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Project Report



Teaching and Learning Circles: Developing Reflective Practice and Enhancing Teaching Culture

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Executive Summary

Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) are a facilitated peer observation of teaching professional development opportunity for tertiary teachers. In this report, we describe the successful implementation of a TLCs process at one New Zealand university. We share evidence of the impact of TLCs on collegiality, confidence and competence among participants, and we encourage other tertiary institutions to adapt and apply this approach with their own teaching staff.

TLCs are made up of four teaching staff who observe each other teach, then reflect together through a facilitated process on what they have learned from watching each other in action. The focus is on personal reflection about one's own teaching, rather than on providing feedback to those under observation. We implemented a TLCs initiative at our university with 44 teachers participating in 11 circles over the course of about a year. Two academic staff from the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) facilitated the TLC process. We conducted research on the outcomes of the TLC initiative, during which the two facilitators were interviewed, along with 12 of the 44 participants.

Findings show that TLCs had a positive impact on participating teachers' confidence, gave them opportunities to develop their teaching practice by exposing them to new and different skills, and decreased the sense of isolation that people had been experiencing prior to participating. Encouragingly, the TLC initiative is slowly taking root more widely across the university, through a 'snowball' approach to the formation of future TLCs. Furthermore, it is spreading beyond our own institution, with four different departments in Australian universities adapting the initiative, and at least one other New Zealand tertiary institution.

Summary of recommendations for other institutions considering introducing TLCs:

- Be clear about the purpose (reflection not judgement).
- Consider a snowball approach to creating new TLCs.
- Be realistic about the logistics of timing (facilitators can help with this).

Introduction

Finding time to reflect on one's teaching in the fast-paced, multi-faceted New Zealand tertiary environment is not always easy. Competing demands on lecturers' time often mean that professional development in teaching slips to the bottom of the priority list, despite many good intentions. We wanted to create a professional development opportunity for tertiary teachers that would not take up too much of their time and would have positive outcomes for everyone involved. To this end, we developed a facilitated peer observation of teaching process that focuses on reflection and aims to improve teaching confidence and competence and enhance collegiality.

In this report, we describe the initiative itself, called Teaching and Learning Circles, and we investigate its effects on teaching culture (including confidence, competence, and collegiality). We encourage readers to treat this report as a companion piece to the excellent report written by Tracy Rogers and colleagues from the University of Otago (Rogers, Wass, Timmermans, & Golding, 2019). Their report, *A Framework for Enhancing Teaching Culture and Practice*, describes a similar initiative and research project implemented at the same time as the project we describe here. We collaborated with them on the design of our research questions and methods, and we shared the original version of the resource used in the first round of Teaching and Learning Circles. We also plan to share and combine our research findings in a future paper.

In this report, you will find a brief overview of the reasons why a facilitated peer observation opportunity is important. Then, we provide details of the process itself for those who may wish to replicate the initiative in their own institutions. In the Research Methods section, we share what we did to investigate the worthwhileness of the initiative, and then outline our Findings. We conclude the report with some recommendations for anyone wishing to try Teaching and Learning Circles – or something similar – elsewhere. Accompanying this report is a [freely downloadable resource](#) which we encourage you to use and adapt for your own contexts.

Background and Context

The majority of academics in New Zealand universities are committed to high quality teaching (Universities New Zealand, 2018), but certification of teaching quality or experience is not a requirement for New Zealand academics. Few academic staff members in New Zealand universities have teaching qualifications, and few report having undertaken in-depth training in teaching (Sutherland, 2018a), despite each university making available (through their own or affiliated programmes) postgraduate level qualifications in university teaching (Universities New Zealand, 2018). Many such postgraduate qualifications, including our own institution's Higher Education Learning and Teaching (HELT) programme, include a thorough peer review of teaching process. Given the small numbers of academics taking such qualifications not all university academics will have undertaken systematic, deliberate, or facilitated peer review of teaching. Accompanying this lack of 'training' in teaching and peer review, is a prevailing culture of 'closed' classrooms, where it is not really commonplace for academics to observe each other teaching, systematically *or* informally. As one participant in our project noted, "We've no idea what's going on in other people's classes.... I've been here since 1992 and I might've observed colleagues teaching half a dozen times...that's how unusual it is."¹

¹ See the Research Methods section for more information on how we gathered data and quotes.

New Zealand universities do not uniformly require peer review of teaching. Examples exist in some universities, including Auckland and Otago (Matear, 2017; Rogers, et al., 2019), but expectations that staff will routinely have their teaching observed and/or reviewed by peers are not widespread, and rubrics for such evaluation are not evident across the country (Matear, 2017). We do not wish to imply that peer review of teaching (for evaluative purposes) *should* be compulsory nationwide. However, we do want to argue in this report for an increased uptake of peer *observation* of teaching as a means of improving teachers' confidence and competence, as well as enhancing collegiality.

We distinguish, therefore, between peer *review* of teaching for evaluative purposes and peer *observation* of teaching for reflective and/or developmental purposes. In this report, we use the term 'peer observation' and, following Rogers, et al (2019, p. 5), we adopt the following definition:

... we define peer observation of teaching as **not requiring the observer to provide feedback on the observed teacher** (see Hendry, Bell, & Thomson, 2014). Peer observation offers teachers ... the opportunity to observe different teaching approaches, question their own knowledge, and reassess their own teaching approach; which may all lead to active self-development [emphasis added].

Plenty of research from around the world shows that peer observation of teaching is beneficial (Bell, 2001) in terms of enhancing collegiality (Hendry, et al., 2014) and making classrooms and teaching more 'open' (Martin & Double, 1998). If the process has a reflective, rather than evaluative focus, it can also be a low-stakes professional development opportunity for time-poor teachers.

Many academics express a desire to spend more time reflecting on their teaching but find it difficult to make time for such reflection when competing aspects of the academic role matter more in terms of climbing the academic career ladder (Sutherland, 2017). Academics also, increasingly, bemoan the loneliness of academic life (Sibai, Figueiredo, & Ferreira, 2019) and express sadness at a perceived loss of collegiality (Macfarlane, 2016) in recent years.

We believed that a facilitated peer observation of teaching process would be an effective way of meeting the need for more flexible professional development in teaching, as well as overcoming some of this isolation. As mentioned earlier, our HELT programme includes a facilitated peer *review* of teaching process, and in our early career programme for new academics (Sutherland, 2018b), we have long run a process of teaching *observation*, modelled on 'teaching squares', an initiative first developed by Anne Wessely at St Louis Community College (Berenson, 2017; Haave, 2018; Rhem, 2003). In 2018, we decided to offer this teaching observation opportunity to more people, so we trialled what we came to call Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs)². Each TLC at our university comprises four teaching staff who voluntarily sign up to observe each other's teaching and then reflect, through a facilitated process, on what they have learned from their observations. The focus is on learning about one's own teaching not on giving evaluations or reviews of others' teaching.

² We thank Tim Cooper, then Associate Dean (Academic) for Humanities at the University of Otago, for sharing this name with us (Rogers, et al, 2019, p. 7).

How do Teaching and Learning Circles (TLCs) work?

Our accompanying resource describes the process in step-by-step detail, but put simply, it requires the following steps:

- 1) **Pre-observation meeting:** Four interested academics meet with a facilitator from the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) to establish the TLC. Alternatively, the four academics can meet without the CAD facilitator and use the resource pack to guide their TLC process. The initial meeting requires participants to reflect on, then discuss, a series of questions relating to their teaching values and goals, and their hopes for participating in the TLC.
- 2) **Scheduling the observations:** At the initial meeting, participants agree which lectures/classes they will attend in order to observe the other three participants. Some groups all attend the same classes, but scheduling does not always allow for this. Because the focus is on personal reflection (i.e., what can I learn from watching others teach), rather than on providing feedback or evaluation, it is not necessary for group members to attend the same classes.
- 3) **The observations themselves:** Each participant observes the other three participants teaching and takes reflective notes on what they notice at each of these class observations. These notes are meant to guide the observers' thinking about their own teaching and how they might teach differently as a result of observing other people teach, rather than evaluative notes that become feedback for the observed.
- 4) **Post-observation discussion:** After all four TLC participants have observed each other's classes (usually over a 2-4 week timeframe), the group meets for a post-observation discussion. We encourage groups to meet over lunch or coffee, in order to create a relaxed and congenial environment for the reflective discussion. The resource pack provides a series of question prompts for individuals to reflect upon before they meet for the group discussion. The prompts include reflections on how one's teaching values have been challenged or affirmed through the observation process, what the observer might change in their own teaching as a result of having watched the others teach, and what the participants have learned about their own teaching from participating in a TLC. The group discussion, which can be (but doesn't have to be) led by a CAD facilitator, then centres around each individual's learning as a result of their participation.

When we introduced the TLC initiative at our university, we wanted to track participation and outcomes, so we sought funding from Ako Aotearoa to conduct an exploratory research project. The next section of this report outlines our research methods, and after that, we share what we found as a result of this research.

Research Methods

Our research project aimed to explore how 'Teaching and Learning Circles' affect teaching confidence, collegiality, support, reflective practice, enjoyment, and openness to enhancement. The guiding research question was: To what extent, or in what ways, does the Teaching and Learning Circles initiative influence teaching culture/s? We chose to explore this through questionnaires and interviews, described below. We received ethical approval from the Human Ethics Committee at Victoria University of Wellington to conduct this research (ref no: 26117).

Participants

TLCs are voluntary. Participating in the research project associated with them was also voluntary. We recruited participants for TLCs by attending various Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee meetings, and School meetings, at which we gave brief presentations on the project, then followed up by email afterwards. Over the course of a year, 58 teachers expressed interest and applied to participate in a TLC. From those expressions of interest, 11 successful circles occurred with a total of 44 participants. Two further circles (comprising eight participants) were initiated but did not get off the ground for timetabling reasons, and six interested participants ended up unassigned to a circle due to scheduling difficulties.

Four of the TLCs were made up of participants from within single programmes: Law, Education, and the English Language Institute (x2). Seven were multi-disciplinary: School of English, Film, Theatre and Media Studies; School of Languages and Cultures (x2); School of Accounting and Commercial Law; School of Economics and Finance; Faculty of Health; and Faculty of Commerce. All TLC participants were invited (but not expected) to complete pre- and post-TLC questionnaires, and to be interviewed within six months.

Questionnaires

We used questionnaires to gauge participants' current level of engagement in various teaching activities, and to identify values relating to teaching. The questionnaire comprised 24 short statements reflecting different aspects of teaching culture, for example:

- I am a confident teacher (confidence).
- I engage in conversations about teaching with others in my programme and/or School (collegiality).
- I find it easy to give a lecture (competence).

All the statements from the questionnaire (it was the same pre and post) are reproduced in Appendix One.

Eighteen TLC participants completed a pre-questionnaire, but only seven completed a post-programme questionnaire. Not all those seven had completed a pre-questionnaire, so we were unable to use this pre-post data to see any patterns or shifts. Instead, we have used the pre-questionnaire to provide context for our interview findings (see more in the Findings section).

Interviews

Twelve participants (just under a third of all TLC participants) agreed to be interviewed for this exploratory research project, and a research assistant who had no prior involvement with the TLC initiative conducted eight individual interviews. We also held one group interview (with four participants). The research assistant also interviewed the two TLC facilitators, making a total of 14 interviewees. The questions are available in Appendix Two.

The research assistant then transcribed the interviews and removed names for analysis. She and one of the facilitators read through several of these transcripts individually, noting down key themes that seemed prevalent in each interview. Obviously, some of these themes came through because of the questions we asked (see Appendix Two),

but we also looked for more latent themes. We then compared notes and identified themes that had stood out to both of us. Then, we read through a new transcript together applying the common themes to our analysis of the new transcript and looking for any new themes. We coded each interview against these themes, noting how many participants spoke about each, and below we present the most prevalent themes. Where we provide participant quotations in this report, we have used pseudonyms.

Findings

The key themes that came through in our interviews related to the following: motivations for joining a TLC; benefits of taking part; and challenges with participation (actual and potential) in TLCs. We describe what we found in detail, below.

Motivations for joining a TLC

In order to encourage future participation by current and potential observers in future TLCs, it is important to try to understand the different reasons people have for participating. The participants we interviewed cited a range of reasons for signing up and came from a range of teaching backgrounds and experiences. Motivations varied depending on these backgrounds, and included being encouraged/invited by a colleague; wanting to learn more about teaching from more experienced colleagues, or to share experiences with junior colleagues; learning from how other teachers deal with our changing student population and changing technologies; and making time for professional development focused on teaching.

Our pre-questionnaire findings showed that TLC participants were confident teachers who enjoyed teaching (see Appendix Three). However, they were not necessarily actively engaged in professional development in teaching (half had not attended any teaching professional development in the previous three months), and they reported a lack of collegiality around teaching (only 17% strongly agreed before participating in the TLC that they felt well-supported in their teaching by colleagues within their programme or school). Moreover, the majority had not observed another teacher, or been observed by another teacher in the last 12 months.

At least half of the interviewees said they took part in a TLC because they were asked to join by a colleague. Participants had been approached by disciplinary colleagues setting up a circle or were encouraged by one of the facilitators at events run by the Centre for Academic Development. Some interviewees also saw their participation in a circle as an opportunity to be of service to their School. For example, Elspeth, chair of a School Learning and Teaching Committee, recognised the potential for TLCs to enact learning and teaching goals at the School-level:

This would be something good to prod the School towards strategic goals around being responsive to making sure that we're really keeping best practices for engaging our students and paying attention to our own skills as teachers.
(Elspeth)

Several others cited students as their reason for joining a circle. For example, Althea claimed that, "Over the last five to six years, the whole classroom environment and student behaviours have changed, in my opinion, quite radically". She and other interviewees acknowledged that the changing student population means that teaching strategies that have worked in the past, may not anymore:

[Students] are changing fast and their interests are changing so fast, I think we have to keep asking ourselves, are we reaching them? What worked now is not going to be the thing that works next time. (Elspeth)

Participants were also motivated to take part in a TLC as a way to update their teaching skills, learn from colleagues, and adapt to the changing nature of student learning. As voluntary participants, they were already interested in finding ways to reflect on and develop their teaching, so it is important to think about how to attract participants who may not have contemplated this kind of professional development before. Almost all of the interviewees saw the circles as a professional development opportunity that was worthy of more formal recognition. They noted that having such participation formally recognised in promotion processes might provide motivation for colleagues less intrinsically interested in teaching development to consider participating. Other ways to appeal to less motivated colleagues may be to highlight the benefits of participating, which we turn our attention towards below.

Benefits: Moving towards a more collegial teaching culture

One of the most significant benefits noted by TLC interviewees was an increase in collegiality. Different facets of this theme include: social connections between colleagues; reducing the isolation of teaching; sharing ideas; and more time to think and talk about teaching.

TLCs – where colleagues commit to spending at least four hours in each other’s company – provide a unique social experience for which busy academic schedules do not often allow. As Althea noted, “People are so ridiculously busy that you don’t often get a chance to sit and talk”. Interviewees said that they appreciated the social experience of spending time with colleagues, helped by the informal setting of a lunch, coffee, or post-work gathering for the post-observation reflection. For newer teachers, the circles were an opportunity to “get to know other colleagues” (Audrey), while even those who had worked together for decades appreciated the time they could share together: “We do enjoy each other’s company, but we don’t get much of it.” (Althea)

As Jimmy’s quote below illustrates, collegiality is at the heart of a positive TLC experience, even for a very experienced and award-winning teacher (as Jimmy is):

The fact that we talked and shared things and so on, that for me was the best part of it. Getting closer to and knowing my colleagues better through that particular process and seeing that we can have this openness to talk about the things that we care about, it was non-judgemental but actually quite supportive. (Jimmy)

TLCs in two different multi-disciplinary Schools (one, a very new School, and one well-established) both highlighted the possibilities for collaboration as a result of watching colleagues teach. Participants in both circles claimed that the collegiality fostered by their TLC facilitated their functioning as a School or team:

I think [it’s] really valuable across our school because we’re such varied disciplines and quite varied teaching contexts, so really in addition to facilitating learning, it facilitates our functioning as a School, if we understand what each other is doing in a more ‘on-the-ground’ kind of way. (Elspeth)

The benefits of TLCs may vary based on participants’ experience. For newer teachers, circles can increase confidence (as emphasised by participants in the Health and Commerce TLCs). More experienced teachers can have their expertise affirmed, such as Richie, who made the comment below:

[When] observing something not go well ... I guess it made me grateful for all the experiences that I've had where something similar had gone well. But it also reinforced for me why I don't do more of that. (Richie)

Even teachers with decades of experience found that they also learnt new things from colleagues and that the experience could "... do a lot to just broaden people's views of what you can do in a classroom, and why you might do it or not do it." (Althea)

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, for some busy academics, teaching can operate in a culture of isolation. Interviewees noted how infrequently they had observed colleagues teach, with the only opportunity for observation tied to formal evaluation or promotion contexts. Althea, who we cited at the beginning of this report, expressed a hope that the TLC initiative might create "an environment in which sharing things becomes the norm rather than something that you do six times in 27 years!" Likewise, a younger teacher noted that currently, "you just don't go to a core lecturer's class or a colleague's class and sit there. Nobody would do that" (Miles). However, the TLC experience can normalise observation and open up classrooms and teaching practice.

A different benefit of TLCs was that they formalised and carved out time for personal reflection and development. As Elspeth says:

I hate the phrase, but we really are time poor. And this hour, where I'm really not allowed to do anything else, to just be sitting there and reflecting on my teaching, I liked prioritising that for myself and having that sort of support. And because it's being run by CAD, I can think about it as professional development, it's not wasting time. (Elspeth)

A clear benefit of the TLC initiative, then, is that it enables academics to dedicate time to thinking about one's own teaching and discussing teaching with colleagues. This time spent thinking and talking also led to practical changes to participants' teaching practice, and we outline some of the benefits participants described in relation to their practice, below.

Benefits: Making changes

Participants noted a number of practical changes and personal insights they had gained from TLC participation. Several interviewees said they had learned about new technologies by observing colleagues. For Audrey, this was particularly useful:

One of the problems that I have had over and over again is that when new technology comes online, I somehow never manage to get to any of the training sessions. So, picking them up through watching a colleague in action is a kind of alternative way. (Audrey)

Interviewees talked of observing very practical steps such as using resources from a shared drive, reviewing PowerPoint slides before lectures, and using students' names more as simple ways they could improve their teaching practice. They also observed a variety of different techniques for engaging students, such as new tools to sample student opinions, storytelling, and illustrating concepts with contemporary examples. Even experienced teachers who already used strategies to engage students found observing their colleagues was informative. For example, Elspeth describes witnessing a lecturer answer a student question from a new perspective:

I hadn't really been on the other side of that conversation, where as a lecturer you really, really try to engage with that student who's asking the question, but realising how that really cuts you off from the rest of the room. So that was

probably the biggest revelation for me. I always think, 'Oh, I'm engaging with the class.' No, I'm actually engaging with one student, and probably in the process losing contact with a lot of the class. (Elspeth)

The experience of observing a colleague can increase empathy, not just for the colleague being observed, but also by providing insights into the student experience. Several participants noted that simply sitting in a different place in the classroom provides a physically different perspective that can be eye-opening and help them to reflect more on what is happening for their own students.

It is encouraging that so many participants identified potential changes they could make to their teaching, and that they learned new techniques and developed more empathy for what students are experiencing. However, some participants pointed out that timing considerations may make it hard to implement potential changes based on what they've observed. As Richie notes:

It's actually quite hard to see something and then immediately act on it. We have these teaching obligations that are for these weeks and then in some cases you've got eleven months until you do the thing again. (Richie)

Not being able to implement new ideas immediately is one issue. Below we outline some other challenges that participants faced during their TLC experiences.

Challenges

These challenges are helping to inform further implementation of TLCs at our institution and may be useful for others to consider if looking to adapt the TLC initiative to their own context.

What makes a successful circle?

Participants noted that the make-up of the circle was an important component of their experience. Factors that influence compatibility include level of experience and teaching context. Some interviewees, like Miles, saw potential value in having a mix of experience in the group but appreciated that their own circle members were close enough in experience level for the observations to have been particularly valuable. Miles is himself a relatively new academic, whose circle comprised only other early career academics, so it would be interesting in future to encourage him to participate in a circle with a mix of experience (i.e., a circle including some more senior colleagues). Another interviewee, Elspeth, was concerned that her more junior colleagues might gain less from the experience because power hierarchies might prevent them from sharing equally in discussions. For such reasons, it is important to allow for flexibility in the composition of the circles. We encourage everyone to participate at least twice: once with colleagues of similar experience levels, and once with a mixed group of experience. Such diversity can also be applied to the mix of disciplines.

Interviewees disagreed on the need for compatibility of teaching contexts. Some interviewees saw the greatest benefit for circles within similar subject areas. For example, Audrey claimed "I think it is probably good in your field, especially if you're a new teacher, you can get more ideas." On the other hand, some interviewees saw similar subject areas as a constraint, such as Althea:

If they're – as ours was – confined to very similar subject areas, then I think there is probably a limit to how useful that could be; once you've seen how other people are doing similar things there's not a lot of take-home from that. (Althea)

Other interviewees highlighted the benefit of observing outside their own subject area:

I think watching interdisciplinarily [sic] helped me identify some issues that I hadn't quite thought about, hadn't sort of articulated as a generic issue in teaching. (Elspeth)

One participant, who was not formally interviewed but who emailed through some feedback, stressed that she felt she would have gained far more from observing people beyond her own programme:

I would have much preferred having a circle that was outside my school. I think we probably tend to do things in a similar way in the school and I feel I would have gained a lot more from observing people who are in completely different disciplines. (Michelle)

Subject area is definitely not the key consideration in creating a TLC, however. As Richie noted, the content of the class was less relevant than the teaching challenge – such as the size of the class, the level of difficulty, or the way the teacher and students approach the material. More often problematic was the logistical challenge of compatible timetables.

Logistical challenges

Most interviewees identified time commitments as a challenge. Finding times for four academic staff to attend each other's classes can be particularly tricky:

Because we teach at different times it's really hard to find [time slots] ... there are only a few spaces where one can go and visit the other. (Gloria)

However, one interviewee stressed that there was no point in waiting for a time when colleagues aren't busy. Miles formed his own circle without CAD facilitation and noted that if he had waited until everyone was 'ready' it would never have happened:

They would say, 'Okay, give me time to get really prepared.' And that's just one easy way to kind of push it. And then when are you going to be really prepared? 'Maybe next trimester. Another trimester.' And then it never happens. (Miles)

Other interviewees pointed out that they greatly valued the facilitation from CAD as a way to overcome logistical hurdles at the beginning and to encourage firm commitment to the process along the way.

Purpose of observations

As noted earlier, very few participants had recently or ever undertaken any form of observation, so, quite understandably, there was some nervousness for a few participants about having their teaching observed by others. For example, three different interviewees worried about selecting a 'good' class to be observed. One participant "completely re-did [her] teaching plan" (Elspeth) because she thought the class would not be 'suitable' for others to observe (she thought it might have been too practical and not content-focussed enough). This raises interesting questions about unintentional effects that TLCs may have, and also highlights the importance for facilitators to stress that there is no such thing as a 'good' or 'bad' class for observation, because observers' focus is self-reflection.

Some interviewees worried about creating an 'unrealistic' environment for observation. For example, Althea was concerned that students might behave differently:

It doesn't matter how low-key you try to make it, students are always aware that there are observers in the class, so not sure that we were getting a hundred percent natural in-class behaviour. (Althea)

However, given that the focus of TLCs is self-reflection for the observers (not judgement of the teacher under observation), students' behaviour in response to observers being present does not preclude useful reflection.

The tension between self-reflection and feedback was evident in a couple of interviews. In particular, one participant completely misinterpreted the purpose of the TLCs, and expressed dissatisfaction that the programme was not geared around peer feedback:

I had prepared extensive notes from my own observations of two others but only one of them wanted to take them away. It was not discussed in terms of specifics. I was not provided with any written feedback and only general affirmative comments about my own teaching. (Barbara)

In contrast, most other interviewees recognised that the focus of the initiative was reflection rather than feedback, but still struggled to maintain this focus in both observations and discussion. Elspeth noted the difficulty of reflection when presented with the allure of a new topic:

We're interested in learning and we're interested in teaching and it's really delicious to go into some field you don't know anything about and learn some stuff about it. And, it's easy to get distracted by that stuff, whereas the goal of this exercise is more to be reflecting on my own teaching. So, that was my main challenge, struggling with that. (Elspeth)

Likewise, participants struggled with their own and others' desire for feedback. Richie noted that "It's very natural to go, 'Oh that didn't go so well.'" Miles reflected that "Your colleagues may not actually highlight the parts you need to improve that much, because they don't want you to feel bad about yourself" but reassured himself that "... if you're smart enough, you can also pick up what you're not doing that they're doing." Rogers, et al (2019) write of similar challenges in balancing the desire for feedback with the focus on self-reflection, and this is something that we will look at more deeply in future research.

Process

Benefits of facilitation

Interviewees were unequivocal in stressing to the research assistant how beneficial the facilitation provided by the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) was to the functioning and outcomes of their TLCs. Two different CAD staff (the first two authors of this report) between them facilitated the majority of the pre-observation discussions (only one TLC went ahead without a CAD facilitator for the pre-observation meeting). Several TLCs also had one of the CAD team facilitate their post-observation discussion. Interviewees identified three areas in which the CAD facilitation was helpful: supporting and advocating for the initiative, guiding the initial observation focus, and discussing reflections as a group.

Participants saw support and facilitation, whether from CAD or elsewhere in future (such as the school's Learning and Teaching Committee), as essential for TLCs' development and impetus. For example, Althea noted that:

Someone needs to sponsor it. That could be a Learning and Teaching committee within a school, there's no problem with that, but if we just sort of talk about it vaguely and wait for it to happen I think we'll be waiting a long time. (Althea)

Facilitation in the pre-observation meeting is also very important for managing expectations, such as clarifying the purpose as self-reflection, not evaluation. Facilitation at that early stage can also help TLC members to decide on a focus for observations:

[In future] I would like to think about focusing our observation towards a couple of target areas ... as a way of guiding the observation: 'Oh that's so interesting I want to pay attention to that' ... Especially if you're going interdisciplinary – it's hard to know, yeah, what do you reflect on? (Elspeth)

Facilitation can also balance potential hierarchies in group discussions, especially among colleagues with different levels of seniority:

I think a facilitated discussion is really helpful. Even though everybody's really generous and interested, there's too many pressures in terms of the clear hierarchical structure. A facilitated discussion, formulating a goal and then reflecting back on what was valuable, I think is just really helpful. (Elspeth)

Where to next?

Several interviewees mentioned strategies for increasing uptake and scaling up the initiative. Audrey suggested that representatives who had already participated could present the TLC initiative at seminars. Miles recommended collecting testimonials from participants, and Jimmy likewise suggested former participants should act as ambassadors.

Resolving logistical challenges, such as scheduling observations earlier in the trimester was cited in three interviews as a means for increasing rates of participation. Interviewees also noted that emphasising the professional development benefits of participation (such as adding to a teaching portfolio or promotion application) would increase interest. A few interviewees highlighted the possibility of subsequent circles to expand across schools, or to progress with a targeted focus, such as use of technology or teaching first year classes:

Going forward there may well be a circle that's focussed, that's more targeted, for example engaging first year lecturers. (Richie)

Conclusions and recommendations

A TLC is, in our experience, an easily implementable, highly beneficial professional development teaching activity that does not require huge amounts of effort from facilitators or participants, but has great outcomes. This confirms prior research on such initiatives elsewhere (Bell, 2001; Bell & Cooper 2013; Berenson 2017; Haave 2018; Hendry, et al., 2014; Hubball, Collins & Pratt 2005; Martin & Double 1998; Rhem 2003). Returning to our research question – 'To what extent, or in what ways, does the Teaching and Learning Circles initiative influence teaching culture/s?' – it is clear that for our participants, there was a positive shift in participants' sense of isolation around teaching, and many made positive changes to their individual teaching practice. For the joy of collaboration alone, we will certainly continue to encourage and facilitate the formation of TLCs as an ongoing activity at our university. We are less certain about claiming incontrovertible evidence of influence on teaching culture more broadly, as we

do not yet have enough data from the pre- and post-programme questionnaires, and the number of interviewees was low (although acceptable for exploratory research). However, our interview findings give us confidence that we are on the right track. In the next iteration of TLCs, we will work on encouraging better participation in the pre- and post-questionnaires to help participants take better advantage of their reflective teaching observation experiences, as well as for us to collect more data. We also hope to look at whether there are differences in multi-disciplinary and single-discipline TLCs or if the benefits accrue for any combination of participants. In the meantime, we lay out below some recommendations for others considering implementing a TLCs initiative at their own institution.

Be clear about the purpose

It is important to emphasise that the purpose of TLCs is to reflect on one's own teaching, not to pass judgement on what others do. The emphasis on 'reflection, not judgement' can be stressed by the facilitator in the pre-observation meeting, but if groups wish to go ahead without facilitation, we have also redesigned the resource pack (available for free download and adaptation) to emphasise this even more. Feedback may well be a helpful by-product of the post-observation group discussions (as it indeed was for some of our participants), and as it clearly was for many participants in the TLC initiative at Otago (Rogers, et al., 2019). But, if giving feedback becomes the *focus* of TLCs, it may be harder to encourage more sceptical or nervous colleagues to participate in future iterations. If potential participants think they are going to be judged, they may be less willing to commit to the process. There are other forms of peer observation that focus on the provision of feedback, and the TLCs are not in competition with them but instead provide an alternative.

Encourage 'snowballing'

In order for the benefits of TLCs to be felt more widely, we are undertaking a 'snowball' approach at our university this year, where we are encouraging and working with people who participated in a TLC last year to establish a new TLC with different colleagues. Already one school Learning and Teaching Committee chair, who participated in a cross-disciplinary TLC last year, is setting up a new TLC in her school, with new participants from each of the school's programmes. She will facilitate the pre-programme discussion herself and has asked CAD to facilitate the post-programme discussion. Participants from another TLC in a different school have committed to shoulder-tapping different colleagues to set up three new TLCs across their School, with members at different levels on the academic career ladder. Their first TLC involved a programme head and three very new academics; each of the new TLCs will include a balance of senior and junior colleagues.

Be realistic about timing

Our TLC groups variously experienced challenges in scheduling their observations. In general, we found that those groups who committed to finalising an observation timetable at the pre-observation meeting (usually with firm prompting from the facilitator) were more successful at having all group members observe all other group members. Where TLC participants were unable to pin down the observation timetable in person at that first meeting, it became much more difficult to ensure attendance by all participants at all observations. This was particularly pronounced the further into the

trimester the group was set up. We encourage groups to try to meet before the trimester begins, or very early in the trimester, and to conclude their observations before the realities of marking and course administration become heavier as the trimester progresses. We also found that completing all observations over a shorter time period (2-3 weeks) was often more beneficial than spreading the observations out over a longer timeframe. Participants were better able to recall what they had observed and reflected upon when condensing the reflection into a shorter time period.

Adaptation elsewhere

We are encouraged by the strong interest already shown in adapting the TLCs concept elsewhere. After a joint presentation with our University of Otago colleagues at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference in Auckland in July 2019 (Rogers & Sutherland, et al., 2019), several conference attendees contacted us about adapting TLCs for their own institutions. Consequently, we are aware that the concept has already been taken up, and our resource pack adapted by, the School of Medical and Health Sciences and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, both at Edith Cowan University, as well as by the School of Education and the Arts at Central Queensland University, and the First Year College at Victoria University in Australia. A presentation at the Ako Aotearoa Central Hub research-in-progress colloquium in October (Sutherland, 2019), also led to the initiative being adapted by teaching development practitioners at the Universal College of Learning (UCoL) in early 2020. We are happy for other institutions to contact us for further information or to download and adapt the resource pack for their own use. We would love to hear how TLCs go at your institution!

Appendix One: Questionnaire Statements

Scale 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree

- 1) I am a confident teacher
- 2) I am confident with using digital technologies in my teaching
- 3) I am confident with engaging students in active learning within my lectures
- 4) I find it easy to give a lecture
- 5) I am experimental with my teaching
- 6) I engage in conversations about teaching with others in my programme and/or School
- 7) I know who to ask if I need help with teaching
- 8) I feel well-supported in my teaching by colleagues within my programme and/or School
- 9) Teaching is discussed at staff meetings
- 10) I feel comfortable having others observe my teaching
- 11) Separate from this TLC process, I have observed other colleagues teaching in the last 12 months
- 12) Separate from this TLC process, one or more of my colleagues has observed my teaching in the last 12 months
- 13) At times, I find teaching stressful
- 14) I feel as if I spend too much time on teaching
- 15) I enjoy teaching
- 16) I am passionate about teaching
- 17) It is worthwhile investing time in teaching
- 18) I am a member of Vic Teach
- 19) In the last 12 months, I actively sought to read about teaching
- 20) I have attended a teaching-related professional development event (other than this TLC) in the last three months
- 21) I implement changes in my teaching based on feedback I receive from students
- 22) I meet regularly with my class rep/s
- 23) Students' voices are prominent in my classrooms
- 24) I gather informal feedback (outside the formal student evaluation process) on my teaching from students

Appendix Two: Interview questions

- 1) What made you want to take part in a TLC?
- 2) Please describe the benefits you experienced from participating in the TLC initiative.
- 3) Please describe the biggest challenges you faced participating in the TLC initiative.
- 4) Have you noticed any differences in the teaching culture of your programme/Faculty as a result of the TLC initiative?
- 5) Have you changed any aspect of your teaching practice as a result of your participation in the TLC?

Appendix Three: Pre-Programme Survey Results

Scale 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree

		Mean	% Strongly Agree/ % Agree	Count
1	I am a confident teacher	1.78	22/78	18
2	I am confident with using digital technologies in my teaching	2.06	11/78	18
3	I am confident with engaging students in active learning within my lectures	2.00	29/47	17
4	I find it easy to give a lecture	2.41	24/29	17
5	I am experimental with my teaching	2.17	6/78	18
6	I engage in conversations about teaching with others in my programme and/or School	2.06	22/61	18
7	I know who to ask if I need help with teaching	1.83	33/56	18
8	I feel well-supported in my teaching by colleagues within my programme and/or School	2.39	17/39	18
9	Teaching is discussed at staff meetings	2.83	6/44	18
10	I feel comfortable having others observe my teaching	2.40	20/33	15
11	Separate from this TLC process, I have observed other colleagues teaching in the last 12 months	3.22	11/33	18
12	Separate from this TLC process, one or more of my colleagues has observed my teaching in the last 12 months	3.65	6/24	17
13	At times, I find teaching stressful	2.22	11/67	18
14	I feel as if I spend too much time on teaching	2.94	6/28	18
15	I enjoy teaching	1.33	67/33	18
16	I am passionate about teaching	1.39	67/28	18
17	It is worthwhile investing time in teaching	1.28	72/28	18
18	I am a member of Vic Teach	3.56	11/17	18
19	In the last 12 months, I actively sought to read about teaching	2.27	33/40	15
20	I have attended a teaching-related professional development event (other than this TLC) in the last 3 mths	3.00	11/39	18
21	I implement changes in my teaching based on feedback I receive from students	1.72	44/39	18
22	I meet regularly with my class rep/s	3.06	12/29	17
23	Students' voices are prominent in my classrooms	2.00	35/41	17
24	I gather informal feedback (outside the formal student evaluation process) on my teaching from students	2.17	22/56	18

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