Mapping Organisational Structures Against Actual Teaching Collaborations

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Keywords: Academic Development; Teaching, Higher Education, Communities, Teaching Groups

Extended Abstract

Introduction and Background

Based on the understanding of the importance of supportive environments, academic development has looked into various approaches involving communities, such as Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), faculty learning communities (Cox, 2004), or mentoring circles (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Academic development initiatives involving communities are usually based on voluntary participation, leading to low participation rates in relation to overall staff numbers (for examples, see MacKenzie et al., 2010, or Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

Based on this background, earlier research was undertaken to investigate if and how it might be possible to build on the advantages of community approaches while at the same time addressing a majority of academics. Instead of relying on volunteers joining initiatives, the focus would be on transforming the contexts in which academics teach—their teaching groups—into communities. Instead of trying to attract academics into separate communities, this focuses on working with academics in their day-to-day environments. The potential of teaching groups as basis for academic development was confirmed (Heinrich, 2013 and 2014/5).

The research reported on in this abstract focused on cross-referencing teaching groups identified by individuals and on comparing these to organisational structures. The aim of the research was to examine how teaching groups could be identified across an organisation and how organisational structures map against teaching group boundaries (only a subset of the research data can be reported in this abstract).

Research Design

For this research, the members of one organisational unit of Massey University, referred to as the institute, were surveyed. A list with staff details was obtained from the institute. This list contained names, email addresses and position details of all staff in the institute. After removing administrative staff and professors emeriti, 102 individuals remained and were sent survey invitations. With one email bouncing and four individuals responding saying that they did not have any teaching...
responsibilities, there were 97 potential participants. With 29 respondents, the response rate was 29.9%.

The survey was sent to all staff in the institute, including staff with job titles that do not necessarily suggest involvement in teaching (such as post docs, research officers, technicians and project managers). Considering only staff with job titles that suggest teaching responsibilities (such as professors, lecturers and tutors), the response rate was 38.2%. Figure 1 shows the information given to participants to introduce the teaching group concept and the survey parameters.

Findings

Participants were asked to name their three most relevant teaching groups. A total of 68 teaching groups were named. Seventeen participants named three teaching groups, five participants named two teaching groups and seven participants named just one teaching group. Not all teaching groups in the institute will have been captured as participants were restricted to naming three teaching groups only and not all staff in the institute provided data.

The names and descriptions provided for the teaching groups were compared and overlaps identified. Forty-seven teaching groups were named by just one participant, seven teaching groups were named by two participants, and two teaching groups were named by three and four participants respectively. Overall this resulted in 56 distinct teaching groups.
Of the 56 teaching groups, 14 contain Massey University staff members from outside the institute. In two groups, these outside staff outnumber institute staff. Of the 56 teaching groups, 6 contain members from outside Massey University. In three groups these members from outside the university outnumber institute staff. Twenty out of 56 teaching groups have members who not belong to the institute (there are no groups with members from both outside the institute and the university). Figure 2 illustrates the linkages between institute staff and others inside and outside the university.

![Figure 2. Links between teaching group members (not all participants are shown).](image)

The staff list provided by the institute contained 54 individuals with job descriptions that imply teaching responsibilities. Seven of these individuals with assumed teaching responsibilities were not named in any teaching groups (which might be because not all teaching groups were captured). The teaching groups named cover 47 or 87.0% of the overall 54 individuals.

Of the institute staff with job titles that not necessarily imply teaching responsibilities, 32 were named as teaching group members. These included admin staff and staff who had withdrawn from the survey stating no teaching in the institute. Figure 3 shows the distribution of teaching groups regarding assumed teaching responsibilities.
Discussion and Conclusions

The data show a considerable number of teaching connections with staff beyond the institute. It is important to bring the teaching connections across institute boundaries to light as they demonstrate that organisational structure charts do not fully capture teaching links between staff. The teaching group data for the institute show a strong integration of research and technical staff into the teaching. Staff with job titles suggesting research-only roles (such as ‘research officers’) seem to be heavily involved in teaching. Technical staff (such as ‘technicians’) also seem to be central to teaching. This suggests that staff with job titles that do not imply teaching responsibilities might play a more important role in teaching than possibly recognised at institute or university levels. Displaying the roles of these staff members more fully might open up possibilities on individual levels and for teaching in the institute.

The approach to academic development underlying this research is to work with academic teachers in the context of their actual teaching collaborations, referred to as teaching groups. Organisational structures are insufficient guides for identification of these groups. Any approaches to working with teaching groups in assisting their transition into communities will require careful attention to address all group members, including research and technical staff as well as university outsiders.

Figure 3. Teaching responsibilities (not all participants are shown).
References


3. Heinrich, E. (2014/5). Towards using relevant collegial contexts for academic development. Accepted for publication in *Journal of Active Learning in Higher Education*. To appear in volumes 15(3) or 16(1).

