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Learn Something New in 20 Minutes - Bite Size Sessions to Support Research and Teaching

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Abstract:

The School of Health and Related Research (SchARR) at The University of Sheffield run an innovative series of informal 20 minute Bite Size sessions to help staff and students teach, research, collaborate and communicate more effectively. The sessions have two clear strands, one focused on teaching and the other on research. The remit is not to teach people how to use something in their work or study but to let them know why they should use it and how they can employ it. By introducing participants to the possibilities and how they can apply ideas and technologies in their work and study in an enthusiastic manner it is possible to send them away with at least the intention to explore and experiment. The evidence shows that this organic approach is working - staff and students are starting to use many of the tools that Bite Size has covered. Any kind of widespread change within organisations can be hard to deliver, but by bringing champions on your side and delivering sessions in a convenient, informal and timely manner; good practice and ideas can spread naturally.

Introduction:

The environment in healthcare and education institutions is increasingly pressurised with busy staff finding it difficult to take time out for training, even when it might enhance their role and enable them to work more efficiently. As time pressures are frequently cited as a barrier to

professional development (Ellinger, 2005), at SCHARR we have addressed this through a programme of short-format professional development sessions, to provide an accessible form of training that enables staff to engage with new technologies whilst balancing other demands and priorities.

Background:

Technology is one way that staff can use and manage their time efficiently, but learning to use it effectively requires support that is not necessarily readily available. Given the time pressures outlined above, scheduling time for undertaking such development can be difficult.

David Boud (1999) states that “Academic development should be conceptualized not only as a university- wide process, but also as a local practice” - we feel this is true both pedagogically and pragmatically- the *localisation* of professional development allows local knowledge to be shared locally, with minimal inconvenience to staff. It also ensures that learning is embedded within the context of the organisation, increasing its relevance and impact. This is also a concept that is relevant to healthcare organisations. While there are often staff who are innovating in key areas of professional practice, sharing their knowledge throughout the organisation can be difficult. Ellinger (2005) quotes Marsick’s assertion that informal learning is often perceived as “tacit and integrated with work activities” - this is in essence both its strength and its weakness for an organisation such as ours - staff at SCHARR often undertake innovative work under pressure to tight deadlines and do not have time to learn or share good practice, so valuable tacit knowledge can remain ‘locked away’. Collinson and Cook (2001) in their qualitative research with school teachers found that many cited a lack of time *with* colleagues as a barrier to professional development: “We don’t have sharing time...we don’t have common time”. This lack of ‘common time’ is also a barrier to collaboration both in HE and healthcare organisations, but at SCHARR by using the concept of the ‘tea break’ even though such a break is not routinely taken, we have been able to use the idea of ‘common time’ as a means of motivating staff to attend. One study which looked at Bite Size teaching in a clinical context (Wyer et al, 2004) found that “clinical learners respond best ...when they are offered...“easily digestible bites” or mini-lessons, presented in tandem with clinical problem-solving.” Our Bite Size sessions emphasise the links between teaching and research practice and practical applications of tools and technologies, to demonstrate their potential for improved efficiency and time-saving.

Methods:

Bite Size is a programme of 20-minute professional development sessions run during the afternoon, pitched as ‘tea-break’ sessions and based on two simple ideas: whilst individuals may not wish to spend hours training, they can spare 20 minutes to learn about potentially useful technologies. Secondly, as the sessions are informal, we provide cake to incentivise attendance and enhance the ‘tea break’ concept, making the sessions more convivial (Figure 1). We give a 20 minute presentation using a variety of technologies and interactive demonstrations, along with an optional 10 minutes for questions, during which staff can ask

questions or leave whenever they need to. The 'Bite Size' programme is designed to cover a variety of topics relating to teaching and research practice, with a strong emphasis on Web 2.0 and emerging technologies and innovations. It actively promotes sustainable technologies that can address staff needs and organisational problems, usually for no cost.

Box 1 gives some examples of the topics covered during the sessions, which act as both a demonstration and a signpost to further resources. They do not cover everything in detail, but simply alert staff to what is available, how they might use it and where they can find support. Recently we have started to record Bite Size presentations, enabling staff who are unable to attend to watch them later.

Promotion

The target audience are emailed twice ahead of each Bite Size: a week before the event and on the day of the session. Posters are embedded in emails with the abstract also included. Social Media such as Twitter feeds, Google+ streams, community pages and Google Events are used to spread the message as widely as possible. The events are listed in a Google Calendar which allows colleagues to subscribe and get all Bite Size events added to their calendar or pick individual ones of particular interest. The Bite Size sessions are also blogged on the SchARR Library Blog <http://scharlibrary.blogspot.co.uk/>. Finally, colour posters are placed in strategic locations for maximum effect (Figure 2). This final method works best within a single building due to the effort involved in putting up and taking down posters.

Location

It is important that colleagues do not spend more time travelling to a session than they actually spend at it. A centrally located, accessible venue is vital, as missing the first few minutes of a Bite Size session means that attendees can miss important information. Our Bite Size sessions often take place in a meeting room catering for 15 people seated - this choice is deliberate and is based on an idea often used in restaurants: fuller, smaller venues are more appealing, and there is also greater networking potential as colleagues sit close together.

Evaluation

To evaluate Bite Size we conducted a web-based survey using Google Forms; a part of the Google Apps suite we have at the University. A total of 54 people responded, of whom 39 said that they had attended a Bite Size session. Of those who had not attended the majority said this was because they were not aware they existed (8/15; 53%). Others stated lack of time (3/15; 20%), working part-time (2/15; 13%) and not feeling that they had anything to learn (2/15; 13%) (Table 1). The overwhelming majority of respondents felt that short sessions such as Bite Size were an effective way of learning (49/54; 90.7%). Over half of respondents felt that it was very important for them to learn about new developments and tools and only 1 felt that it was not important.

Nearly 90% of Bite Size attendees felt it had helped them in their work (34/39; 87.2%) and almost all would recommend it to colleagues (37/39; 94.9%) (Table 1). The duration of the sessions was felt to be about right (35/39; 85.2%), with this being the most popular reason for liking Bite Size (30/39; 76.9%). The next most popular reason was content (25/39; 64.1%). Other reasons included the cakes (with nearly a quarter citing this reason for liking Bite Size

(9/39; 23.1%), the informal nature of the sessions (5/39; 12.8%) and their interactivity (5/39; 12.8%). Interestingly only 3 attendees cited the location as being a reason.

Over three quarters of Bite Size attendees had used at least one tool (30/39; 76.9%) and over a quarter had used at least 6 tools that had been showcased during Bite Size sessions (10/39; 25.6%) (Table 2). The most popular tools were Google Scholar (21/39; 53.8%); uSpace (the University's collaborative working platform) (16/39; 41.0%) and Google Docs (15/39; 38.5%).

Attendees have included a good mixture of staff and postgraduates, with many staff having made Bite Size a routine 'date' in their diaries. This may indicate that staff who initially came to hear about something they had an interest in, then subsequently continued attending future sessions with a more open-minded approach. This challenges the conventional theories around adult learning, such as Malcolm Knowles' work on 'andragogy' (Knowles, 2011), where it is assumed that adults learn things that they 'need' to know; our sessions provide an opportunity to learn things they didn't know they wanted to know! Mark Smith (2) has criticised the theory of andragogy, arguing that it "underestimates just how much we learn for the pleasure it brings". The saying 'if you build it, they will come' sums up Bite Size - giving people the chance to investigate new technologies in a friendly format has drawn staff in.

The combination of the short time-slot, cake, exciting tools and ideas, and examples of their grassroots application is what makes Bite Size such a successful format.

Comments on the sessions include:

"They do not take much time out of the day, so I do not feel bad about going to ones on topics that may not be directly relevant to my own work. I always learn something and it gives me an insight into lots of aspects of work that people are doing"

"Gets to the point. Allows me to meet real researchers, as I'm from the Library. Useful model for training we might try to offer"

"They are a good, quick intro to a new tool. Because they're given in person you have the chance to ask questions. I like the social aspect of it - meeting other colleagues you might not know"

This approach is currently unique within SCHARR, and to our knowledge there is no other programme like it for facilitating knowledge acquisition and transfer amongst a group of professionals who are expected to be outstanding educators and world-class researchers. The evidence indicates that staff value these sessions and find them informative, engaging and effective. We would recommend this 'Bite Sized' approach to any healthcare library and information service struggling to get staff engaged with new technologies and resources.

Discussion:

Time is the Key

The MTV and subsequent YouTube generations are showing us that people's attention spans are shifting and shortening as a result. (Purcell, 2012) found that technology had a detrimental effect on learning amongst students as 87% of teachers said these technologies are creating an "easily distracted generation with short attention spans". (Purcell, 2012) added that 64% of teachers said today's digital technologies "do more to distract students than to help them academically." Furthermore, a common problem for health library and information professionals trying to implement staff development sessions is that particularly within NHS institutions clinicians and other healthcare staff are becoming less willing or indeed able to give up time to undertake a workshop or course. With a 20 minute session, the idea is to give attendees a brief taste of a resource or tool that they themselves do not have time to explore. Bite Size is built very much around the concept of 'show and tell' and the idea that if an individual does not find the session of use they have only wasted 20 minutes rather than a few hours.

Current considerations

There are many things that require careful thought when starting a Bite Size-type programme. These range from the development, promotion and administration of sessions, to finding people to deliver relevant sessions. Despite the informality and duration of Bite Size sessions they do require some foresight and planning. Administrative support is, if not essential, certainly desirable, to help with the room-booking, sourcing of equipment and refreshments, and creation of and dissemination of promotional materials.

Future Development

Without doubt, SchARR Bite Size has been a big success within the department, anecdotally and statistically. The Bite Size model has now been franchised across the University with a Dentistry Bite Size that includes CPD points for professionals as an incentive. There has also been a Faculty of Medicine Bite Size series and one hosted in the University Information Commons for students. These developments are evidence of how the format can be rolled out into different departments with initial sessions based on previous SchARR Bite Size sessions. In addition there has been interest in the format from colleagues outside of the University including enquiries from the Highland Health Sciences Library, Health Sciences Library at the University of Leeds, York and the Library of the Australian Taxation Office.

Conclusion:

The Bite Size approach has proven to be a successful way of engaging and supporting SCHARR staff to use both existing and emerging technologies that can enhance their working practice. The Bite Size method has few limitations and the major benefit of running a Bite Size series is that the topic range is potentially huge. The format can be translated to any sector and topic of interest. The application of the Bite Size approach therefore has huge potential to benefit within healthcare organisations.

Little evidence exists about the use of short-format learning in the workplace. Ellinger (2005) argues that while informal workplace learning in general may be widespread, "little is known about how such learning is best supported, encouraged, and developed within organizational settings." It is unclear whether informal learning like Bite Size simply remains 'off the radar' from

a research perspective, and that Bite Size's uniqueness is less in its format, and more in our desire to formally evaluate and share our findings. Nevertheless, the success of the format and the widespread interest among colleagues both within the University and beyond suggests that there is something about Bite Size that is both appealing and effective and that annexes the practices and principles of informal learning, but semi-formalises them, to produce a kind of 'third way' for professional development of academic staff in HE. Ellinger (2005) states that "the interplay between informal learning and the context in which it occurs has been a largely unexamined area of inquiry". In our work and research on Bite Size we hope that we have contributed something to this under-investigated area.

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Links:

[https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/Bite Size/](https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/Bite%20Size/)

[http://prezi.com/14u5rgltskcc/Bite Size-learn-something-new-in-20-minutes/](http://prezi.com/14u5rgltskcc/Bite-Size-learn-something-new-in-20-minutes/)

<http://youtu.be/oCibJ1MwLXY>

Figure 1: The Bite Size formula

Figure 2: Sample Bite Size poster for Google Apps session

Box 1: Example Bite Size sessions

Teaching-related sessions	Research related sessions
Introduction to Symposium (electronic whiteboards)	Patient and Public Involvement in Research
How (not) to display data	Searching for Grey Literature
Prezi (zooming presentation software)	Mobile phone apps for the researcher
Online assessment and Feedback	Mendeley (reference management and research networking)
Facilitating online discussions	Medline

Table 1: General information on Bite Sized

Attended a Bite Size session:	
Yes	39 (72.2%)
No	15 (27.8%)
If no, why not (n=15):	
Work part-time; it's on the wrong day	2 (13.3%)
Didn't realise they existed	8 (53.3%)
Don't have time	3 (20.0%)
Don't think I could learn anything	2 (13.3%)
If yes, has Bite Size helped you in your work?	
Yes	34 (87.2%)
Not sure	4 (10.3%)
No	1 (2.6%)
Would you recommend it to a colleague?	
Yes	37 (94.9%)
Not sure	2 (5.1%)
What do you think about the duration of the sessions?	
Just right	35 (85.2%)
Too short	4 (14.8%)
What do you like about Bite Size	
Time	30 (76.9%)
Content	25 (64.1%)
Cakes	9 (23.1%)
Informal	5 (12.8%)
Interactive	5 (12.8%)
Location	3 (7.7%)
Networking opportunity	2 (5.1%)
What do you dislike about Bite Size?	
Not in depth enough	4 (10.3%)
Too short	4 (10.3%)
Not recorded	3 (7.1%)
Not relevant	1 (2.6%)
Overrunning	1 (2.6%)

Table 2: What tools featured on Bite Size have you used? (n=39)

	N (%)	
How many tools have you used?		
0	9	(23.1%)
1	2	(5.1%)
2	5	(12.8%)
3	6	(15.4%)
4	6	(15.4%)
5	1	(2.6%)
6	3	(7.7%)
7+	7	(17.9%)
Which ones have you used?		
Google Scholar	21	(53.8%)
uSpace	16	(41.0%)
Google docs	15	(38.5%)
Linkedin	13	(33.3%)
Facebook	12	(30.8%)
Prezi	10	(25.6%)
RSS	10	(25.6%)
Mendeley	8	(20.5%)
Youtube	8	(20.5%)
Twitter	8	(20.5%)
Pubget	8	(20.5%)
iGoogle	7	(17.9%)
Research professional	6	(15.4%)
Researchgate	6	(15.4%)
CiteULike	5	(12.8%)
Delicious	4	(10.3%)
Turning Point	4	(10.3%)
Vimeo	3	(7.7%)
Academia.edu	3	(7.7%)
Diido	2	(5.1%)
PBWiki	2	(5.1%)
Disposable webpages	2	(5.1%)
Echo360	2	(5.1%)
Xtranormal	1	(2.6%)
Netvibes	1	(2.6%)
Pearltrees	1	(2.6%)

Table 3: Attitudes to Learning (n=54)

	N (%)	
How important is it to learn about new developments, tools and websites for your work?		
Very important	32	(59.3%)
Partially important	21	(38.9%)
Not very important	1	(1.9%)
What restricts you from finding out about new ways of researching? (nb categories are not mutually exclusive)		
Too many out there don't know which to choose	38	(70.4%)
Don't have enough time	31	(57.4%)
Don't know where to look	22	(40.7%)
Tried some and they were not what I wanted	4	(7.4%)
I don't think they would help me	3	(5.6%)
Do you think that short sessions such as Bite Size are an effective way of learning new ways of working?		
Yes	49	(90.7%)
Not sure	4	(7.4%)
No	1	(1.9%)
How should Bite Size be delivered in future?		
In person	44	(79.6%)
Pre-recorded videocast	28	(51.9%)
Live videocast	16	(29.6%)
On a blog, website, uSpace	16	(29.6%)
Pre-recorded audio podcast	8	(5.1%)