Title: Peer learning in the age of excellence: how cross disciplinary
                collaboration can help develop practice

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Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

-         Identify the benefits of peer learning within a staff development programme

-         Discuss how peer learning can enhance practice amongst academic staff

Session Outline

Peer team-based learning is used widely within HE for a number of different reasons. One might be to try and encourage engagement and critical thinking amongst students (Sweet, 2012). Peer learning can also help reduce anxiety associated with transition in to HE by improving academic confidence (Keenan, 2014). From an academic perspective, students are able to take greater ownership of their learning experience and participation can improve in their own personal learning community (Ody and Carey, 2013). Peer learning is most commonly seen within the classroom with students who belong to a particular course or module, however other diverse variants such as peer mentoring exist which work outside these parameters (Keenan, 2014).

Birmingham City University runs a PGCert in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The course is designed for staff who have some responsibility for enhancing the quality of learning, teaching and assessment at BCU. There is a strong emphasis on critical reflection, collaborative learning and the theory-in-use underpinning learning and teaching practice (Schön, 1987; Finlay, 2008; HEA, 2011).

A unique aspect of this course is that colleagues across a range of different disciplines are brought together to explore their own learning and teaching practice. We as tutors have used this in a way which encourages academics to discuss key issues in HE whilst also considering the perspectives of colleagues from different disciplines. Peer groups (teams) have been engineered maximising participant diversity, so a range of disciplines are represented in each group. Criticality is a key component of the learning outcomes for this course so the use of peer groups can possibly help foster critical thinking as personal positions may be enriched by the views of other colleagues in a particular group.

From our own experience we have found that peer learning has helped raise awareness amongst students of issues within the institute and also in the wider sector. For example students have commented that discussions with peers have allowed collaboration to begin

on projects from a cross faculty perspective. The range of discussions amongst peers from different disciplines have also encouraged staff to consider and adopt different approaches to learning and teaching.

This session will reflect on the impact this approach has had on participant engagement with the learning activities and formative feedback, constructively aligned with the assessment tasks (Biggs, 2012). It will also aim to share the tutor perspectives and personal experiences of using this particular approach.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

The outline of the workshop is a follows;

-        Introduction to peer learning groups on PG Cert and how they are used (10 mins)

-        Discussion around how peer learning can be beneficial from both a staff and student perspective (10 mins)

-        How do we use peer learning in a staff development context? (We will discuss our own experience and open up for discussion) [10 mins]

-        Based on feedback from colleagues throughout the session and our own evaluations, we will discuss how we could improve this approach in the future (10 mins)

References

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