

CASE STUDY: GATESHEAD COLLEGE

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Background

Gateshead College is a General Further Education (FE) college located in the North East of England. It was rated 'outstanding' (1) by Ofsted in 2015. The college offers a range of courses including GCSEs, vocational-career focused courses, adult learning, apprenticeships, Higher Education, and professional work-based training. In 2014, the college was graded as 'Requiring Improvement' (3) by Ofsted and has been on an 'Improvement Journey' ever since. Now it is rated 'Outstanding' and is ranked the fourth best college in England for student achievement, as well as the top performing college in the region.

Understanding the role of advanced practitioners

At Gateshead College, advanced practitioner-type staff are called Lead Practitioners (LPs). The role is peer-facing and their remit is to act as a coach to support staff to develop their teaching practice through a variety of different mechanisms. For example, informal observations, workshops, coaching, and participation in project research. They are viewed as beacons for good quality teaching and are key to sharing good practice across the college.



The whole idea is to share good practice across the college and across the curriculum and to be able to see different methods and different techniques used to better the outcome for the learner. At the end of the day, everything that we do is predominantly for the outcome of the learner.

Lead Practitioner

We don't encourage the idea [that LPs] are going in as the expert on that subject area, we encourage the idea that [LPs] are going in as a second pair of eyes, as a supportive professional, to ask the right questions and to get that person to reflect well on what they are doing so they can improve.

Senior Manager

Lead Practitioners used to conduct formal graded observations across the college and then 'subtly' conduct CPD during feedback. Management felt that this created a barrier between Lead Practitioners and the staff they were there to support. Consequently, the role was adapted and changed to the peer-facing, coaching-focussed role it is today, with the aim of creating and building a sustainable learning culture.



Previously Lead Practitioners used to grade the sessions. Now they've changed the roles, they're being completely supportive. So I think some lecturers probably might have seen them with a bit of fear previously, where now they see them more as a supportive role which I think could only benefit.

Tutor

Gateshead College has 15 Lead Practitioners and four Lead Assessors (based in Apprenticeships), who provide support to 285 staff across the college. Lead Practitioners and Lead

Assessors both receive a 20 per cent timetable remittance and an uplifted salary.

In their teaching role, Lead Practitioners are embedded in their teaching team and report to their Head of Department. In their Lead Practitioner role they are responsible for coaching a cohort of 15 staff across college departments. The team operate centrally under the badge of 'Teacher Academy' and report to the Head of Teaching and Learning.



I think it's very important that they're embedded within the teaching teams, partly because they have a huge contribution to make to the quality of delivery when they're good practitioners themselves and they work with learners four days a week.

Senior Manager

Activities

Lead Practitioners are responsible for a number of different activities, these include:

- Leading action research projects which aim to improve professional practice in teaching, learning and assessment.
- Offering one-to-one support and coaching to a cohort of 15 staff.
- Inducting new staff and preparing them for a coaching relationship.

Each Lead Practitioner is responsible for developing a project which they work on alongside other staff in the college. Five projects are directly related to Ofsted priorities and ensure that the college stays ahead of emerging themes within the sector; other projects cover aspects such as new developments in research, and technology. For example, one Lead Practitioner is currently developing a teaching app. The app will include toolkits designed and uploaded by LPs which can be accessed quickly by staff to support their professional practice.



I'd say it's a fantastic role because they're doing so many different projects at this minute in time within the college, which is now allowing teachers, like me, to go join in with these projects...And it's really good.

Tutor

The college believe that Lead Practitioners are pivotal to creating and building a learning culture within the college. They provide CPD, coach teachers, take part in learning conversations, and conduct supportive observations, which may be filmed with the tutor's permission. Following an observation, feedback is provided to tutors on a one-to-one basis, and LPs use coaching techniques to suggest areas for potential development.



The whole process of interacting with someone else and thinking it through, is very productive, and I think what it's really about is getting teachers to have meaningful discussions about teaching, and that almost inevitably improves good practice, so just developing that culture that sits beneath all of this is very significant.

Senior Manager

Learning conversations are a three-way discussion between tutors, their Lead Practitioner, and

their manager. The aim is to facilitate discussion between all parties and further stimulate a learning culture within the college.



It's creating a triangle of support for the teacher from their manager but also from their coach. It ensures that it's joined up from that individual's point of view. It means they can have an informed discussion around improvements that need to be made or areas that need to be developed.

Senior Manager

A conference has also been planned for this year, where Lead Practitioners will present their areas of interest and expertise to teaching staff throughout the college.

Rather than going straight into a coaching relationship, new teachers take part in a teaching support programme. The programme is led by Lead Practitioners who act as mentors for new staff. However, unlike the coaching relationship, the programme does not assume staff have prior knowledge of college processes. This programme aims to prepare new staff for the college's development process, the coaching dynamic, and working within a learning culture.

Capability

Lead Practitioners are supported in their role in a number of different ways. For example, external training has been delivered by the Institute of Leadership and Management to provide all Lead Practitioners with a recognised Level 5 coaching and mentoring qualification. Lead Practitioners felt very positive about this training and wanted to develop it further.



The biggest change for me was we were offered ILM Level 5 and we were offered coaching. And, I mean, that's a huge bonus in an organisation, to be offered a qualification. So that, to me, is a huge benefit, and I wouldn't have necessarily had that was I not in this role.

Lead Practitioner

Lead Practitioners are also encouraged to apply for a 50 per cent financial subsidy to assist with the cost of further external training which they have identified as relevant for their role. In-house training is initiated by the Head of Teaching and Learning, covering topics such as embedding equality and diversity. This training is then cascaded by Lead Practitioners throughout the college.

Lead Practitioners additionally support each other on an informal basis, for example, by emailing other LPs for ideas and having corridor conversations. Each month, the team meet to identify, discuss and plan for development themes which may be emerging across the college.



Themes emerge as the year progresses, and one of the themes that's emerged is providing a very deliberate response to the mental health agenda – supporting those young people who need emotional and pastoral input if they are going to make steps towards maximum academic achievement. How do we help develop them into effective learners? We've started to address this through specialist training.

Senior Manager

Outcomes

The college has been on an 'Improvement Journey' for the last few years and has employed a range of different mechanisms to achieve their Grade 1 from Ofsted. Consequently, it is difficult for them to measure the direct impact of Lead Practitioners in relation to teaching and learning outcomes, because their role is just one part of a joined-up approach to supporting staff and improving learner experience.

Despite this, Gateshead's 2015 Ofsted inspection report highlighted Lead Practitioners as a significant force in improving teaching and learning. Considering that Gateshead ascended from 'requires improvement' (3) (Ofsted, 2014) to 'outstanding' (1) (Ofsted, 2015) in only one year, this observation should be taken into consideration. Pertinently, the focus on development is singled out as a major change in their approach to quality.



College managers have significantly improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment through investment in a team of Lead Practitioners in all main subject areas, and by offering coaching to all teaching staff. A recent shift away from the use of the observation system to enforce compliance to the current more developmental approach means that good practice is now transferred more effectively between teams. This has resulted in the more skilful use of questioning techniques in lessons, a rapid increase in the use of learning technologies to enhance teaching and better understanding about how to make equality and diversity relevant to learners.

Ofsted, 2015

Anecdotal evidence is also very positive. This includes personal experiences of staff progress and a notable change in the culture of the college:



It can also be really rewarding when you see a member of staff develop to the extent that they do and then recognise that themselves. You can go away with a smile on your face thinking I helped them to see that for themselves.

Lead Practitioner

I think the culture's changed. I think there's a big shift on the expectations about teaching... I think the culture's changed in that you do have teachers who do aspire to become Lead Practitioners, I think they do value what we do, but I think the culture change is the most significant.

Lead Practitioner

And those strategies that [the LP] had shown me with the review of learning, educated me more, as a teacher, to think: actually, I'm assuming my students are all okay with this, and actually, they're not. There is more that I need to do; and I'm going to put that in place the next lesson. I'm going to slow the pace down a little bit. I'm going to check that review of learning a little bit more frequently, because the curriculum, there's so much to learn, and it can be quite heavy.

Tutor

Shared learning

Senior managers, tutors, and Lead Practitioners all feel that the introduction of a peer-facing coaching relationship has been conducive to staff development. In other words, by moving the role away from formal graded lesson observations and encouraging the development of a coaching relationship, Lead Practitioners have been more effective at improving teaching, learning and assessment outcomes. The college feel that the purpose of the role needs to be clearly communicated to all staff in order to break down perceptual barriers. This creates a safe space where staff feel comfortable to identify and address areas of development.



Having a clear message to all staff at the beginning about what the role actually is, because there's a lot of mixed messages... is it a coaching role, is it a performance related role, is it teaching and learning or is it the bigger picture? What is it? What is the clear message that's going out there at the beginning?

Lead Practitioner

Another element which has been key for success is the change to the culture across the college. Staff are encouraged to seek out development opportunities and build on their existing skills. This stimulates the idea of developing a culture of continuous learning and spreads good practice amongst staff.



What I think is key is providing the right kind of culture, context and climate for people to each develop their practice. It's about encouraging that individual ownership but a very positive approach towards personal development, something that people want to engage with and see as a very positive opportunity to develop their practice. I think if you can create that sort of motivation and set in place the support around that, then the whole thing gathers its own momentum.

Senior Manager

I think it's really important to embrace it, and accept that there's always room for improvement...why not have someone else come into the class and give you those bits of advice and tips. Because, as a teacher, you leave that lesson, thinking, why? Why didn't it work? What could I have done? If you've got somebody else beside you, that's an extra piece of information, a bit of input.

Tutor



Top tips for other providers

- Establish a peer-facing role which aims to build a collaborative coaching relationship with staff.
- Encourage the development of a culture of continuous learning throughout the college, and disseminate good practice.
- Clearly communicate the purpose of the role to teaching staff in order to help them understand and buy-in to the bigger picture.