

HIGH IMPACT LEARNING

Introduction

The following report summarises the key themes that were explored with a series of focus groups. The focus groups discussed the outputs from the *High Impact Learning* roundtable discussion that took place at the CDN College Expo 2021. The focus groups were conducted in February 2022 and consisted of lecturers and managers from across the Scottish College sector who had experience of teaching both prior to, and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The information shown below in this report summarise the views of the individuals who participated within the focus groups.

QUESTION

Where is the modern classroom being used effectively? How is this being done? Why is it effective, and what are the barriers?

Our research discovered numerous examples of the modern classroom producing high impact learning in colleges across the Scottish college sector. While the modern classroom is not a digital phenomenon, nevertheless, its development has been assisted and facilitated by the recent necessitated embrace of digital connectivity. In its most simple and transferrable terms, the modern classroom challenges the traditional notion of gathering in-person in a physical space, synchronously with other people at fixed dates and times, to follow

a pre-determined curriculum plan. The modern classroom can break down hierarchical, physical and virtual boundaries to connect learning (and teaching) with the wider community and real-world contexts (Reed 2018).

Students are empowered to actively collaborate in shaping their own learning (Hase & Kenyon 2013). Lecturers can reposition themselves as facilitators, embracing the learning (and teaching) potential of connecting with the world and resources beyond the walls of the physical classroom (Petty 2014).

Our research identified four key principles and practices:

- Collaborative, active learning
- Flexibility
- Teacher as facilitator
- Integration of technology

Students express their satisfaction with many aspects of the modern classroom. Active participation and collaboration promote higher-order thinking and develops social skills. Students can have more influence over the pace of their learning. Digital resources can be accessed as often as needed, and at times that fit in with other commitments. Engagement challenges traditional metrics of attendance. Enhanced communication through multiple modes enables feedback to be personalised and communicated swiftly. The modern classroom builds learner confidence and enables independent, self-directed learning.

Barriers to the effectiveness of the modern classroom tend to fall into three main camps:

- Management's assumptions and beliefs about traditional modes of teaching and attendance
- Lecturers' assumptions and beliefs about the effective practice of learning and teaching
- 'Staffroom folklore' surrounding some subject areas and collective assumptions about; presence/attendance, effective practice of learning, teaching and assessment.

QUESTION

What approaches and practices are fundamental to high impact learning, irrespective of which method of delivery is being utilised? How is this being done? Why are they effective, and what are the barriers?

Our research has identified that there is no single solution or process that institutions can adopt to produce high impact learning. Drawing on consultation and interviews with focus groups across the Scottish college sector, we have defined nine fundamental principles and practices which can be embraced and adapted to render learning highly impactful. They are presented here in a diagram.



Each section inter-links with the others to form a collective whole. These principles and practices are distinctive for their consistent, people-centred, relational approach, rather than a task-centred focus.

Respectful relationships based on trust and empathy play a significant role in developing a sense of belonging which can have a significant bearing on student success. This can also impact positively on lecturer happiness and satisfaction. Nevertheless, belonging is a voluntary action which can be cultivated, but not insisted upon. There were examples of proactive **support for early-stage students** – school-leavers and mature students – to adapt to and navigate successfully around the relative independence of college life. In this context, communication and contact was regular, consistent, and empathetic.

Strategies which contribute to *High Impact Learning* include:

- 'Student buddies' (across year groups)
- An informal 'keep-warm curriculum', including information and ideas for new and prospective students to begin thinking about college before courses start
- Holding events, exhibitions and showcases to give a taste of college life
- Mentor schemes and CPD opportunities for lecturers to share ideas and practical know-how

Performance expectations set an appropriate level can provide clarity and transparency about college values, and standard of work and effort to be successful. This is most effective when supported by a **holistic approach** to learning as meaningful self-development that values relationships and belonging. These messages are supported with frequent, timely and constructive **feedback**. Supporting lecturers to work with more autonomy and a collaborative approach to project based-learning, the focus for students (and lecturers) can be attuned more closely to personal goals. Students participating in activities that feel purposeful are more satisfied with their college experience, more likely to persist, and more likely to attain.

Strategies which contribute to *High Impact Learning* include:

- Clear communication about the purposes and potential pathways for courses
- A coaching approach to feedback, focusing on actionable, personal improvement
- ‘Joined-up’ learning through holistic, meaningful educational activities
- Regular communication and support through in-person and remote modes

Flexibility impacts positively for students and lecturers in many ways. Learning and teaching strategies can be developed that are closely attuned to demographic, subject-specific criteria, and prior skills and knowledge. High impact learning is characterised by active **participation and collaboration**. For students, content made available through digital platforms can be accessed on demand. The flexibility of the modern classroom also enhances opportunities to **connect with real-world contexts**: masterclasses, guest speakers, field trips, external competitions, and events. Working with later-stage students to showcase their achievements can be particularly effective as a part of maximising opportunities to organise **capstone events** and showcase learning.

Strategies which contribute to *High Impact Learning* include:

- Supporting lecturer autonomy and professional judgement with CPD opportunities
- Embracing the potential of the modern classroom and digital connectivity to link with the wider community and workplace
- Co-creating the curriculum and project-based learning
- Enhancing engagement by harnessing current communication practices, such as the use of social media

- Later-stage students collaborating to organise events celebrating learning journeys with family and friends, potential employers, suppliers, and other important contacts. Colleges can showcase their courses, values, and principles to a wide range of stakeholders and prospective students

Our research confirmed that **high impact practices** are embedded with – and indivisible from – the nine characteristics outlined above. These include, but are not limited to, the following learning and teaching approaches:

- Cognitive load theory – consideration applied to the way in which we process information
- Discussion – drawing on lived experience and enabling the student voice
- Retrieval practice – regular and often checks on prior learning to aid memory retention
- Gamification – tapping into the resilience and persistence that occurs within game play
- Dual-coding – harnessing the power of visual triggers to aid retention of information.
- Collaborative learning – a key component of the modern classroom (see below)
- Guest speakers and masterclasses – making the link with workplaces and real-world expertise
- Visits and field trips – making a connection with the wider community
- Competitions – raising profiles and confidence
- Project-based learning – combining learning outcomes and units into holistic projects based on real world contexts

Similar barriers to the modern classroom resurfaced, predominantly when assumptions and key beliefs around the task-centred focus of delivering teaching diverted attention from the people-centred focus of promoting and supporting high impact learning.

QUESTION

How are lecturers being supported to be autonomous, collaborating in the development and implementation of local solutions? Why is it effective, and what are the barriers?

Our research into high impact learning identified significant benefits of supporting lecturer autonomy, and established three key principles:

- **Management respect and value the expertise of lecturers**
- **Project-based approaches combining units and learning outcomes**
- **Regular, purposeful communication between members of teaching teams**

Management respect and value the expertise of lecturers

Lecturers gave accounts of feeling the full support of managers to exercise their professional judgement to develop and implement effective strategies and solutions. Lecturers felt respected as subject experts, and supported to be autonomous and innovative, designing learning experiences that were closely attuned to demographic circumstances and subject-specific criteria.

In discussions about the gains and losses of online learning with management, effective blended learning and teaching strategies were highlighted where some components were better suited to online delivery, interfacing effectively with on-campus activity. Online learning was identified as being effective for lessons based on theory, and more conducive for peer assessment and feedback.

Project-based approaches combining units and learning outcomes

Self-directed teaching teams are being supported to explore how individual / discrete learning outcomes and units can be combined into holistic activities and project-based challenges relating closely to real-world contexts. Students and lecturers expressed their satisfaction with the participatory and collaborative, purposeful focus of project-based learning, in contrast with more granular approaches to meet the evidence requirements of individual learning outcomes and units. Students said learning this way “feels joined-up”, while lecturers report enhanced levels of engagement, retention, and achievement.

Regular, purposeful communication between members of teaching teams

Enhanced lecturer autonomy is being facilitated through online meetings. Shorter and more frequent, lecturers praised the exploratory dimension of these peer-to-peer collaborations. Students also commented favourably on the consistency of teaching across courses as a direct consequence of lecturers being in better communication with each other. Lecturers also identified that enhanced communication can reduce the propensity for lone-wolf operators – working in isolation, teaching units that can seem dislocated and unconnected to the wider course.

There were numerous accounts of mentorship and CPD programmes in colleges, facilitating the exchange of information and practical know-how. These can be effective, and function well when aligned with management’s demonstration of trust in the expertise of lecturers and support to exercise their professional judgement and autonomy. Nevertheless, barriers persist through top-down, task-focused directives prioritising performance indicators.

CASE STUDIES

Accounts of high impact learning in colleges across Scotland.

Case Study 1: Connecting with real world contexts

Early-years care students spent time outdoors over the space of twelve weeks. Initially reluctant, and not dressed appropriately, the students quickly adapted. After three months of being regularly outdoors, the students visited an outdoor nursery (enacting the Reggio Emilia principles of outdoor play). The lecturer described how the students immediately “got it”. They were able to connect their own lived experience of learning outdoors (and away from the classroom) in ways that were much richer and impactful than a theoretical understanding of play-based early-years care taught to them in a traditional classroom environment.

Case Study 2: A capstone and keep-warm event

Students curated a showcase event for their Floristry course. Inviting potential employers, suppliers, customers, and friends and family, the students co-ordinated guest lists, refreshments, publicity, and social media coverage. As a capstone event to celebrate the achievements of leavers, the college further harnessed the energy and positivity of the event by inviting prospective students and those about to start their studies as ‘special guests’. This was a subtle, yet deliberate ‘keep-warm’ strategy, to promote and consolidate the college’s inclusive and supportive culture. It also enabled the college to clearly signal its values and high-performance expectations.

Case Study 3: Active, collaborative learning

Students on a Forestry course are actively collaborating on ‘fieldwork’ through the sharing of images and video of green spaces near their own homes. By harnessing the visual triggers of dual coding and the active learning strategy of retrieval practice, student engagement is high. This is one of many examples of enhanced learner participation through the purposeful harnessing of students’ everyday communication skills.

Case Study 4: Improving and self-development

Hair and beauty students are using their own devices to video and photograph their working processes and completed assignments. The lecturer is enabling the students to purposefully harness the tools and platforms they use in their everyday lives to align learning and assessment with how the industry now prefers to promote itself. For the students, their course is clearly a pathway into a career, and they are proactively collaborating to invite contributions from professionals, in the form of expert masterclasses and online discussions.

Select Bibliography

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