

CASE STUDY: SHREWSBURY COLLEGE

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Background

Shrewsbury College is the UK's largest Sixth Form College operating over three sites. It was formed last July following a merger between Shrewsbury Sixth Form College and Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology, which was a general Further Education (FE) college. Shrewsbury College is designated as a Sixth Form College which is unusual, if not unprecedented. Shrewsbury College has a turnover of £23 million pounds, compared to a turnover of approximately £10 million pounds for an average Sixth Form.

Understanding the role of advanced practitioners

Advanced practitioner-type roles at Shrewsbury College are called Learning Coaches (LCs). LCs currently operate from the original College of Arts and Technology site; however, the College is looking to introduce a similar role across the Sixth Form in the future. The LC role evolved from an Advanced Practitioner (AP) role previously in place at the college which had a different, project-led, focus. However, the college wanted to move towards a more collaborative, peer-led approach and to *'focus the role more on coaching and mentoring and less on being bastions of good practice'*. As such, the primary aim of the LC role is to co-ordinate Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and to support a culture of openness, ambition and improvement. Importantly, participation in PLCs is completely voluntary, although attendance is generally good. In addition, LCs use coaching and mentoring to develop reflective practice in others, encouraging colleagues to share good practice and identifying key areas for development.



What we very much want to do is to encourage staff to take ownership of their development, we are looking for accountability, responsibility, and buy-in, rather than the role being seen as a resident 'expert' that you just go to for help.

Senior Manager

Shrewsbury College undertook extensive research before introducing the PLC model, for example, by observing the model working effectively at other colleges. The change of emphasis was reflected in a move from APs to Advanced Learning Coaches (ALCs); this also helped to instigate a coaching culture within the College which was further reinforced by investment in training and accreditation, initially for the ALCs and, later, for the LCs.



I think it's someone who facilitates development... as a team and as individuals. And it's got to be about working towards empowering staff and colleagues to go through that process of improvement and development on their own.

Learning Coach

In terms of the focus of the role, the continual development and improvement of teaching, learning and assessment is certainly a priority. However, senior management, LCs and staff feel that the role involves much more than this, and is holistic in terms of the peer support it offers. Whilst there is a focus on measuring the impact of LCs on teaching, learning and assessment outcomes, Shrewsbury College is also concerned with the quality of staff development and the impact

interactions with LCs may have for staff on a more personal level, for example, the way they work in teams and individually.



To me it means a strong focus on supporting and developing outstanding practice and practitioners... which is informed by coaching principles. So I think it's a development through coaching rather than through telling.

Senior Manager

The college has ten LCs who each lead a PLC; the FE part of the College employs approximately 100 teachers so it was decided that 8-10 people in each PLC would be a manageable and effective size. Following a presentation to the Senior Leadership Team outlining the PLC model and business case, supported by extensive research, a decision was taken to introduce PLCs as a key element of the professional development strategy.

LCs have a remission from teaching which equates to 90 hours per annum. This is approximately 13 per cent of their time (half a day per week). LCs receive remission from teaching in order to fulfil their role but do not receive a salary uplift.

Whilst the PLCs are curriculum-based, the role of a LC at Shrewsbury College is not subject-specific, though some LCs do work within their core subject areas. This has been viewed very positively by staff and LCs, who believe that there are *'some huge advantages associated with sending somebody who knows nothing about the topic'*. LCs are *'not distracted by the subject, they're actually focused entirely on the teaching and learning activity'*.



It is that passion for teaching and learning. If they haven't got that, then no matter how good they were, I don't know that they would be hugely effective as Learning Coaches.

Senior Manager

I'm looking for people who are passionate about, not only being excellent practitioners themselves, but passionate about supporting their colleagues to become enthusiastic, passionate and excellent practitioners.

Senior Manager



The skills and attributes of a good Learning Coach

The role of a Learning Coach requires a **broad skills-set** that goes beyond simply being a good teacher. Whilst Learning Coaches are expected to have **demonstrated outstanding practice, passion** is an important personal characteristic. Shrewsbury College also focuses heavily on **effective coaching and mentoring**, so Learning Coaches must be excellent at working collaboratively and encouraging peers.

Activities

LCs are **primarily responsible for co-ordinating and leading PLC meetings to support a culture of openness, ambition and improvement**. They are expected to use coaching and mentoring techniques to develop reflective practice in others and to encourage the use of new learning strategies on a one-to-one and team basis. Moreover, LCs are required to develop, promote and involve teaching staff in creative initiatives to share good practice.

LCs set up, facilitate and encourage others to attend the PLC fortnightly meetings. The agenda for the PLCs is set collaboratively; however, the LC will plan the session, set the pace and steer the discussion. They are also required to coordinate peer observations, where members of staff will be paired to participate in non-graded observations and support a Lesson Study approach to planning and peer review.

Each PLC is tasked with developing and undertaking an Action Research Project. This involves identifying an area for development within the department; producing a plan to develop this area, and selecting a method to measure the outcomes of actions taken.

LCs may also be required to undertake ad-hoc support, which can include providing **bespoke one-to-one support** for members of staff. Whilst LCs are not involved in graded observations for members of their own PLCs, a small number of LCs are part of the graded observation team. Those members of staff that receive a Grade 3 or Grade 4 in their formal observation will be supported primarily by their line manager. However, it would not be uncommon for a line manager to approach a LC to request further support for this member of staff.

LCs are also responsible for planning and leading sessions on teaching, learning and assessment on staff development days.

Capability

The LCs at Shrewsbury College undertake a Level 5 ILM Coaching and Mentoring qualification, which is delivered in-house by the Professional Development Manager and fully funded by the college. Whilst this is costly for the college, they perceive this training as essential to ensure that LCs are fully equipped to deal with their roles.

LCs have monthly one-to-one sessions with the Professional Development Manager; the focus of these meetings is flexible and responsive to individual needs but draws on coaching strategies to model and evaluate good practice, and support the personal and professional development of LCs. LCs also meet as a group on a monthly basis - these meetings act as a means of sharing best practice and providing support to each other. Both approaches provide channels of communication through which to disseminate organisational priorities.

Outcomes

There is a significant focus on measuring impact at Shrewsbury College, in particular, impact on staff in terms of the quality of their practice, as well as the impact on students. Since the introduction of the LC role and the PLCs, the college has seen an **upward trend in success and achievement**. A large part of tracking and monitoring is carried out through the Action Research Projects, where each PLC is required to produce an impact report. Fundamentally, the introduction of an action research approach has enabled teams to determine the impact of innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

The Professional Development Manager at Shrewsbury College also conducts a holistic review. This involves collating feedback from staff on the efficacy and impact of PLCs, the Peer Review and Lesson Study processes, and the Action Research Projects. A senior manager commented that it is important for the role of the LCs to align with organisational priorities in terms of meeting key performance indicators, and aligning with the college's mission and vision.



Sport Professional Learning Community: Action Research Project

The Professional Learning Community for sport identified retention, attendance and punctuality as an area for development, on which they would focus their Action Research Project. As part of the PLC, members of staff, led by the LC, identified possible reasons for the fall in retention and developed a number of actions that could be undertaken to address this. The PLC devised and introduced house competitions, outdoor adventure days, and a new student survey, as well as organising an end of year trip for students.

The **Sport, Outdoor Sport and Public Service PLC has seen an improvement in both attendance and retention** following the implementation of the house competitions and other activities. For example, attendance for sport, outdoors and public services is currently at 88 per cent which is an increase from 81 per cent in the previous year. Although it is not possible to establish a causal relationship between the Action Research Project and this improvement, staff certainly feel that the Action Research Project has made a positive contribution and were pleased with the results.

Shared learning

The Professional Learning Community model was felt to be an effective means of sharing best practice between colleagues, and was viewed as particularly beneficial by the LCs themselves.



I think the Learning Community meetings are a really protected hour of reflecting on what you do well and sharing good practice and asking questions.

Learning Coach

It gets us together for one thing; we look at best practice, sharing best practice. It's

a formalised sort of method. I think we do it anyway informally but this is a more structured approach.

Tutor

The Professional Development Manager believes that research-based proposals and a rigorous approach to supporting and developing LCs is key, in addition to a well thought-out approach to evaluating impact.



Top tips for other providers

- LCs should be current practitioners so they are able to gain credibility from their peers.
- Participation in Professional Learning Communities should be voluntary and not mandated.



I think it's important that it's not forced upon staff, it's offered to staff and it's up to them... rather than they feel that it's maybe another thing that they've got to do.

Learning Coach



- It is important that the role of a LC is seen as separate from management, and that PLCs are collaborative and not a management-led activity.
- Members of staff at Shrewsbury College felt that senior management were invested in the PLC model, which is an important factor.



Most models of effective coaching within organisations are based on buy-in and support by members of the senior management team.

Senior Manager