Drip Fed Academic Staff Development

Using a Virtual Reading Group

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Many academics have an interest in learning about innovative teaching and of keeping abreast with the pedagogic research literature. However, workloads mean that it is increasingly difficult to find the time. A Virtual Reading Group on teaching and learning provides one way to overcome these problems.

A Virtual Reading Group is a form of online collaborative learning. If members take part in some form of teaching and learning related development activity that enthuses them, such as reading a paper or attending a workshop, they share the experience and their enthusiasm with the other members of the group. This is done using a structured, moderated and digested mailing list, backed up by a web archive. This approach overcomes the mail overload problems of many discussion lists and some of the impersonal nature of abstracting services.

In this paper we will describe the results from a year long pilot (funded by a 1998 SEDA Small Grant) to set up and evaluate a Virtual Reading Group on Higher Education at Middlesex University. The group, which currently has 70 members from across the University, has been very successful. We will reflect on the setting up and operation of the group, and discuss the feedback from the participants. We will also overview the membership breakdown and range of contributions submitted to the group during its first year of operation.

Participants of the session will:
• gain an understanding of what a Virtual Reading Group is, and what such a group can achieve, and
• gain an understanding of how to maximise the chances of success when setting up and running a Virtual Reading Group.