Northumbria Research Link

Putting principles into practice: a change model for a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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The CETL initiative and models of change

Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) are an initiative of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The aim of the initiative is to:

'recognise, celebrate and promote excellence by rewarding teachers who have made a demonstrable impact on student learning and who enthuse, motivate and influence others to do the same.' (HEFCE, 2004, p.3)

Whilst CETLs are expected to show a 'discernible impact', we are told that they are not projects. We are all very familiar with projects where we bid for funding to undertake development according to pre-defined programme goals. CETL is different in the sense that we were invited to define for ourselves what 'excellence' meant in our context.

'We do not attempt to define excellence in absolute or "gold standard" terms. This … is more likely to constrain than encourage institutions to select excellent practice in a local context.' (p. 10)

Projects bring with them a raft of expectations and mechanisms: accountability, targets, business plans, milestones and so on. CETLs come with a vision:

'Our vision for CETLs is of vibrant, dynamic entities with a visible presence in their institutions.'

Projects provide us with a defined framework within which to work, to plan our activities, and to demonstrate our progress, impacts and achievements. Perhaps, as Murray Saunders (2005) has discussed in a recent Higher Education Academy newsletter, CETLs are operating within a different framework. Projects have been underpinned by technical-rational and resource-driven models of change. The new framework is underpinned by complexity models of change (Trowler, Saunders and Knight, 2003). Networks and partnerships are seen as the way to harness the energy and vision of staff, and perhaps students, for positive development. These processes can seem ill-defined and unpredictable: however, this kind of approach fits well with the proposals of the CETL in Assessment for Learning (AfL) at Northumbria, one of the 74 CETLs currently funded. (The full list can be found at **http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/TInits/cetl/final**/)

CETL Assessment for Learning

The CETL AfL is based on well-established innovative practice and research in assessment. Our approach to AfL means that students benefit from assessment which does far more than simply test what they know. They take part in the kinds of activities that are valuable in the long term, helping them to develop and providing them with guidance and feedback. They learn how to assess themselves, and to support others, as future professionals. For us, AfL is not primarily a set of techniques but a re-conceptualisation of learning which can lead to a variety of specific practices.

We use a set of six principles or conditions to express our perspective on AfL. It requires a learning environment that:
1. Emphasises authenticity and complexity in the content and methods of assessment, rather than reproduction of knowledge and reductive measurement
2. Uses high-stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly, rather than as the main driver for learning
3. Offers students extensive opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed
4. Is rich in feedback derived from formal mechanisms such as tutor comments on assignments and student self-review logs
5. Is rich in informal feedback. Examples of this are peer review of draft writing and collaborative project work, which provide students with a continuous flow of feedback on 'how they are doing'
6. Develops students' abilities to direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments, and support the learning of others.

The CETL is cross-institutional but is initially based in a small number of core subjects: childhood studies, education, engineering, English, history, and psychology. Within each of these subjects there is a CETL Fellow who takes a leading role in the enhancement of AfL practices. Although starting with a few subjects, we aim to influence practice across the university. When considering how we should go about this, the way forward seemed obvious – if not easy! We can adapt our AfL principles and apply them, not to students and their learning, but to the process of staff and organisational learning that we believe can transform practice across the university.

Using the six principles in changing AfL practice

The rationale behind our AfL principles is that assessment is a crucial element of learning and teaching, and that we should harness the power of assessment to promote good learning. If we then think about changing teaching and assessment practice as a process of learning at individual, collective and organisational levels, we can then see how our principles can be applied to the promotion of effective change.

This shift of focus requires us to:

1. Recognise and value complexity and authenticity in AfL practices

We expect AfL practice to vary considerably across different contexts, subjects, modes and levels of study. We aim to support staff in developing their own understandings and interpretations of AfL principles and in developing AfL practices that fit their subjects and contexts. This means using a partnership approach where everybody is engaged in learning and strengthening their understandings of AfL and the rich variety of ways in which it can be employed. This is quite different from change models which aim to promote 'best practice' solutions or to disseminate ideas and methods derived from pilot projects and 'early adopters'.

2. Use evaluation to support development and keep accountability demands in check

Formative evaluation, which helps to improve AfL practice and enables sharing of experiences and ideas, is a key component of our activities. This contributes to a positive climate where engagement with AfL is fostered through participation and social motivations. We do need to be accountable but we do not want a heavy emphasis on hitting targets to dominate what we do. We must enable emergent outcomes and achievements to be fully taken into account in demonstrating the value of our activities. Over emphasis on accountability demands can very easily lead to a reliance on incentives and sanctions as extrinsic motivators for change. The parallel here with the dangers of summative assessment dominating our learning and teaching is clear.

3. Assist staff to gain the confidence and capabilities to develop their AfL practices

Change often requires support. Things often do not work out exactly as we hope and there are often disappointments along the way. We aim to foster a positive environment where colleagues in local teams, and across the university, can collaborate in delivering the kinds of educational changes they wish to promote, can exchange ideas, difficulties and solutions and share successes. We aim to provide a wide range of tools and resources to help staff to access a range of AfL ideas and approaches that they might adapt, and to alert them to potential pitfalls. Equally important is our strategy to review and develop the university environment, especially its procedures and processes, to make them more hospitable to the requirements of AfL. We need to address barriers to AfL practices and to put more supportive structures in place.

4. Use formal feedback to promote change in AfL practice and in the university environment

At the local or 'classroom' level, the use of evaluation tools provides formal feedback on the effectiveness of AfL approaches and provides pointers towards further development. Broader organisational learning requires discussion of AfL to be part of the formal processes and decision-making systems. We ensure that AfL is considered within the formal quality assurance and enhancement structures and that we participate in relevant committees. CETL AfL has a voice in important decision-making bodies, such as Learning and Teaching Committees, and is sufficiently embedded to ensure that we are included in formal consultations on matters relating to learning and teaching. Particularly important are formal links with the student body at institutional and departmental levels.

5. Use informal feedback to promote change in AfL practice and in the university environment

Our approach to AfL is based substantially on social models of learning. We expect learning to be more effective when there are opportunities to test out ideas and give and receive feedback, to collaborate with others to meet challenges, and to broaden thinking and understanding through access to a range of views and perspectives. This is just as important for staff as it is for students. CETL AfL supports interaction and collaboration amongst immediate colleagues and develops communities of interest across the university. We are greatly assisted in this by having a physical centre. The CETL hub provides a well-designed, well-equipped and welcoming environment where staff can meet and work together in a variety of ways, from organised meetings and workshops to chats over a cup of coffee. We are already noticing the ways in which this new environment can free up creative 'space' for thinking about new developments and also the benefits that 'bumping into' like-minded colleagues can generate.

6. Develop the university's capacity to generate and support positive change

CETL AfL does this by helping to create an environment which is supportive of change which is led at the local level, building on collaboration within existing teams and across the university. We particularly contribute by providing tools, resources and support for change based on AfL principles. As a very prominent focus, CETL ensures the visibility of the change, progress and energy centred on AfL through the flows of communication and feedback within a complex institution.

Rhetoric or reality?

To some readers our change agenda may seem somewhat idealistic and perhaps impractical. It does differ from some of the accepted approaches to good project management, dissemination and embedding. If we go along with the often-heard claim that there is nothing so useful as a good theory (or set of principles?),

perhaps the utility of our approach will be assured. Our change agenda has, in fact, a dual history, being based on both AfL principles developed over many years, and experience of successful institutional-level change management in relation to e-learning. In the e-learning development programme, successes were based on providing tools and support for locally-based developments, fostering learning through collaboration and communication, and investing considerable time and energy in transforming the university environment into one which is user-friendly for e-learning. The parallels with our CETL AfL approach are evident.

Nevertheless, there are still worrying moments. For example, when a committee demands to see progress on targets and figures to back up the claims, and these seem to represent only an impoverished version of all the exciting activity that is *really* going on. There are still times when a CETL director wakes up in the night thinking: 'Are they really going to believe we're achieving anything worthwhile?' However, these concerns are part of the 'gift' of CETL status, bringing along with it the opportunity to be part of a new framework for change in higher education, moving away from some of the constraints of technical-rational project-based approaches, and making it work!

References

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Saunders, M. (2005) 'How can evaluation help manage complex change?', *Academy Exchange*, Issue 2, pp. 22–23.

Trowler, P., Saunders, M. and Knight, P. (2003) *Change thinking, change practices*,
LTSN Generic Centre (available at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record&section=generic&id=262).

Further information

The CETL Afl web site is under development at: http://northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/

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