

TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT THINK TANK

Following the first ever no-notice pilot inspection, Exeter College recently received an ‘Outstanding’ grade for teaching and learning. This required the whole Organisation to strategically commit and contribute to a compelling case for teaching and learning.

A major contributory factor to this was the creation of an innovative Teaching, Learning and Assessment Think Tank. The Think Tank meets regularly (or whenever the organisation needs it to or whenever they want to meet) and is chaired by a senior manager with an equality and diversity champion in attendance. It has no formal agenda other than the discussing, reflecting and sharing of views on big picture (some would say, game-changing) proposals or issues that would come from anywhere in the Organisation. The process is very simple and requires someone to attend the meeting, present the idea (or issue) and receive feedback from the practitioners who will eventually be implementing it. Its membership consists of staff that are passionate about teaching and learning and want to be involved in shaping the future of what teaching and learning feels and looks like at Exeter College. Nobody gets paid and it is always in the lunch break. It saves time, money and frustrations. It buys people in to a vision, establishes a holistic approach to developing strategy and allows people to take ownership of the things they care most about. Some examples of projects we have discussed that have been used (or not) are:

- *The College’s Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy*
- *“Back 2 School!”* - a staff development approach that turned staff into students to experience inspirational teaching and learning.
- *Open Doors* - a faculty approach to breaking down the barriers of having people just drop in and watch teaching and learning.
- *The Coral Project* – when coral is ill they attach it to healthy coral to grow and flourish, will it work with students? Will it work with staff?
- **12** – College themes are identified and a group of 12 committed practitioners with a passion for the theme are called to work on producing resources; the first theme is ‘stretch and challenge’.

When devising the concept of the ‘Think Tank’, we had to agree a few non-negotiables that, in turn, not only defined the power of the group, but also inevitably created a few challenges. Namely:

1. It isn't only for Grade One lecturers. This ensures the group draws from a wide pool of staff which heightens the group’s dynamism.
2. It aims to represent the College’s portfolio and diverse range of provision (representatives from all 13 faculties are invited).
3. Members are free to comment in a safe and reassuring environment without any comeback. We have created and adopted a ‘freedom in a box’ mentality.
4. Attendance is not compulsory. Members were invited but didn’t have to come and if they didn’t, we didn’t chase them.
5. There are no targets, just a relentless focus on teaching and learning.

Convincing colleagues that you could produce an impact with a group that has no agenda or terms of reference was more challenging. The notion that letting go of something often sets it free was difficult to grasp for many, but for us it has been the cultural step-change that led to outstanding teaching and learning at Exeter College.

We have started to disseminate this initiative across the sector with two other colleges engaging in the 'Think Tank on Tour' campaign where Think Tank staff visit other practitioners to challenge conceptions and ideas.