

CASE STUDY: SOUTH DEVON COLLEGE

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Background

South Devon College is a Further Education and Tertiary College, rated 'outstanding' (1) by Ofsted (2015). It is located across nine campuses within Torbay and the surrounding area. South Devon College was ranked the number one Further Education and Tertiary College in England by the Skills Funding Agency in 2014. The college provides courses from Entry Level to Level 7 in a range of subjects, including tertiary courses in conjunction with the University of Plymouth. The college has around 11,000 students.

Understanding the role of advanced practitioners

At South Devon College, advanced practitioner-type staff are called Teaching, Learning and Assessment Coaches (TLCs). The TLC role was established to improve professional practice and the consistency of teaching, learning and assessment across the college through a supportive mechanism for staff. The aim of the role is to identify emerging developmental themes, as well as best practice and strengths from cross-college observations, and feed these into the college's improvement strategy and development plans.



TLCs are our eyes and ears on the ground, they are practitioners which is interesting, they are crucial.

Senior Management

The TLC role was initially driven by, and structured around, Learning Reviews – a management tool which involves a series of mini-inspections graded against Ofsted criteria to assess sections (departments) and identify those that require improvement. Critically, TLCs are firmly separated from the Learning Reviews, which are conducted by members of the college management team.

However, TLCs are now allocated to every section of the college, regardless of whether a Learning Review has taken place, because they have proved to be so successful. This change has been welcomed by Section Heads.

To effectively utilise and deploy the limited number of TLCs available, Quality Managers allocate a variable number of TLCs to departments according to their level of need, and the amount of support required. For example, if a section requires improvement, two TLCs will typically be deployed to support the development of the staff within that department. The Section Head and TLC will discuss the needs of the department, and then prioritise a set of actions.



The tightrope we walk is between staff development and meeting their needs, and responding to what the Section Heads have asked us to do often on the basis of the learning reviews.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment Coach

Senior management emphasised the TLC role as being adaptable, innovative and supportive. One of their key intentions when establishing the TLC role was to encourage a culture of best practice within the college. As part of these efforts, the college moved away from graded observations with

the intention of making observations less linked to performance management and more focused on a reciprocal, supportive and developmental process.



The attitude we've taken is; watch, think about it, go back, talk about it, offer solutions. And it's that offering solutions bit that was missing before, because the solution was just to put a rubber stamp or a grade on something and now we're saying "we might need to think about this a bit more and you could do this or this or this or this". The TLCs have been really helpful in this role.

Section Head

South Devon College has 13 TLCs drawn from a number of different curriculum areas. They receive two and a half hours remission per week and are appointed on a 12-month fixed-term contract. To maintain consistency across the college, TLCs are managed centrally by the Quality Team for their TLC role and are line managed by the Section Head within their curriculum area for their teaching role.

The college places no importance on subject specialism; TLCs work across the college and are rarely deployed to their own curriculum area. Tutors view this as advantageous, as TLCs can introduce different skills, techniques and perspectives from other areas.

Activities

TLCs have a number of different roles:

- Working on a one-to-one basis with individual staff to support improvement and development or areas of exploration through developmental observations, coaching and the design of bespoke action plans.
- Being a member of the College Observation Team (COT) – undertaking Learning Observations and learning walks.
- Involvement in Initial Teacher Education – including delivery of sessions.
- Working with managers across the college and departments to centrally collate observations, and disseminate and raise awareness of best practice.
- Contributing to the review and development of improvement initiatives through membership of college quality groups.
- Contributing to the development and delivery of a rolling programme of CPD, including leading CPD sessions and professional development days, and designing and delivering bespoke CPD for section teams.
- Attending monthly meetings with other TLCs to share best practice and source and share relevant research.
- Supporting best practice lunches and using resources such as TLC tablet, Google+ pages and video blogs to upload useful resources for staff.
- Responding and adapting to change, for example, changes to the curriculum or the Ofsted inspection framework.

Capability

At South Devon College TLCs are expected to either hold a coaching/mentoring qualification or be willing to undertake one. TLCs undertook a Level 4 coaching qualification with City and Guilds and hope to pursue a recognised Level 5 coaching and mentoring qualification in the future.

In terms of professional development, internally TLCs benefit from the college's approach to sharing best practice from events, courses, secondary research or other resources through their TLC tablets and Google+ pages. TLCs have monthly meetings to share best practice, coach each other through an informal system of supervision, and also attend and support best practice lunches. The Senior Management Team and TLCs feel that having a lead TLC ensures that TLCs are supported and are able to identify and discuss their own developmental needs.

Additionally, TLCs are encouraged to attend external workshops and complete coaching qualifications to develop their own skills and knowledge. For example, five TLCs attended a professional development day on coaching and teaching observation which encouraged the adoption of a narrative approach to observations. Practitioners now provide commentary rather than critical evaluation feedback. This approach has been adopted across the college and TLCs feel that this has been both a positive and liberating process.

Outcomes

Many of the outcomes that the college have identified are qualitative. Tutors, TLCs and senior management feel that the college has started to shift towards a culture that embraces openness, reciprocity, and self-improvement – tutors particularly highlighted a change in their approach and attitudes to observations – a shift that was partly attributed to the establishment of TLC roles. Tutors commented that TLCs have made a real difference to the open door policy in the college.



It's just been more of an organisational shift in the approach to CPD, something that's done with and by the staff, not something that has been done to the staff.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment Coach

It's shifted the culture and attitude towards the teaching practice, that has become non-threatening, supportive, peer led, it's made the vast majority of teachers want to progress, feel comfortable in saying "yes I have got a weakness or I have something I need to build on because I know I can do this with somebody".

Tutor

I think maybe the culture has a different feel across the college. I think staff feel more open to sharing of practice and development as well.

Senior management

The Senior Management Team reported that where a TLC had been assigned to a section following a learning review, there had been a significant improvement in all cases. Senior management also reported that feedback from the staff survey about TLC roles had been very positive. For example, 80 per cent of respondents perceived TLCs positively.



I feel I have gained a wealth of knowledge just in one term, I have seen some great practice and ideas which I have now been implementing into my own practice and

sharing with others. I feel I have a greater understanding of teaching, learning and assessment now.

South Devon College Staff Survey

A number of tutors commented that TLC contact had increased their confidence, made them comfortable with observations, increased their use of active learning methods, and helped them to develop new skills in their teaching practice.



I think we're seeing better outcomes for the learners – confidence in the learners. Rather than just answering questions there is more probing going on, giving them something to aspire to, stretch and challenge.

Tutor

It's been very positive. It's what you need when you're struggling a bit, it could make the difference between staying in your job and enjoying it, and thinking I've had enough of this and leaving.

Tutor

Shared learning



Top tips for other providers

- Use outcomes from learning reviews (or equivalent) to structure and organise advanced practitioner workloads: Utilise departmental reviews to design bespoke action plans and support for departments and individual staff.
- Encourage sustainability in the advanced practitioner model by sharing and disseminating good practice. Resources should be readily available for all practitioners to access.
- Identify, celebrate, share and disseminate good practice internally: Identify areas of success, centrally collate these themes and promote best practice through wide distribution.
- Create an open, informal and reflective environment for observations so that peer observation becomes both empowering and the norm. Consider adopting a narrative approach to peer observations, aided by learning walks.
- Encourage a strong team bond amongst advanced practitioners through central management and establishment of a lead advanced practitioner if possible. Encourage interaction through informal lunches, regular meetings, and peer coaching.
- Utilise technology such as advanced practitioner tablets and Google+ pages: These can be used to easily transmit useful resources widely amongst practitioners.
- Know your tutors: Be flexible and offer bespoke support which

is responsive to their needs.

- Consider assigning advanced practitioners to entire sections/departments to allow them to grasp and fully understand the department's needs.