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“Culture Club”: Experiences of running a journal club for continuing professional development in higher education.

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the experiences of a journal club established to enable staff from different higher education (HE) institutions and roles to develop their knowledge and understanding around a shared interest in the areas of internationalisation and educational technology. Journal clubs have been used, mainly within the field of medicine and healthcare, to facilitate group learning. The club enabled the group to navigate a complex terrain of literature, develop a focus for reading and identifying a potential area for research and collaboration. Members of the journal club experienced several benefits from participation which are discussed together with the challenges of sustaining engagement over time. The article concludes with highlighting ways in which journal clubs can provide a fruitful form of continuing professional development in higher education, particularly in complex subject areas that traverse numerous roles and domains and makes recommendations for those considering establishing a journal club for similar purposes.

Keywords: journal club, continuing professional development, internationalisation, educational technology, transnational education

Introduction

The higher education (HE) sector faces numerous challenges in terms of globalisation, marketisation, and policy changes, which have brought about significant changes in the nature of academic work (Locke, 2014). This has led to a call for forms of continuing professional development (CPD) which are tailored to individual needs rather than being institutionally or managerially driven (A. Rothwell & Rothwell, 2014; Locke, Whitchurch, Smith & Mazenod). Although HE professional development may take many forms, we suggest that engagement with educational research literature within a journal club could enable academics to identify and discuss recent case studies in an environment that ensures a level of equality between the individual and the organisation (Locke et al., 2016). In addition, there is evidence that ongoing staff development may lead to more positive outcomes than a single event (De Rijdt, Stes, van der Vleuten & Dochy, 2013). It is within this particular conceptualisation of change offering the potential to support continuous professional development that we view journal clubs.

Literature Review

Journal clubs are commonly defined as ‘a group of individuals who meet regularly to discuss critically the clinical applicability of articles in the current medical journals’ (Linzer, 1987: 475), reflecting their origin and most widely used context of medical education. Their use is now well-established in educational and workplace settings (Lee, Boldt, Golnik, Arnold, Oetting, Beaver & Olson 2005; Honey & Baker, 2011; Dozier & Webber, 2015) in a wide range of medicine and healthcare sectors, such as pharmacy (Becket, Henriksen, Hanson, & Robison, 2018), psychiatry (Serghi, Goebert, Andrade, Hishinuma, Lunsford & Matsuda, 2015) and paediatric nursing (Purnell & Majid, 2017).

There are many reported benefits of journal clubs. These include increased familiarity with the literature (Purnell & Majid 2017), developing critical appraisal skills (Hunt & Topham, 2002; Becket et al., 2018), the sharing of knowledge (Dozier & Webber, 2015), development of communities of practice (Newswander & Borrego, 2009), and integrating evidence into practice (Purnell et al., 2017). Two systematic reviews (Harris, Kearley, Heneghan, Meayts, Roberts, Perrera, & Kearley-Shiers, 2011; Honey & Baker, 2011) conclude that despite their challenges, journal clubs can facilitate effective learning, and are still widely used in a variety of medicine and healthcare settings.

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With respect to challenges, Dozier & Webber (2015), for instance, observe two main types: those associated with establishing and maintaining the club, and those related to facilitating the sessions. In terms of the former, the most obvious challenge is scheduling and maintaining attendance at meetings which requires motivation and effort (Young & Vilelle, 2011). In terms of the latter, Dozier and Webber refer to the literature on facilitating small group discussions online and face-to-face. It is not surprising therefore that literature on journal club considers sustaining engagement as a key success factor (Deenadayalan, Grimmer-Somers, Prior & Kumar, 2008). Sustaining engagement can be achieved through:

- incentives (e.g. food and drink) (Sidorov, 1995),
- offering members autonomy in article selection (Deenadayalan et al., 2008),
- having well defined goals and a skilled facilitator (Valentini & Daniels, 1997), and,
- supporting club participants in developing their critical skills in order to drive their analysis to a deeper level (Haglund, 2008).

Despite these numerous benefits within the fields of medicine and healthcare, few other professions report on adopting journal clubs. Exceptions include library and information science (Young & Vilelle, 2011), social work education (Moore, Fawley-King, Stone & Accomazzo, 2015) and teacher development (Sims, Moss & Marshall, 2017). To the best of the authors' knowledge, apart from a writing group study (Grant, Munro, McIsaac, & Hill, 2010), there is a paucity of studies on factors that make journal clubs effective for the professional development of education and educational technology professionals in HE. The current paper aims to explore exactly this.

Background and Motivation for the Journal Club

The initial idea for the journal club emerged from our engagement with a regional branch of the Evaluation of Learners' Experiences of e-learning Special Interest Group (ELESIG). ELESIG is a vibrant community of researchers and practitioners in higher and further education with the aim of sharing knowledge, practice and developing a repertoire of resources to benefit its community. At ELESIG's North-West inaugural event, keynote Professor Ashwin (2014) discussed the importance for new researchers to engage with literature before embarking on pedagogic research. This inspired the creation of our journal club, enabled by a small grant from ELESIG.

The journal club's main purpose was to facilitate our CPD through the exploration of the literature within the broad area of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) for a group of HE staff. We hoped to develop a community of practice to enhance our understanding and knowledge of international students' experience of TEL through primarily reading and discussing academic literature, and in turn, share this learning with the wider ELESIG community.

As noted in the introduction, there is a growing recognition that institutions need to provide CPD opportunities tailored to the individual (Locke et al., 2016), which reflect the complexity of issues in a global context that go beyond simplistic training solutions (O'Mahony, 2014). Given the expanding body of literature relating to international students' learning experience (Lawton & Jensen, 2015), a journal club presented an opportunity for our regional ELESIG group to explore a body of literature in a way that corresponded to our needs and interests. Adhering to the traditional principle of journal clubs, we set out to read and critically discuss such literature as relevant to our professional contexts which centred on exploring a particular research area at the intersection of international students, technology and the student experience.

The next section describes the process of setting up and running the journal club, together with the way we approached investigating our topic. Then, the benefits and challenges of the journal club are discussed based on an analysis of our meeting notes and outputs and a reflective discussion of the four authors. Finally, we propose recommendations for those considering running journal clubs for CPD.

An Overview of the Journal Club Process

Participants

Three ELESIG committee members recruited interested colleagues from North-West HE institutions. The initial group consisted of ten participants from five institutions from a variety of roles, and an expert in international education acting as a critical friend. During the twelve-month period of the collaboration, the group's number and composition varied from meeting to meeting; but four core members remained a constant.

It is important to highlight that all members were invited to contribute to the reflective process of the journal club. However, in the end, for pragmatic reasons, the four members who maintained a commitment to this process became the authors of this paper. We acknowledge that the benefits and challenges we are putting forward could be limited in the sense that they have emerged from our reflections and not those of all the ten participants.

Our roles and interests surrounding TEL and international students were as follows: two educational technologists with an interest in understanding the experience of international students at home and students in transnational contexts; two

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senior lecturers, one whose main interest was engaging international students in a distance learning environment, and another whose interest lay in internationalisation at home and students in a transnational context.

Meetings

The journal club had eight meetings, some face-to-face and some virtual. The first, face-to-face, meeting enabled the group to get to know one other and share experiences and interests. Participants had been asked to read three articles (Jung, 2014; O’Mahony, 2014; Singh, 2005) in advance, recommended by our critical friend. These articles focused on definitions and exposed the diversity of perspectives, e.g. pedagogical, cultural and geo-political. When facilitating our first meeting, this critical friend used the discussion of these articles to highlight some of the complexities within the literature related to internationalisation and transnational education (TNE). As a result, our own conceptualisation of who an international student was, broadened.

Each subsequent meeting, we either self-selected and read articles of interest, or identified articles which either supported or challenged particular findings in relation to the topic. This also led to a certain flexibility in our goals as members brought different articles to the table. These were shared and, in some cases, reduced in order to identify key texts to discuss. In most cases individuals would create and share their reading notes. The next reading task was decided at the end of each meeting. This process allowed us to analyse the issues from different directions, which provided us with a wider range of perspectives on international students, also arising from our differing roles, experiences and institutional contexts.

We suddenly found ourselves grappling with more complexity than certainty. For instance, a few of us were involved in supporting international students who arrived at our UK campus from studying at an international university (satellite campus), some of us had experience with TNE students studying for UK degrees abroad, whilst also others had worked with international students both abroad in their own education system and in the UK. Because of these variations, we found finding a common ground initially difficult.

Tasks

As a result of this variation, we came up with the practical idea of creating a sequence of ‘essay’ tasks for each subsequent meeting, e.g.:

The recent HEA report on TNE defined it as . . . “award- or credit- bearing learning undertaken by students who are based in a different country from that of the awarding institution (O’Mahony, 2014, p.8)”. Does this description capture the diversity within this emerging area? Are there other ways to think about the delineations between students in divergent learning spaces?

Such essay questions helped us to outline the boundaries of our exploration. At a typical meeting, we discussed how our chosen articles supported or challenged the essay question, and finish with refining the next essay question. Post-meeting, we shared notes with members. We spent a large part of each meeting discussing the next essay question, which created a cycle of readings built on members’ needs. This process helped us sustain our progress with a clear focus.

To keep momentum, we decided to deliver our findings as a joint presentation (Turner, Mason, Varga-Atkins & Harrison, 2016) at the European Association for International Education. This external recognition motivated participants. Conference participation also led to further collaboration in Copenhagen (Jørgensen, Pedersen, Mason, Turner & Harrison, 2017). Having described our strategies to maintain engagement, we turn to discussing the benefits and challenges of associated with running a journal club.

Benefits

Five key benefits emerged in terms of participants’ professional development. The journal club (1) enabled us to navigate a complex and diverse area of literature. Participation (2) broadened our knowledge, understanding, and transformed our perspectives on a specific topic, internationalisation. We also (3) enhanced our research skills, (4) developed a focus for our own research interests, and (5) created new professional networks. Next, each benefit is described in more detail.

Navigation of a Complex and Diverse Area of Literature

Our journal club aimed at exploring the literature on international students’ experiences with technology. However, as part of this process we came to realise that our own understanding of ‘international students’ varied considerably. For instance, would transnational students and distance learning students be categorised as international students? To answer such questions, the group developed a diagram (Figure 1) in order to help plot the different kinds of international provision. Diagramming was useful in forming a shared awareness of our conceptualisation of ‘international students’.

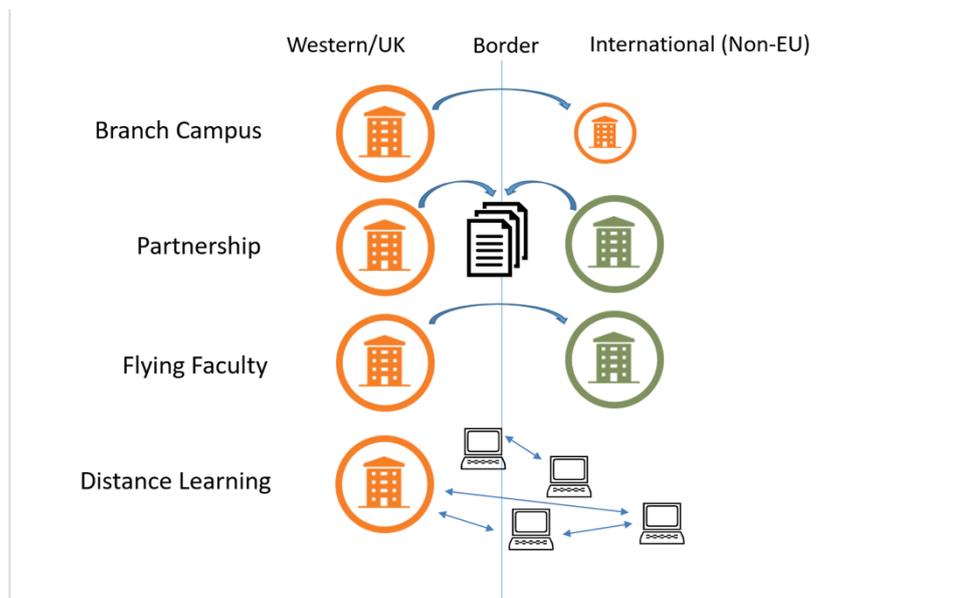


Figure 1. Illustration of the Different Types of International Education

Another example emerged from the problematic nature of defining transnational education. To deal with this, we set to analyse a HEA definition [see Tasks section above] in preparation for the subsequent meeting. This led us to widen our scope of research, drawing on examples which closer related to our experiences, described next.

Broadening of Knowledge, Understanding and Perspectives on a Specific Topic

The diversity of our roles and experiences forced us to question some of our basic assumptions and theoretical standpoints around international students and internationalisation. For instance, just the mere fact that our institutional contexts were different meant that our default concept of an 'international student studying via technology' was different: from transnational students studying in a non-UK country, through international students studying on-campus in UK to distance learning students from anywhere studying for a UK degree online.

Engaging with people from diverse backgrounds, was energising and enriching. Had our institutional contexts been the same or had there been plenty of existing literature in this area, we might have dived straight into a literature review without questioning our theoretical standpoint of the concept of 'international students'. Instead, we gained a deeper understanding which informed our specific areas of interest in relation to international students' experiences with technology. Members introduced us to literature that we would otherwise have overlooked.

An example of this was our growing awareness of the problematic nature of the term 'culture', its definitions and uses within the literature. Our 'Culture Club' became a shared creative, vibrant learning community in which we were able to respond to new ideas, challenge each other, and so, widen our perspectives, offering a positive and supportive environment for professional development.

Development and Enhancement Research Skills

As well as enhancing our search strategy skills through sharing, we also learned new specific techniques for literature analysis. The range of literature and the problematic nature of the concept of international students led to one group member to conduct a bibliometric analysis, a technique which was shared with group members.

We illustrate two examples of using of large-scale bibliometric analysis, which could benefit other journal clubs investigating new or complex research terrains. In the first one, 2000 articles were analysed in the Scopus database for similar terms within keywords, titles and abstracts. Three broad areas were compared: articles on international students, distance learning, and transnational education, with search hits represented in a Venn-diagram to show overlapping articles, but which clearly demonstrated a lack of crossover among these fields. For instance, there was only one article that shared the terms 'distance learning' and 'transnational education' (see Figure 2).

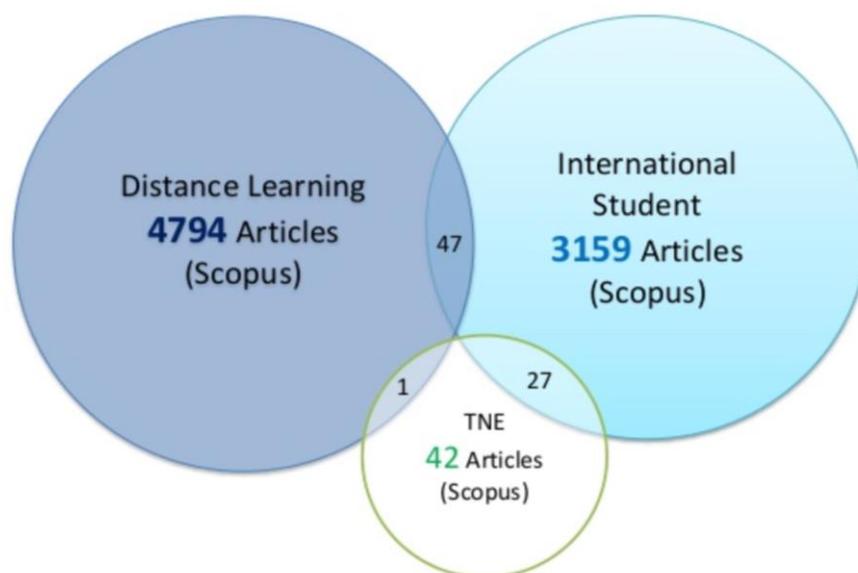


Figure 2. Results of the Bibliometric Analysis Showing the Number of Articles that Share the Same Keywords (TNE=Transnational Education)

Having read some of the articles, we confirmed that, instead of being connected, they were distinct areas of research within their own journals. This was despite the fact that distance learning had traditionally been included as a form of transnational education, both internationally and in the UK (HESA, 2017).

The other large-scale bibliographic analysis was conducted when we decided to narrow our focus to cultural exchange, as it became necessary to identify different theoretical frameworks for understanding culture. A similar bibliographic analysis of terms and keywords used for culture was conducted, of 2000 articles. The first hundred highest reoccurring terms were organised by their recurrence. Figure 3 shows the range of terms organised according to how students’ own home culture is recognised within the educational process and/or curriculum design.

These quantitative approaches to analysing literature were new to several group members, some of whom have since applied them in other areas of their research.

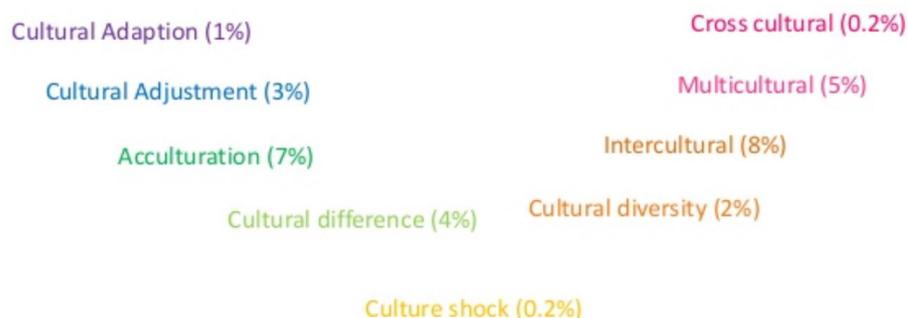


Figure 3. List of terms used in the literature when discussing culture. Percentages indicate the number of instances found relative to the number of papers analysed

Developing a Focus for Further Research

The journal club enabled us to develop a specific focus for further research and collaboration in several ways. Firstly, setting ourselves a task for every meeting helped us sustain our progress and gradually narrow our focus. In our final essay task we tried answering the following research question based on consulted literature:

Is it possible to identify approaches to course design that use social aspects of technology to facilitate cultural exchange?

With this clear focus, we were able to locate two case studies that illustrate how intercultural learning can be successfully facilitated through technology (Lam, 2012; Li & Zhang, 2015). Perhaps more significantly, however, we identified a paucity of studies on the use of technology for cultural exchange outside the domain of language learning, a finding which corroborates Çiftçi’s (2016) literature review and also noted by de Wit (2017). The two studies were chosen specifically because they were not conducted with language learners. Given the current focus by many institutions on internationalisation at home (Haigh, 2014), and the huge potential of technology to contributing to this agenda (de Wit, 2017), we felt this was a ripe area for further research.

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Creation of New Networks

The journal club provided opportunities for expanding our network by engaging with colleagues in different roles and institutions. This aligns with sentiments expressed by Nixon and Brown (2013), who reflect on the importance of communities of practice in shaping professional development.

Challenges

Our journal club faced several challenges, some of which were easier to overcome than others. These included 1) issues associated with a diverse group, 2) the practicalities of finding a suitable time and location, and 3) sustaining long-term participation and engagement.

Diversity of Roles and Focus

The diversity of our roles, experiences and institutional contexts created challenges, notwithstanding the benefits highlighted above. Because of our varied perspectives, it was initially difficult to establish a common ground. Previous studies on group work have shown that although heterogeneous groups take longer to work on a task, usually perform better and are more creative (Watson, Kumar & Michaelsen, 1993; Kelly, 2009). We found performing longer but better also to be the case: discussing multiple perspectives was a useful source of learning.

As a result, we were able to effectively narrow our focus through using ‘essay’-type questions, drawing on our skills as teachers. This provided structure, which Lee et al (2005) found to be a successful strategy in running journal clubs. At the same time, the open-ended essay tasks allowed us freedom to develop our own perspectives, and weave previous conceptual understandings into the issues being explored.

Practical Difficulties of Time and Location

The biggest challenge was keeping the club going when all participants had multiple demands on their time. As members were spread across different institutions, it was not possible to meet face-to-face every time. We juggled between varying locations, times and mixed online and physical attendance, with most meetings involving some members’ participating web conferencing via Skype. At times, those physically present tended to dominate the conversation, having the advantage of being able to respond to non-verbal cues in the room. This was perhaps a less satisfying experience for those connecting virtually as they were not always able to contribute instantly to the conversation. In later meetings all participants joined virtually, allowing everyone to work on an equal level.

Sustaining Participation and Motivation

As noted earlier, initial membership of the group included ten participants, with only four core members. The main reason for non-attendance and drop-out was workload. The initial interest generated by our aims and availability of funding dwindled as participants found it difficult to justify the time against competing demands. Similar difficulties are cited in nursing where staff workload competes with the ‘mantra of evidenced-based practice’ (Rodriguez, Victor, Leonardi, Sulo, & Littlejohn, 2016) and in education. Wenke, O’Shea, Hilder, Thomas, & Mickan, (2019) see increased motivation through reading articles that are immediately applicable and promote the use of journal clubs with stronger guidance and direction, than traditional journal clubs, along with the recognition from senior staff. Studies into the success factors for medical journal clubs highlight making them mandatory with allocated work time to be the biggest factor that affect their sustainability (Sidorov, 1995; Valentini & Daniels, 1997; Deenadayalan et al., 2008; Dozier & Webber, 2015). It could be argued that our own journal club lacked these immediate intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. However, these factors may apply to those working in a clinical setting, but not for those in an educational context.

One strategy that helped us address the challenge of maintaining our engagement, was the decision to present our findings at various events. The international conference allowed us to reach an international audience, which was a strong extrinsic motivator, leading to a further collaboration with colleagues from a Danish institution. Another strategy was to keep our group size small, which allowed for greater efficiency and organisation, and in turn, successful team decision-making and functioning (Hackman & Vidmar, 1970).

Recommendations

The journal club process offers an interesting avenue for wider staff CPD. Journal club meetings can engage staff on a range of topics and form part of a continuous engagement with literature and reflection on practice. Topics outside of education could be considered such as management and leadership, health and wellbeing. Based on the above benefits and challenges discussed, we propose the following recommendations to those who are considering establishing a journal club for staff development in HE:

- Create a Cyclical Approach with Each Meeting Responding to the Needs of its Members - A cyclical process consisting of identification-reading-discussion- and defining-the-next-stage can provide structure while supporting wide-ranging perspectives.

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- Use Bibliographic Analysis to Help Explore Emerging or Disparate Literature - Bibliometric analysis can be useful in helping journal clubs highlight areas of interest across disparate or emerging subject areas and journals.
- Use Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivators to Sustain Engagement and Focus - The key to intrinsic motivation lies in developing a focus of shared interest. A form of output to a wide audience can be a strong external motivator.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed some of the benefits and challenges of a sustained, topic-based journal club through our experience of developing our understanding of the intersection of the broad areas of internationalisation and technology-enhanced learning. As HE institutions are challenged to provide novel methods of CPD, it is our view that journal clubs focusing on a specific topic despite the challenges of sustaining engagement from a diverse group, can provide an enriching and highly rewarding experience for its participants.

Biographies

Jim Turner has worked in the field of learning technology for over 20 years. He is Senior Learning Technologist at the Teaching and Learning Academy at Liverpool John Moores University. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Tunde Varga-Atkins is a Senior Educational Developer at the University of Liverpool, and current chair of ELESIG. Her educational research areas include digital capabilities, authentic assessment, networked learning, and in particular qualitative and visual methods for curriculum evaluation, such as nominal focus groups.

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Roger Harrison is teaching and developing the Online Distance Learning Postgraduate Programme in Public Health and Primary Care at the University of Manchester.

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