Knowledge Cafés

Knowledge cafés, also known as ‘conversation cafés’ or ‘roundtables’ are based on the socialization approach to Knowledge Management (Demarest, 1997; McAdam & McCreedy, 1999) which places communication at the heart of the creation and sharing of knowledge (More, 1999). The aim is to bring people together to share knowledge or experiences and to learn from each other through informal discussion. Well planned cafés

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This paper discusses the use of the knowledge café as a learning and teaching method in higher education. It presents an actual case where knowledge cafés were used in final year undergraduate teaching at MMUBS, including an analysis of qualitative data on the student experience.

“foster collaborative dialogue, active engagement and constructive possibilities for action” (World Café Community, 2002); attributes which would be of obvious benefit to those involved in teaching and learning.

A knowledge café involves progressive rounds of conversation around a central theme or problem. Cafés can be held around any subject, general or specific. For example “Overcoming problems with the assignment”, “The future of Knowledge Management”,

References


“Improving the student experience”, “What do we want from our new building” are all suitable themes. The café begins with tables of five or six participants, one taking the role of table host and two of ambassador. At these “home tables” participants discuss the theme or questions that the café is to focus on, recording key ideas on their table cloth. After the initial round of conversations the ambassadors move off to take the key points and questions from their discussions to other groups, whilst the host welcomes ambassadors and shares with them the themes and ideas of the initial conversation. This cross-pollination of ideas should stimulate knowledge construction and facilitate problem solving. Towards the end of the café participants return to their home tables to share discoveries and insights. A whole group conversation can round off the café and consolidate learning.

Case Study

Using a knowledge café in teaching Information and Knowledge Management

Information and Knowledge Management is a final year undergraduate Business School wide optional unit which is now in its second year. It is also core to the new Business Information Systems degree. In the current year the unit has seventy-four enrolled students and is usually taught using a combination of weekly lecture and tutorial (three groups of twenty five).

The knowledge café replaced the tutorials in one week of the course. This served two purposes. Firstly, the knowledge café is an established technique in the creation, sharing and management of knowledge. Many management consultants advocate knowledge cafés and even act as facilitators for company based cafés. Holding a knowledge café actively involved the students in an established knowledge management practice, combining theory and practice in an enjoyable experience.

The subject of the knowledge café was linked to the unit’s consultancy style assignment. The assignment brief states that the student is an Information Management Consultant who is to explore information provision within an organisation of their choice, focusing on one key role. An analysis of the information needs of the person in the selected role and an evaluation of the extent to which those needs are satisfied forms the main body of the assignment. The student is then expected to draw conclusions and make recommendations to the organisation based on their findings. This assignment demands a range of skills including interviewing and report writing, application of models and theories, evaluation techniques and the ability to make reasoned recommendations. Facing such a challenge, the students frequently have questions or need reassurance that they are “on the right track”.

It is fair to recognise that a management consultant may discuss a case with colleagues, drawing upon social capital (Bourdieu, 1997) and seeking inspiration in other’s experiences (key themes in knowledge management). Similarly, students discuss assignments, share experiences, work through problems, and generally come up with feasible solutions. Bringing those discussions into the seminar room is not such an easy task. Students often feel that they shouldn’t “admit” to discussing the assignment, don’t want to share their own knowledge, or find the seminar too “formal” or “intimidating”. Holding a knowledge café reinforces the idea that the students on the unit are a “learning community,” (Wenger,
IKM Knowledge Café: Surmounting the problems of an Information Management Consultant

Setting up a knowledge café is quite simple and inexpensive, requiring little more effort than an ordinary seminar would. The knowledge café in this case study was held in an ordinary seminar room in the Aytoun tower block. As the unit leader, I briefed the students on the concept of knowledge cafés and on the specific subject of this café prior to the event. Some student volunteers came in ten minutes early to assist in setting up the café. The tables were rearranged into “café style” clusters. This immediately made a difference to the ambience of the room. Paper table cloths and pots of coloured pens and crayons were put on each table to encourage participants to record their discussions – in words or pictures. A sign “IKM Knowledge Café” was put on the door to alert students to the fact that they were entering into a new experience, not an ordinary seminar room. Refreshments complete the café and reinforce the “informality” of the occasion. Participants had been asked to bring refreshments to share and we enjoyed quite a feast of doughnuts, biscuits, crisps, coffee and juice.

The tutor in each café adopted the role of host to facilitate the process, and to outline the theme of the café in a welcome or introduction. The host moved between the tables contributing to the discussions where appropriate. Students actively engaged in animated discussions about their individual organisations, sharing examples of good and bad practice. Research methodologies and interviewing tips were shared and problems as varied as “thin data”, philosophical approaches to research and “models versus theories” were hotly debated. When the time came to move the groups around ideas were carried. New personalities, themes and questions revived the discussions, new connections were made and knowledge foundations were built upon. Both tutors involved noted a new energy about the students as they engaged with each other in this novel forum. At the end of each knowledge café the host synthesized the key themes or ideas that had emerged and closed the café. Again student volunteers helped to tidy the room and replace the tables into their usual rows.

The Student Experience

Following the knowledge Café students were asked to write a short paragraph beginning “The knowledge café was...”. 82% of participating students responded, and the feedback was very positive. Three main themes emerged from the responses:

1. Communication
2. Student focussed learning
3. Enjoyment

The first theme that strongly emerged from the responses was that of the new or improved lines of communication that the café had facilitated. Some students commented on the fact that within this forum it was easier to speak to the tutor and discuss ideas with them as “tutors rarely have the time to sit down with you and help answer queries or worries” Others found the small groups and informal atmosphere more conducive; “some people don’t like to speak up in large groups” and “small groups make it easier to say what you think”. Others commented on the fact that they got to talk to people they wouldn’t usually talk to and that they felt this had enriched their knowledge:

“The knowledge café was very helpful because everybody has different focuses and experiences with his own assignment and exchanging these ideas really makes me consider aspects that I didn’t think of before.”

Secondly, the theme of student-centred learning was prevalent. Lecturers increasingly strive to make learning more student-centred. Feedback illustrates that students experienced the knowledge café as a “new (teaching) method that was based around the students”. Students helped each other in solving problems they had encountered in the true spirit of a learning community. Features of the knowledge café could be drawn upon to give more structure to group work in tutorials. Without laying on a fully embellished knowledge café, table hosts and ambassadors could be identified to cross pollinate groups with new ideas and instill a sense of student-centred learning.

Finally, it was clear from the feedback that the students enjoyed this session. One student wrote “Fantastic! I really enjoyed it”, others commented how “it made a change from lectures and tutorials every week” and “it would be a good idea to do it for other units too”. However, the greatest accolade was a rareadvocation of longer classes (“I think it would be better if the café was a bit longer than an hour”) which was made by several students.

Conclusions

The knowledge café involved little more preparation or expense than a traditional tutorial. However, the benefits were plentiful. Students enjoyed first hand experience of a knowledge management technique whilst getting assignment guidance and support from tutors and fellow students. For the tutor this reduced the need to answer the same questions or work through similar problems on a one-to-one basis. In sharing experiences of their chosen company, students gained insight into practice in a diverse range of organisations, and got the opportunity to engage in some problem based learning.

In establishing the group as a “learning community” the knowledge café was invaluable. Interacting in a less formal, social setting allowed students and tutors to get to know each other better, and illustrated to the students that they can learn from each other by discussing problems and sharing experiences. Students could draw upon the experience of the knowledge café in their independent learning. Learning spaces within MMUBS such as group rooms in
the drop in centre, or the newly created Café.com facilitate such working practices and could enrich independent study.

The next challenge for the staff and students on the Information and Knowledge Management Unit is to form “Communities of Practice” around the shared problem of passing the summer exam. Through this we can structure revision, share resources that we have discovered, and encourage each member of the community to achieve their full potential. Finally, “communities of practice are not only a context for the learning of newcomers but also… a context for new insights to be transformed into knowledge” (Wenger, 1998) Perhaps these new insights could help tutors to improve too.

Bibliography


EMPLOYABILITY AND THE INTERNATIONAL AGENDA: The case for a university-wide language strategy

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The context

We live in a global society in which trans-national collaboration is a way of life creating a need for people with language skills in the professions, the world of business, finance and the leisure industry. At the same time languages ceased to be mandatory in schools at Key Stage 4 from 2004 with a consequent drop in take-up of languages with negative repercussions not only in terms of the employability of British students at all levels but also, as noted by the President of the British Academy, in terms of the future reputation of UK scholarship:

We are deeply concerned about the effect that a decline in language learning is having upon UK scholarship - and not just in language based subjects. It is already possible to see the negative consequences of this trend at doctoral level, and above. Increasingly, research projects undertaken by UK PhD students in the humanities and social sciences do not have an international dimension, because students do not have the language skills, or the time to acquire them, with the risk that UK research will be increasingly insular in outlook.

Britain now faces a skills deficit in the area of languages which is so serious that languages have been officially designated as a “vulnerable subject of national strategic importance”. The Government has responded to the situation by commissioning Lord Dearing to write a review of the situation and by investing £4.5 million through HEFCE to address the problem. The British Academy has responded to the perceived threat to the reputation of UK scholarship by suggesting that a language should be a compulsory entry requirement for university programmes, a

1 Many commentators language. This is seeking to work in the business, and part Review (2006: 20).

2 British Academy Reports, February 2007.

3 The British Academy bel at higher education le countries. Universities sh learning becomes a key skill for all students." British Academy Reports, February 2007.