

Developing and Maintaining Collaborative Communities of Practice in Art, Design & Media: The North West Network Experience

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Abstract

This paper describes and explores the methodologies underpinning the development of the North West Network of the Higher Education Academy's Art, Design & Media Subject Centre (ADM-HEA). Founded in 2006 the network's members are drawn from a range of institutions across the North West (NW) including pre and post '92 Universities and Further Education (FEC) Colleges with Higher Education (HE) provision. To date it has completed and disseminated two major collaborative research projects looking at research informed teaching and aspects of the student experience. The network provides opportunities for staff working at different levels, in different areas of the sector, to work together, to share good practice and to feed these experiences into teaching. It provides a model of co-operation which circumvents the problems posed by increasing competition between institutions, the difficulties presented by limited funding, and time constraints. Here, in order to promote debate about the hierarchies and perceived barriers to collaboration, are outlined the means by which the group has been sustained; the network's research has been achieved; and the ethos of the group developed. The projects outlined here demonstrate that it is possible to provide opportunities for staff working at different levels, in different areas of the sector, to work together to undertake research and to share good practice.

Background

In 2006 the Art, Design and Media Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy (ADM-HEA) invited the University of Bolton to look at developing a regional network in the NW as a pilot for potentially developing other networks within the ADM-HEA communities in the UK. Through making a number of contacts in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the NW the first network project was born.

The successfully completed first project, Linking Disciplinary Research to Teaching (Thomas, 2007) was the enabling mechanism to develop collaborative activity which was expanded in the second NW network project, the 3Es. The first project resulted in case studies used as resources for the ADM - HEA and a regional seminar which provided an opportunity to disseminate the findings as well as enabling additional staff from HEI's and HE in FE to become acquainted with the project and indicate their interest in being involved in future collaboration.

The 3E's project (Thomas, 2009) was therefore developed with a key ambition of involving our colleagues based in the region's HE in FE provision

The overall aims of the Network were to:

- develop and sustain a regional network that is based on aspects of learning, teaching and research which references both the individual agendas of institutions in the North West and the ways in which they are responding to the aims of ADM-HEA
- ensure that information and knowledge about the activities of ADM-HEA in relation to good practice and approaches to the student learning experience are disseminated both regionally, nationally and where appropriate internationally
- encourage additional individuals to join the ADM-HEA database, extending and enhancing the breadth of subject expertise available
- promote constructive exchange between HEIs and Further Education Colleges (FECs) especially from the perspective of Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE)

This second project had a twofold aim to:

- further develop and sustain a regional network inclusive of both HEI's and FE providers who deliver HE in Art, Design and Media

and

- enable and grow an innovative collaborative research culture between individuals in HEI's and FEC's. It is the development of this collaborative activity which underpins this paper.

Literature review:

In line with grounded theory (Charmaz and Bryant, 2010), the literature reviews for each project were delayed until after the data collection and analysis. Members of the group were then able to look for correlation and resonance with the wider contexts of HE and HE in FE. Thus, some of the texts referred to here reference

collaborative activity, others are relevant to the findings of the 3Es. As acknowledged by Barnett (2000) contemporary research is undertaken in a 'Supercomplex' context.

The literature review for these projects and the related activities of the network is perhaps problematic in that it has the potential to reach into many different areas of academic activity, examples of potential literature reviews could include the following: the nature, theories and benefits of networking; research informed teaching; reporting on the HE student experience; the relationships between HE and HE in FE. Cognisant of the potential scope of the review, in this instance, the review included here stands as an example of the literature that was used to inform the compilation of the 3E's report. Here, the literature review revealed that the group's findings related to existing research into the relationship between student expectations and their experiences in the initial year of undergraduate study.

Watson (2006, p.9) argues for a 'consultative, and research based approach to what students really want and need'. Austerlitz et al (2008) 'consider the evidenced and perceived range of expectations by both students and their tutors' alongside the implicit 'ambiguity' of the art school experience. Shank (1996) examined expectations from the perspectives of both students and staff and his results show that 'expectations vary by university type'. The complexity and perceptions of staff roles and bureaucracy was reported upon by Thomas (2008). Also useful is the work of Braxton, Vesper and Hossler (1995) look at the relationship between unmet expectations and retention which is reinforced by.

Longden and Yorke (2006) refer to the likely withdrawal of students being influenced by no pre-entry knowledge of the institution. Also pertinent to the issue of retention are the debates raised and examined in Yorke's paper (2008) titled presented at Nottingham Trent University in 2008. In terms of putting the qualitative data into an overall context, Booth's research (1997, p.205) suggests that students' performance is powerfully influenced by perceptions and responses conditioned by previous experience of learning in their subject'. This is supported by the results of research undertaken by Cook and Leckey (1999) that confirmed that students bring with them and retain the study habits that they acquired in their previous institution.

Pancer et al (2000) discuss managing student expectations and show that 'students with more complex expectations about university tended to adjust better to stressful circumstances than did students who had simpler expectations (pp.38-57)'. The disparity between student expectations and their actual experience is also investigated by Lowe and Cook (2003) who show that 'There was a student expectation that lecturers would dictate notes and this was not borne out by experience (p.53). This relates to the detrimental effect of bad communication picked up in the 3 E's project and also studied by Dobos (1998) who 'investigates how communication predispositions promote or detract from individual students' motivation (p.118). '.

The 3E's literature review contextualised the project and linked it to other evidence-informed projects and, along with the links to the ADM subject centre and the HEA,

gave the members of the network a credible academic framework within which to position their findings for dissemination. This framework was particularly pertinent for the members of the group who delivered HE in FE contexts and where the opportunities for involvement in externally funded research projects and contact with the HEA were more limited, but where engagement in scholarly activity and the creation and maintenance of an HE ethos were desirable. The differences between HE and FE cultures, and the issues arising from these distinctions, are the subject of several articles published between 2008-10 in *The Journal of Further and Higher Education*. Griffiths and Lloyd (2009) discuss the need for provision for scholarly activity in FE contexts. Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) discuss the stratification and distinctions between FE and HE within one specific institution and Turner et al (2009) discuss the emergence of HE cultures within FE colleges. In an earlier paper, Widdowson (2003) offers a general review of the recent position of, and challenges faced by, staff in FE colleges who are delivering HE programmes.

With regard to the development of HE cultures specifically within Art, Design and Media, Barker (2005) provides useful insights into research in HE in FE and looks at how research cultures could be developed within specialist FE institutions. Barker raises issues around the importance of scholarly activity aligned to ambitions of colleges to move into MA and post-graduate work and the perceived barriers, the lack of financial support for research activity and accounts for these in terms of the lack of evidence for a link between research and teaching quality. Barker concludes that the scholarships of 'implementation, application and teaching' are most appropriate for HE in FE.

Overarching methodologies:

The NW network grew out of the ADM-HEA's focus at the time on developing regional networks. The aims of the subject centre, to support and enhance learning and teaching through the development of networks, the sharing of knowledge and the promotion of good practice heavily influenced the overarching methodology adopted by the NW network. The group embraced the HEA's emphasis on the development of evidence-informed practice and each project involved members in the collection of qualitative data from primary sources, in particular the views of students and staff, which were analysed and used to inform thinking about the learning experience.

The group was engaged in 'action research':

identifying an issue, planning and taking action to address the issue, gathering evidence about the impact of that action, evaluating the evidence and then considering the next step. (Optimus, 2007, p.1)

The methodologies underpinning the collection of data were determined by individual partners according to their institutional contexts. Having this scope for individual interpretations of the projects relates closely to notions of 'design research':

... the focus is not on oneself but on developing interventions to make them work effectively...any intervention that has been shown to 'work' does not necessarily and easily work in any context, it needs adapting to the circumstances. (Optimus, 2007, p.1)

This flexibility ensured that, rather than being bound by a uniform approach and rigid methodology, network members could adapt the way in which the evidence was gathered according to their institutional constraints and individual circumstances.

The first project undertaken by the network looked at the relationship between research and teaching and this project was the key starter for all subsequent collaborative activity.

The Linking Disciplinary Research to Teaching in Art, Design and Media Project in Context

This project brought together a group of individuals in the North-West (NW) who had a known interest in research into learning and teaching in the departments of Art and Design. The institutions represented specialist art schools, Russell Group members and post-'92 universities with well established or growing departments of Art and Design. It was at this point that collaborative activity became the focus for how the group worked.

The project leader had been involved in the original Higher Education Academy's Support for New Academic Staff (SNAS) project which developed annotated resources focusing on key areas such as the curriculum, assessment and student support. From 2006 the focus was broadened to include developing resources on the linking of disciplinary research to teaching. This was known as SNAS Strand 3 and was the focus for the resources that were developed from the network.

The project was planned and developed using the workshop material prepared for the HEA by Alan Jenkins and Mick Healey to support engagement with SNAS Strand 3 in the context of ADM-HEA and in ensuring an approach where the outcomes would meet the needs of both the HEA and ADM-HEA.

A questionnaire was developed and used by the network members to interview staff resulting in twelve exploratory case studies within the discipline areas. To simplify the use of nomenclature the group used 'research' to define the range of activity described by staff and which includes creative practice and scholarly activity.

The project hosted a series of departmental workshops in the four participating institutions to develop the research informed teaching debate with a larger audience. The workshops addressed similar issues to the case studies, contributing further to the evidence base of research – teaching practice in the discipline. Reflection on

how case study interviewees had responded to the research-teaching link had informed a more focussed approach for this link in the workshops.

The findings of the first NW network project were presented at a regional seminar in Bolton in March 2007. A common agenda based on initial analysis of the case studies and commentaries was agreed under the title: *Connecting research to learning and teaching – exploring the territory*. Particular focus was put on engaging

HE with FE colleagues as this was becoming a focus of future work for ADM-HEA. Connections made at this seminar provided an important starting point for further development of the NW Network with a defined focus on collaborative activity. The broadening of the membership of the group to include HE in FE colleagues demonstrates the ways in which social networks can expand and concurred with the aims of the HEA to support the delivery of HE in FE.

The 3 E's Approach in Context

The original NW network looked for HE in FE partners willing to engage and develop this collaborative project. This approach then enabled the group to work with FE colleges across the broad region. A meeting was held at the University of Bolton to develop the questionnaire and evidence-led methodology and to agree common outcomes. As a result of this meeting individual HE and HE in FE teams were asked to agree research methodologies

One difficulty in the early stage of the project was staff changes and availability for meetings. This meant changes to the original membership of the network. To overcome this the project lead met with individual institutions to outline the project, agree partner responsibilities and discuss approaches. Where HE in FE partners were unavailable for these additional meetings the HE partner took responsibility for informing the HE in FE partner thus consolidating the collaborative approach. A Networks magazine article about the benefits of collaborative research enabled the network to articulate shared responsibility and the benefits of working in this way.

In addition to the web resources a national seminar *Expectations, Experiences and Encounters in HE and HE in FE – the 3E's* was held at Bolton in April 2009. A separate but interesting involvement for the group was an invitation to take part in a Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) 'Think Tank' focus group meeting on supporting the student experience at Bolton in December 2008. While the project is aware of the HEA and JISC development of technology led resources this was not a major factor in the project. Both events represented an expansion of the informal social network linked to the NW network, and whilst the participants in these events did not become formal members of the group, several connections were made that were pursued after the events. This constructive informal activity is generally in line with that identified in the literature and websites that promote and examine the nature and benefits of networking for the creative industries.

In order to flourish creative enterprises increasingly group together in Creative Clusters, pooling together resources into networks and partnerships to cross-stimulate activities (Unesco, 2006)

Reflection on collaborative research

As indicated above, the NW network's collaborative approach to research developed from a NW network project on *'Linking Disciplinary Research to Teaching'* undertaken in 2006/7 and was explored further in the *'3E's student expectations,*

experiences and encounters with HE and staff perceptions'. Existing HE partners who had contributed to the first project had indicated their interest in continuing working in the network and to find HE in FE partners for this continuing collaborative working. The approach and methodologies used had enabled staff to visit each other's institutions and to meet staff and students. This enabled comparative overviews of the agreed questions to be undertaken and the subtle but different approaches used has resulted in rich data for analysis, informing both local level strategies and enhancing sectoral knowledge. A factor in the successful approach of the project was that the work was brought about by agreement between partners based on confidence and trust between experienced and inexperienced members of the network group.

The collaborative activity between HE and HE in FE was without doubt a factor in the mixed sector attendance at the national seminar which included representation from specialist colleges, HE in FE, the post-'92 and pre-'92 HE sector and offered an opportunity for those staff to respond to three key areas around need and developing networks.

Does it fit with the agendas of institutions? Is it strategically led?

These two areas of discussion led to a focus on working harder across hierarchies, making links to shared interests where partners could work independently then come together;

What do we need?

Research should be led by need, including cross subject collaboration and importantly an institutional culture that values collaborative research.

Developing supportive networks

It happens but is not formalised through discussion and shared interests and partnerships within bigger groupings. It can also be part of staff development but informally communication in staff rooms is important - especially to link with courses outside of your subject area suggesting a need for a co-ordinator to bring a focus/data base of ideas.

This feedback from the seminar closely mirrored some of the approaches that were used by the NW network where collaboration happened through:

'The serendipitous meeting of a HE in FE partner through the first NW Network regional ADM seminar enabling a collaborative partnership to develop.'

and for others

'They offered the most positive response and this may in be due to the personal and professional relationship I have built with the staff.'

For some collaboration was developed was through progression or other formal recognition agreements. When the partnerships started working on their collaborative approaches a range of different but equally pertinent individual and

network benefits were articulated in the following comments. These give an overview of good practice, benefits of collaborative research and individual approaches by partners:

'Discussion of subject specific issues rather than generic T&L'

'strategies, visits to another institution give insights into similarities'

and 'differences between working conditions and discussions with students give insights into similarities and differences between experiences of HE and HE in FE'

'The project enabled a link to develop through collaborative working and research activity in 3E's project. Meetings have largely taken place in offices or student refectories – chips and something, cups of tea – being common currency.'

'It has been very interesting to discuss and explore experiences with a colleague from a different type of institution, this has helped to highlight the strengths of the different institution and also similar difficulties and pressures we face. It's been good to share our experiences and views within a supportive and constructive environment.'

'We have met a number of times and reviewed our findings and this has led to some interesting discussions.'

'One example resulting from the collaboration was the decision to jointly run all of meetings with students at both institutions, and presented in the form of a 'double act'. Time was also planned in to provide the opportunity of meeting staff from each institution and to visit their learning resource areas and studios.'

'It became clear how the process as well as the product is important for the success of this project and for the purposes of building the NW network.'

'Allocating enough time for each stage of the project was important in enabling the collaboration to flourish and for the preparation for meetings with students and staff'

'...both students and staff have responded positively to our approach'.

Generic good practice was highlighted as:

'Encouragement to get to know about/participate in the work of

'the subject centre e.g. the annual forum, dissemination of information about the subject centre to colleagues and basic contact with other HE providers i.e. getting to know who is who'.

The motivation and commitment of the group was key to the development of the project leading to successful completion:

'The shared responsibility has been a pleasure and we look forward to the outcomes'.

Collaboration happened in a number of ways including:

'The serendipitous meeting of a HE in FE partner through the first NW Network regional ADM seminar enabling a collaborative partnership to develop'.

'Meetings have largely taken place in offices or student refectories – chips and something, cups of tea – being common currency'.

'it was decided that we would start a collaborative partnership in a café bar halfway between the two establishments'

The following comments are indicative of the positive feedback from partners in the 3E's project during which good working relationships were developed:

'it was really good to talk through how the students reacted to each other and us as staff'

'The collaboration has worked successfully and a very good working relationship was established from the beginning. Important for this was the joint planning, ideas and development day which set the scene and became a useful foundation for further collaborative initiatives during the course of the project'

Staff comments indicate that their individual approach was appropriate in the context of their own institutions confirming the decision to allow partners to use the agreed questions in context.

Difficulties encountered were tempered by a clear message from partners about developing collaborative relationships:

'We are willing to undertake this research and the opportunity to further strengthen working links'

'It became clear how the process as well as the product is important for the success of this project and for the purposes of building the NW network.'

An additional key benefit has been the range of different but equally pertinent individual and network benefits articulated in the following comments:

'We have met a number of times and reviewed our findings and this has led to some interesting discussions'.

'Allocating enough time for each stage of the project was important in enabling the collaboration to flourish and for the preparation for meetings with students and staff'

'The project overall has been an incredibly positive experience in terms of both analysing the students and their understanding their expectations, experiences and encounters but also creating a working partnership with another colleague with an alternative experience of teaching degree level.'

Findings - the 3Es project

In common with Shank (1996) looking at the attitudes of both staff and students in the 3E's project informed the analysis of observations made regarding the differences and similarities in the experiences reported by HE and HE in FE students. The investigation of the attitudes of staff in the 3E's also built upon the examination of the complexity and perceptions of staff roles and bureaucracy reported upon by Thomas (2008).

However, unlike Shank (1996) comparing and contrasting the results of data gathered in differing types of institutions was not an aim of the project. During the early discussions of the 3E's project the group reached an agreement to anonymise the results in an acknowledgement of the sensitivities that might arise between competing universities and colleges. Thus, the disparities and differences between the findings of members of the network, at different institutions, and between HE and HE in FE could not become a major feature of the reporting.

The 3 E's analysis showed a dramatic increase in negative comments by students responding to their situation 'now' and this was usefully informed by the work of Braxton, Vesper and Hossler (1995).

A very real strength revealed by the 3E's project was the influence of pre-entry knowledge and the managing of student expectations. This supports the work by Pancer (2000) and Longden and Yorke (2006) who refer to the likely withdrawal of students with no pre-entry knowledge.

In line with Barker's (2005) recommendations and consistent with its aims, the North West Network provided a supportive, non-competitive context within which inexperienced researchers delivering HE in FE were able to work alongside experienced university staff, visit partner institutions and engage in informal exchange and scholarly activity linked with evidence-based action research into the student experience.

The 3Es project also contributes to the debates raised and examined in Yorke's paper presented at Nottingham Trent University in 2008 and revisited at the 3Es event at the University of Bolton on the 12th June 2009. In particular the qualitative data could contribute to thinking about approaching issues arising from the uneven performance in the NSS across institutions, a concern highlighted in the Group for Learning in Art and Design's (GLAD) recent executive summary (2010).

The findings of the 3Es project demonstrate that the collaborative activity of the NW network can be linked to contemporary research on the student experience and to the wider academic community.

Conclusion

Keeping a collaborative partnership project moving towards outcomes is exciting and frustrating but ultimately satisfying and if asked to describe what are the key features of getting to the completion stage they would be organisational skills, persistence and determination. Although not all collaboration was straightforward, problems encountered have raised awareness of embedding approaches to minimise difficulties in future activity.

In addition to the informal links forged in some partnerships were formed on the basis of more formal collaborative reasons, including new partner relationships and one based on individual planning meetings between sector colleagues. Although there have been difficulties for some in contacting staff and gaining access to full student groups, the experience overall has been a positive one, particularly learning from each other's experience.

As with any continuing network group staff change, move on and new staff are brought on board. This is key in growing networks and developing relationships but the timing of this is not always helpful in terms of managing the project. Where this happened the role of the project lead in ensuring new partners are included and informed on developments has been a factor in ensuring the project moved on to

completion. Although this ensures that information is disseminated this does not replace the project meetings where the discussion is broader, developmental and supportive. As with any project, meetings involving 10 institutions are difficult to manage and it is almost inevitable, despite forward planning, for everyone to attend.

The opportunity to share ideas and develop a range of approaches has allowed students and staff to be very open and honest in some collaborative partnerships whilst in others has offered a more nurturing experience over a longer time period and this may have fostered the more positive comments from those approaches.

The qualitative data outlined above, in which participants reflect upon their experience of being involved in NW network events and projects, demonstrate that it is possible to provide opportunities for staff working at different levels, in different areas of the sector, to work together and to share good practice. The NW network *could* provide a model of co operation which, due to the persistence and commitment of the members, appears to circumvent the problems posed by increasing competition between institutions; the difficulties presented by limited funding; and time constraints . With the development of this model in mind, further debate is needed about the hierarchies and perceived barriers to collaboration across institutions and sectors.

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