Transitioning Points of View: Participating in a Faculty Learning Community at Edinburgh Napier University

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Abstract

Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) are formal, time-bound, and selective communities that encourage collaborative enhancement of teaching and learning. Based on the model developed by Milton D. Cox (2004), the first FLC at Edinburgh Napier University was founded in 2018 intending to explore the ways in which staff could support each other throughout the institution. This paper reflects on the activities of the FLC participants and uses these to explore potential barriers to successful participation in future FLCs.

Keywords: faculty learning communities, professional development, higher education

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Introduction

Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) are formal, time-bound and selective communities of support that encourage collaborative enhancement of teaching and learning. Developed by Milton D. Cox of Miami University, they are a year-long program of

meetings and activities that stimulate learning, development, and scholarship with the intent of transitioning institutions into learning organizations (2001). The aim of an FLC is to create a formalized learning community focused on a central and shared problem, theme or idea.

Cox reported that for participants the outcomes of an FLC include an established support network, intellectual development, improved teaching and learning practice, broadened cultural awareness, and increased organizational involvement (2004). An increase in participant involvement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) also features as an outcome in FLC participation (Tierney, 2010). FLC have been observed to benefit participants by enabling transition between stages of growth in SoTL expertise, from novice through to expert (Cox, 2003).

While the benefits of participating in an FLC are widely documented, there has been little discussion of the barriers to successful participation in an FLC. Aside from the tendency for FLCs to resemble committees and the inability for some members of teaching staff to make a long-term commitment, other obstacles to participation and engagement have not been identified until now (Ortquist-Ahrens & Torosyan, 2009; Parker, Gleichsner, Adedokun, & Forney, 2016, p. 519). This paper will discuss the formation of an FLC at Edinburgh Napier University, including the benefits and barriers to participation.

At Edinburgh Napier University, our first FLC was founded in 2018. The aim of the Edinburgh Napier FLC was to explore the theme of “supporting each other in the university.” With a cohort of eight participants, including the author, we committed to a year of monthly meetings and a set of measurable outcomes, including professional development, networking experience, intellectual stimulation, confidence, and

community. The mix of participants was cross-disciplinary and cross-professional with half on academic contracts and half on professional service contracts. In the Miami model, FLC participants are released from some of their teaching obligations and receive funding to support both attendance and research activity (Cox, 2001). The Edinburgh Napier FLC received enough funding to cover the cost of the first meeting at an external venue. At this first meeting of the FLC members committed to a manifesto with established ground rules and expectations.

Members of the FLC identified several social and aspirational outcomes that they expected to result from participation. These included time away from the business of university life, time for reflection and personal growth, social support and networking, improving teaching practice, and participation in scholarship. The emphasis on the personal and social amenity of FLC participation stands in contrast to the specter of neoliberalism within Higher Education and its emphasis on quantitative Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and tangible academic outputs as worthy aspirational goals. At their first meeting, members of the FLC committed to writing at least two articles to bookend participation as well as several scholarly activities acting as milestones. These included a horizon paper declaring the aims and origins of the FLC, participation in a University-wide event on the theme of belonging, a visit to our sister FLC at the University of Glasgow, and a paper to mark these achievements at the end of the 12 months.

Method

Semi-structured group and individual interviews took place with the participants after the 12 months were completed. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of the group activities and as well as the barriers and enablers to their participation.

Given the reflective intent of this paper, a critical theory approach was taken to the interpretation of interviews, acknowledging the transactional and subjectivist relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This paradigm allows for the understanding of how underlying structures can and might be changed effectively in future FLCs at similar institutions.

Discussion

Hill writes that the penultimate aim of learning communities in Higher Education is to respond to the “shrinking budgets, a professional reward system, and internal patterns of resource allocation” that maintain an organizational expectation at odds with staff and student development (1985, p. 3). Challenging this organizational expectation become a common theme for the FLC at Edinburgh Napier. Topics identified for discussion at the inception of the FLC included the ideological shift from students to customers and conflicting roles of universities as both profitable businesses and educational charities.

Activities

Based on the facilitator’s previous experience with an FLC, scholarly outputs were an expected outcome of the Edinburgh Napier FLC (MacKenzie et al., 2010; Tierney, 2010). This was perhaps the most anticipated of all the outcomes, as it represented the development of participants as academic and scholarly practitioners. Members reported and reflected on their FLC participation at a variety of conferences and seminars, building confidence and experience. The FLC at Edinburgh Napier also afforded participants with the opportunity to engage in supported, confidential dialogue and peer support. On several occasions the problems faced by academic colleagues were discussed and often resolved by professional services colleagues. Members of the FLC

partnered on short research projects and scholarly investigations, while professional colleagues provided proactive support, expertise, and in-class workshops. These benefits are a direct result of the cross-professional cohort in this FLC. Interestingly, the reverse of this dynamic was not observed, which perhaps speaks to the culture of service ethic within professional support staff that is not necessarily reciprocated by their academic colleagues.

Against a background of rapid and discontinuous institutional, abiding by the rules and exploring these topics to achieve the expected outcomes became a challenge. The theme of the FLC — “supporting each other in the university” — remained broad enough to interest all participants, but did not give the group enough focus to direct scholarly activity. At the initial meeting an ambitious list of possible topics was assembled based on the group's interests. While the group was able to reflect on the ideological shift from students to customers and conflicting roles of universities as both profitable businesses and educational charities, we were not able to pursue these themes as a scholarly activity because the themes remained too broad to develop as research questions. As such, participants did not have the opportunity to influence the direction of the FLC.

Additionally, while members of the FLC had permission from line managers to take part in our group discussions, they were not accorded protected time to participate. Permission to participate in activities should not be equated with organizational support for those activities. This contrasts with the organizational practice of “buying out” staff teaching time to support participation in research. During the interviews, participants reflected on the way that their participation was perceived by colleagues and whether or not this was supportive.

> Yes, saying “oh, no, I can’t come to that because I’ve got faculty learning community,” people looking at you thinking “what’s that? I’ve never heard of that, I’m not part of that, nobody else does that, so what are you doing?” So therefore they don’t value it and they’re like “R3 isn’t coming to the review board meeting today she’s doing something that is much less important sounding than what we’re doing.” And that’s really frustrating because then you’re saying “well, actually, this is really important to me.” (Interview 3, R3)

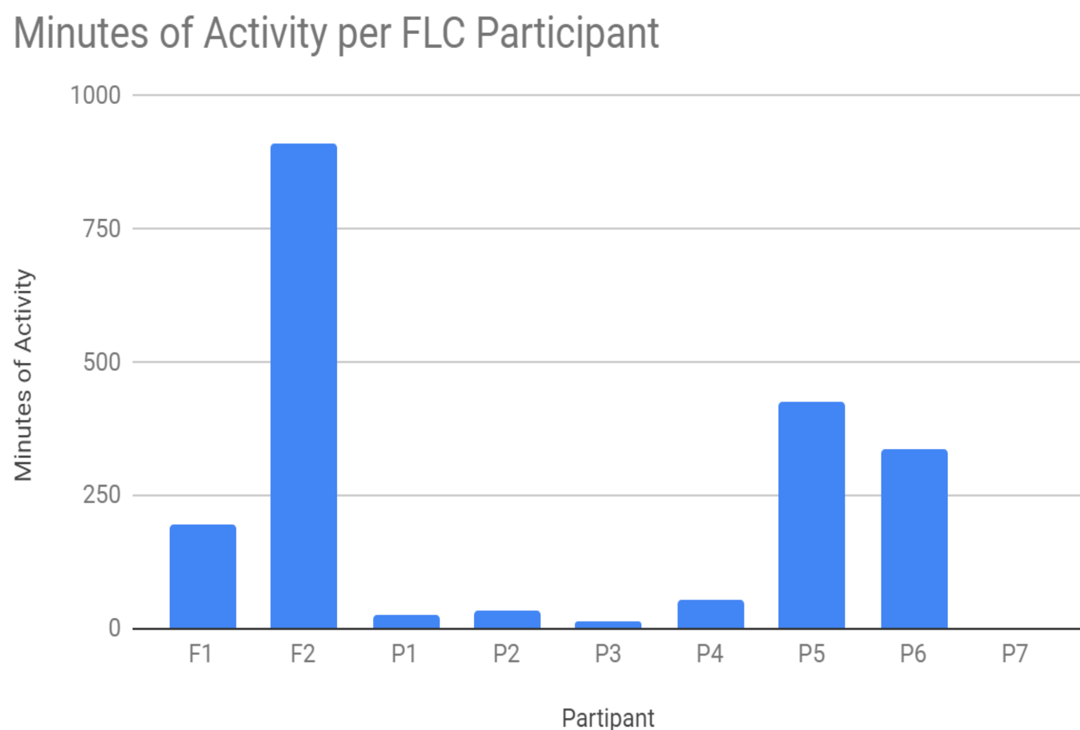
Participation in scholarly activity to support learning and teaching is not widely accepted as a constructive use of time — not only for the academic members of the FLC, but also for those who are professional support staff. Professional staff expressed concern at the need to cover even small amounts of time from their workloads and how this aspect of the FLC was missing.

> If staff engage with an FLC and we as an institution value that they’re doing that, so it should be that they can have two hours a month whatever it is, and for us that would be two hours, then casual hours staff could come in and cover those two hours. (Interview 4, R4)

An FLC is a year-long curriculum of seminars and activities with the aim of stimulating learning and development (Cox, 2004). The initial seminars are overseen by the program director who scaffolds support with the aim of enabling the other members of the FLC to organize and present all later events in the program. At Edinburgh Napier, however, the seminar program did not progress beyond the first two organized by the program director. These monthly meetings had a consistent attendance rate of 50% or less.

The inability to meet as a full group delayed the completion of the horizon paper that the group had initially committed to write until the twelve months of the FLC was almost complete. The group initially decided to use a virtual learning environment to cut down on excessive email communications. However, analysis of data from the virtual learning environment show that over half of the group's participants minimally engaged over the course of the year (see Figure 1). In the face of low numbers and reduced participation the rules established at the outset of the FLC were not enforced.

Figure 1: Minutes of Activity per FLC Participant



It might seem disingenuous to call our FLC a learning community, when engagement in any one activity rarely surpassed 50%. However, the personal and social amenity provided by the FLC is not to be underestimated. The present emphasis in Higher Education on tangible and economically profitable outputs ignores the value of staff participation in activities that promote community belonging, mindfulness, and

individual wellbeing. Participants reflected on this in different ways during their interviews.

> So it was all the sort of stuff that maybe wasn't the formal intention of the FLC, it was more the informal stuff that came as a result of getting together and being able to have a conversation with somebody in the corridor if I bumped into them, and just being able to share, you know, have a bit of a moan, have a bit of a whinge and understand what's going on in their areas and I really enjoyed having those meetings, just having that opportunity. (Interview 1, R2)

> Whenever I'm in a room without a purpose it makes me feel really anxious, and guilty in a way, like I'm wasting university time by doing that, so no, the idea of like, outside of a tea break, sitting there and not having a purpose makes me feel really anxious. (Interview 1, R1)

Cox (2001) notes that "graduates of faculty learning communities have a perspective that goes beyond their disciplines and includes a broader view of their institution and higher education" (p. 70). The vista thus accorded to group members is not always a pleasant one. Participating in the FLC revealed to us many of the institutional barriers to our involvement in continuing professional development and the scholarship of teaching and learning. This resonates with observations from Boose and Hutchings (2016) concerning scholarship as a subversive activity, because it invites critical conversations about the issues and challenges facing higher education.

Context

In discussing the way that FLCs can succeed or fail, Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan (2009) note that FLCs can, in the wrong circumstances, become committee-like in their

structure and function. While Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan (2009) write that the ways in which facilitation influences the outcomes of FLCs, they do not discuss the influence that organizations exercise over learning communities such as FLCs.

During the FLC, Edinburgh Napier University released the results of an employee engagement survey. The results were lower than in previous years and spoke of a workforce demotivated by rapid change, poor communication, and unmanageable workloads (Nolan, 2018). Speaking within the context of higher education, Kuh and colleagues (2014) define initiative fatigue as a "state in which faculty and staff members feel overwhelmed by and sometimes conflicted about the number of improvement efforts to which institutional leaders and external authorities are asking them to devote time and effort" (p. 184). During participant interviews the themes of workload, allocation of time, and bureaucratic pressure were prevalent.

In this environment it is possible to imagine that the FLC became yet another competing demand in an already demanding situation. Kuh et al (2014) write that one of the side effects of initiative fatigue is an interference with performance at both the individual and group level. Instead, rather than a year-long curriculum of seminars to stimulate learning, the monthly meetings became an unofficial support group for the participants who could attend, serving instead as a social-therapeutic amenity. An established theme in FLC literature is that the outcome of a successful learning community is both the development of knowledge and experience in the cognitive domain, and of equal importance, the creation of meaningful communities and the development of the affective domain. During the interviews, participants reflected on the affective influence of the FLC, especially in relation to their workload.

> The most important thing was to realize that everybody is feeling frazzled and nobody's feeling like they're in control of their workload and that's ok, well, it's not ok, but it kind of is, because it means then that there's not something wrong with you that means you can't manage your workload, it's that it's a collective so that's kind of all right? It's not really all right, but it makes it feel a bit better. (Interview 3, R3)

Recommendations

Cox (2004) discusses the ten qualities necessary for community in FLCs but aside from Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan (2009) few authors have explored specific barriers to FLC participation and success. As mentioned previously the FLC at Edinburgh Napier encountered several barriers. The following discussion explores how these might be countered in future FLCs at similar institutions.

1. <u>Focus</u>

The topic or theme for the FLC must be focused enough to give direction to the participants. Broad topics are inclusive, but they risk ambiguity. The theme of "supporting each other in the university" was broad enough to appeal to all FLC participants, but lacked the focus and definition needed for a robust research question.

2. <u>Participants</u>

The cross-disciplinary and cross-professional makeup of the group was a beneficial factor, allowing for a multitude of viewpoints, experiences, knowledge and skills to be shared. Interestingly, the primary beneficiaries of this knowledge and skills sharing were the academic colleagues.

> R1: There is that divide between academic and professional. It still feels like sometimes even though they sat there in the same room with me, I've solved their problems, I've helped them solve problems, they still don't see…
>
> Int: You're still just professional, just not an academic. (Interview 1, R1)

Future iterations of cross-professional FLCs should benefit from considering how professional service colleagues can benefit equally from their participation. Facilitators might ensure this through carefully uncovering the expectations of professional service colleagues at the outset. Facilitators might also pay attention to bridging any perceived divides between cross-professional teams, and ensuring that the service-ethic apparent in professional service staff does not overtake their participation the FLC activities.

3. <u>Perception</u>

Participation in an FLC is a professional development activity with long term benefits for student experience as well as the career prospects of participants. The organizational perception of the scholarly activity surrounding teaching and learning as somehow less valuable — especially when the outputs of that activity are not measurable in the traditional sense —is a problematic barrier for future FLCs in similar organizations. Participation in scholarly activity needs to be recognized as a legitimate and estimable academic undertaking worthy of time and investment and not an extra-curricular distraction. Participants in our FLC observed:

> So, I wish I could do it again, and make more of a fuss about it to the people that I work with, saying "this is really important, you have to listen to me," and saying "I'm doing this now, it means I can't do

> anything else," and for them to be able to understand and respect, so that there was no, so that people aren't thinking, "Oh I don't know what she's doing, just off doing some silly, ridiculous thing that's probably meaningless," for people to understand better what it is. (Interview 3, R3)

> I can't think of many changes from the way you did it that I think would make a difference, other than making sure that people are supported with the time to engage with it. (Interview 6, R6)

At the Edinburgh Napier FLC attendance at monthly meetings, and participation in the online learning environment frequently fell below 50%. As discussed above, this lack of participation was a function of unmanageable workloads and a misalignment with institutional priorities. Without a commitment to attendance and participation from beyond the participants FLCs risk losing momentum.

4. Investment

FLCs require investment to be successful. Not just for financing retreats, but also for buying out staff time. As well as providing support for teaching staff, this practice would be of benefit to participants in professional roles, as observed above. Time and its financial cost should be factored into planning for future FLCs in similar universities. During interviews, participants repeatedly reflected on how organizational investment would benefit future FLCs.

> And I guess, if you are thinking more widely about what makes something ideal, understanding from your colleagues and your manager that this kind of professional development requires time

release and maybe even requires investment, so time and money would play into that as well. (Interview 1, R1)

Conclusion

This paper has shared the experiences of the Edinburgh Napier FLC and reflected on the institutional challenges to successful participation. FLCs have a greater chance of achieving the goal of transforming institutions into learning organizations when (1) the chosen theme is sufficiently focused, (2) a commitment to engagement is made, and (3) the scholarly activity is valued and appropriately financed by the institution.

This paper has also reflected on the activities of the group and their effectiveness in fostering the outcomes articulated by Cox. The cross-professional makeup of the Edinburgh Napier FLC proved to be valuable for academic colleagues. Despite the subversive nature of FLCs in challenging the bureaucratic priorities of modern higher education, those priorities became an impediment to the success of the FLC. The engagement in scholarly activity to support teaching and learning requires an organizational commitment to supporting the professional development of all university staff, not just those engaged in scientific research.

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