

Evaluating the Learning Communities: what impact do they have on the Fulfilling Lives team?

Summary

Toby Lowe (Senior Research Associate, Newcastle University Business School) and Sophie Boobis (Fulfilling Lives Research and Evaluation Lead) have been undertaking research on the Learning Community process that has been developed as part of the Fulfilling Lives programme. Using notes from the Learning Communities themselves, and interviews with Fulfilling Lives staff members, we have found the following:

The Learning Community sessions are helpful in helping Fulfilling Lives staff members to respond to the complexity of their work, and the uncertainty that this complexity causes. The Learning Communities are useful because:

- They provide a 'safe space' where it is OK to admit to being uncertain, and to reflect on how they do their work
- In this 'safe space' colleagues provide emotional support and reassurance to one another
- Colleagues also support one another to make sense of the complex situations in which they make decisions about what they should do, and how they should do it
- Colleagues also share suggestions about things to try ('practice tips') and swap information about different services that are available
- They help to explore what being a 'good' Service Navigator looks like and provide mutual definition of what is expected in their role
- The process of reflective practice has become an integrated part of the Learning Communities

Things to think about for the future:

- Should we revisit the format of the Learning Community?
- We think we need to talk about the role of 'challenge' within the Learning Community, so that there is shared agreement about whether this is ok, and how it should be done.
- What is the role of using the data that Fulfilling Lives collects to inform conversations in the Learning Community? Would it be helpful to use these (or other measures) to inform conversations?
- We think it is worth reviewing the relationship between Learning Communities and Clinical Supervision

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the findings from the evaluation of the Learning Communities, and to assess the value of the Learning Communities to the Fulfilling Lives team. More specifically this will consider:

- How the team use the Learning Communities
- How they're supporting, or contributing to supporting, the team

- Things to think about for future development

How the Learning Communities are used

Through looking at the field notes taken by Toby, and latterly his research assistant, and the interviews undertaken by Toby and Sophie an analysis was undertaken to look at how the Learning Communities are used.

This analysis detailed several common and reoccurring themes that repeat in Learning Communities and help to give us an understanding of how Learning Communities are supporting or helping the Fulfilling Lives programme.

It should be noted that the information collected and used for this evaluation took place before the shift to thematic Learning Communities and therefore may not reflect some of the changes that have occurred.

Through the Learning Community field notes a repeated structure or pattern of discussion became apparent. For the presenter this meant:

- Providing contextual information (details of the client and their history)
- Details of the presenters actions (relationship building, understanding client needs, challenging clients behaviour, navigating clients, identifying issues with the wider system)
- Emotional impact

Through the discussion following the individual case presentations this developed into:

- Talking about uncertainty and mistakes
- Making sense of different situations
- Talking about what good looks like
- Providing emotional support and reassurance
- Problem solving and information sharing
- Reflections on good practice.

Why is any of this of interest?

Understanding what is talked about in the Learning Communities helps us to understand how the Learning Communities might be contributing to supporting the Fulfilling Lives team to produce better practice. It helps us to make sense of what the impact of the Learning Community might be having on how people relate to their role, their wider team and to their practice.

Underpinning all of the core themes that the Learning Community helps to promote is that of reflective practice. From knowledge sharing to helping each other to tolerate uncertainty the participants are engaging in a process of reflective practice. This should be considered when exploring the core themes that we have identified that the Learning Community has helped to promote are:

Helping to recognise and understand complexity (sense making)

Those participating in Learning Communities seemed to respond to the complexity of the situations they described to one another by spending a considerable amount of time engaged in sense-making

activity: conversation aimed at helping collective understanding and meaning of particular client behaviours, languages, courses of action and contexts.

An example of what this looks like in practice can be seen through an exchange taking place when the group were trying to make sense of where a client with no obvious source of income managed to get the money to maintain her lifestyle. The group explored explanations around sex work, theft, drugs, and support from family members. In the end they came to the conclusion that it was not possible for them to know enough information in order to make a judgement about the best course of action. Instead, they made a judgement that the best course of actions was accepting the possibility that any of the ideas they discussed may be true:

“maybe our work is about ‘not knowing’. Not knowing is OK. This was a story about tolerating uncertainty – about the importance of not imposing a drug use or sex work story onto a client, just because those are familiar to us.” (LC3 fieldnote)

Alongside sense-making about clients was sense-making around the Service Navigator role. Given the complex nature of the work Navigators undertake, and the relatively unstructured environment in which it’s done, there seems to be great difficulty in a strict defined definition of ‘good practice’ being developed – there is no single ‘right way’ to perform the roles. However, this does not seem to mean that there were no conceptions of better and worse practice, or that all practice is equally correct in all circumstances and these discussions form a core part of the sense-making process. Understanding the Service Navigator role is an important element of the Learning Community process.

Helping to tolerate uncertainty

People told powerful stories about the complexity of their work, the uncertainty that this creates for them, and how the Learning Community had enabled them to respond to that uncertainty. All of the interviewees expressed the idea that Learning Communities were safe spaces to talk about their uncertainties. There was also a strong sense in most of the interviews that the talking about uncertainty in the Learning Communities had changed their capacity to think about and tolerate uncertainty: “previously I wouldn’t have said, “Oh, I haven’t got a clue what to do with this, personally.” Now, that’s a normal conversation sometimes. “Well, what am I going to do here?”” (Interview 9 – Navigator)

The capacity to tolerate uncertainty seems to have created a positive error culture, a willingness to look at uncertainty or perceived errors in practice as a means to ask for support, reassurance and guidance from colleagues to help reflect and improve practice: “I feel safer to take it in there [Learning Community] and just thrash it out and say, “Can I have some help please?” (Interview 6 – Navigator) Learning to tolerate uncertainty also seems to have a strong impact on practice, with Service Navigators expressing how uncertainty has led them to be more flexible and open when looking for solutions “It’s just, kind of, being more open-minded, rather than thinking, “That’s it, I’ve got to solve it, and this is what we have to do, this plan.” (Interview 9 – Navigator); “It has helped me to accept as well sometimes that I haven’t got the answer there and then; it might reveal itself further down the line. Yes, it has just allowed me to be more open-minded and feel more secure in my job.” (Interview 9 – Navigator)

One of the most significant elements of talking about uncertainty was the emotional impact on people,

particularly how this provides reassurance and encouragement. There seemed to be two aspects to this sense of reassurance: firstly a sense of “I’m not alone” (Interview 12 – Navigator), and that others share your sense of uncertainty. Secondly, there seemed to be reassurance in getting feedback and suggestions from others that helped Navigators to appreciate that they had done everything they could to help clients they were struggling to make progress with.

Learning and knowledge sharing

All of the interviewees talked about Learning Communities as a place to learn and share knowledge. This learning took a number of different forms. Navigators spoke about the ‘practice tips’ they had picked up from others, they also spoke about the way in which the Learning Communities had helped them to learn to think differently about their practice. In turn, this change in ‘thought processes’ around their practice extended to the development of thinking and reflective skills. As one Service Navigator described the Learning Communities provide “reflection, knowledge, skills” (Interview 5 – Navigator). This reflective practice extended into the management levels within the Fulfilling Lives programme. This meant that the Learning Communities encouraged learning and development in respect of how the programme itself operates.

Building community

For the managers in the Fulfilling Lives Programme, Learning Communities contribute significantly to team-building for the programme, this has particular importance in relation to the disparate structure of the programme. This sense of team-building was also echoed by many of the Service Navigators who also highlighted the benefits of a cohesive team: “these learning communities are bringing us together as a team, it’s making us stronger as a team” (Interview 3 – Navigator).

Bringing it all together

The overarching question that we asked ourselves at the beginning of this evaluation process was do Learning Communities result in practice improvements? Our findings suggest that on the simplest level, the answer to this question is a clear ‘yes’. Colleagues share information which helps them make better judgements, and learn new practice techniques from one another.

Looking at this question from a higher level, it also seems clear that the Learning Community has enabled its members to ‘tolerate the uncertainty’ which surrounds their practice. They share uncertainties with one another, and try to make sense of the situations surrounding those uncertainties. Potential challenges to difficult solutions are and that enables reflection on the practice that emerges.

In these reflective moments, the fluid nature of ‘good practice’ is reinforced. Colleagues remind and support one another in the idea that there is no single right way, but still, through direct and indirect challenge, question and gain an account of each other’s practice.

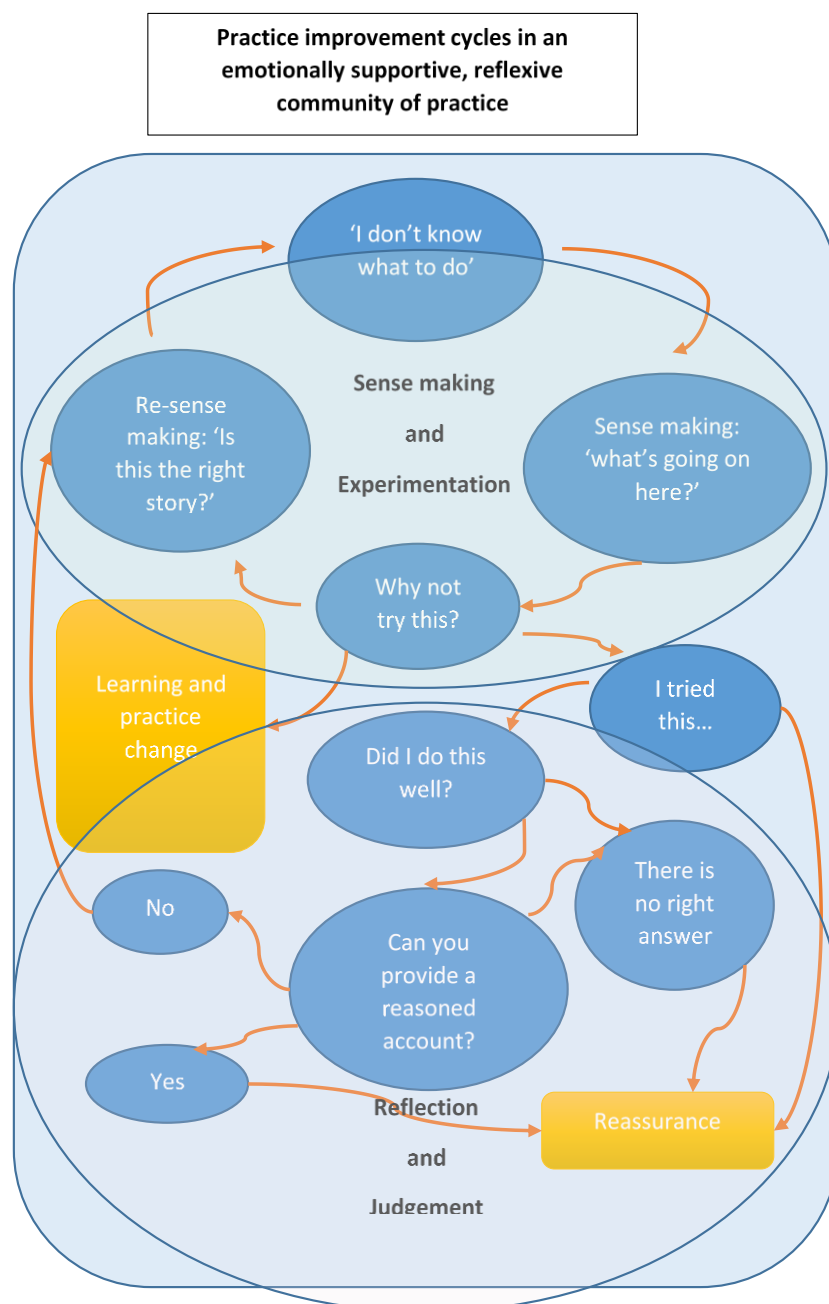
They have also created an emotionally nurturing, normative community. Participants are prepared to make themselves emotionally vulnerable to one another, and in turn, receive emotional support. They use the Learning Community to explore what being a ‘good’ Service Navigator looks like. Partly, this need for emotional reassurance seems to stem from the complexity and uncertainty surrounding their practice. The uncertainty of their work takes an emotional toll. The reassurance which is found within the Learning Community helps to mitigate some of this.

Helping with judgement making

From the interviews with members of the Learning Community, it seems clear that his process does impact positively on people's ability to make judgements in situations of uncertainty. It seems to do this in three ways:

- By helping them make sense of the uncertainty, and to tolerate not knowing
- By improving capacity to learn from collective mistakes and uncertainties through group reflection
- By providing emotional support and reassurance which gives confidence to continue to make judgements in situations of uncertainty

This judgement making process emerging in the Learning Community is modelled here:



The Learning Community provides a mechanism to build a reflective Community of Practice. It enables staff to respond to the complex nature of their working practice and system in which they work. The Learning Community has helped the Fulfilling Lives team to develop a positive error culture, and an emotionally supportive environment, which enables people to share the anxieties around uncertainty, and to receive emotional support. The Learning Community also creates a space for group-based critical reflection which improves confidence and ability to make judgements in complex situations.

Considerations for the future

Format of the Learning Community:

The value of having an external facilitator as an intrinsic part of the structure of the Learning Community was highlighted by many of the participants in the interviews. This was discussed in relation to how it allows everyone there to give their full contribution to participating instead of having to minute or be making comprehensive notes.

The value specifically of someone who has a knowledge of how the Learning Community works, how everyone has an equal right to contribute, and is therefore facilitating in a way that encourages this was also highlighted.

Whilst the majority of those interviewed didn't see a problem with the different role hierarchies in the room (Navigator, Broker and Programme Manager) there were some who mentioned this as being a slight filter between what they would like to say and what they do say. This was mentioned particularly in relation to the programme manager.

However there were also raised benefits to having different roles in the room particularly in relation to the knowledge sharing and learning that can be contributed by different perspectives.

The role of 'challenge' in Learning Communities

Whilst there were much evidence in the fieldnotes of the Learning Community sessions to suggest that the Learning Communities are used as a safe space to challenge each other, some of the responses from the interviews that this was not been done to the extent that it could be. It was raised that there was a danger of "a collective mentality" in the Learning Community sessions (Interview 11 – Navigator) and that this impacted on how challenges were made.

Considerations should be taken for how to ensure that the Learning Community doesn't promote a group mentality and allows for challenges to be made constructively.

It may be useful to have a conversation to revisit the groundrules of the Learning Community to help develop a greater shared understanding about the idea of challenging one another's practice in this context. Are people happy that challenge to one another's practice is part of what happens in Learning Communities? If so, how do we enable that and still protect the 'safe space' of the Learning Community?

The role of 'data' in Learning Community conversations

The Fulfilling Lives Learning Community has reached a mature state, and is now able to think about the way in which it undertakes its own reflective practice. A question that came out of the most recent Learning Community was one that was asked as part of the original design questions, but which was

put aside at that time. It therefore seems appropriate to revisit the question now: 'what is the role of data and measurement in informing the conversations in the Learning Community?'. Fulfilling Lives collects lots of data about clients, and about how the programme is working. Is any of this useful for informing Learning Community conversations? Which measures (if any) would be useful to Learning Community conversations?

Clinical Supervision

Through the interviews a number of navigators brought up the comparison between Learning Communities and Clinical Supervision. In the majority of these comments the Learning Community was perceived as being a much more positive environment to Clinical Supervision. Comments were raised about the benefits of Clinical Supervision and whether it was a needed space.

A recommendation would be to conduct a review of the Clinical Supervision provided to assess whether it is fit for purpose in its current form.

Conclusion

The Fulfilling Lives Learning Community has successfully created a reflective space that supports the Fulfilling Lives team to consider the challenges and difficulties in practice decisions they face within their roles. It helps them to increase their tolerance for not knowing, to share system and practice knowledge and to create shared understandings of complexity and their role within it. It has also helped to encourage a positive error culture by which frontline staff are not afraid to admit uncertainty or perceived error in practice but instead use these instances to reflect and seek support, guidance and reassurance from colleagues.

It is not easy to ascertain whether the Fulfilling Lives Learning Community created a genuine form of peer accountability. This was the case for some people, but not others.

Based on the conclusions of this evaluation the Learning Community makes a significant and positive contribution to the Fulfilling Lives programme and should be continued as an integral part of the programme's structure.