</i>
What stops us from doing what we want to do?	What frustrates you? What problems need to be solved? What difficulties need to be overcome? What are the possible solutions? <i>Focusing on these questions helps members to find solutions to problems, builds trust amongst members and strengthens relationships.</i>
What do we want to do in the future?	What new skills or competencies do you need? How can members help each other to develop the required skills? What strategies are effective in setting and implementing career plans? <i>Focusing on these questions helps members to achieve positive outcomes and career development from the activities of the community.</i>

## Communication

The community will need to develop a clear communications plan, both for communications between members and for promoting the community's activities to others across the university and to the outside world.

All communities will be allocated a dedicated space on the Centre for Teaching Innovation website at <http://cti.westminster.ac.uk/communities>

Maintaining effective communications is fundamental to the success of every community, but it can be time-consuming, particularly if the burden lies with one person. Decisions will need to be made about the following:

- Responsibility for drafting communications and posting to the website
- Normal channels for communication between members and how these are managed
- Use of the discussion forum on the CTI website. This can be an excellent way of sustaining the discussion beyond face-to-face events, but needs management
- Publicising activities to a wider audience
- Other communication campaigns – producing newsletters, flyers, posters, handouts, cards, items for University intranet etc
- Social media – Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms

## Managing conflict

Even the most successful communities occasionally have to deal with conflict. Conflict is not just a difference of opinion. Differences of opinion are a natural and healthy part of any community, and can promote creativity. However, when conflict is destructive it will inevitably undermine the success of the community, and may even lead to the early break up of the community.

Fostering a positive working environment in which everyone's opinion is valued and there is mutual trust, will create a culture in which conflict is less likely to arise. Nevertheless, it is important to be attuned to the early warning signs which could indicate potential problems. Such signs include the body language of community members (e.g. facial expressions, rolling eyes, crossed arms etc.) which can be indicative of underlying issues. The earlier such issues are addressed the less likely it is that they will escalate into open conflict. It is important that the issue or problem is separated from the people involved, so that it does not become personal. Encouraging open discussion and allowing everyone the opportunity to express their views, will often alleviate grievances. The ideal approach is to try to generate solutions which offer some benefit to everyone involved. The focus has to be on the community as a whole rather than the personal wishes of the individual. In extreme cases, it may be advisable to seek advice or help from outside the community to offer some form of mediation.

## SUSTAINING THE COMMUNITY

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As the community begins to function effectively there may be a period of widespread enthusiasm about the community's activities. However, it can be challenging to sustain that 'buzz' beyond the initial excitement. Having a clear plan for the activities of the community over a period of at least a year is essential. If milestones have been identified, then the community members need to have suitable plans in place to meet those milestones. For funded communities, a condition of funding is that there is a programme of activities, and update reports are provided to indicate progress.

Issues to consider in sustaining the community:

- What happens in between face-to-face meetings?
- Do members have tasks to complete?
- Are conversations maintained, for example, through a discussion forum online?
- Is the community's communication plan effective in keeping the activities and successes of the community publicised?
- Is the membership of the community continuing to grow? Are more people seeking to get involved or, on the other hand, has involvement actually diminished? How can the membership be boosted?
- Is the membership mix appropriate? Is it necessary to target prospective members from particular parts of the university?
- Are 'peripheral' members of the community being drawn into the centre? If not, what can be done to promote this?
- Are students actively involved in the community?
- To what extent is the community achieving its objectives? Have the objectives evolved?
- Is it necessary to stage an eye-catching event to raise the profile of the community?
- How successful has the community been in engaging with external stakeholders? Could external activities provide a boost to the community?
- Can the community exploit its successes to greater effect? For example, if the community has produced outputs, can these be used to promote the community and recruit new members?
- Is the community becoming more like a university 'committee' rather than a true community? Has the community been effectively appropriated by the university to prioritise institutional imperatives over member's interests?

## CLOSING OR RENEWING THE COMMUNITY

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Funding for communities is offered initially for one year. Future funds will be dependant on the continued support of the University. Some communities may have been established with specific goals, and once these goals have been achieved it may be appropriate to close the community. If a community has reached the end of its natural life, the members may simply decide to formally close it. In some cases, it may be appropriate to consolidate the activities of two or more communities into one.

Other communities may be more in the form of a 'standing' community and may therefore wish to continue their activities beyond the first year. In such cases, it will be important to review the objectives of the community to ensure that they are still relevant and appropriate, and to develop new plans to boost membership and hold activities.

All communities should consider how their successes can be celebrated and how their outputs can be disseminated.

## REFERENCES AND OTHER RESOURCES

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