

Teaching, Learning Communities – a triad approach to enhancing peer observations

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1. Introduction to Teaching, Learning Communities

The primary function of a **Teaching, Learning Community (TLC)** is to harness conducive and collaborative relationships. According to Fielding et al (2005) 'Rather than passing or cascading practices to colleagues a more sustainable process would be to **develop relationships and trust between groups** of professionals where **ideas can be explored** together over time.' Dylan Williams writes extensively on TLCs and has spent 15 years exploring how they can best work in teaching and learning contexts. Williams tellingly observes how the **most powerful teacher knowledge is not explicit** and that is why **telling teachers what to do simply does not work**. Williams cautions that the hardest bit about changing or developing teaching practice is not about getting new ideas into people's heads but, instead, it is trying to get the old ideas out.

In a TLC, there are **no 'experts,' just like-minded individuals** who commonly share the goal/desire to improve one's practice. By embedding peer observation into a TLC the process should facilitate HE lecturers' professional skills development along with enhancing the quality of teaching and learning for the ultimate benefit of the student.

This guidance document has been prepared to enable colleges and their HE departments to put in place a process whereby staff can undertake peer observation via a Teaching, Learning Community.



2. Aims of the TLC process

The aims of the TLC process are:

To enhance current observation practice by promoting wider collaboration across curriculum areas.

To encourage collaboration, confidence and a scholarly discourse.

To encourage the sharing of 'good' practice in teaching and learning.

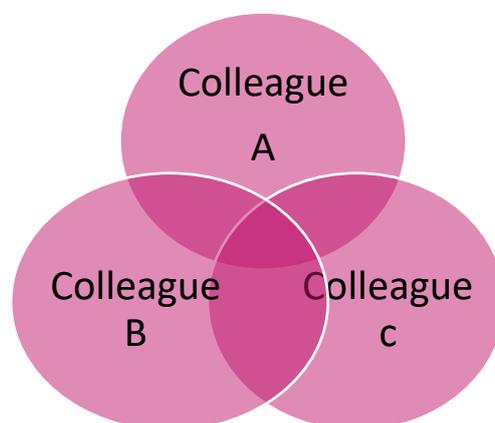
To encourage all staff to reflect on the effectiveness of their practice and to identify development needs where applicable.

To highlight areas for inclusion in the Performance Enhancement Review/Appraisal Process.

To develop mechanisms for staff to disseminate scholarly activity.

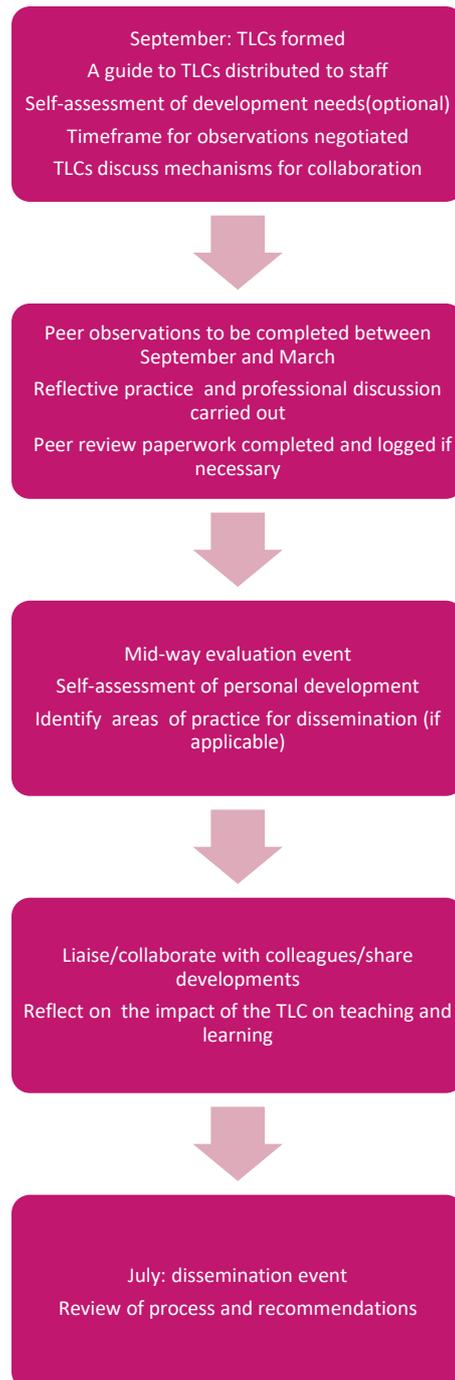
To identify areas for dissemination at local Teaching and Learning events.

To help in enhancing the learning experience for HE students.



3. Scope and expectations of the process

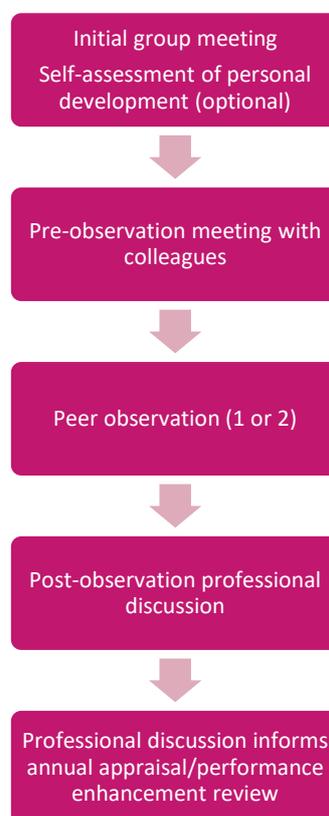
This process should apply to all staff teaching on HE awards, irrespective of mode and location of delivery. The following diagram gives an illustration of how the process can be introduced:



3.1 Organising and facilitating the groups

Ideally, HE lecturers should have some involvement in determining the triad groupings. If that proves to be problematic, HE managers could work together to assist the process. There are many considerations when determining the groups and it is probably wise to have a back-up plan if groups don't work for whatever reason. HE managers could ask lecturers to identify a specific theme they would like to explore, e.g. developing students' critical thinking skills or developing resources for online learners. Groups could then be formed according to themes. Groups could also be formed by allocating more experienced lecturers with less experienced lecturers; however the groups are organised, they should ideally be formed with staff across three different curriculum areas to promote collaboration across institutions.

If at all possible, some allocated time should be set aside at the beginning of the first term for groups to initially meet and familiarise themselves with each other and the process. Clear guidance and expectations should also be discussed at this stage and this will differ according to each college context. In **Appendix 1**, there is a pre-trial evaluation tool which could be adopted/adapted by college managers to evaluate lecturer expectations at the start of the process.



3.2 Initial group meeting

Clearly, there are many methods in which the TLCs can be introduced to college lecturers and, almost certainly, the approach adopted will be influenced by the current observation approach adopted in each setting. Ideally, if the triad approach is significantly new, then the process should be introduced face to face whereby lecturers have the opportunity to ask questions about the process. This is an excellent opportunity to have conversations about teaching and learning across departments and college managers could consider how this opportunity could be fully exploited. There may be opportunity to share and develop resources and collaborate on pedagogical research where discussion reveals common concerns and issues. Each college would need to consider expectations such as peer observation documentation and whether this is to be stored centrally, within curriculum areas or with the individuals involved. Likewise, if colleges intend to use the TLC process to inform teaching and learning dissemination events, lecturers should be informed about this at the start of the process. **Appendix 2** has a self-assessment tool which could be adopted/adapted as an initial icebreaker/introduction to the process

3.3 Responsibility

The responsibility for ensuring that the process is completed will depend on the culture and structure within each college context. If peer observation is entirely new to the setting, then it is logical that a senior member of staff is given some responsibility for facilitating the process. Key responsibilities may involve liaising with curriculum teams to ensure that TLCs are operational, organising meetings and carrying out evaluations. On occasion, the post-holder appointed may need to act as an arbitrator if any difficulties arise. If graded observations are still practised within the institution then senior management will need to clarify whether the triad approach is in place of graded observations or is to run alongside such a scheme.

4. Focus for the TLCs

The overall aim of the TLC is to support HE lecturers in their professional development. The aim of the TLC is to be supportive, collaborative and developmental; whilst lecturers will have been allocated into small groups of

three, it is recommended that it should be their choice whether they observe one or two of their colleagues. The focus should be on generating qualitative feedback for the development of professional practice and teaching and learning at the college. It is recommended that colleges support the process by allocating additional time to review the process at a mid-way point and to support lecturers who may not feel confident at giving feedback on an observation. Some colleges may also like to consider implementing introductory workshops on how to give effective feedback to peers. Where at all possible, it is further recommended that colleges allocate some designated time throughout the year for lecturers to meet and discuss their professional development.

Appendix 3 has an evaluation tool which could be adopted/adapted to gain some valuable insight mid-way throughout the year. This would be an ideal opportunity to explore the potential of further collaboration among TLCs or if learning from the groups could be disseminated at an end-of-year event. Whether the college decides to plan for dissemination events or not, at the very least individuals should feel more prepared to discuss their professional practice and development needs at appraisal. It is important that TLCs continue to meet throughout the year, post observation and feedback, to further support and learn from each other; however, this will undoubtedly be influenced by a number of factors, most significantly, time and space allocated by each institution. Whilst outcomes of the TLCs and peer observations will vary, this should at the very least include greater insight into teaching practice at the college in addition to promoting a professional reflective dialogue. **Appendix 5 and 6** have examples of observation documentation that could be adopted/adapted.

5. Evaluating Impact of TLC

As with any new professional development activity it will be essential to carry out a robust and valid evaluation. If the pre-trial evaluation and interim evaluations have been carried out, then this should shed light on what areas to focus on at the end of the academic year. As suggested earlier in this guidance document, colleges could potentially hold a dissemination event for evidencing learning or, in some smaller contexts, the Head of HE may prefer to carry out a post appraisal evaluation. However the evaluation is carried out, the information obtained should feed into the college's CPD programme for the subsequent year. Whilst it may sound obvious, it is important to ensure that adequate time is allocated to carry out an evaluation. This will guarantee that the process can be developed effectively for each college setting. Key messages from the evaluation should be shared with the relevant post holders to ensure that future development needs are met. **Appendix 7** shows an example of an evaluation tool which could be adopted/adapted by colleges.

References

Fielding, Michael et al. (2005). Factors Influencing the transfer of good practice. Nottingham: DfES Publications. Available from:
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR615.pdf.pdf>

Williams, D. (2018). Professional Development. Available from:
http://www.dylanwiliam.org/Dylan_Wiliams_website/Welcome.html

Appendix 2

Initial self-assessment tool

- 1. What elements of Teaching, Learning Assessment (TLA) do you have an interest in or would be of use for you to focus upon or develop? (You may wish to use feedback from your last observation or discussion from performance review/annual appraisal.)**
- 2. What are your aims/hopes related to focusing on the element of TLA that you have identified?**
- 3. Based on the element of TLA that you would like to develop, what things have you already tried? What things have you done that have shown some potential?**
- 4. What part of this TLA focus do you wish to further explore? This may be where you identify some sources of information to help, or your group share ideas they have used/seen/heard of.**

Examples of areas you may be keen on developing:

Extent of students' peer learning and group work

Embedding more peer work into the curriculum (using peers/buddies from more advanced groups)

Encouraging students to actively self-assess

Students' engagement and use of subject specific terminology

Developing effective interaction within the classroom

Developing digital pedagogies

Exploring students' perceptions of assessment feedback

Developing tools for student feedback on teaching and learning

Exploring students' perceptions of the NSS (comparing the UK with the USA)

Providing 'empty' modules/space for students to negotiate their own learning outcomes

Embedding study/professional skills into the curriculum

Fitness for purpose of chosen activity/delivery method

Students' demonstration of higher level analytical skills

Effectiveness of questioning techniques

Students' understanding of topic(s)

Demonstration of independent learning by students

Students' contribution to the topic(s)/context

Students' ability to disseminate their scholarly activity

Exploring subject areas' pedagogy: is there a distinct subject pedagogy? How would this be articulated?

Appendix 3

Interim evaluation tool

Reflecting on the TLC experience to date, please answer the following questions:

1. What examples of scholarly activity have you observed during the TLC process? This can be either staff or student scholarly activity. (Scholarly activity can be anything that demonstrates subject expertise and enhances the student learning experience.)
2. What, if anything, are you finding **most useful** about the TLC experience?
3. What are you finding most challenging about engaging in the TLC process?
4. What is the impact of learning from the TLC experience so far?
5. What plans do you have to continue to develop your teaching-related knowledge, skills and practice through teacher-related CPD?
6. How might the TLC process be developed to assist you further?

Appendix 6

University Centre Sparsholt

Peer Observation of Teaching and Learning

Lecturer:	Location:
Observer:	Student group:
Unit:	Level of learners (4, 5, 6 or 7):
Date & time:	Duration of observation:

	<p>Aims of observation (you might like to consider some of the following: reviews and recap of learning; management of behaviour; <i>*explanation</i>; communication, style and delivery; use of ILT; <i>*how to make the subject interesting</i>; <i>*intellectual stimulation</i>, effective engagement and participation by students; teaching and <i>*challenge</i> at the appropriate level (4, 5, 6 or 7); variety of differentiated teaching methods for the particular group; developing independence).</p> <p>1</p> <p>2</p> <p>3</p> <p><i>*Link directly to National Student Survey (NSS) questions on teaching quality</i></p>
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	<p>Inclusion of scholarly activity within taught session</p> <p>Activities or practice observed to take forward into your own delivery</p> <p>1</p> <p>2</p> <p>3</p>
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Action plan

Activity or practice identified during peer observation	Action (what you will do to include the activity into your own practice)	Cohort & date of introduction or implementation	Reflection on impact or effect of new practice	Further changes or amends to practise

Session profile

The National Student Survey contains four statements that relate to the quality of teaching:

1. Staff are good at explaining things.
2. Staff have made the subject interesting.
3. The course is intellectually stimulating.
4. My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.

The section below uses questions keyed to the NSS and reflective of the 'Indicators of sound practice' found in the UK Quality Code, Chapter B3, *Learning and Teaching*. You should use the context of your observation as follows:

- A. Is planning sufficient to support delivery of the learning outcomes? (1)
- B. How good are the materials provided to support learning? (2,4)
- C. Is there effective engagement with, and participation by, students? (2,3)
- D. How effective is the breadth, depth and pace of teaching? (4)
- E. Are the students being taught and challenged at the appropriate level, i.e. level 4, 5 or 6? (4)
- F. Is there an effective and suitable variety of teaching methods for this particular group? (2)

- Wider reading in the subject so as to equip the teacher to deal with potentially stretching student questions, research topics and to prepare the changes in subject matter following original research.
- Contribution to the development and understanding of higher education pedagogy e.g. investigating, developing, evaluating and reporting on approaches to curriculum delivery such as the impact on the use of audio feedback on student attainment.
- Involvement in higher level professional activity e.g. maintaining CPD for professional status, contributing to the wider higher education community through involvement in the Higher Education Academy and other appropriate organisations.

Examples of how 'scholarly activity' might be evidenced in a lecture:

- Reference to current literature, recent information gathered from professional conferences, etc.
- Reference to personal research or recent professional activity.
- Current reading lists provided and updated teaching material.
- The use of current facts, figures, legislation, etc.
- Asking students to evaluate and analyse information. Case studies are a particularly good way to promote evaluative & analytical skills, particularly at Level 6.

Appendix 7

Reflecting on your experience of the **Teaching, Learning Communities** this year, please answer the following questions:

1. As part of the TLC process, you were expected to observe at least one of your peers and be observed at least once.

(a) Did you manage to observe one peer from your group? Yes No

If you did not observe a peer, please explain why

Were you observed? Yes No

2. In your opinion, how well were the following aims of the triad process met? (Please circle)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Improve teaching and learning within own classes.	<input type="radio"/>				
Improve collaboration across teams	<input type="radio"/>				
Develop engagement with the peer observation process	<input type="radio"/>				

3. What did you find **most useful** about the TLC experience?

4. What do you believe has been the **impact of learning** from the TLC experience so far?

5. What did you find **most challenging** about engaging in the TLC process?

6. What plans do you have to continue to develop your teaching-related knowledge, skills and practice through teacher-related CPD?

7. How well do you think the following ideas would support the process next year?
(Please circle)

	Would help a lot	Would help a bit	Would not help	Would actively hinder the process
More flexibility with the groups - e.g. more choice with who to observe	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Specific time slots to complete planning and professional dialogue	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More meeting time allocated throughout the year	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being allocated a theme to explore	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please add comments to support your ratings, or suggest your own improvements.

Thank you for completing this evaluation.