Resilient Learning Communities in Social Science: Online Learning Groups & Teaching Cafes

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Summary
This poster explores the ways in which the School of Social Science responded to the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent turn to online learning through their Blended Learning Group, a Staff Survey, the Development of an Online Learning Guide, and our regular Teaching Café.

Introduction

In March 2020, along with the rest of the University, the School of Social Sciences closed its doors. The Blended Learning Task Implementation and Finish Group for Social Science (colloquially called the Online Learning Group) was inaugurated, and operated at least once a month from April on. The role of the Group was to disseminate information coming from the University-wide Blended Learning Task Implementation and Finish Group to the Schools, and also to raise issues from staff on the front line of teaching with our project manager. However, the Group also undertook a number of initiatives to support teaching in the School.

The Survey

Once the initial confusion had died down, our Online Learning Group determined that it would be a good idea to understand the mood and experience of the School in order to determine how best to offer help; and what form that help should take. During May, we spent time devising a 15 point questionnaire, covering the following topics: Overall; Staff Needs; Key Areas of Concern; Practice; and Resources. We gained 12 responses, which gave us some indication of the mood in the School, and proved useful when offering support; the Teaching Café is an example of this.

The Online Learning Guide

As an initial attempt to develop a resource for the School of Social Science, we designed a guide to online learning. This was intended to be a one stop shop for individual members of staff to return to over the months in which online learning was necessary, and to be specifically designed to work alongside the Principles of Online Learning and the broader university guidance. It was, however, expressly geared towards those working in the Social Science disciplines. Chapters covered in the 21 page guide included: Designing and Delivering an Online Curriculum; Accessibility and Inclusion; Developing a Community of Learners; Supporting Students to Learn Online; Technical Issues; Resource for Online Learning.

The Teaching Café

The Teaching Café has been one of the longest standing consequences of the change in teaching which has come about due to the pandemic. This Teams event was originally run on a semi-regular basis by Jen Walklate and Nancy Wachowich, and is now a monthly social event with either an open kaffeeklatsch style structure, or a theme; such as 'Returning to Classroom Teaching', for example. We are hoping to continue to run this event once we return to working on campus, as it has provided a great social space for those who are especially interested in dedicating time to thinking about pedagogy.

Conclusions/Discussion

There are a number of things which might have improved the work of the Online Teaching Group; perhaps running the survey earlier would be one of the most obvious, or running the survey on repeat; that was the original intention, but many surveys were operating at the time and we did not wish to add to that. We should also update the Guide more regularly. Finally, it would have been of benefit to fix on a structure for the Teaching Café much sooner; however, teaching commitments and staff illness were factors here. We hope, long term, to build on the work we have done to inculcate good pedagogic practices, particularly in online and digital learning, in the School of Social Sciences.