How can we develop practices that are recognisably and distinctively 'Westminster' that all our students and staff can be excited and inspired by?

8th May 2017

The Hallam Centre

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The Centre for Teaching Innovation and the Leadership and Organisational Development Team organised and facilitated an event to launch the Westminster Learning Communities. Open Space Technology was the approach chosen as a way to bring together academic and corporate service colleagues. The purpose of the event was to provide an opportunity for staff to collaboratively explore ideas, topics and themes around which learning communities could form, and how they could be developed in to a learning communities funding application. The application process opened immediately after the event.

Colleagues were invited to generate topics and questions in response to the question 'how can we develop practices that are recognisably and distinctively Westminster that all our staff and students can be excited and inspired by?'
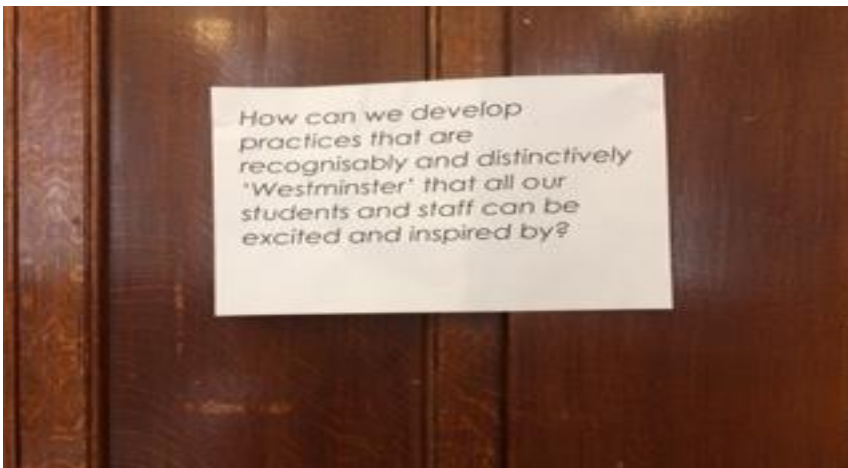
Open space is a methodology whereby attendees create their own agenda in response to the question posed. Everyone sits in a circle as there is no hierarchy in the group, everyone has an equal say irrespective of their role or status.

People are invited to select topics or questions they would like to explore in the groups and post them on the agenda wall. The flags represented the group stations.
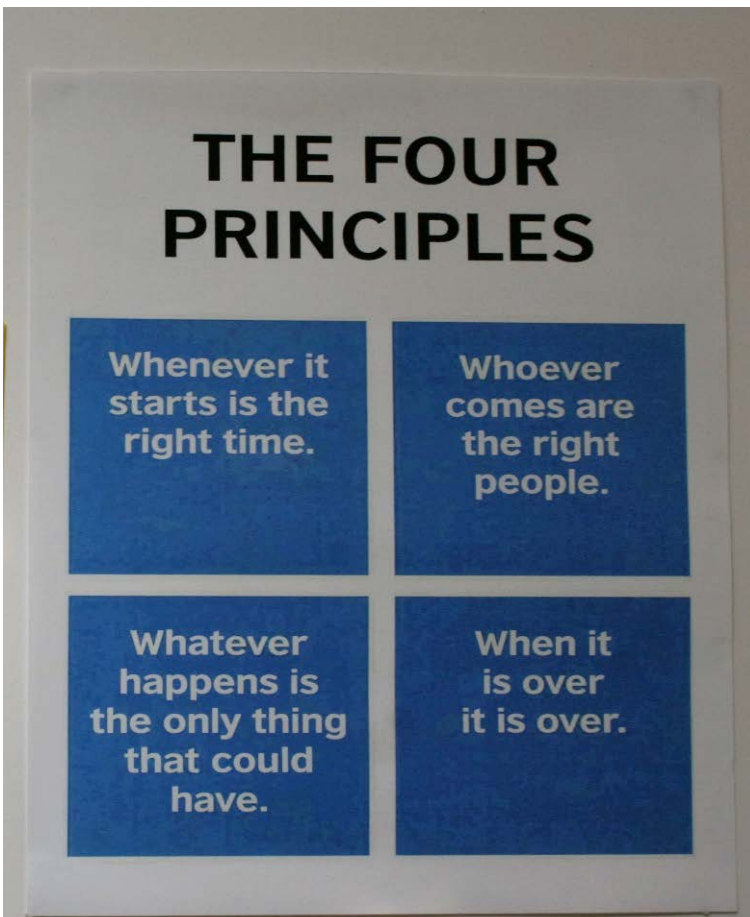

After all the topics were posted, people could join groups of their choice. They could also use the law of two feet and move around to wherever they felt they could make a valuable contribution, without feeling constrained to stay in one place.
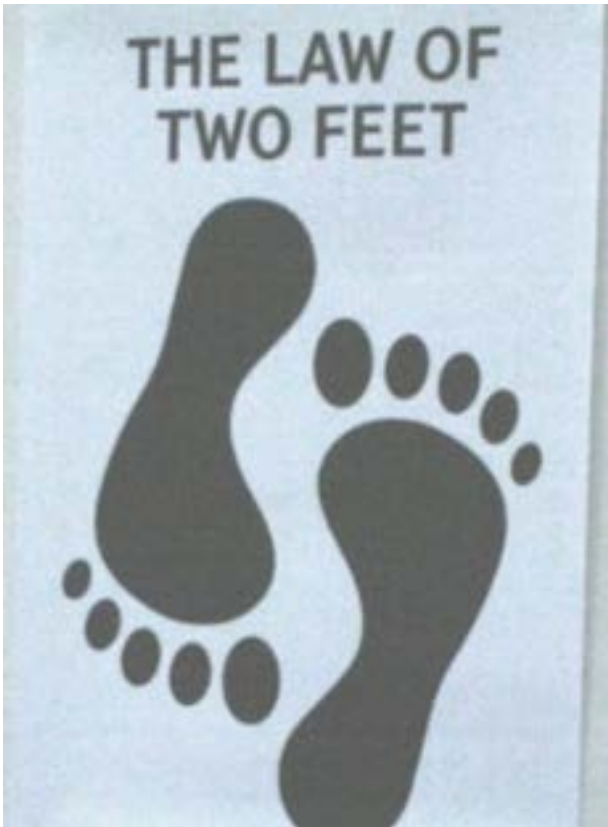
There are four principles for open space technology which are cited below;

After the discussions people were asked to use the five dots they had been allocated and to prioritise their recommendations against the summaries from each of the flagged groups.

Here is a summary of each of the topics and the priorities. The numbers indicate the number of people who identified this as important to them.

Topic 1: How can academics find the time & space to develop excellent teaching?
Teaching priority: Teaching & Support Learning
Discussion: WAM often provides hours for subject- based research: • Equal remission should be given for pedagogic research   • Equal teaching, tutoring & marking workload for teaching & learning and research- focused academics   • T&L 'champions' (maybe SFHEAs?)
Expected outputs: • Hours   • Teaching & Learning champions

14 colleagues identified this as being important to them.

Topic 2: How can we reach a diverse student body and develop flexible and creative learning and teaching practices?
Who needs to be involved?   • Learning & Teaching champions   • Senior Fellows   • Across faculties
Teaching priority (s):   • Learning Communities   • Inclusivity & Flexibility   • Teaching & Support Learning   • Technology & Infrastructure
Discussion: • How can we ensure that our course design and review processes produce courses which are innovative, engaging, and inclusive and employability focused?   • How do we develop a sense of pride and belonging in our diverse student body?   • What does an inclusive curriculum look like?   • How do we create/ develop initiatives & practices that are attractive to both current & prospective students   • Course design   • Inclusive learning & teaching strategy which will become one of the Westminster distinctive features
Expected outputs: • Enhances T&L strategy   • Inclusive/ Innovative/ Creative teaching strategy- distinctive of UoW

15 colleagues identified this as being important to them.

Topic 3: Technology & Innovation to support new learning approaches to enhance creativity/ imagination with support from alumni
Who need to be involved?- Markos, Frands, Joy & Daniela
Teaching priority (s): • Learning Communities • Inclusivity & Flexibility • Teaching & Support Learning • Research, Inquiry & Practice • Technology & Infrastructure

Discussion:
• Possible move to a larger network that can support communities
• Engage alumni students even cross/ country
• Cross discipline platform/ new facility
• VR conference/ lecture simulation
• Engage Alumni to use/support the platform
• Interactive event with live streaming. Activities:
   o Google platform- news, updates and forums
   o Webinar- Facebook

14 colleagues identified this as being important to them.

Topic 4: How do we create a coaching + mentoring community? (Staff + students by alumni)

Discussion:
• Students: lots of messages- no focus
• Clear/ simple message (unified)- a lot more nudging at different points
• Career development centre- Mentoring scheme
   o Employability inductions
   o CDC- champions
   o Engage website
• What else can be done to encourage students to participate?
   o Embed into core module
   o Alumni website- advertising opportunities to work

6 colleagues identified this as being important to them.

Topic 5: How can we create an assessment scheduling tool that will be useful to staff and students with respect to avoiding bunching of deadlines, overall view of course schedule and feedback return dates?
Who needs to be involved? Efie & Markos
Teaching priority: Technology & Infrastructure
Discussion: An online integrated tool that can be used from all staff to add or modify deadlines and students to have access on it. The tool would allow module leaders to set deadlines in a user friendly way. The tool would display all deadlines in a course in a visual way. Possible feature a notification to students approaching deadlines. Discussed similar approaches /tools developed by other universities and JISC (Greenwich, Glamorgan)
Expected outputs: online assessment scheduling tool

6 colleagues identified this as being important to them.

Topic 6: Employability focused curriculum- How do we define what that should be? What should be the relationship between teaching the subject and educating for employment?	
Teaching priority: • Employability focused curriculum	

Discussion:
• Nobody came to talk. Why? It's the most important output
• How do we relate the DLHE outcomes to reflect in journey through degrees?
• How much value do staff place on employability, and appreciate impact to students paying large fees?
• Lifelong learning as opposed to employability
• Autonomy:
   o Mentoring
   o Degree apprenticeships
• More variable course types
• Fewer courses but better quality
• Audit of courses
	
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9 colleagues identified this as being important to them. This figure does not include those who identified specific aspects of the discussion being important to them.

Topic 7: How do we as a Westminster community of staff and students learn for life?	
Who needs to be involved? Anyone including: • Alumni • Teaching staff • Librarians • CDC staff • Employers • Counsellors	
Teaching priority: • Employability focused curriculum • Learning Communities • Teaching & Support Learning • Technology & Infrastructure	
Discussion: • Different 'employability' for different graduates; timeline of employability e.g. on graduation, five years hence, lifelong • How can we support staff in their learning effectively- ilearn, change academy • Success would have the hierarchy of teaching morphing to a network and people would feel connected in a positive/ supported way • More cross- disciplinary peer observation to see differences (academics and corporate services staff) • Greater student involvement • Open lectures to all (a substitute for electives?): offer Adobe, Mos to Alumni & ext staff? • Badges to evidence attendance at lectures (potentially); gamification; pebblepad at Edinburgh • Other systems (WhatsApp, SMS) for communication with students; seamless integration from school	 1 3

Expected Outputs: • An active network; (Linked In); integrated digital capability in our curriculum; ilearn directory	1

8 colleagues identified this as being important to them. This figure does not include those who identified specific aspects of the discussion being important to them.

Topic 8: How do we define 'Westminster' and what makes us distinctive?	
Teaching priority: • Employability focused curriculum • Learning Communities • Inclusivity & Flexibility • Teaching & Support Learning • Research, inquiry & practice • Technology & Infrastructure	
Discussion: • Market awareness- what is the competition doing? How can we distinguish ourselves? • How do we capture and implement- a coherent strategy amongst staff and students to ensure we are recognisable and distinctive? • Go back to our roots, and develop a student- centric and inclusive programme • Everyone should identify with one common goal on how to make Westminster distinctive • Identify and promote the 'Westminster story' • How do we translate and package strategies and policies in a way that the outside world will understand? • Be the 'listening University'- listen to the students and others on their needs. Provide value for money	 3 1 5 1
Expected outputs: • Charter	

17 colleagues identified this as being important to them. This figure does not include those who identified specific aspects of the discussion being important to them.

After the recommendations attendees are asked to share their reflections on the discussions in what is referred to as a 'talking circle'. People hold on to an object in this case a 'parrot' and talk briefly if they want to. Below are the comments.

The 'Talking Parrot'

'Me and Percy think it's been great. It's what we want to be doing more of. We want more time and space to talk. Looking forward to talking and seeing the learning communities'.

'I was wondering what an inclusive curriculum actually means and what people understand by that term. We know we have some students who are detached, and not engaged in learning. We are keen to see who we can reach. We want students to get in touch, so we can be as successful as possible'

'It was a fantastic opportunity to meet people from across the University. Really useful to float and join the conversations, and see the common factors. Good starting point'

'Really inspiring. Shame that there were not more people, but actually it being smaller meant there was more time for conversation. Would like more support to make things happen. Sometimes we see the same faces. It is a struggle to find like-minded people. When we try to implement things it can feel like nothing is changing'

'Great opportunity to talk to other disciplines. Difficult to prioritise. Great to see next step forward'

'Interesting to hear how different faculties approach learning practice and for us to see and find a unifying way to approach this'

'I'm against silos. This provides a catalyst for change. It will resonate with like-minded souls. We know with change there are 20% who resist, 20% who drive it and then 60% in the middle and we have a great opportunity to bring that 60% with us. I thought the ideas from FABE were great!'

I'm from corporate services so it was good to talk with academics, to explore what we can do together and through the learning communities. I saw great passion in the room. I want to see more of these types of events. What struck me was the conversation I had about values, and how we can embed this in our behaviours consistently'

'I've been here for 15 months and I'm still not sure what Westminster distinctiveness actually is and how we create this. I think we need to add some more meat to the bones. It's not always about what we do in here but how we reach out. The same people seem to be generating the ideas…'

'Really interesting comments. I'm passionate about learning and teaching. We are taking what is good and what we value and sharing this so that the University values good teaching. I'm optimistic about the CTI and having Terry involved. Empowering us, giving us time and opportunity will make it possible to achieve. If we can be freed up that would be amazing'

'As a careers consultant I'm keen on employability. It is very important in terms of what the curriculum looks like. We do things that don't always impact the bottom line. I hope we can create a sustainable future'

'I enjoyed it. There were some brill ideas. It would be good if we can think of how we can put it in to practice, so we can see it come to fruition'

'Interesting to have a discussion with people who you don't know and where they are in the hierarchy. Distinctiveness needs a balance between the message it has about the University and how we have respect…'

'One message will not meet all needs. Some are long lists like graduate attributes which most people can't even remember. We need a story'

'As I was on my way here I was thinking I can't even remember why I signed up as I have so much to do. However being here made me realise that now more than ever we need to be part of a community and not bound by those resistant to changes and remaining. I thought about the importance of values, and that you don't just stick them on the wall, it's about how we communicate'

'Distinctiveness is something I struggle with. It's the same old buzz words I have seen in strategies in other Universities. If I can't articulate it to myself how can we do this to students. What concerns me is that we are dealing with this at a gloss level and not at root and branch. For example we ask students what they want and yet we still timetable at 9am, when we know that students tell us the impact that has on travel costs etc. We don't have a plan for how we are more adaptable. If we can't define something I wonder whether we should drop it?'

'It always surprises me, even though I have been to a few open space sessions. I think the University and what is going on reminds me of 'tacking' in sailing. I think we need to develop confidence in staff and students'

'Three things stuck me; timely, synergy and realisation. We are seeing an existential change in how students want to learn. It is different to how we taught five years ago. I would like to see synergy between learning communities and employability and distinctiveness. In theory the event was fantastic but how we realise this in practice needs a more sustainable approach to make this a realisation'
'There's been a lot of talk about distinctiveness, and we have been discussing this for several years, which is concerning. We need to put things in to practice so this leads to something. Without being a killjoy these are repeat conversations, and they don't get us anywhere. We need to get some concrete learning projects, and collaborate with others who are equally keen, and I am hopeful that will happen'

'I've seen so many ideas I would like to see implemented and if there is time to do 2 out of 7 that would be great. I think we need a framework for how we move forward for the next six years. One day I would like to see students here, and ask them where they see this moving on towards'

'There is a move towards the realisation of the learning communities. The topic of change has come up a few times and while we are not here to talk about how we will change, there is assumption and linkage between learning communities and change. Is it about change or is it about adapting to change? We have a plan and this is patently inadequate and was from the beginning. I see learning communities as consolidating informal networks and then a plan may emerge'

'Change is permanent these days, the norm. It is easy to become negative. The communities provide a channel for positive thinking. We are all enthusiastic, how do we pull in colleagues, and engage them too? We can initiate discussions, put forward concrete ideas and seek involvement. The CTI can provide support and opportunities for facilitation training'

'I see learning communities as part of a jigsaw. There are four of us in a team, we can't do everything. We need to look at how we involve students, pedagogic research, cross curriculum and how we can get people involved. There are links between them. This is how we can really innovate. We already have great ideas. We need to start with our strengths and build on this, and not focus on trying to build on weaknesses. We need to start with like-minded people. It's not about the CTI doing what you tell us. You've met people. We all have busy lives, but when you care about something it invigorates you. You know who you have been talking, take if further. Develop a strategy. Start small. We'll support you. We have funding for 10 communities. Don't go away and expect the CTI to do something – there is the shift. Distinctiveness is in this room, employability is part of our history. Inclusion is how we are one the most diverse Universities. These are all areas of distinctiveness.

Next Steps

All the discussions summarised in this document will be used to inform the development of the Learning Communities in the coming months. Colleagues who attended the event are now encouraged to develop their ideas into proposals for Learning Communities. Those who have a firm proposal can register their community and apply for funding via the Learning Communities pages on the Centre for Teaching Innovation website. Those who would like to develop their ideas further by engaging with colleagues from across the university can do so by using the Marketplace on the CTI website. Here you can float ideas for others to comment on, and you can make contact with colleagues who may be interested in forming a community with you.

All the information and guidance about starting a community can be found here: http://cti.westminster.ac.uk/starting-a-community/