

## **‘Find the Gap’: can a multidisciplinary group of university teachers influence learning and teaching practice?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes and analyses a year’s project undertaken by a small, multidisciplinary group of academic staff in a UK post -1992 university. The purpose of the group was to: take a scholarly and inquiring approach to learning and teaching; build staff confidence and expertise in teaching and leadership in teaching; and offer a model of a potential approach to institutional change in educational practice. The project involved colleagues with interest and expertise in teaching sharing ideas for practice together through dialogue. They also undertook an Appreciative Inquiry into effective professional learning in this field and shared the findings with colleagues and institutional leaders.

Evaluation identified individuals’ professional learning over the year and their growth in confidence to share practice ideas beyond the local. Barriers to using this approach for university practice development included perceived issues of authority to act in an institutional context, and performative approaches to change in teaching. Colleagues identified that they needed to find ‘gaps’ in allocated time schedules and in perceptions

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of teaching development and leadership if they are to influence more than their own practice. It is suggested that universities need to build the expertise and leadership capacities of academic staff with knowledge and skills in teaching by bringing them together in multidisciplinary groups to share ideas and create new practice. Gaps in policies and systems need to be opened up to enable these colleagues to have time and opportunities to work together, network with others and enhance university educational practice.

**Keywords:** appreciative inquiry; changing educational practice; gaps; multidisciplinary groups; professional learning; teaching focused academics; university teaching

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to describe the creation and subsequent work of a multidisciplinary group of academic staff who worked together for a year focussing on learning and teaching. The context was a UK post-92 university. One of the group aims was to influence learning and teaching practice in the institution and we will consider how we construed this task and the extent to which we regard ourselves to have been successful.

We first explain the thinking behind the setting up of the group and then describe the process of how we worked together over the year. We draw on evaluation data to explore the outcomes of our work and identify what we have learnt about change in the context of university learning and teaching.

## **Conceptual base**

The group leader had two purposes underpinning this work. First, to create a multidisciplinary group of teachers who could work together on a regular basis taking an inquiry approach to learning and teaching. This was based on her understanding that teaching requires the development of technical and theoretical understanding, together

with the fostering of 'professional wisdom' (Shulman, 2004), or practical judgement. Professional wisdom grows from critical reflection on experience and allows choices to be made about how to act in a range of different circumstances to meet the learning needs of students. Necessary ongoing staff learning can be fostered by a collegiate, inquiry approach where multidisciplinary differences enable challenge and critique (Mason, 2002).

The second purpose was to surface the idea, within the home university, that professional learning in educational practice can be fostered through a network of staff-led groups. The work described here was intended to demonstrate what could be achieved by one group and to identify how this approach, if successful, could be extended. Groups have been identified as a significant source of learning for academic staff in relation to learning about teaching in higher education. Staff Mentoring Communities (Felten, Dirksen, Bauman, Kheriaty, & Taylor, 2013) and Faculty Mentoring Communities (Cox, Richlin, & Essington, 2012) are approaches to professional learning which are staff-led and build individual confidence and capacity through regular group meetings with a self-chosen focus. An aim for the group described in this paper was to create an opportunity for individuals to gain from participation through sharing and creating knowledge, and a further aim was to extend the learning beyond the group so that ideas for practice could be used in wider contexts within the University.

The importance of influencing beyond the group relates to an issue identified by Roxa and Martensson (2009) when in a study of 106 academics the researchers identified a pattern that those staff who talked about teaching did so with a small number of chosen colleagues in private, informal conversations. They suggest that these small groups could be seen as 'significant networks', where individuals' ideas about teaching are developed but not necessarily taken beyond the local context. Indeed, the authors suggest that staff members were reluctant to contribute to discussion about teaching in more formal meetings beyond 'what they believe they are expected to say' (Roxa & Martensson, 2009, p. 215). This could be connected to Crawford's (2010) study of two higher education institutions where academics compared their teaching and their research networks: '...teaching networks were experienced as pragmatic, business and organisation-led, while research-related communities were considered to be collegiate

and discursive' (Crawford, 2010, p. 197). This could relate to the way teaching is viewed. In the current context of marketisation, teaching has come to be seen as performance that can be identified and measured. As Skelton (2005) noted over 10 years ago this can lead to an approach to teaching development that lacks criticality and responds only to customer satisfaction ratings. Staff learning in this context can be seen to be about compliance and may be part of the reason for a declining interest in teaching by staff in many national contexts (Macfarlane, 2011). The group leader did not want the group described in this paper to be seen by potential participants as focusing on managerial initiatives and therefore the decision was made not to include as group members those academic staff with designated School/Department-based institutional roles for learning and teaching. The group leader did not have an institutional role in relation to learning and teaching, but did have a measure of acknowledged expertise in the area with a professorship in educational practice and a national teaching fellowship, and therefore academic staff would understand why she might initiate a learning and teaching group.

In relation to leadership, Woods (2016, p. 160) argues that '...all are engaged in some way in determining who is included in or excluded from exercising authority and leadership'. Even in increasingly hierarchical university contexts, where educational development is managed by top-down initiatives encouraging 'a kind of 'party-line' sameness born from agendas of quality and audit' (Pesta, 2014, p. 65), there has been a recognition of some form of shared or distributed leadership (Bennett, Wise, & Woods, 2003; Bolden et al., 2012, Bolden, Jones, Davis, & Gentle, 2015). This approach to leadership accepts that expertise is widely distributed across an institution and needs to be drawn on for the good of that institution and its members. At the same time it acknowledges that in a complex changing environment, where practice is created in social contexts, all participants will influence that practice (Stacey, 2006). This idea was important for the new group being developed, as if a network of groups is to be created then colleagues will need to build confidence and capacity to initiate and lead in learning and teaching, and the institution will need to enable this to happen. The group leader decided to work initially with colleagues who already had a level of acknowledged interest and expertise in teaching as they could be then more likely to take on leadership and influencing roles.

## **Our group process**

### ***Creating the group***

The stated purpose of the group noted in its initial documentation was: 'To create a group of people from different disciplines in the University with a significant interest in learning and teaching to share and generate ideas for practice together.' The process would be researched by the group and University ethical agreement for this was sought and obtained. How to invite people to this group was problematic. Initially the group leader attended a day event for academic programme leaders, explained the project and asked if anyone there was interested in joining the group or if they could pass the invitation to anyone on their programmes that had shown a particular interest in teaching. This method only produced one response. The group leader then asked a range of people to let her know who they thought fitted into the category of having a significant interest in learning and teaching and/or who had been identified in their context as a 'good' teacher. She then approached these people individually, and some of these in turn approached others, with the aim of forming a group from a range of disciplines and with different approaches and views. Sixteen people were recruited of whom three left the University during the course of the project and three were unable to attend the sessions due to other priorities. The final group of ten people included three colleagues from the discipline of Education, three from Creative Arts, two from Law and one each from Business and Engineering.

Cox et al. (2012) suggest that from their experience with Faculty Learning Communities a good group size is between six and ten members. We found that ten allowed us to split into smaller groups at times and also to undertake activities when a portion of the group was unable to come. A regular time slot of an hour and a half a month during a lunch time on a day that was identified as possible for participants was chosen and a central room was booked, which could be seen as conferring some status to the group. Lunch was provided, paid for by the group leader's national teaching fellowship fund. Providing food was seen as important as it was both practical and recognised the importance of eating together as having potential to lower power differentials and provide a relaxed social environment for dialogue (Thomas, 2016).

## **Working together**

The way we planned to work was informed by the concepts of: group inquiry; scholarship; and the importance of conversation particularly across disciplines. Inquiring together would enable us to gain insights into others' thinking about practice as well as to create new ideas and approaches. Shaw (2002) suggests that part of the function of leadership is to create open spaces for reflective inquiry. Drawing on her extensive work in organisations she argues for engaging people at all levels together in a context that is not highly managed so that new insights and ways forward can be identified through the conversation of experienced practitioners. This is not about problem solving around a particular situation but rather an orientation to inquiry as an ongoing approach to organisational change and development. Her aim is to move leaders away from abstract strategising to engaging with colleagues at all levels through conversation and improvisation in the moment. This keeps the action located in the context and involves acting in the present to make sense of emerging knowledge and practice. 'The point is to create ripples of local sense-making that drive new activity' (Shaw, 2005, p. 21). In relation to the concept of learning and teaching it was important to engage with scholarship in the field, partly to gain from insights from a wide range of research and publications and partly to re-position teaching as an academic and scholarly endeavour. Scholarship was also important as '...there is a significant relationship ...between [staff] engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and changes in students' course experiences' (Brew & Ginns, 2008, p. 543). Exploring evidence and current literature can help improve educational practice, raise the status of teaching and engage academics. Conversations around teaching need to become scholarly. It is important therefore that 'academic development initiatives are geared towards offering arenas for scholarly conversations ...' (Roxa & Martensson, 2009, p. 217).

Group engagement was through dialogue. Cunliffe and Erikson (2011, p. 1434) stress the importance of spaces 'in which meanings and actions are worked out between people in everyday 'back and forth' dialogue.' Senge (1990) argues for the importance of 'meaningful conversations' which involve exploring underpinning assumptions and beliefs. This can happen when we are with others from different disciplines with associated assumptions and practices that can challenge our thinking.

The aim was for the focus of the group to emerge through this dialogue. There was no fixed agenda but initially we used some activities to enable us to think together, such as working in pairs to explore what was important to us in our teaching. Colleagues were passionate about teaching and committed to creating excellent learning experiences for students. By paying attention to the process of listening, encouraging conversation and articulating what was emerging we enabled ideas to be shared and learning take place. 'The dialogic relationship is one in which power and influence is fluid, being continuously negotiated both consciously and unconsciously' (Critchley, 2012, p. 24). The group leader needed to step back to enable others to influence the conversation and activities. Shaw (2005, p. 20) argues about developing inquiry: 'The key seems to be to dare to stay longer in the forming process and not to rush too quickly to capture clear formulations, which are all too likely to be cast in familiar or limiting ways'. This was an anxious time for the group leader as she did not want to push the inquiry in a particular direction as she wanted to encourage others to lead, and it was also difficult for other group members, one of whom noted in project evaluation about this stage: "Holding open possibilities – quite tricky. What are we doing?", while another wrote that their own perspective at this stage was a: 'feeling of uncertainty about the outcome of this group. It feels difficult to justify prioritising finding time in a busy schedule to keep coming'.

In the fourth week group members shared examples of practice which produced a high level of energy. When evaluating this session one group member wrote: 'This was amazing and a real game changer for me.' S/he talked about hearing about a novel teaching approach which s/he subsequently tried with excellent results and positive feedback from students. The group member noted: 'I have since shown other colleagues how to work in this way. A brilliant, spontaneous sharing of practice.' Through sharing a range of examples of practice, colleagues were articulating and building on their own work and learning from others. Participants were keen to capitalise on the multidisciplinary nature of their experience and to undertake an inquiry together. It was decided that as we all had in common that we were interested in learning and teaching we would like to explore how this had come about, whether it was similar or different for people in the group, and how we could enable others perceived as not so interested in this area to become so. The group leader suggested taking an Appreciative Inquiry approach (Cockell & McArthur-Blaire, 2012) as this focuses on

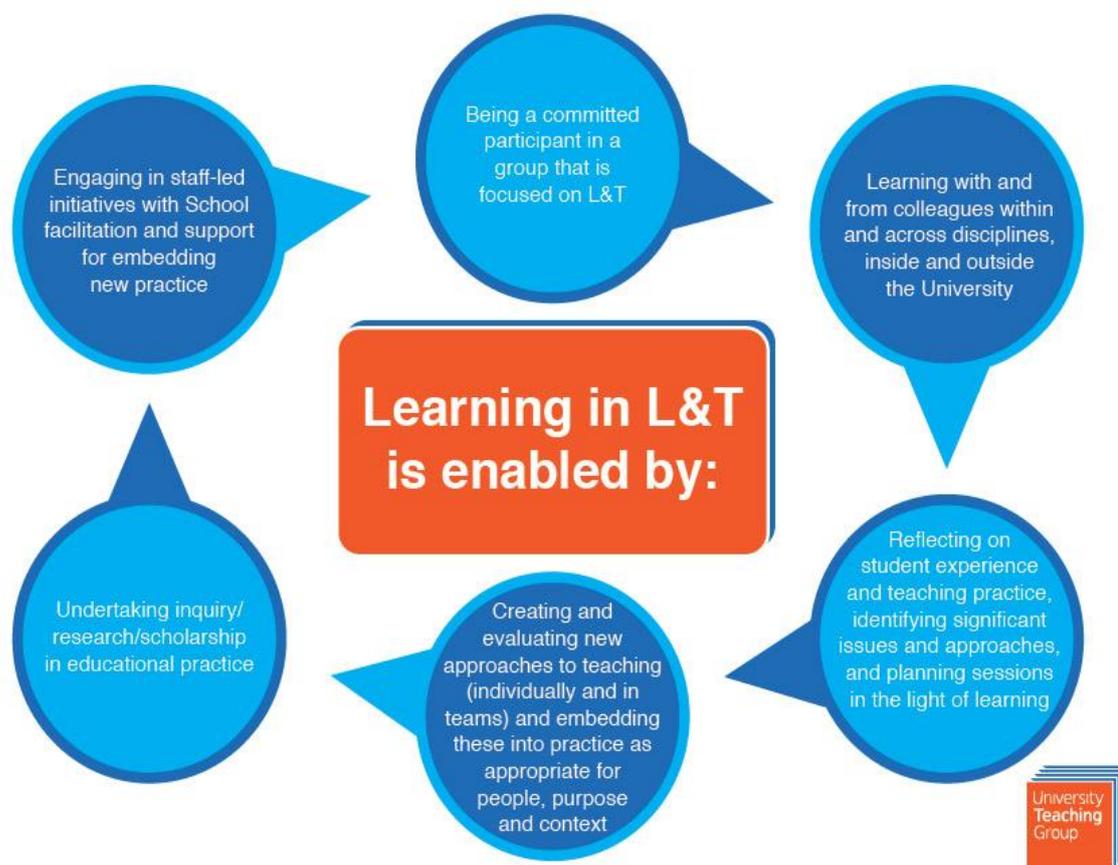
positive aspects, important at a time when teaching and its development has been embedded in a compliance agenda. It is also a clearly defined approach which is important for those new to educational research. Colleagues in disciplines other than education can find educational research very different from their own approaches (Cleaver, Lintern, & McLinden, 2014) and undertaking a particular form of inquiry together would give colleagues practical experience in this area. Undertaking a joint inquiry would support our engagement and skills in scholarship in education.

### ***Undertaking a focused inquiry***

An advantage in undertaking an Appreciative Inquiry is that the clearly articulated four-stage process, Discover, Dream, Design and Do, drives the work, rather than it being led by an individual. This was important if the group was not to be dependent on one person as a leader. The first stage 'Discover' involved individuals working in pairs to identify the key influences that had engaged them with teaching. Pairs interviewed each other using a proforma and the group leader subsequently typed the notes and returned these to each participant for verifying. Post project evaluation identified this articulation as important for a number of group members 'Seeing our own experience as valuable - being validated. Plus a chance to validate another's practice.'

For the 'Dream' stage small groups created imaginary newspaper pages for 2020 illustrating the practice they would like to see in the future if there were no limits to ambitions. The purpose was to uncover the aspects that participants see as important. For the third 'Design' stage we assembled all the data together and spent a session looking for themes and key principles that underpinned what had been important to us in helping us to learn about and engage in teaching, and what we would like to happen for ourselves and colleagues in the future. We summarised our data analysis into a chart (see below Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Enablers of professional learning identified in the data



The final stage of the appreciative inquiry is Do – what we aim to do as a result of our learning. We drew on our knowledge of our University context together with the data analysis to develop a set of possible actions to put the principles into practice (see below Figure 2). These possible ways forward were focused mainly on institutional actions designed to present to leaders and managers in learning and teaching. This is an issue which will be discussed later in the paper.

**Figure 2.** Identified actions to promote professional learning in teaching

### ***Documenting and reflecting on the process and outcomes***

We documented the whole year of the group's work both informally and formally. We kept a file which recorded each session's activities and included any materials produced so that we could return to these for reflection and learning. For the Appreciative Inquiry we designed and made posters and flyers so that material could be shared beyond the group. Producing high quality materials as outputs made the group more visible and the learning more tangible and perhaps more likely to be taken seriously by those beyond the group.

At the end of the year we undertook a reflection on the process using a procedure adapted from a reflection workshop approach (Church Urban Fund, 2006) which enables the group as individuals to document their perceptions and then to see these in

the context of the whole group. The group leader prepared a long sheet of paper divided into sections and in the centre of each section wrote the date of each session and briefly what happened in the session, to remind participants of the context for their reflection. Group members then wrote reflections on each section and were asked to place these either above the session description, indicating that these were positive comments or below the description for negative points. This enabled the group to see the pattern across the year, identify which sessions were mainly positive or negative and why this was, and which sessions were seen very differently by group members. The participants' comments used in this text to date come from this reflection approach. We then looked for themes across the year in order to identify our learning. These will be explored later in the text.

Two other forms of reflection contributed to our identification of themes arising from the year's work. One involved the use of Lego and drew on the principles of Lego Serious Play which include the idea of metaphor as supporting the identification of underpinning thinking and the role of kinaesthetic and visual approaches to provoke new ways of thinking (Gauntlett, 2007; James & Brookfield, 2014). Individuals were asked to make a model of the group and then talk about it, explaining their ideas. They were then asked to alter the model to make it as they would like the group to be in the future. Taking photographs of the models, and making notes of the commentary on them, enabled the ideas to be shared. Perhaps because of the materials available, the models included bridges and vehicles connecting people across the University. There was an emphasis on making connections and building more groups to encourage wider involvement of people in thinking about teaching. There were also a number of closed doors in the models indicating barriers to wider sharing. Anxiety about the group being able to sustain its momentum to try to open these doors and the need for people with energy and expertise to do this was expressed by the model makers. At the same time the role of senior leaders in enabling 'opening of doors' to greater cross-institution engagement of staff in ongoing learning about teaching was stressed. These themes form part of our later discussion.

The final form of documenting and reflecting on our learning was an individual questionnaire about personal learning resulting from participating in the group and how this is influencing professional practice. A key purpose of the group was to build group

members' capacity for learning about teaching, engaging in scholarship in the field and taking on informal leadership roles. Of the eight group members who completed the questionnaire all stated that now they would be now more likely to talk with people outside the group about teaching. Most identified an increased interest in teaching and some that they had become more confident about their own teaching. New approaches to teaching had been created as a result of hearing about the work of others in the group. Developing a language for talking about teaching was seen as important by a few and being part of the wider University was also noted as an advantage. Group members' confidence in making a contribution to teaching more generally was noted. For example one participant commented: 'I now understand that my voice, practice and ideas are valid and powerful.' While another noted; 'The experience has shown that I have something to offer.' Only three participants thought they would start their own group, however, noting time pressures and also issues around authority which will be discussed later.

### ***Sharing the process and outcomes***

We shared our learning from the group experience, and from the Appreciative Inquiry in particular, both externally and internally. Eight of the ten members of the group attended a conference (2<sup>nd</sup> Enhancing Student Learning Through Innovative Scholarship Conference ESLIS16) towards the end of our year's work and presented a summary of the Appreciative Inquiry process and outcomes. This was an important event for connecting with scholarship in the field, and with colleagues from other institutions, and was part of our aim to be a learning and scholarship group. For those unfamiliar with education conferences it was important for raising awareness of the extent of national and international engagement in the field. It took us beyond our local concerns to be part of a wider context. Writing this article has also been part of engaging in scholarship and an additional way for us to make sense of what we have been doing. However, we were also aware that 'For sustained and sustainable engagement with student learning, SoTL [scholarship of teaching and learning] must be woven into the fabric of our institutions, rather than reliance on individuals operating in isolation' (Williams et al., 2013, p. 50). We therefore arranged two meetings to share our findings with internal leaders and managers with responsibility for learning and teaching. All leaders with designated roles in this field were invited and over half attended.

These meetings were designed to be informal and relaxed so lunch was provided. A display of our work, including the principles and ideas for action (Figures 1 and 2), was explained by group members to the visitors. Everyone then talked together about these topics at small round tables over lunch. When these sessions were reflected upon in our end of year evaluation process they raised positive and negative issues. Group members were pleased that they had been listened to and felt that group ideas had been well presented. They identified that those with responsibility had taken the ideas seriously and had agreed with many of them. On the other hand group members were dismayed that in general the leaders and managers stated that they could not implement the ideas, partly issues of costs were raised and partly that it was not within their remit. One group member noted: [that they] 'expected managers to see outcomes as opportunity/challenge but not seen that way'. It was also felt that there was an issue about how the group was perceived. Despite it being noted in documentation that we were a university teaching group, there was a feeling that it was being seen as *the* University teaching group and questions about its representative nature were raised when members were not from all Schools and disciplines. How this group fitted into the structure of the institution and the nature of authority in learning and teaching practice development, were issues that group members felt were evident beneath the surface. This linked to individual members' reflections in relation to their own contexts. One member perceived that 'grass roots initiatives from experienced teachers, as opposed to researchers, do not seem to be welcomed but are seen as a threat'. This connects with the suggestion in Crawford's (2010, p. 197) research that teaching groups and networks were seen as 'organisation led'. Therefore someone without an organisational role might not be expected to contribute to developments beyond the local. A group member also noted in reflection on this topic that if s/he initiated a learning and teaching group in her/his School colleagues might well ask 'Who do you think you are?', while managers would be likely to draw attention to the issue of working hours being designated for particular tasks and if there was 'spare' time it would be best used to do something more important for the School such as writing research papers. While we were discussing this issue of permission and authority to contribute to institutional practices an article written by two Australian academic developers was found to be useful. Whitsed and Green (2016), drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, argue that hierarchical university organisation can be likened to a game of

chess, where each piece has limited moves and is restricted in what it can do. Those with little room for manoeuvre have fewer opportunities to contribute but even those with significant roles have limitations, real or perceived, on what they can do within this structure. Whitsed and Green identify another game – Go – in which the pieces are not restricted to certain moves but can move according to where they are in that moment in the game. ‘Go pellets operate in an open, non-striated space where power is fluid and situational, rather than hierarchically fixed’ (Whitsed & Green, 2016, p. 294). They liken this to distributed leadership which, as discussed earlier, can be considered part of the reality of practice in an institution where expertise is widely distributed. Whitsed and Green (2016, p. 294) argue that ‘Playing Go, rather than chess, within the academy means intentionally fostering an alternative to top-down approaches...’ We identified that perhaps we had been trying to play ‘Go’ but when our activities connected with those playing ‘chess’ there was understandable confusion about roles and authority to act.

It is highly likely that university leaders and managers would express themselves keen to engage all staff in contributing to an institutions’ educational practice development. In reality hierarchical structures can limit both real and perceived opportunities to do so. A sobering fact was that Whitsed and Green’s (2016) work, in which they were attempting to take a distributed leadership approach in relation to their focus of internationalisation in the curriculum, ended when structural reforms and new priorities were identified by senior leaders in their institutions. They question the possibility of distributed leadership being a reality in universities at this time and argue that the concept ‘begs further problematisation within universities...’ (Whitsed & Green, 2016, p. 296). More positively, however, they argue that there are ‘gaps’ within structures and institutional ways of working that can be identified and worked within. Our group fitted into a ‘gap’ as we created a type of group that wasn’t currently part of the learning and teaching context and colleagues were able to find time and purpose in their busy schedules to work together. We created a dialogic approach and a context of trust which enabled people to build their capacity in thinking about, talking about and ‘doing’ teaching. We were proactive in finding a small amount of time and a format that enabled us to make a difference in our local context. Group members reported on changes made to teaching, for example: using a new technology; leading discussion within a module team ‘which has led to more creative ideas for some of our sessions’; and at programme level to

leading the team 'to identify quality learning experiences for our students'. In addition we are more confident in talking about teaching in wider contexts. As one group member noted in a reflective comment:

*This experience has encouraged me to make more of opportunities that arise through working with colleagues inside and outside of my own School. Today we considered how we can work in 'the gaps'. That was a comfort to hear. It is only by working within 'the gaps' that I find myself participating in situations and activities like this one.*

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

We started this work with the aims of developing our own professional learning and of contributing to the development of educational practice in our institution. Our idea was to create a new group that could encourage other groups to form by: creating an example of benefits to individuals and the institution of this type of group; by building experience of group participation and leadership; and by encouraging group members to connect with those outside the group, internally and externally to the University, and to build networks.

Looking at our own reflective data we identify that we have built a measure of individual capacity in relation to teaching practice, thinking about practice and engaging in scholarship and inquiry. We are using our learning to develop our own teaching and to connect with colleagues. We have found that the group can encourage us, and keep us focused on learning about teaching, in busy and demanding contexts. We are unclear whether we have had a positive influence on University practice. We will look for and encourage: the creation of more staff learning groups; wider contexts for cross-disciplinary discussion of teaching; more opportunities for staff members to contribute to developing teaching and to be recognised for doing so; and a critical, scholarly approach to the development of educational practice. If we believe that these things are important then we need to be proactive in contributing to their development. We are currently focusing on developing our conversations with colleagues outside the group and exploring ways of building new groups. We have continued to share ideas with leaders and managers and have submitted a paper to senior leaders suggesting a process for facilitating the creation of similar groups to ours.

We are aware that in the process of our Appreciative Inquiry we had identified actions for educational managers to undertake rather than our own ways forward. By focusing initially on the role managers could take to enhance professional development we were perhaps acknowledging the importance of the 'chess game', but by placing too much emphasis on this approach we could lose sight of our own agency and the potential inherent in 'Go'. It is easy to be seduced by chess and to fail to have the courage to look for the 'gaps' in which we can work. We have found that membership of a group such as the one described in this paper can sustain us in engaging beyond the local. If we believe in the importance of teaching academics contributing to the building of educational practice then we need to continue to 'find the gap' in which to create multi-disciplinary groups of staff who can work together in this area. These gaps relate to the institutional restrictions on allocation of time; to the understanding of what teaching is and how it can be developed; to the role of teaching in the life of an academic; and to how they can make a contribution to the learning and progression of the whole university. Failure to recognise the importance of 'gaps', to create them and to foster opportunities for working within them, may lead to compliant, mediocre learning and teaching practices with negative consequences for all concerned.

There is pressure for those leading staff development to comply with a performativity view of development, focusing on 'directive task based approaches' rather than 'developmental, process based approaches' (Stefani, 2002, p. 48). A partnership role with staff, advocated by Debowski (2014) to engage the academic community in taking a critical approach to educational practice may be more easily undertaken by staff without institutional School/Departmental roles, as was the case in the work described here. Building capacity for leadership in learning and teaching at all levels in universities therefore becomes particularly important. University leaders also need to consider whether by emphasising performativity and compliance they are losing the opportunity for effective knowledge and practice development that can be led by teaching focused academics. The approach described in this paper may offer us one way to improve staff learning about teaching and consequently to develop excellent educational practice in universities.

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