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Drinking Coffee and Reading Papers: That's not real teaching is it?

Professor Susannah Quinsee – Director Learning Development Centre

This is a case story of applying a teaching technique learnt about from a colleague at another institution to a taught module on a postgraduate, Masters-level degree programme.

Background

The bulk of my teaching now takes place at post-graduate level on the Masters in Academic Practice (MAAP); to students who are actually staff within the University. This can be a challenging (in a good way!) group to teach because you want to demonstrate innovative and interesting techniques to inspire the staff to take back into their own practice as well as enabling deep learning. The MAAP is also taught in a “day release” block pattern. So the Academic Leadership module that I lead is taught over four days in two day blocks. Whilst this is great for getting staff engaged in a subject and giving you the flexibility to explore in detail a particular theme, it is also challenging as you do not get to know the learners over a period of time and there is not much time for them to reflect on their learning between the taught sessions. So it is rather in-depth and intensive.

I am always on the lookout for new techniques and ideas that I can incorporate into my own teaching to meet those inspirational and innovative aspirations of the MAAP. I am continually saying to the teaching team that we need to be exemplary in the way we run the programme, but that is often easier said than done. One technique that I came across in 2009 I thought was genius and this is Colin Beard's “coffee and papers” idea. Colin Beard is a National Teaching Fellow and Teaching Fellow at Sheffield Hallam University. He gave a keynote at the annual SEDA conference in 2009 where he presented a selection of his teaching ideas; an approach analogous to that of a teaching “toolbox”. What is very compelling about Colin's approach is that his activities are relatively easy to implement and engage students in a variety of different ways. We subsequently invited Colin to run an event at City for our Learning Development Fellows where he talked through some more ideas, including the coffee and papers idea.

Coffee and papers activity

The coffee and papers activity is very simple; and lovely for its simplicity. Basically, Colin argues, none of us have enough time to read or we feel guilty if we sit at our desk publicly “reading”. Yet, without wishing to state the obvious, reading is so important. As academics how can we expect to be research-active or excellent teachers if we do not keep up-to-date with our field, and read? Reading should not be done in private as a secret activity. Furthermore, as academics, merely reading in isolation is a rather soulless activity. We need to be able to discuss and debate our reading with others within our field to hone and shape our own ideas. And we need to be encouraging our students to do the same; actively prompting reading as a dialogic exercise that is vital for their development as learners. This is particularly important for programmes such as the MAAP where we are developing staff to become reflective practitioners and incorporate continuing professional development for teaching into their regular working lives. The coffee and papers activity gives people “permission” to read. As part of a workshop, seminar or away day or any time where you have people for a few hours you allocate a certain amount of time for reading. People can go where they are comfortable and read from a selection of papers chosen by the tutor or facilitator. At the end of the allocated time everyone comes back into the group to discuss

the readings. The readings should be selected around a particular theme or topic so that the discussion is focused.

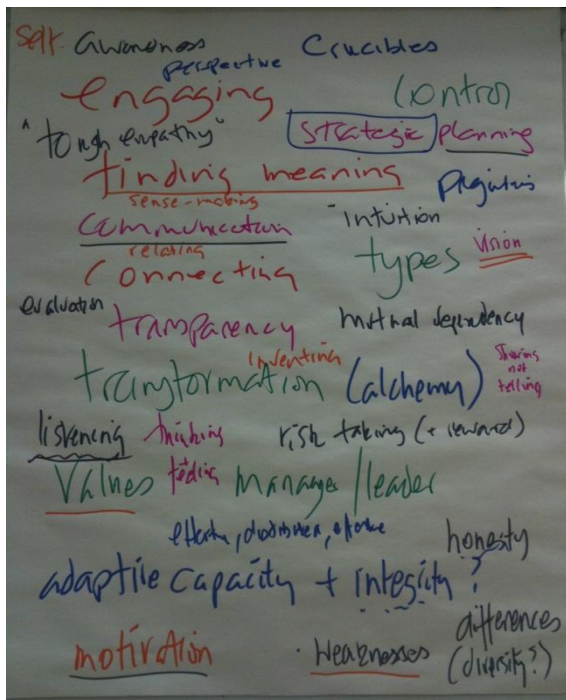
I loved this idea so much that I thought I would try it with our participants on the Academic Leadership module. One of the problems we have had with this module is that there is vast amounts of leadership “theory” available but to try to “teach” this to the participants is particularly dull. How do we get participants to be familiar with the theory and critique it without just running through multiple PowerPoints which just present one theoretical approach after another? On a radio 4 programme broadcast about leadership earlier in 2011, Carolyn Quinn commented that a search for literature on leadership produced more results than any other, including very popular topics like cookery. That demonstrates the enormity of the task when trying to teach leadership “theory”. Furthermore, often when talking about leadership it is hard to distinguish between leadership and management and presenting the theories does not help separate the two. As participants on the Academic Leadership module had complained previously: *“Focus on leadership not management – I felt that the management focus dominated, even when people used the word leadership”*. But the participants still wanted to *“be more aware of theoretical management models”*.

As explained above, the Academic Leadership module is taught to staff over four days so we decided that the first morning would be the coffee and papers session. I was concerned that the participants might think it was a lazy exercise for the tutors as it seemed we were just getting them to read and not do anything ourselves. However, the task of selecting the appropriate articles and texts should not be underestimated. I carefully selected approximately twenty key articles on leadership that would provide a broad spectrum of approaches. I did some “crowd-sourcing” via Twitter and asked colleagues for any suggestions of significant or pivotal leadership articles they had read. Gathering the articles took considerable time to ensure we had a good mixture of theoretical approaches. Never mind the logistics of getting the articles copied and so on.

When I introduced the idea to the participants they all looked a bit stunned – “what? We are allowed to just go and read for an hour and half?” was the question that was on all their lips. Given this was the beginning of the module too, and we didn’t really know the participants at this point, such a reaction was not unexpected. They all seemed a little hesitant to select the articles, as if it was some kind of test. To help them focus their reading and the following discussion session I extended the activity from Colin’s and asked each participant to identify three keywords for the article they had chosen and, provide a three-minute pitch they could give back to the group.

The results...

After an hour and half we called everyone back together for a full group discussion session. I could not have anticipated how successful this discussion activity was. We produced a flip chart (shown opposite) with all the key words on it which gave a really good overview of the kinds of issues that occur frequently in leadership literature. Many of the articles fed from each other and, there were similar or opposing concepts. The participants were able to incorporate this into their “summaries” or pitches and, see the connections or contradictions in the literature. We also avoided some of the problems we had experienced in the past about the distinction between leadership and management as the participants were exposed much earlier on in the module to leadership vocabulary and language. This, then resulted, in



a much deeper discussion about the weaknesses or biases of much leadership theory. For example, the participants noticed that it was a common theme that much leadership literature is located within business and the private sector with a very small evidence base. By considering a theory on its own this implicit bias in the literature would not have been so easily noticed. Therefore, the discussion was much richer because the participants could compare a range of authors, instead of myself and the co-tutor merely talking through each theory in turn and in isolation. From their own experience and reading, the participants were able to critically evaluate the literature and benchmark the articles they had read against other texts, read by other participants. What also surprised me

was that throughout the following two days of the module, we frequently referred back to the coffee and papers session and the themes that had come up. We kept the flipchart of key words up through the whole module and, as we explored other topics, the participants were able to reference articles they had read. This again demonstrated a much deeper understanding of the theories they had explored, as well as them being able to apply them to a variety of different contexts.

The participants responded so well to the first coffee and papers session that we ran it again in the second block of the module with the theme of change management. They loved the fact we had given them the space to read, but with the support of a facilitated discussion immediately afterwards, to give them context, and, share their ideas. Again we had the same rich discussion and could relate issues around change management theory to the leadership theories we had explored previously. They posted their summaries onto the virtual learning environment so that we could start to create a resource that we could refer back to from one year to another. At the end of the module, feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly positive: *"I loved the coffee and papers sessions. I also enjoyed the fact that there was a good balance between theory and practice."* The participants have asked for it to be incorporated into all modules on the MAAP because they loved having the permission to read as well as getting a really good overview of the key texts. *"I thought the paper sessions were absolutely fantastic!! Definitely something I would like to see in other modules. Very important though that the papers are carefully selected...."* This last comment allayed my fears that the participants would see this as an "easy" job for the lecturers, when the reverse is true. The point about paper selection is extremely important, as noted above. Furthermore, the participants also felt, like I had as a module leader, that the sessions presented a new way of presenting theory: *"Because the module is very different from any other module I have attended, I was probably expecting to be spoon-fed with presentations, and theoretical blah blah blah. It took me a bit to get used to but I really enjoyed the course!"*

Even more exciting, introducing these sessions has helped inspire the participants to change their own practice: *“The “coffee and papers” sessions were very enjoyable and productive – would like to emulate some version of this in practice.”*

Conclusion

I would thoroughly recommend incorporating a coffee and papers style session into any teaching you are doing or if you are engaged in facilitating team events. It does not have to take very long. You could do this in an hour although some of the richness of the discussion may be lost. You could also experiment with learners bringing their own articles to see what impact that has. It would also be a great tool as part of a team away day. Being given the permission to read is a precious thing and one that is so important but that we are rarely allowed to do in work – we must be seen to be “busy” and ironically, reading seems not to count as “busy-ness”. Coffee and papers can counter that perception.

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