

**Title:** **Authority, Leadership and Cake: enablers or inhibitors of the creation and effectiveness of academic staff learning groups?**

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### **Session Learning Outcomes**

In this workshop we will explore assumptions underpinning different views of the role and purpose of staff groups in educational practice and identify how we can use our awareness of these assumptions when working with groups

### **Session Outline**

The leaders of this workshop have been variously involved in academic staff learning groups for the past ten years. These have involved multi-disciplinary groups of colleagues engaged in educational practice development. In this workshop we aim to explore assumptions around the role and purposes of such groups focusing on three factors identified as significant in our own work: authority, leadership and cake.

We wish to ask a key question for each issue. Why are matters of authority, and the need for permission to engage, contested (e.g. Jarvis et al, 2017)? Why might group leadership by academic developers be problematic (e.g. Roxå, & Mårtensson, 2017)? Why can the seemingly innocuous and positive provision of cake at meetings (e.g. Thomas, 2016) be interpreted negatively?

We understand that these questions relate to assumptions, or 'theories in action' (Argyris & Schön, 1978) held by ourselves, colleagues and managers about the purposes of staff groups, the process of group working, responsibility for leading teaching, and about how university teachers and teaching develop. These affect the creation of groups, how they are led and how 'effectiveness' is perceived and evaluated.

The workshop seeks to tease out underlying assumptions about authority, leadership and cake by exploring a simplistic binary opposition for each. Participants will be encouraged to explore different perspectives and their underpinning assumptions and intentions. The aim is to consider whether the group processes we adopt with staff groups are in fact aligned with our purposes and consider how greater awareness of assumptions can help us to adapt our work to particular contexts.

### **Session Activities and Approximate Timings**

The session will comprise:

00.0 – 00.10 Participants seat themselves in groups of about 4 and engage in the activity prepared and laid out on the table. The activity is to use strips of paper provided to

write the assumptions they think may underpin two contrasting statements in relation to the provision of **cake** for staff groups engaged in learning about teaching.

00.10 – 00.20 Workshop leaders draw out ideas about assumptions from the group. They then explain the background to the workshop, why they consider that looking at possible assumptions is important when working with staff groups, why the topics have been chosen and how the quotations about the topics used in the research have been generated. They explain the next stage of the workshop which will be for the groups to explore assumptions underpinning statements about one of two topics: authority and leadership.

00.20 – 00.35 Groups will be given resources related to one of the two topics.

Two large sheets of paper will be available for each group. For the group looking at **authority** on the top of one of these sheets of paper will be written a quotation about who has authority in relation to convening learning and teaching groups and on the top of the other sheet will be a quotation giving a contrasting view. The same pattern of two sheets of paper with contrasting quotations about leadership will be given to the groups exploring assumptions in this area.

Participants will use strips of paper provided to write the assumptions they think may underpin the statements made (one per strip) and place these under the appropriate quotation.

Question cards will be available to focus thinking as necessary. Prompt questions will include: What is the role of participants here? What are the desired outcomes? What processes are involved?

Participants display their work on the table or wall and then look at the work of other groups in order to see the thinking about both areas. The work can be photographed.

00.35-00.45 Group leaders ask questions to elicit themes and ask participants to consider in relation to the workshop, what for them will influence their thinking in relation to their work with staff groups.

## References

Argyris, C & Schön, D (1978) *Organisational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley

Jarvis, J., Thomas, R., Rosella, T., Smith, J., Nimmo, S., Hodgkinson, J., Glass, L., Clark, K., Barlow, J. & Baker, T (2017) 'Find the Gap': can a multidisciplinary group of university teachers influence learning and teaching practice? *Practice and Evidence of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 12:3 446-464

Roxå, T & Mårtensson, K (2017) Agency and structure in academic development practices: are we liberating academic teachers or are we part of a machinery suppressing them? *International Journal for Academic Development* 22:2 95-105

Thomas, R. (2016). Going out on a Roll: Cake, conversation and critique. *LINK* 2(2). Retrieved from <http://www.herts.ac.uk/link/volume-2,-issue-2/going-out-on-a-roll-cake,-conversation-and-critique>