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Locating opportunities for building digital confidence in staff

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Keywords: Covid-19; digital confidence; teaching online; digital skills; online learning; learning technology.

The challenge

The pandemic is often described as being a catalyst for the rapid acceleration of existing trends in higher education, including more digital, flexible, and inclusive approaches to education (Hastings, 2020). As a team that helps teaching staff achieve pedagogical aims with the help of learning technologies, we have experienced our own micro-versions of this shift, especially around digital confidence. Our team, based in the School of Arts and Humanities, has long been working towards a model of supporting and guiding staff to take ownership of their online learning content and digital tools used in learning and teaching. The pandemic hastened this shift, resulting in colleagues with various levels of prior confidence and experience adapting to digital ways of facilitating learning and teaching.

The JISC 2020 digital insights survey acknowledged a heightened need for 'investment to support [staff] to develop these digital skills and enable them to teach with confidence and innovation' (Feldman, 2020, p.3). However, digital capabilities are often spoken about in the same breath as digital confidence without exploring whether confidence might require

its own approach (for example, Greener and Wakefield, 2015; Newland and Hanley, 2016). Supporting the development of digital capabilities and literacies in this time has been key, but our experience suggests that this is not enough if staff do not have the confidence to feel in control and supported if, for example, the technology for a learning activity should fail them. Our challenge concerned the team needing to be both a springboard and safety net for staff who found themselves suddenly navigating the dizzying heights of online and blended learning.

The response

Encouraging a community of practice

Confidence was identified as a key priority in the initial stages of the move to flexible delivery, and this enabled us to seek and exploit opportunities to build digital confidence across our practice right from the start. We took advantage of the strengths of being a School-based team with strong relationships with colleagues, and the mutual familiarity that brings, and used this to encourage an online community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Lock, 2006). We instigated this immediately and employed two key strategies.

Timely support with peers

Firstly, we created a School-wide online Microsoft Teams space where we held frequent drop-in support sessions. While the drop-in was to allow staff to ask us any questions about learning technologies, there were many who told us they came solely for the feeling of connection and the opportunity to learn from the questions of their peers. Hearing others' questions highlighted that they were not alone in struggling with unfamiliarity and uncertainty, and we encouraged staff to 'buddy up' with one another to build confidence with using new tools and approaches. Over time, as confidence grew, we saw staff use this space to give advice to others based on their own experiences and learning.

Bespoke training

Secondly, we developed a programme of training to support the move to flexible learning, including topics like hosting online sessions and facilitating group work, with opportunities for confidence-building integrated throughout. In addition to offering advice and

demonstrations about effective online learning, we increasingly asked attendees to collaborate on a problem that uses their own expertise as educators. This facilitates the building of confidence through providing opportunities to receive positive feedback from colleagues, framing staff as experts. It also provides space to gain confidence in a low-stakes, supported environment prior to using new tools and approaches with students. The success of these approaches has had visible impact, in that colleagues have developed the confidence to begin exploring technology in more complex and positive ways, and increasingly involve us in the development of new pedagogical approaches for online teaching. Staff now engage in discussions around online learning across the university and beyond, confidently sharing their experience with others. They now regularly feature on our blog and digital confidence became particularly evident through a dramatic increase in their contributions at a recent annual institution-wide event on flexible and online learning.

Recommendations

Through a process of reflecting on the different ways we have aimed to build digital confidence since the pandemic began, we identified three distinct thematic strands which help to articulate our approach.

Welcoming

We aim to help staff feel comfortable and prepared when attending our sessions, to help people to engage more confidently with new concepts. We circulate information about the session beforehand, ensuring attendees understand the level of participation expected of them, and begin with an informal 'corridor question' to build rapport and ease into a session where sharing of experiences and ideas is paramount.

Empowering

We emphasise to staff that their pedagogical insight is not only relevant, but key in the online learning environment. We challenge the notion that this mode of teaching is only for those who consider themselves 'tech-savvy', and gently push back whenever staff preface their questions with a variation of 'this might be a stupid question, but…'. We make it clear

that if they are struggling with something, there is a good chance that someone else is too, so their questions are always helpful. We also highlight any technology failures that occur during our workshops and draw attention to how we handle them in real time. In combination, these approaches allow staff to recognise that issues they experience are a normal part of using technology for learning and can be experienced by anyone. This recognition is a key step to believing that their problems can be overcome and building confidence in their ability to overcome them.

Sharing and reflecting

We have found that sharing and reflecting are inextricable from each other in our context. Moving into a post-pandemic future, we do not want staff to lose sight of the huge progress and innovations they have made. A programme of encouraging the sharing of practice benefits other staff but has also proved to be a useful mechanism for staff reflection and the refinement of their own ideas (Sandoff et al., 2018). This emphasis on sharing now runs through our training, drop-in sessions, and our blog, each of which provide a forum for staff to articulate their experiences.

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