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Creating Momentum Around Transformative Active Learning

By Theresa Nicholson and Carmen Herrero
Manchester Metropolitan University

Dr D. Theresa Nicholson, Reader (Higher Education and Pedagogy), AdvanceHE National Teaching Fellow and Principal Fellow HEA, University Innovation Scholar, Man Met Uni.

Dr M. Carmen Herero, Reader (Hispanic Studies), Director of the Film, Languages and Media in Education Group (FLAME), Senior Fellow HEA, University Innovation Scholar, Man Met Uni.

Welcome to our contribution for the Active Learning SIG Blog in which we share our aspirations and strategy for developing an institution-wide Active Learning Community of Practice (ALCoP). A key aim is to foster engagement with active learning, and in this post we will explain the context for our activity and steps we have begun to put into place. Hopefully, this will spark your interest sufficiently to take part in a webinar we will be running in May, when we will report on tangible progress towards realising our ALCoP aspirations and discuss some of the challenges and opportunities along the way.

Introduction

Manchester Met's new Education Strategy commits to a future-focused and co-created approach to learning, with transformative active learning at its heart (Figure 1). Research shows that active learning is effective, but multiple surveys have also shown that active learning is what students want. It also engenders the range of future-thinking competencies and skills that employers seek.
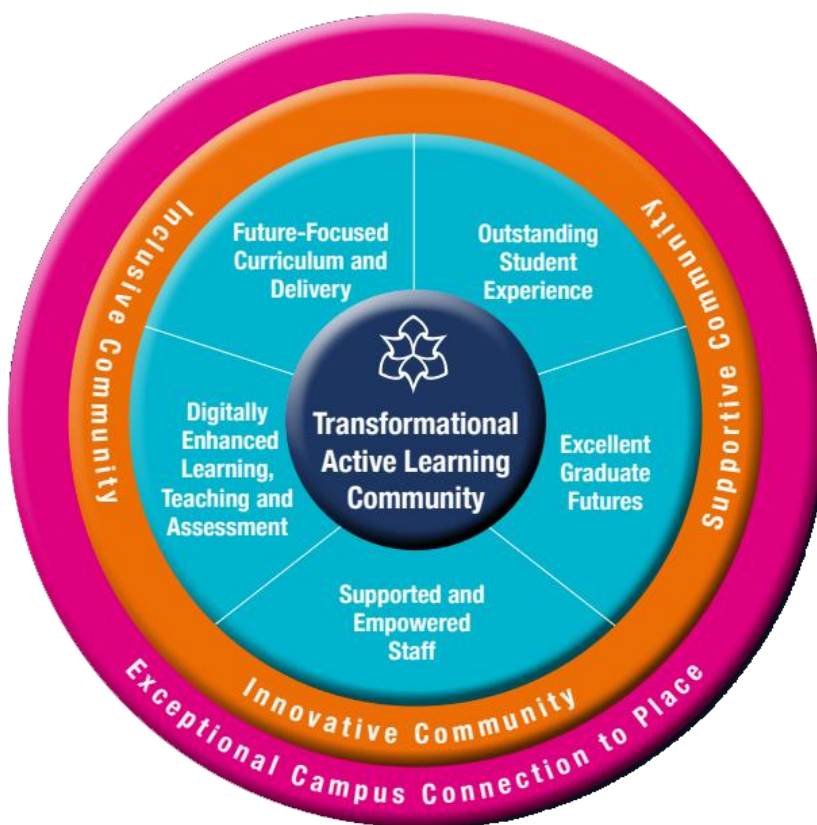
Figure 1: Transformational active learning community at the heart of our Education Strategy

The Challenge: Creating Momentum

Our institutional commitment to delivering education with transformational active learning at its heart is a laudable aspiration. We acknowledge, however, that many individuals and teaching teams are already achieving this at a local level. A significant challenge is in *capturing* the wide and varied innovative practice that already exists, and using this to help *galvanise,* drive and *guide* momentum for much wider *engagement* and implementation*.*

In a large and complex institution such as ours, success requires commitment at all levels; top-down, bottom-up, and middle-out. We believe that building an institution-wide, strategic **Active Learning Community of Practice (ALCoP)** is one of the keys to achieving this. We now outline three mechanisms we are using to help realise our ambitious aspirations; (1) establishing leadership, (2) seeking out the innovators, and (3) building our active learning community.

Mechanism #1: Establishing Leadership

Under the leadership of Professor Mark Peace, a team of Education Innovation Scholars have been appointed in cross-institutional roles to empower innovation and to drive forward the implementation our university's thematic priorities (Table 1). We, Theresa and Carmen, lead the Active Learning strand, but of course we recognise the inevitable intersections between themes and work closely with the other theme leads.

Table 1: Institutional thematic priorities with aligned Innovation Scholars and CoPs

Thematic Priority	Linked CoPs
Active, experiential and skills-based learning	Active Learning (ALCoP)
Authentic and flexible assessment	Authentic assessment
Enterprise and entrepreneurship	SIG linked to ALCoP
Digital fluencies (staff-focused)	SIG 'Digital Me'
Belonging and mattering	Belonging and Mattering CoP
Closing experience and outcomes gaps	'The Collective'

In this short video, you can see our Innovation Scholars outlining key aspirations for the delivery of these aspects of the Education Strategy.

Mechanism #2: Seeking Out the Innovators

With thematic leadership in place, our first task was to unearth and connect those individuals and partnerships who are passionate about active learning and already doing great innovation. To this end we brainstormed multiple sources, building up a database of individuals including those connected with institutional innovation and leadership schemes, as well as contributors to our last learning and teaching conference. To these, many were added from anecdotal sources. Conversations with some 70 or more individuals and small teams thus far has captured some amazing exemplars of transformative active learning and enabled us to begin identifying some of the key themes (Figure 2) that may ultimately form part of our signature pedagogy.
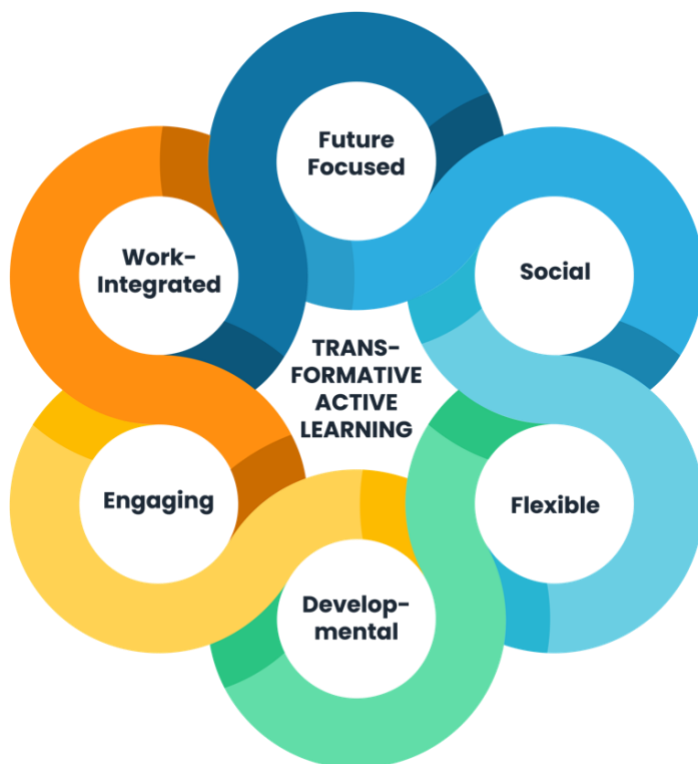

Figure 2: Key themes derived from conversations with innovators (key below)

Future-focused: Developing digitally literate confident, aspirational new professionals with capability as change agents for the 21st century

Social: Learning from inter-disciplinarity and from peers, collaborating in team-based projects, optimizing use of social learning spaces

Flexible: Curricula and assessment capable of personalization and variety in content, study mode, media and outputs

Developmental: Assessment for learning, low stakes assessment, authentic assessment, '*just-in-time*' skills and competencies

Engaging: Challenging but fun, learning activities that create energy, 'buzz', dynamic simulations, game-based learning

Work-integrated: Connecting employers, encouraging entrepreneurship, tackling real-world problems

Mechanism #3: Building Our Active Learning Community

We have been buoyed by the modesty of some of our 'finds' and through witnessing their delight at our 'discovery' of their work. This affords new opportunities for raising their profile and the visibility of their practice. We are finding that the mere fact of opening up a dialogue about active learning is beginning to create some momentum. To help capture this, we have established a MS Teams channel to keep the conversation going, and this will provide a valuable mechanism for communication as the Active Learning Community of Practice (ALCoP) begins to grow.

Intentions for ALCoP.....

So what exactly *is* a community of practice (CoP)? Well, Wenger-Trayner *et al*. (2023, p. 11) say:

> "Communities of practice are group(s) of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly"

Wenger-Trayner, E., Wenger-Trayner, B., Reid, P. and Bruderlein, B. (2023). *Communities of Practice Within and Across organisations: A Guidebook*. Social Learning Lab: Portugal. Online at: https://www.wenger-trayner.com/cop-guidebook/

And how do we envisage ALCoP developing? Experience shows that CoPs work best when they develop organically and are resistant to hierarchies and formal regulation. That said, some formality is necessary for resourcing, and for promoting engagement. CoPs can be described in terms of their domain, community, and practice and we use these to explain our intentions and aspirations for ALCoP:

Domain (what is it about?)
ALCoP will bring together those passionate about innovative, active, experiential and skills-based learning. Two Special Interest groups (SIGs) have already been identified; (1) Enterprise, and (2) Education for Sustainable Development, but the others may emerge organically. The exact focus

will be determined by members, but ALCoP will be well-placed to explore the potential for institution-wide practices, such as:

- Adoption of active learning models such as SCALE-UP, TREK, or Enquiry-Based Learning.
- Strengthened integration of our co-curricular RISE programme.
- A digital portfolio for supporting and showcasing students' professional development.

Community (who will be involved?)
ALCoP will be a self-organising, staff-led, democratic, and distributive venture. We envisage that members come from all spheres of university life, including academics, professional services colleagues (e.g. technical services, student support roles), and students.

Practice (what will we do?)
ALCoP will serve several crucial goals. For example, it will:

- Catalyse broad institutional dialogue around active learning
- Drive forward momentum and influence university policy and practice
- Collaborate, curate and connect around good practice in active learning
- Be an enabler for good ideas, providing a network of peer support
- Support professional development of staff and students

Practically, ALCoP will have regular meetings, host activities and events, create and share good practice resources, oversee pilot studies, and evaluate and disseminate outcomes.

What Next?

In the near future, the university is hosting two internal 'soap box' events around active learning and authentic assessment to begin to scope a signature pedagogy. These conversations will continue afterwards in ALCoP, supported by the MS Teams space and regular meetings, and early outcomes will be presenting for discussion at our summer learning and teaching conference.

Maintaining momentum and continuity over time presents a challenges for any community of practice. However, we have learned that one of the reasons for the great success of our longstanding EdTech CoP is the flat hierarchy of its distributed leadership model. Here, the formal CoP leadership is strongly scaffolded by a tightknit team of highly committed, passionate expert actors who contribute significantly to agenda-setting and decision-making. Given in time, we aspire to steer the development of ALCoP along comparable lines.

Our Aspirations and Success Measures

Given our over-arching purpose to implement aspects of our education strategy, success will be measured from a growing institutional reputation for producing confident, highly-skilled graduates, equipped as global citizens who will make a valued and lasting contribution to society. We have some specific aspirations; to curate and create enabling resources (e.g. a multimedia active learning resource, an open education collection of active learning practices at Manchester Met), and to embed Education for Sustainable Development, incorporating transformational active learning, in every programme.

Finally, An Invitation.....

We will be hosting a follow-up ALT-C Active Learning SIG webinar in May where we will update you on progress and share and discuss some of our experiences thus far. We can also look at opening some of our soapbox events to external participation and you are warmly invited to join in the discussion around this. Meanwhile, if you'd like to ask questions or have any comments please get in touch with Theresa at d.nicholson@mmu.ac.uk or Carmen at c.herrero@mmu.ac.uk.