

learning landscape project

Research Methods: Project Steering Group

About the Project Steering Group

Between March 2007 and June 2008, the Learning Landscape Project conducted eleven meetings with the Project Steering Group. The Steering Group consisted of 38 staff and 5 students drawn from a range University teaching and administrative units, plus the Colleges, the Language Centre, the Institute of Continuing Education, and the undergraduate / graduate student unions. The Steering Group was established to provide direction and oversight for the researchers undertaking the project, and specifically: to agree the questions the project should aim to answer; to recommend ways to engage stakeholders; to make recommendations to the Project Board on project strategy and planning; to recommend new approaches to source data; and to discuss day-to-day issues as they arose. The role of the Group was summarised in its Terms of Reference: “The Project Steering Group should facilitate student and staff engagement and ensure the relevance of the project to mainstream learning and teaching stakeholders.”

Rationale and Research Warrant

Research in the field of organisational learning and management studies has long argued that the formation of intra-organisational groups is an important mechanism through which organizations can learn from experience (Holmqvist 2003). Through the formation of groups with cross-institutional membership, single organizational groups and departments share partly different bases of experiences and may learn differently from the same experience (Crossan et al. 1999).

The relationship between the research team and the Steering Group may be analysed in terms of Burt’s theory of brokerage (Burt 2005). Burt identifies brokerage as an enabling process for organizational learning, enabling collaboration and knowledge sharing between disparate individuals or institutions. Over time, the role of the Steering Group evolved from engaging in the simplest form of brokerage, in which participants share their separate difficulties and concerns, but draw no inferences or comparisons from one another’s experience, to a more complex process of participating in the co-construction of new knowledge.

Process

Practical arrangements for meetings (selecting meeting dates via email, booking rooms, organising refreshments) were made by the Project Manager. Meetings were held at a range of locations around the University, and were intended to reflect the diversity of the Steering Group membership, as well as accommodating the desired meeting style and the size of the group in attendance. Meetings incorporated several formats: formal boardroom-style meeting, computer-based workshop, informal discussion group, structured focus group (see the separate Learning Landscape Research Methods Briefing on “Movers and Shapers” Focus Groups), and a group prioritization exercise, performed using a PRS (Personal Response System).

Steering Group members were asked to prepare for meetings, either by reading research reports or briefing documents circulated in advance, or on one occasion, early in the project, by responding to an online survey. The online survey was introduced as a potentially useful way to identify early-stage research findings that resonated with Steering Group members’ experiences. This activity of reviewing and reflecting on research findings was subsequently repeated towards the end of the project, in May 2008, when the Steering Group engaged in a “hands-on” prioritization exercise, using a PRS (Personal Response System).

Since the late 1990s, PRS technology has been used to deepen audience participation and engagement in educational settings (Hake 1998, Draper et. al. 2002). The project used a PRS with the Steering Group to create an additional, temporary forum for group interaction and enhanced group decision-making. For this interactive session, key findings in five Learning Landscape

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research themes (Space, Information and Communications Technologies, Small Group Teaching, Authentic Learning, and Transferable Skills) were presented to the Steering Group in turn, and each member “voted” anonymously on each key finding, using a PRS handset. Instant anonymous feedback from each voting session was provided via the PRS software, enabling “on the spot” group discussion of voting results. This activity proved useful both in terms of providing feedback to the research team, and as an enjoyable and stimulating engagement activity.

Benefits of the Project Steering Group

At one level, the Steering Group acted as a fact-finding and information cross-checking service for the project, helping the research team to locate additional and non-public information resources, supplying missing facts, or fine-tuning reported findings. However, the Steering Group was a true working group, not simply a reporting body. The Steering Group had active input into the research process, and helped to co-construct and interpret research findings.

The Project Steering Group enabled the project to achieve a high level of institutional engagement and embedding. By working with staff in key positions of responsibility for teaching and learning, the project was able to access—and influence—early-stage discussions on educational policy and practice that were taking place elsewhere in the institution. Importantly, Steering Group members acted as “gatekeepers” to institutions (Wenger 2000), enabling further introductions and brokering meetings at the local level. Relations of reciprocal trust were built between the research team and the Steering Group over time. Over the life of the project, Steering Group members helped (both individually and collectively) to disseminate and publicise the project at institutional level, helping the project to meet a key challenge: how to share information and good practice effectively in the context of a devolved organisation.

About the Learning Landscape Project

The Learning Landscape Project (2006—2008) is a research project that was initiated to create a descriptive framework of learning and teaching at the University of Cambridge.

For further information, please visit the project website:

<http://www.caret.cam.ac.uk/learninglandscape/>

References and Further Reading

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