

# Loughborough University Teaching Innovation Awards

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## Project title

Using a Community of Practice to Enhance Learning and Teaching

**N.B. Total word count should be in the range 1500-2000.** Expand the text boxes as necessary.

## Abstract (200-250 words)

Despite teaching standards becoming increasingly important, academics have less and less time to develop and disseminate good teaching practice. To help ease this problem, we established a 'Community of Practice' (CoP) within the School of Business and Economics. The CoP provided a series of events with associated online resources where experienced practitioners presented a range of teaching innovations and experiences, and where participants could engage in open discussions. To help other Schools and universities set-up their own CoPs, and to further understand the effects of CoPs, the project provides i) some reflections on establishing a CoP, ii) an analysis of the level of participation within the CoP (offline and online), and how participation varied across different types of academics, iii) an assessment of how the CoP is perceived by participants and non-participants, and iv) an indication of the extent to which CoP participation impacted on actual teaching practice, and how this differed across different types of academics.

## Issue(s) addressed by project

Enhancing teaching standards is becoming even more important in the advent of higher tuition fees, increased sector competition, and new regulation, such as the Teaching Excellence Framework. However, pressure on academics to undertake a wider range of activities is also increasing, and so the time available to develop and disseminate good teaching practice is becoming more limited.

In other organizational settings, the use of a 'Community of Practice' (CoP) has been applied as a method for groups of people to share common concerns and interests in a topic to fulfil both individual and group goals (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). In the context of higher education, CoPs provide an opportunity for academics to come together to share experiences and to disseminate good teaching practices and innovations. CoPs create a defined space to allow participants to focus on teaching practice, rather than on other competing activities (Lindkvist, 2005; Roberts, 2006). For example, 'Learning communities' (e.g. MacKenzie, 2010) have been successfully employed to stimulate and focus dialogue on enhancing teaching practice and learning. The existing literature primarily documents the effects of CoPs with the use of self-reported statements from participants about the benefits of collegiality, dialogue, sharing of knowledge, social learning and collaboration. However, despite the growing popularity of CoPs, evidence documenting their actual impact of on teaching practice remains scarce.

To help fill this gap, this project established a CoP comprising face-to-face events and online resources. The project was conducted within the School of Business and Economics (SBE), a Triple-Accredited, full-service business school with over 140 academic staff and 3,500 students. We document the ability of the CoP to engage and influence different academic participants in their teaching and learning practices. In particular, the project offers four (preliminary) contributions:

<sup>1</sup> During the project, Dr. Stocchi left Loughborough University and Gabi Witthaus joined the project. We thank Dr Marjahan Begum for her initial impetus to commence this project, as well as our research assistants Rachel Fuller, Josh Morton, and Akin Sharimakin.

- i) A discussion of how the CoP was implemented, together with some reflections of our experiences;
- ii) An analysis of the level of participation within the CoP (offline and online), and how participation varied across different types of academics;
- iii) An assessment of how the CoP is perceived by participants and non-participants;
- iv) An indication of the extent to which CoP participation impacted on actual teaching practice, and how this differed across different types of academics.

The project's overall findings may be useful to other academics, Schools, and universities to develop their own CoPs to further enhance learning and teaching.

## Aims

- To improve teaching and learning practice in the SBE by establishing a CoP
- To monitor and study its effectiveness in engaging staff and impacting their teaching practices
- To disseminate any findings to a broader audience within the university and beyond to further improve teaching practice

## Specific objectives

Objective	Activities
Enable discussion amongst academics in the SBE about teaching practice	Organise three CoP sessions within SBE
Establish a set of related online resources for academics in SBE	Set up and maintain a 'virtual' version of the CoP with online recordings and resources
Ensure that SBE colleagues are aware of the opportunities and resources provided by the CoP	Document and reflect on the implementation of the CoP
Measure perceptions of CoP participants	Conduct a perception survey of CoP participants
Assess the CoP's impact on practice	Conduct an impact survey of CoP participants
Ascertain reasons for non-participation in the CoP	Conduct a survey of non-participants
Provide evidence-based recommendations for Loughborough University and the wider HE sector on the use of CoPs for enhancing teaching practice	Conduct a statistical analysis of the survey responses to i) measure perceptions, engagement, and impact of the CoP and, ii) identify which type of staff are most likely to be engaged and influenced by the CoP.

## Methodology

The project comprised three face-to-face (offline) CoP sessions, which were also supported by online resources available through a 'virtual' version of the CoP via a dedicated page on the Learn platform. Access to both offline and online versions of the CoP was open to all academic members of the SBE. Each offline session started with a buffet lunch before experienced practitioners presented a range of innovations pertaining to teaching. After each presentation, participants were invited to engage in an open discussion of these methods, issues and other related experiences.

To further bolster participation and effectiveness, online resources were made available to all SBE staff within the 'virtual' version of the CoP. This includes video recordings, audio podcasts, presentation slides from the sessions, and a discussion board for further interaction.

The CoP sessions revolved around specific themes related to large group teaching: i) Teaching to Large Groups (May 2015), ii) Feedback and Assessment in Large Groups (Oct 2015), iii) Engaging Students in Large Groups (Feb 2016).

The project conducted three surveys. After each CoP event, any new participants (offline and online) were identified and surveyed with an 'exit survey' to assess their perceptions. Access and usage data of the online resources were collected via Learn's reporting facilities. In April 2016, three months after the last offline event, all

participants were surveyed for a second time with an 'impact survey' to measure how joining the CoP had influenced their teaching practice. A third 'non-participant' survey was conducted to capture the perceptions of non-participants. The latter two surveys were conducted online with an incentive (a £50 Amazon voucher prize draw). To supplement this data, we also collected some non-confidential demographic information about each academic member of the SBE, including gender, rank, and discipline group. Using a public website, we also obtained data on whether each staff member was submitted as a researcher to the REF in 2014.

The analysis is broken into three parts. i) Participation. Here, we report the level of participation and how participation varied between the offline and online versions of the CoP. Further, by using the participation data with the demographic information, we then provide a descriptive and multivariate statistical analysis to understand which types of academics are most likely to participate. ii) Perceptions. To study perceptions of the participants and non-participants, we report the responses of the relevant survey questions. iii) Impact. By using the 'impact survey', we report the extent to which the CoP influenced teaching practice. With further use of the demographic information, we also offer a descriptive statistical analysis to assess which types of academics are most likely to be influenced by the Cop.

Finally, during the project, we sought to extend our study by further investigating the existing literature on CoPs, and the use of CoPs in higher education. We therefore commissioned a detailed literature review to supplement our own data collection and analysis. This will extend the reach of the TIA project in terms of publication and wider application.

## **Use of award money**

From the award of £1,650, we spent £382.93 on catering for the three CoP events; £181.59 on the administration of three surveys and the provision of respondent incentives; £634.55 on research assistants to collate and analyse the survey responses. With the remaining £451 and substantial top-up funding from SBE, we extended the project by commissioning a comprehensive literature review on communities of practice.

## **Project outcomes/findings**

### **1. Reflections and Tips for Setting up a CoP**

Before considering the statistical analysis, we offer some reflections from our experiences of setting up and running the CoP in the form of five quick tips.

- Choose your dates carefully. Avoid weeks near exam or marking deadlines, and school half-terms.
- Don't include too many presentations because participants want plenty of time to discuss. (Two presentations per hour were found to be best.)
- Pick the presentations carefully. Participants like a mix of tips based on everyday experience, as well as more advanced methods.
- Be prepared to chair the discussions to keep people on track.
- Incentivise speakers and participants as much as you can by highlighting how participation may enhance their teaching and efficiency, and by providing free lunch, posters, and reminders.

### **2. Statistical Analysis**

#### **i) Participation**

- Out of 142 academic staff, 33% participated with the CoP either by attending a session offline or accessing the online resources.
- Participation through session attendance was the most popular form of participation. The online version of the CoP was used rarely. Out of all participants, 68% interacted only offline, 17% interacted only online, and 15% interacted both offline and online.
- Within the online version of the CoP, presentation slides were the most popularly accessed resource ahead of discussion boards, lecture capture recordings, and audio recordings, respectively.

- From our descriptive analysis, a staff member was significantly more likely to participate if they were of junior rank (lecturer or senior lecturer) and/or if they were not submitted to the last REF. For instance, 47% of all lecturers and senior lecturers participated, while only 7% of all readers and professors participated. Weaker effects also suggest that staff are less likely to attend if they are part-time.
- Some other factors such as gender were not statistically significant, although there were significant differences between discipline groups.
- The results from a more sophisticated multivariate probit analysis confirm that rank is the most powerful determinant of participation. They also confirm that part-time staff are less likely to participate, and suggest a weak negative effect on participation from years spent at Loughborough and from being submitted to the last REF.

#### ii) Perceptions

- After surveying new (offline and online) participants soon after each session within the 'exit survey', we collected views from 89% of participants.
- 86% of survey respondents stated that they were 'likely or very likely' to participate again in the future, 81% stated that they would encourage another colleague to attend, and 66% stated that they would be likely to use something that they had learned from the CoP.
- Respondents thought that the CoP was most relevant for encouraging staff to talk about teaching to their colleagues, encouraging staff to seek support from their colleagues, and encouraging staff to try novel ideas.
- When asked how to improve the CoP, most respondents suggested less speakers and more open discussion time.
- Through the non-participant survey, we collected views from 17% of non-participants. Most suggested that they had been too busy to participate or that they had other commitments that clashed.

#### iii) Impact

- Through the 'Impact Survey' in April 2016, we collected responses from 51% of participants.
- 58% of respondents reported an 'impact' by confirming that they had used some material and/or ideas from the CoP to support their teaching.
- The most popular forms of impact included: rethinking my teaching approach (29%), update my teaching skills (25%), and designing new material (25%).
- The common reasons for not reporting an impact included lack of time or lack of opportunity.
- Overall, 71% of all respondents agreed that the CoP had led them to think differently, with 46% also agreeing that it led them to talk more about teaching to their colleagues.
- Over 70% of respondents thought the CoP was either relevant or very relevant for providing a different learning opportunity, encouraging staff to try new ideas, improving staff confidence, and providing motivation to enhance teaching.
- The 'impact survey' provides us with a relatively small sample size for analysis. This limits the scope for a more sophisticated statistical analysis.
- However, by using a descriptive analysis we can suggest that lecturer participants were significantly more likely to report an impact than senior lecturer participants. This compares to our previous result that suggested that lecturers and senior lecturers were more likely to participate than more senior staff. Hence, staff of higher rank seem less likely to both participate and report an impact.
- Some weaker effects also suggest that staff with less research interests were more likely to report an impact, such as those on teaching and scholarship contracts and those not submitted to the last REF.
- Other demographic factors were not significant, although there were significant differences between discipline groups.

### Project outputs/deliverables

- The implementation of a CoP within the SBE;
- Three CoP sessions within the SBE, and ongoing plans for further sessions in 2016/17;
- Provision of associated online material within the virtual version of the CoP, see <http://learn.lboro.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=10002>.
- A statistical analysis of the usage, effectiveness, and perceptions of the CoP;

- A presentation of our findings;
- A formal written paper of our findings for journal submission (in progress)

### **Impact on teaching and learning (including links to University strategy)**

In line with the existing literature, our results suggest that CoPs can be a useful tool for building and enhancing staff capabilities and supporting capacity growth *with* excellence in one of the university's core strengths; teaching. In light of our findings, we suggest that face-to-face teaching forums, rather than associated online resources, are likely to be most effective. In addition, our results highlight that CoPs seem most effective for certain groups of academics, such as junior, rather than senior, staff. A key questions remains of how to engage a non-participants, especially more senior staff.

**Dissemination plans including location of resources for Loughborough colleagues to access** (a link to these can be created for you from the CAP website if you wish – please ask Deena)

To communicate our findings, and to guide others into thinking about the development of their own CoPs, we will adopt the following dissemination strategy. First, we will disseminate our findings within Loughborough in accordance with the conditions of acceptance for the award. Second, we will disseminate a formal working paper of our findings by making it publicly accessible online, by submitting it to a higher education academic journal.

Please submit the completed form to:

Deena Ingham, *Teaching Innovation Awards Panel Chair*  
Centre for Academic Practice

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