

2020

## TLABs: A Teaching and Learning Community of Practice – What is it, Does It Work and Tips for Doing One of Your Own

Shelley Beatty

*Edith Cowan University, s.beatty@ecu.edu.au*

Kim Clark

*Edith Cowan University, k.clark@ecu.edu.au*

Jo Lines

*Edith Cowan University, j.lines@ecu.edu.au*

Sally-Anne Doherty

*Edith Cowan University, s.doherty@ecu.edu.au*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp>

---

### Recommended Citation

Beatty, S., Clark, K., Lines, J., & Doherty, S. (2020). TLABs: A Teaching and Learning Community of Practice – What is it, Does It Work and Tips for Doing One of Your Own. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 17(5). <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.17.5.9>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## TLABs: A Teaching and Learning Community of Practice – What is it, Does It Work and Tips for Doing One of Your Own

### Abstract

Communities of Practice are an increasingly common tool used to support novice academics in higher education settings. Initiated in 2015 at a Western Australian University, TLABs is an acronym for 'Teaching and Learning for Level A and B' academic staff and was designed to build a community of practice to mentor junior academics; help them develop their teaching skills; and enhance academic careers. The paper describes the nature of TLABs; how it is experienced from the perspective of participants and provides recommendations for implementing a successful teaching and learning community of practice in a higher education setting.

### Keywords

community of practice, professional development, novice academics, early career academics



2020

## TLABs: A Teaching and Learning Community of Practice – What is it, Does It Work and Tips for Doing One of Your Own

Shelley Beatty

*Edith Cowan University, s.beatty@ecu.edu.au*

Kim Clark

*Edith Cowan University, k.clark@ecu.edu.au*

Jo Lines

*Edith Cowan University, j.lines@ecu.edu.au*

Sally-Anne Doherty

*Edith Cowan University, s.doherty@ecu.edu.au*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp>

### Recommended Citation

Beatty, S., Clark, K., Lines, J., & Doherty, S. (2020). TLABs: A Teaching and Learning Community of Practice – What is it, Does It Work and Tips for Doing One of Your Own. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 17(5). <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol17/iss5/9>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

## **TLABs: A Teaching and Learning Community of Practice – What is it, Does It Work and Tips for Doing One of Your Own**

### **Abstract**

Communities of Practice are an increasingly common tool used to support novice academics in higher education settings. Initiated in 2015 at a Western Australian University, TLABs is an acronym for 'Teaching and Learning for Level A and B' academic staff and was designed to build a community of practice to mentor junior academics; help them develop their teaching skills; and enhance academic careers. The paper describes the nature of TLABs; how it is experienced from the perspective of participants and provides recommendations for implementing a successful teaching and learning community of practice in a higher education setting.

### **Keywords**

community of practice, professional development, novice academics, early career academics

## Introduction

That teaching lies at the heart of quality in universities (Houston & Hood, 2017) is something that seems to go without saying. It follows then, that inducting new teaching staff into their roles and supporting them with the processes of acquiring the knowledge and skills to optimise their role effectiveness should be central to the quality assurance planning in universities. The provision of professional learning to enhance teaching quality is important and in particular, support for early career university academics is recognised as fundamental to establishing a culture of learning and teaching professionalism and effectiveness in higher education institutions (Locke, 2014). Despite this, Fraser et al., (2017) have characterised a sector-wide tendency of only offering piecemeal support to early career teaching academics during their transition into teaching roles. Inevitably, the absence of a systematic approach to scaffolding early development amongst this group in ways that combine challenge with assurances of professional safety will struggle to deliver the best long-term outcomes for students.

There are, of course, many ways in which professional learning opportunities oriented to optimising teaching effectiveness can be provided in universities. Among them, facilitating and encouraging informal, non-structured conversations with colleagues has been reported as being useful in assisting novice academics with: managing their teaching contexts; getting reassurance about their teaching practice; allowing them to discuss teaching-related issues; improving student learning experiences; and transforming their teaching, thinking and ongoing practice (Thompson, 2015).

Peer learning communities, also known as communities of practice (CoP) can capture and capitalise on the benefits of incidental corridor conversations, by providing regular opportunities for collaborative learning. Fraser et al. (2017) characterise a CoP as relating to a topic of shared interest in which members voluntarily help one-another to develop their schemas of effective practice and related skills. CoP have long been recognised as groups where participants share what they know, learning from and with each other during face-to-face or virtual interactions. Their essence is situated in mutual engagement and common interests or focal areas, with a shared repertoire that generates knowledge and expertise through regular interaction (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

Notably, CoP have been reported to be an especially useful mentoring tool to support the induction and transition of early career academics into their teaching roles. Among the reasons for this are that a CoP can: connect people; provide a shared context; enable dialogue; stimulate learning; capture and diffuse existing knowledge; introduce collaborative processes; and generate new knowledge (Wenger, 1998; Nickol, 2003; Cambridge et al., 2005; Churchman, 2005; Viskovic, 2006; Jawitz, 2009; Warhurst, 2008; Remmik et al., 2011). Understandably, therefore, CoP have been suggested as a pivotal professional development strategy in higher education settings, with the recommendation that staff development programs should actively implement such forums (Arthur, 2016).

This paper reflects upon the importance of teaching quality for all universities, with specific reference to an initiative in the bailiwick of CoP called TLABs, which has been running at one Western Australian university since 2015. The TLABs acronym stands for ‘Teaching and Learning for Level A and B academic staff’. The structure and effectiveness of this TLABs initiative will be reported, giving a range of insights about both the potential benefits and significance for teaching quality in universities from the use of the CoP strategy. Along with this, suggestions and reflections are offered for those considering adopting a similar CoP strategy for junior academics in their own organisations.

For context, the TLABs CoP forms part of a broader School strategy on enhancing teaching quality. Central to this strategy has been the seemingly incontestable view that the School’s capacity to provide effective and well-received teaching would substantially be a product of the knowledge and attitudes of its teaching staff as well as their practical skills. The School’s concern with teaching quality is by no means a recent matter or something unique to the organisation. As Knapper (2016) has pointed out, Australian universities and many international counterparts have been increasingly attending to teaching quality to remain competitive in a global market for students and to be accountable for the public funding they receive.

Of course, there are also broader imperatives at play than simply market share and public accountability when it comes to the quality of university teaching. Reflecting this theme, Fraser et al., (2017) refer to an increasing need for university teaching staff to enhance their pedagogical skills to meet the needs of both a changing student cohort and the new technologies that are increasingly available to support teaching. McMillan and Gordon (2017) have also highlighted the imperative for universities to prepare students for the changing skill requirements of a knowledge-

based economy and point to a related need for further development and support to foster relevant and effective teaching skills. With substantially more ambition, Khamis and Scully (2020) refer to this issue as a nation-building piece, oriented to the creation of inclusive and diverse societies that advance through research-led innovation.

Wherever the drivers are located in the minds of those with a stake in what happens to university teaching, to see improvements, universities must engage early career teachers in thinking about the pedagogies that will be most beneficial to contemporary student learning (Fraser et al., 2017). These scholars stress that the responsibility of those in university educational development roles is to support early career teachers' transition into their roles by implementing strategies that intentionally scaffold role maturation. This is a point echoed by Houston and Hood (2017) and was reflected in the thinking that led to the initiation of the TLABs CoP.

Empirical evidence of this TLABs CoP as a teaching quality endeavour remains a work in progress. Although it would have been useful to have a clearly established evidence-base upon which to interpret the likely impact of TLABs on teaching improvement prior to its implementation in the School, it is important to recognise that TLABs emerged from solid underpinnings of scholarly thought and study. This is reflected by Botham (2018) who referred to a broad recognition amongst scholars that engagement with pedagogical issues by teaching staff translates into improved student experiences and satisfaction.

A distinguishing feature of TLABs vis-à-vis the general issue of teaching quality endeavours is that it is a departure from what Houston and Hood (2017) refer to as a predominant focus on indicators that reflect past efforts. While acknowledging the legitimacy of universities collecting these backward-facing accountability measures of teaching quality, Groen (2017) argues that they have been over-emphasised and that there needs to be more forward-looking educational improvement processes, using bottom-up approaches of the type reflected in the TLABs CoP. Groen's (2017) model of forward-looking educational improvement resonates with TLABs in that it specifically suggests engagement with teaching staff to ensure they own change processes, by adopting standpoints of:

- Contextual relevance and appropriateness;
- Fostering the exchange of ideas and sharing of different perspectives;
- Being shaped by participants; and
- Emphasising participant capability building for sustained change.

The following section of the paper elaborates on these elements, offering a more detailed description of the philosophy, operation and impact of TLABs.

## **TLABs: What is it?**

To provide context, TLABs operates in a School of Medical and Health Sciences (SMHS) that is comprised of three diverse discipline clusters (Allied Health; Medical and Exercise Science; and Public Health and Occupational Health and Safety). More than 120 staff (approximately 50 of whom are early-career academics) deliver over 40 undergraduate and postgraduate courses to a very diverse cohort of over 2500 students. The Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) (ADTL) has ultimate responsibility for the University and School learning and teaching goals, which include enhancing student retention and success.

The TLABs CoP is grounded in and guided by scholarly evidence (Groen, 2017; Fraser et al., 2017; Houston & Hood, 2017) in that it is a bottom-up approach and forward-looking initiative designed to maximise ownership and engagement by participants. TLABs also implements the CoP success factors outlined by Probst and Borzillo (2008) as summarised in Figure 1.

**Figure 1***Key elements of TLABs*

Highly collaborative and engaging	Fosters forward-looking capability development	Co-design led by participants	Safe, trusting, judgement-free environment
Promotes ideas exchange and sharing experiences	Provides access to decision makers and experts	Informed by scholarly literature	Long-term development strategy and widely promoted
Endorsed by School Executive	Non-compulsory and flexible delivery strategy	Empathic facilitator with excellent group facilitation skills	Hierarchy free

TLABs are held every two months and the sessions are opt-in, welcoming, informal and 1.5-hours in duration. Sessions are facilitated by the ADTL, utilising Scott et al., (2008) ‘Listen, Link and Lead’ principles of learning and teaching leadership. That is, the ADTL provides a forum for participants to access and raise issues directly with an academic leader (listen); broadly connects challenges with learnt experiences and openly discusses viable alternatives (link); and then offers clear guidance with implementation of solutions. Since inception, 22 TLABs CoP meetings have taken place.

Members are involved in the co-design of the content covered whereby at the start of each semester a brainstorming session is conducted to generate a list of potential teaching-related topics. A nominal group voting technique is then implemented whereby each participant votes on their preferred topic/s. This voting process converts the list of topics into an agreed upon order of priority. Co-design of the content combined with the non-compulsory nature of the sessions gives valuable agency to early career academics in managing their ongoing professional learning and allows them to focus on topics of personal relevance and provides for a diverse range of themes be addressed in the TLABs sessions (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2***Examples of TLABs themes and topics*

Conducting needs assessments	Establishing supportive and safe learning environments	Reflecting on teaching strategies	Understanding University curriculum policies and procedures
Discussing quality improvement strategies	Enhancing retention	Managing student behaviour and dealing with challenging students	Improving online student engagement
Designing assessment to prevent academic misconduct	Constructing marking rubrics	Clarifying valid and non-valid grounds for assignment extensions	Managing marking workloads
Using Turnitin to improve student writing	Implementing progressive consensus moderation techniques	Supporting international students	Embedding Aboriginal cultural content and perspectives

Many of the academics eligible to attend TLABs work part-time. To accommodate as many as possible, TLABs sessions are purposefully scheduled on different days and times during non-teaching weeks and video conferencing has been introduced enable staff on the University's rural campus to participate. Attendees are provided with a free nutritious lunch as a way of acknowledging both the time commitment involved and as a token reflection that the endeavour is one of shared purpose.

### TLABs: Does it Work?

TLABs has been informally evaluated twice. In 2016 and again in 2018 TLABs participants were asked to provide anonymous feedback on the following questions:

- How has your attendance at TLABs impacted on any specific aspect of your teaching?
- How has your attendance at TLABs impacted your confidence or knowledge of how to teach, either in the classroom or online?
- How has your attendance at TLABs impacted your professional growth in any way?
- Can you name something you have gained from attending, or something you really like about TLABs?
- Would you like any aspects of the TLAB sessions changed or improved to make them more beneficial to you?

Feedback from these qualitative evaluations was consistently positive, with participants indicating that they felt the CoP provided an opportunity to speak freely about topics that were determined by the group, rather than having topics imposed. They indicated that they enjoyed interacting with peers who were often experiencing similar issues and sharing teaching ideas in a highly collegial and supportive atmosphere. For example:

*"The TLAB experience has been of enormous benefit to me as a new lecturer at ECU". (Participant, 2016)*  
*"To have the opportunity to tap into the resources and experiences of some senior staff has been invaluable". (Participant, 2016)*



*“This has helped me grow professionally”.* (Participant, 2016)

*“TLABS have helped me learn to worry less about my teaching”.* (Participant, 2016)

*“TLABs has introduced me to various strategies of dealing with students who have very limited English speaking and writing skills”.* (Participant, 2018)

*“Without TLABs I would not be aware of new initiatives or resources that have been introduced to help staff and students”.* (Participant, 2018)

*“Through TLABs I have gotten to know my colleagues much better, including their areas of expertise, particularly those outside of my department, but within my School”.* (Participant, 2018)

*“Attending the TLABS has helped me realise how much I do know, and this has helped my confidence”.* (Participant, 2018)

*“It's not something that can be quantified easily, but I feel a sense of connection with my peers and that I am not alone in my struggles with my role. It is a safe space to share thoughts and fears, and to hear solutions from colleagues”.* (Participant, 2018)

These responses accord with Groen's (2017) model as previously outlined. Specifically, the participant feedback reflects fostering and exchange of ideas, sharing of different perspectives and having content that is shaped by participants. As Groen (2017) notes, promoting teaching quality as a core part of the School's strategic orientation situates it well in ensuring that academic staff feel ownership of any change processes. In particular, the participants are more likely to offer one another the type of psychological environment and the sense of safety required to deeply reflect on aspects of pedagogy, and to discuss these with colleagues and identify the personal challenges related to testing ideas for improvement and broader agendas. This is a goal Fraser et al., (2017) seem to have had in mind when they suggested that universities need to engage early career teachers in thinking about the pedagogies that would be most beneficial to student learning.

The claim that a psychologically safe environment was provided in TLABs was endorsed by participants, who reported feeling reassured when their colleagues shared that they were experiencing similar issues to their own. Debriefing and discussing areas of concern in a safe and non-judgmental environment were specifically raised, along with an appreciation of the opportunity to communicate directly with the ADTL who in turn communicates with the School Executive.

In 2019, a Senior learning Designer from the University's Centre for Learning and Teaching facilitated a TLABs session in the ADTL's absence. This opportunity was leveraged to ask participants to reflect on and discuss the usefulness of the TLABs CoP in terms of helping them with their teaching and to canvas suggestions for improvements. A subsequent report from the Senior Learning Designer to the ADTL included the following comments:

*“[the participants] all recognise the value of the TLABs sessions. [...] they enjoy the fact that it is a safe place to share; facilitated by you gives them a ‘voice’ to keep you informed about local issues within the School and their work areas; they like your enthusiasm and complimented your knowledge; the pace, frequency and timing is good –they like the informal nature of the session; a suggestion was more experienced lecturers could be included in the T&L conversations, however, the majority of TLABs staff would prefer to keep TLABs sessions for A&B [early career academics] only and let more experienced staff have a separate session.”* (Senior Learning Designer, 2019).

This general feedback is reinforced by the following more specific unsolicited participant feedback:

*“...as a new academic, the TLABs is a really reassuring environment. I feel like I can share anything that I'm finding hard or concerned about, without being judged or feeling inadequate. Knowing that it doesn't go further than the group and doesn't reflect poorly on me is a real strength. Some great ideas*

*have already come out, and it's encouraged me to reflect on my current teaching practices"* (Email from a Level B academic, 2017).

*"...a quick thanks for the TLABs session. It was really helpful to sit with the other A's & B's and share creative solutions to issues we've been having. It was great how you facilitated our discussion but then let us lead the discussion to specific problems and solutions. Letting us talk about what we wanted and share our solutions was super helpful"* (Email from Level B academic, 2017).

Such testimonials seem to reinforce the point that ensuring a safe, collegiate environment, having time to discuss and reflect on pedagogical issues, and sharing ideas, promote a positive environment for teaching quality improvement and that this is foundational to its realisation. Both TLAB evaluations indicate that participants appreciate the opportunity to meet informally to discuss, share and debate teaching and learning strategies, issues and problems. It was also clear that TLABs facilitates a conduct between junior academic staff and more senior University hierarchy by being able to have access to and raise issues with the ADTL. In this manner the voices of junior academics are heard in a safe and supportive environment. The TLABs CoP is a unique initiative at the University and participants recognise its value.

Another outcome of TLABs has been that it has promoted networking between academics, providing peer support and lessening isolation:

*"I am from the School of Science and attend TLABs. I count these sessions among the highlights of my semester - they keep me in touch with colleagues in a broader community, challenge me to think and help me keep a sense of balance about life as an academic. Shelley's approach fosters a strong sense that HE teaching is a collegial and scholarly pursuit that requires reflective practice and openness to others. I always come away feeling valued, with a renewed sense of enthusiasm for my own teaching practice – and far too many new ideas for my own good!"* (Participant feedback, 2018).

Reflected here seems to be something of Locke's (2014) earlier-mentioned point that professional learning that supports quality teaching, especially for early career academics, is fundamental to establishing a culture of professionalism in learning and teaching in higher education institutions. This CoP provides facilitated peer support for teaching practice and an opportunity to network and discuss shared concerns. Participants gained confidence in their ability to implement teaching and learning policies and procedures and they appreciated the opportunity to access School leaders to share teaching and learning-related feedback. Participants generally indicated an appreciation of the opportunity to raise issues of personal concern and to build a skills repertoire from the strengths and experiences of others, as this offered an accessible and context-relevant platform for teaching improvement.

While acknowledging that the pathway from an initiative like TLABs to improved teaching practices is not clear-cut or uniform, participant feedback supports Botham's (2018) point that engagement with pedagogical issues by teaching staff has the potential to translate into improved student experiences. Some of the ways in which this can occur are reflected in the following participant feedback:

*"As a result of TLABs, I feel more confident as a lecturer and have incorporated many of the ideas that have been suggested in the group; for example, novel ice-breakers, ways to gain mid-semester feedback, and dealing with students with poor English"* (Participant feedback, 2018).  
*"Have learnt lots of good ideas for engaging students, how to identify 'at risk' students and what to do about these students in order to help them stay in the course, using marking rubrics, addressing academic misconduct"* (Participant feedback, 2018).

Over time it has become clear that the TLABs CoP has provided the supportive culture required for novice academics to apply the principles of effective teaching in everyday practice (Quinlan, 2014). Apart from the positive personal impacts on participants, the TLABs CoP has been instrumental in fostering Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) practices both within the University and also across the wider sector. This is evident in the range of papers delivered by TLABs participants at university learning and teaching conferences. TLABs participants have routinely presented at ECulture, the annual University learning and teaching internal conference, (i.e. 51 papers presented between 2016-2019); the Western Australian Teaching and Learning Forum (i.e. nine papers between 2018 and 2019);

and for the first time, at the 2019 International Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia conference (three papers).

TLABs participants have also been recipients of University Vice Chancellor Awards for Teaching Excellence in 2017 (two awards), 2018 (two awards) and 2019 (five awards). Three TLABs participants were nominated by the University for 2019 Australian Awards for University Teaching.

Additionally, TLABs participants have been recipients of internal School-wide and University-wide learning and teaching grants. Between 2016 and 2020, 19 TLABs participants were associated with 14 School-based teaching and learning grants. Between 2018 and 2020, 22 TLABs participants were associated with 12 University-wide learning and teaching grants. Other scholarly outcomes in the form of teaching-related journal publications are increasingly being produced by TLABs participants (i.e. 31 publications between 2016-2020).

This SoTL culture is expanding throughout the School, where in 2019, 47% of all presentations at the University's ECulture conference were delivered by academics from the School. Notable too is the impact that this fostering of SoTL has had upon the confidence of staff to actually participate, feeding the capacity to fuel a positive feedback loop or virtuous cycle of reinforcing actions in the area of teaching quality that offer the potential for sustainable improvements:

*"TLABs gives me an opportunity to collaborate outside of my team and discuss solutions for challenges with curriculum design, online teaching activities, difficult students, TLABs have given me the confidence to present at T&L conferences"* (Participant feedback, 2018).

Improvements in the teaching practices of TLABs participants seem likely to have been at least partially responsible for generating modest but important flow-on positive impacts on key university performance indicators (such as retention and success) with undergraduate dropout rates for the School decreasing from 20.3% in 2017 to 19.6% in 2019. Likewise, unit retention at census of undergraduate students in the School improved from 86.7% in 2016 to 88.0% in 2020 (Balson & Hill, 2020). There have also been small but valuable gains in student success, with undergraduate success rates (i.e. students who pass) increasing from 86.9% in 2017 to 89.3% in 2019 (the latter being above the University average of 88.9%) (Balson & Hill, 2020).

### **TLABs: Tips for Doing One of Your Own**

The TLABs CoP has been a sustained and successful professional development initiative from which a range of learnings have emerged. For those contemplating a CoP for junior teaching academic staff in their university the following points of reflection may be useful points of departure.

Understandably, one of the most important tips is that a CoP should be informed by the scholarly literature on this area as well as that from the broader area of teaching quality. A suggested point in this process is to ground any similar initiative philosophically and practically in the body of thought and study related to forward-looking teaching quality improvement initiatives. This is, as Houston and Hood (2017) point out, distinctly different in its orientation than what is frequently the predominant focus of teaching quality in universities. Specifically, and most importantly, the focus is not on indicators of accountability for past efforts but rather, on forward-looking educational improvement processes, that are viewed as achievable through the implementation of bottom-up approaches.

Additionally, Groen's (2017) model of forward-looking educational improvement is suggested as a sound general guide to the principles to follow to maximise engagement with teaching staff and to ensure they own the process and what flows from it. The TLABs experience reinforces the importance of the principles of contextual relevance/appropriateness including; fostering ideas exchange and perspective sharing; enabling participant-led prioritisation of themes and topics; and capacity building for sustained change. This experience also suggests that these general principles will be critical elements of any architecture capable of engaging early career teachers in thinking about the pedagogies that will be most beneficial to contemporary student learning (Fraser et al., 2017).

TLABs also operationalised many of the CoP success factors identified by Probst and Borzillo (2008) and these are consequently recommended as a useful conceptual guide. In particular, the TLABs experience suggests that having clear and measurable objectives that are co-created by participants and ensuring a non-compulsory nature of sessions gives agency to early career academics in managing their ongoing professional learning. The provision of external

expertise, whereby specialist learning and teaching staff attend, contribute and occasionally facilitate sessions is also suggested.

Probst and Borzillo (2008) also referred to the importance of establishing a safe environment and removing hierarchical pressure as essential elements of a successful CoP. The experience with TLABs reinforces the veracity of their point and the supports the decision taken to operate with a 'flat' structure whereby participants' line managers or any senior academics were not present, with participation taking place in a hierarchy-free learning zone. As a result, TLABs participants seemed to have more confidence that they would not be judged and/or sanctioned if they made mistakes, asked naïve questions or admitted to gaps in their knowledge.

Another more practical lesson from TLABs is that developing an environment of trust and safety takes time. The TLABs CoP has been operating for five years so far, and as such represents a sustained effort to induct, transition and mentor junior academics into teaching. This point resonates with Probst and Borzillo's (2008) recommendation that CoPs be considered a long-term strategy and gives some sense of time scale to their point.

The TLABs experience also suggests that the expertise of the CoP facilitator as a critical success factor (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). The ADTL, who facilitates the TLABs sessions has worked within the tertiary sector for almost 30 years and whilst in a senior leadership role maintains a teaching workload which means she not only has credibility with teaching academics she is also well versed in current issues and challenges faced by such academics. The ADTL is a highly skilled, empathic and supportive group facilitator who discreetly directs discussion whilst appearing to go with the flow of the group. She works to ensure sessions are not dominated by more vocal participants and pays particular attention to ensure she responds to the requests and feedback from all participants.

CoPs are reported to be more likely to succeed if they are promoted throughout the wider organisation (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). The ADTL therefore disseminates information about, and promotes the successes of TLABs at, all-School meetings and at various events and forums including at the annual University teaching and learning conference, as well as national and international conferences.

Probst and Borzillo (2008) also recommend that a CoP be evaluated and the two TLABs evaluations that have been undertaken since its initiation have been important in reinforcing the value of the initiative and consequently playing a sustainability role as well as highlighting areas for improvement or extension as well as other adjustments or tweaks.

While it may go without saying, another important consideration for those contemplating implementing a CoP for junior academic staff is to consider the personal circumstances of potential participants. Certainly, in the case of the TLABs CoP, the timing of meetings required careful consideration to maximise attendance. This was in part because many junior academic staff work part time, leading to challenges with finding times when all staff are available to attend. No doubt this is commonplace across all tertiary institutions and while it is challenging to cater for all needs, the effort taken to find optimal solutions is part of the process of securing commitment. It seems likely that such efforts send a clear message about the extent to which any endeavour in this area is actually valued by the respective university or school that is initiating it.

TLABs sessions have also been better attended when they have been held in non-teaching weeks. As the University has three campuses and some eligible staff are located at its rural campus, video conferencing has also been used to enable these staff to participate. On a practical note, attendance has also proved to be encouraged by providing lunches for attendees, which is a small token of acknowledgement of the balancing act required of busy early career academics, who are often extremely time poor.

To summarise, those who are contemplating implementing a learning and teaching CoP to develop the capacity of early career and junior teaching academics could consider the following tips:

- View the CoP as a long-term project.
- Ensure a 'flat' structure whereby participants' line managers are not present.
- Enable participants to generate and prioritise the agenda.
- Invite subject matter experts to provide short information sessions.
- Ensure the sessions are welcoming, supportive, non-judgmental and safe.

- Focus on teaching improvements and ways to enhance the student experience.
- Attendance at and participation during sessions should be voluntary.
- Sessions should be approximately 1.5 hours duration.
- Maximise accessibility by flexible scheduling and video conferencing.
- Schedule the sessions for the whole year so participants can plan ahead.
- Provide incentives for attendance.
- Encourage participants to engage in SoTL (grant applications, conference papers, publications and teaching awards) and acknowledge and celebrate these successes.
- Skilled empathetic facilitation is essential.

## Conclusions

This paper has described a teaching quality initiative implemented in one School in a Western Australian university. As has been elaborated, the TLABs CoP was a departure from the more typical focus of quality assurance initiatives on indicators of accountability to one that was oriented to forward-looking, capacity building, bottom-up process and to building the potential for sustainable improvement. It did not reflect a departure from accountability measures of teaching quality, which are acknowledged to have a legitimate place in universities, but it did reflect their strategic limits insofar as creating a sustainable quality improvement agenda for teaching is concerned.

As noted, much of the focus in TLABs is creating a positive culture around issues of pedagogy for early career academics in the School; an emphasis that has been encouraged in the literature. Specifically, the rationale offered here has included something along the lines of the potency of early career experiences in shaping career perspectives of teaching and related practices. In the absence of initiatives like TLABs, these early career experiences appear less likely to come from deliberative, reflective, collegiate processes likely to result in the pedagogies that will be most beneficial to contemporary student learning.

Consequently, TLABs fits within a frame of quality oriented to capacity building and sustainability and has been reflected in the School's practical experience of the benefits of the process. It has brought to the School concerned a spectrum of benefits, not least of which has been improvements in student experience reflected in things like course retention and completions. Along with these bread and butter issues, it also brought greater scholarly interest in issues of pedagogy which in their turn appear to have established a positive feedback loop of interest in the further development of teaching quality as well as the confidence to progress this agenda.

As has been noted in the paper, foundational aspects for the success of TLABs were the general intention brought to the enterprise, which drew on principles articulated by scholars in the areas of creating a positive agenda for teaching quality and in developing CoP's. These principles are critical dimensions for anyone contemplating embarking of similar initiatives and have much to offer to those interested in broader questions of teaching quality in universities and in establishing sustainable improvements needed to respond to the significant challenges of changing student cohorts, new technologies available to support teaching, evolutions in the labour market and so on. In the broadest possible sense, they do reflect a willingness to adjust the gaze from accountability for past performance to questions of building a better future, essentially built on forming trusting and safe relationships with those at the front line of teaching and embarking on open enquiries about how things might be better.

Further notable yet more practical elements in the mix in relation to TLABs have been the willingness to commit to the process being a longer-term endeavour, to follow steps outlined in the literature as well as myriad small but important considerations, such as providing lunches and scheduling sessions at times that maximise the potential for attendance. Additionally, TLABs experience reinforces that the objectives and content of these initiatives need to be co-created and that participation must be voluntary. They should also take place in an informal, safe and respectful environment where hierarchical pressure is absent. Skilled facilitation is also critical as is evaluation and dissemination of success stories.

While they were initially intended to improve the quality of teaching, the TLABs CoP has achieved much more. In addition to the typical outcomes of a CoP identified by Nickol (2003) such as stimulating interaction; fostering learning; creating new knowledge; and identifying and sharing best practices; TLABs have evolved into a thriving

and positive teaching and learning community offering a 'safe space' for junior academics to share and discuss perspectives on teaching and learning issues.

In closing, TLABs has become an important vehicle through which the voices of junior academic staff in regards teaching quality issues and related matters can be heard by the School executive staff. This critical but easily overlooked channel of information seems vital to sustainability, not least because those closest to the coal face have the capacity for the clearest views about and they have the greatest stake in ensuring teaching quality continues to be maximised. The experience with TLABs in the School should encourage others interested in working on the issues that prompted the initiative to trial similarly oriented CoP's. As part of this, it is hoped that greater emphasis on research and evaluation might serve to further the evidence base on the important area of forward-facing approaches to facilitating teaching quality improvements in universities.

## References

- Arthur, L. (2016). Communities of practice in higher education: Professional learning in an academic career. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(3), 230-241. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1127813>
- Balson, K., & Hill, A. (2020). *ECU Retention and Success Data Pack*. Perth, Western Australia: Edith Cowan University.
- Botham, K. A. (2018). The perceived impact on academics' teaching practice of engaging with a higher education institution's CPD scheme. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 55(2), 164-175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2017.1371056>
- Cambridge, D., Kaplan, S., & Suter, V. (2005). Community of Practice Design Guide: A Step-by-Step Guide for Designing and Cultivating Communities of Practice in Higher Education. <https://transitiepraktijk.nl/files/Community%20of%20practice%20guide.pdf>
- Churchman, D. (2005). Safeguarding academic communities: Retaining texture and passion in the academy. In P. Carden & T. Stehlik (Eds.), *Beyond communities of practice: Theory as experience* (pp. 11-30). Post Pressed.
- Fraser, K., Greenfield, R., & Pancini, G. (2017). Conceptualising institutional support for early, mid, and later career teachers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 22(2), 157-169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1218882>
- Groen, J. F. (2017). Engaging in Enhancement: Implications of Participatory Approaches in Higher Education Quality Assurance. *Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching*, 10, 89-100. <https://doi.org/10.22329/celt.v10i0.4728>
- Houston, D., & Hood, C. (2017). University teacher preparation programmes as a quality enhancement mechanism: evaluating impact beyond individual teachers' practice. *Quality in Higher Education*, 23(1), 65-78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2017.1294408>
- Jawitz, J. (2009). Learning in the academic workplace: The harmonization of the collective and the individual habitus. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34, 601-614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802556149>
- Knapper, C. (2016). Does educational development matter? *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(2), 105-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1170098>
- Locke, W. (2014). *Shifting academic careers: implications for enhancing professionalism in teaching and supporting learning*. London, England: The Higher Education Academy, Institute of Education, University of London.
- McMillan, W., & Gordon, N. (2017). Being and becoming a university teacher. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(4), 777-790. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1236781>
- Nickol, F. (2003). *Communities of Practice: An Overview*. <http://waterwiki.net/images/8/82/CoPOverview.pdf>
- Probst, G., & Borzillo, S. (2008). Why communities of practice succeed and why they fail. *European Management Journal*, 26, 335-347. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2008.05.003>
- Quinlan, K. (2014) Leadership of teaching for student learning in higher education: what is needed? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(1) 32-45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.864609>
- Remmik, M., Karm, M., Haamer, A., & Lepp, L. (2011). Early-career academics' learning in academic communities. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(3), 187-199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2011.596702>

- Scott, G., Coates, H., & Anderson, M. (2008). *Learning Leaders in Times of Change: Academic Leadership Capacities for Australian Higher Education*. Strawberry Hills, NSW: The Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching.
- Thompson, K. (2015). Informal conversations about teaching and their relationship to a formal development program: learning opportunities for novice and mid-career academics. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 20(2), 137-149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1028066>
- Viskovic, A. (2006). Becoming a tertiary teacher: Learning in communities of practice. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 25, 323-339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360600947285>
- Warhurst, R. P. (2008). 'Cigars on the flight-deck': New lecturers' participatory learning within workplace communities of practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33, 453-467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802211828>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice*. Cambridge University Press.10.1017/CBO9780511803932
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to managing knowledge. *Harvard Business Review*, (January-February), 139-145.