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Speedy professional conversations around learning and teaching in higher education via the brand new tweetchat #LTHEchat

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What is #LTHEchat?

We are all busy and the world around us changes rapidly and constantly - faster than ever before. This increases the need for ongoing learning and development in a period when time is becoming ever more pressured. Engagement in professional development opportunities is a reflection of our personal and professional values, and understanding that to develop our ideas and practices we must learn from experience - our own experiences and importantly the experiences of others (Shulman, 2005).

As such, we wanted to build upon online networks to form an open community of practice that facilitates authentic, bite-size and just in-time opportunities for those who teach or support learning in higher education. Through the use of weekly tweet chats, we aim to: develop a flexible learning community to engage in professional conversations around learning and teaching; facilitate the sharing of experiences and ideas; and encourage colleagues to support each other in a collaborative and collegiate manner.

The idea for a dedicated chat around professional practice in higher education developed quickly as a concept. Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Chat was thus born - with #LTHEchat representing our chosen hashtag for a weekly 'tweetchat' - a synchronous facilitated discussion via Twitter. A dedicated LTHEchat web presence was also established (lthechat.com) where we introduce the project, capture the tweetchats, invite the community to vote for their favourite topic and archive past tweetchats. Each tweetchat has a specific learning and teaching theme and, in line with the collaborative ethos of the initiative, we have begun to invite guest facilitators. We are already fully booked until the end of February 2015.

#LTHEchats more than just chats?

We had successfully used Twitter previously to create a sense of community during the open event Bring Your Own Device 4 Learning (byod4learning.wordpress.com). Facilitated tweetchats were held over each of the five days to bring participants synchronously together for one hour. The benefits of sharing practice and supporting colleagues were plain to see, however these were outstripped by the formation of a lasting, global community of practice (Reed & Nerantzi, 2014).

The #LTHEchats are more than trivial chats in a public forum - they are "fast and furious", focused professional conversations among professional across global higher education. This forms a vibrant community where participants share their experiences, perspectives and questions to develop and broaden understanding of the various contexts within HE. Furthermore, participants also identify opportunities to support each

other in a collaborative and valid way. The facilitators are there to do exactly that - facilitate. They... we... are not the keepers of all knowledge, but rather there to stimulate rich and meaningful discussion amongst participants. As Friere (2011, 80) suggests:

“Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the –one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.”

Such a collaborative, reciprocal and collegiate form of engagement enables participants to leverage value from both the network and community in many ways. Wenger, Traynor and De Laat (2011) discuss five cycles of value creation in networks and communities, suggesting value can be:

- Immediate: answering/being answered;
- Potential: gaining skills/knowledge/connections which we may call upon in future;
- Applied: taking something and applying to practice;
- Realised: reflecting on new implementations;
- Reframing: in light of value gained, how does that impact on our view of success?

Whilst the authors suggest these cycles may not be linear, participants within #LTHEchat can certainly glean value (for themselves personally, as well as for their institutional context) from all five cycles.

How does #LTHEchat work?

Each week there is a pre-determined topic chosen. The community is encouraged to suggest topics and these are put to the vote using a poll. In addition we have invited guests to lead the chat on a topic on which they are a specialist.

The tweetchats are open to all colleagues who teach or support learning in HE as well as students. Indeed as this is an open initiative, all are welcome - just pitch up on Wednesday evenings, 8-9pm GMT to engage in the weekly #LTHEchats, connect with colleagues with similar interests and learn. For some this can be by simply listening in to the conversations taking place.

The #LTHEchat is facilitated by at least two members of the team and centres around a series of questions. Some of them are prepared in advance, however we recognise the serendipitous nature of the medium so facilitators are encouraged to be flexible and responsive to the community and adapt to what is needed in a specific moment in time. We are not the only ones asking questions - community members often build upon questions and provoke thought and reflection of the facilitators as well.

Each tweetchat is visualised using Martin Hawksey's TAGS Explorer (tags.hawksey.info). This provides an archive of tweets and a complex (by nature) but clear visual network diagram demonstrating the community activity. Each visualisation is unique and is characterised by a distinctive form which identifies the various key players in the network i.e. visualising the concept of betweenness centrality, where certain nodes (people) clearly act as facilitators for nodes who would otherwise not connect with others. We plan to evaluate this initiative as it develops and evolves, be responsive to the needs of the community but also proactive and experiment with different approaches that could potentially maximise engagement.

Who are we?

The project was initiated by Chrissi Nerantzi (a Principal Lecturer in Academic CPD at Manchester Metropolitan University) and Sue Beckingham (an Educational Developer at Sheffield Hallam University), who identified the potential for such a development opportunity for busy professionals in higher education - similar communities of practice have been successfully formed for other initiatives e.g. Bring Your Own Device 4 Learning (#BYOD4L), but none focussing on learning and teaching in HE. David Walker (Head of Technology Enhanced Learning at the University of Sussex) and Peter Reed (Lecturer in Learning Technology at the University of Liverpool) joined the team early on to contribute to the organisation, management and facilitation of the initiative.

Next steps?

The initial idea was to pilot the #LTHEchats over eight weeks, however due to the levels of interest and engagement, we're already planning for the New Year - considering topics as well as identifying potential guest facilitators.

After the New Year, we would like to:

- continue inviting guests to facilitate chats around particular areas of interest/speciality
- engage more students in the tweetchats
- invite students to lead tweetchats
- become more experimental regarding the tweetchat format and structure and introduce more variety
- use different media for tweetchat e.g. move beyond text
- continue voting for favourite topics, ask the community to make suggestions too
- seek to discuss topics that are current
- consider institutional engagement of #LTHEchats on a monthly basis
- introduce a more multi-directional approach
- link to other CPD activities within and beyond institutions
- encourage the community to summarise the key points raised and shared during the chats

“Every answer serves as a starting point, not an end point. It invites us to ask more and better questions.” (Douglas & Seely Brown, 2011, p82)

Get in touch with the authors, if you have further questions or suggestions on how you would like to see #ltthechat develop. This is a conversation that will grow with the community so we value your thoughts and ideas; and do check out @ltthechat.

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