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Connections and Community: A Team Training Programme for Academic Librarians at Leeds Beckett University

This article describes how Librarians at Leeds Beckett University Library set up an internal team training programme and considers the successes and challenges we have encountered, especially during the Covid pandemic.

A diverse team

The Academic Support Team at Leeds Beckett University consists of 25 staff members, with a variety of roles, including Academic and Information Service Librarians, Academic Skills Tutors and Research Services Advisors. Although we are involved in lots of different tasks (e.g. relationship management with Schools, online learning and research support), teaching information literacy is a role shared by many of us.

Our team set up several Mini Groups to take forward our cross-team work and bring together all staff. One of these groups is the Professional Development mini group, and our role includes assessing training needs amongst team members, making team members aware of upcoming training and development opportunities, and encouraging all team members to engage in professional development opportunities.

Setting up the team training programme

Our team training programme was first set up in 2018 as we wanted to improve our team members' access to training, whether that be in promoting free online courses, or providing our own in-house training. Although CPD is important for library staff, it can be challenging (e.g., a lack of time and reduced training budgets). We adopted a peer learning model similar to that used by Venturella and Breland, (2019, p.288) where Librarians and Skills Tutors were invited to present a slot on a topic thought to be useful to their team members. We are keen to exploit knowledge within the team, although we do occasionally invite staff from other parts of the Library as guest trainers. We include a variety of topics to expose librarians to different ideas and facilitate knowledge exchange.

Tips for success

Decker and Townes, (2016) set out some helpful considerations when implementing what they call a "vertically integrated instruction program": these are

Scheduling: Although 100% attendance is unrealistic, effort must be made to schedule workshops for when most team members can attend. We check calendars for most appropriate dates and time (moving to delivering sessions online has greatly improved attendance).

Motivation: Decker and Townes suggest holding training sessions regularly to keep the momentum up. We seek to arrange one or two training sessions per month and invite staff to these in good time. We choose to offer sessions on a variety of topics, invite all team members and leave it to staff discretion whether to attend or not.

Skill Level: Rather than separate sessions by 'skill level' as suggested by Decker and Townes, every year we ask team members to list the types of training they feel would help them do their job better. (Three main themes emerged: use of software, teaching support, and broad professional development such as learning more about each other's roles or writing academic articles.)

Benefits for our team

When we get together for our training sessions we meet as equals and give each other support on a reciprocal basis. As peers, we can share relevant experience, empathise with the issues faced by others in their role, and perhaps seek to suggest solutions or better ways of doing things.

The impact of Covid and team members working from home was huge. We decided early on during the pandemic that it was vital to continue the training programme and moved to delivering it online via MS Teams. Our team had to quickly get to grips with using different technologies and teaching online. Sessions were varied and included training on supporting diverse learners, reflective writing for professional practice and coaching each other. It is in large part due to the knowledge shared by team members during this period that helped us continue to deliver an excellent service to our staff and students.

Tomlinson (2014) talks about how the peer learning model of professional development can provide staff with a sense of community as well as the acquisition of new skills. The online programme provided wonderful opportunities for connection at a time when many of us were feeling isolated. It meant we were continuing to consider our own professional needs at a stressful time when these could have been forgotten about. It isn't only about tapping into long standing staff members' skills; we have a lot to learn from new team members who come to us from a variety of backgrounds. In 2021/22 we had an influx of new staff and this enabled us to get feedback from those who could see our team and institution with fresh eyes, with new team members providing a thought-provoking session on "What is different or interesting about Leeds Beckett?".

We receive word-of-mouth and email feedback on an ongoing basis from presenters and attendees. Questionnaire responses show that workshops have had a positive impact on team members' sense of belonging within the team (important to us, as a team comprised of a variety of roles, and especially important during the time we have worked off campus). Many team members agree that they had incorporated things they had learnt from one of the training sessions into their daily work or into a session they had delivered to students (e.g., using the information on creating micro lectures in the Using Panopto session to create short instructional videos). The sessions also help to make team members aware of new techniques or software and we feel comfortable in the realisation that none of us need to be 'experts' in order to share experiences or knowledge.

Conclusions and next steps

Like many other institutions, our team is making the tentative move back to campus. Although we might want to occasionally have some training in person (due to team members missing 1-1 personal interactions and suffering from 'Zoom fatigue'), it is likely we will continue to use MS Teams due to all the benefits it brings. We no longer have the same issues we had whilst working on site (located over 2 campuses) and it isn't quite as difficult to find dates and times that suit everyone. Another opportunity provided by MS Teams is the ability to record most sessions.

It is worth noting that we still deem external professional development as essential (even in these financially straitened times). We always seek to learn from other institutions and enjoy the camaraderie and networking afforded by external conferences and events.

One of our main aims was to encourage staff to make more time for CPD, which we believe we have achieved. Many team members agree that the Training Programme makes them more likely to make time in their week to devote to training and development. Because we send invitations for all training programme events to people's calendars, they are not likely to forget. The training programme has helped us to be a more robust team, able to quickly adapt to changes and share information in a timely way.

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