
Rethinking Faculty Development: Toward Sustaining a Community of Learners

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Faculty development is an essential element of institutional effectiveness in higher education. The extent to which the university supports faculty development will be strongly reflected in levels of student engagement and motivation, and thus ultimately, student learning. Faculty who engage in professional development experiences benefit also in terms of increased vitality, informed pedagogy, teaching innovations, and scholarly teaching. Moreover, faculty professional development contributes to the effective use of emerging technologies and establishes a firm foundation for the overall development of high-quality programs and curricula.

The need for maintaining currency in teaching has never been more imperative for the academy. Today's learners expect and, in many cases, demand that their instructors infuse their teaching with the kinds of digital technologies with which they have grown up and are accustomed. "Net Generation" students use technology in almost every aspect of their lives, although it is so familiar that they seldom think of devices such as PDA's, digital music players, and cell phones as technology (Jakes & Dosage, 2003). "Net Geners" tend to be connected 24/7 by technology. They text message, web conference, meet and chat via "MySpace" and "FaceBook" social networks, and they browse the Internet with ease, sometimes doing several of these things at once. Today's students are multi-taskers, inclined toward rapid shifts of attention. They value speed and sometimes find it difficult to delay gratification. These "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) tend to learn best through visual/graphic modes, and they are typically less adept with processing text and verbal input. A recent survey

of nearly 8,000 college students revealed "Seventy-five percent of students instant message while doing schoolwork. At the same time, the student is also playing and downloading music, watching last night's "The Daily Show" and talking on the phone" (Junco & Mastrodicasa 2006, p.17).

A rapidly changing knowledge base, the lightning speed of advancing technologies, and the unique characteristics of today's learners all demand that the professoriate give high priority to their own professional development. Technological developments and characteristics of learners also oblige colleges and universities to find effective ways to motivate and reward faculty participation. With competing demands for effective teaching, scholarly productivity, and service contributions, faculty may be tempted to opt out of professional development training and seminars.

Facilitators of Faculty Development: Essential Elements

As a professor, I have benefited immensely from professional development opportunities offered here at Fullerton by the Faculty Development Center. In particular, I've gained more expertise in the areas of active learning, classroom assessment techniques, use of multimedia, online instruction, and podcasting. Collectively these experiences have helped me to become more conscious of my pedagogy and to expand my repertoire of available teaching strategies. They have also allowed me to work with dozens of colleagues from across the University. My experiences have also helped me to better understand the essential features of effective faculty development programs. These features include infrastructure, situated learning, differentiated support and training, incentives, and visionary planning.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure that undergirds professional development includes the physical spaces, the arrangement of physical spaces, material resources, and human resources. Our current location of the Faculty Development Center in the

basement of Pollock Library offers one large and one small computer classroom and several office spaces. The large classroom is outfitted with Dell computers, while the smaller classroom offers several Dells and Mac G5s as well. With the ability of Mac computers to now operate in dual platforms (Mac OS and MS Windows), it seems that a dual boot lab would be very useful for training of faculty. The integrated software tools of iPhoto, iMovie, iDVD, iTunes, iWeb, GarageBand, Keynote, and Pages make it very easy to develop attractive and efficient web content. With more and more classes being offered online, we need to provide simple tools such as Keynote that can allow faculty to create a podcast and upload it to a web site or Blackboard within as little as thirty minutes. Adobe Creative Suite also offers integrated software tools such as PhotoShop, Illustrator, Dreamweaver, and Flash for complex development and editing tasks.

Given the importance of faculty development, the University should place a higher priority on finding a more spacious location for the FDC, and one that would also encourage faculty to congregate and access resources in informal as well as instructional settings. Ideally, the location would be contiguous with the prospective Faculty/Staff Club that is under design. The FDC could then become a hub of faculty collaboration in research, grant work, and pedagogical exchanges.

Material resources such as hardware, software, site licenses, and training materials are also critical to dynamic and effective faculty development programs. We currently have a variety of material resources in the FDC, which are quite well selected to allow for diverse trainings. However, we might explore additional options for software that would allow for user-friendly development of interactive lessons for web-based delivery. One such program is SoftChalk Lesson Builder, a simple but powerful tool for the development of web-based lessons with built-in templates and flash tools for development of student practice activities and self-assessments.

I am personally indebted to the faculty and staff of the FDC who have empowered my teaching

through their training sessions and individual support. They are brilliant, hardworking, and deserving of only the highest praise. In terms of human resources, I believe we need to expand the full-time staff to allow for more training programs and the extension of professional development to colleges and departments. This would allow a two-tiered approach to general training in the FDC that is followed and supported by contextualized training within the various disciplinary settings.

Situated Learning

We might think of professional development that is offered in the context of a disciplinary setting as “situated learning.” When faculty have opportunities to apply their new pedagogical skills in the context of their curriculum, the transfer of theory into practice is greatly increased. From an efficiency standpoint, it makes sense to offer university-wide and consolidated trainings, providing opportunities for groups of twenty or more faculty members to gain new skills in technology and pedagogy. But additional training is needed where the “rubber meets the road” so to speak, and that is in curricular and course work applications.

The College of Education (COE) has developed such a program for situated learning. The COE has held full-day retreats around topics such as using classroom technology and assisting students with special needs. The COE has also installed Promethean electronic whiteboards in classrooms and has begun to train faculty in their use. The development of a podcasting studio has provided ready access to additional training and excellent hardware and software. In addition, the COE Instructional Technology committee brings together departmental representatives to establish a mission and extend individual support to faculty. Rather than supplanting the training that is available in the FDC, the College seeks to help faculty build on and apply their new skills. This kind of situated learning is contextualized and immediately applicable to teaching and learning activities. In addition, it is convenient and accessible in proximity.

Differentiated Support and Training

Research has shown that the professional development needs of faculty differ across stages of the career ladder. Not only do faculty differ in entry-level interests and experiences, but their needs tend to shift as they move from early career to mid-career and late-career levels.

According to a recent survey of more than 15,000 faculty at 89 colleges across the country, conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education, mid-career faculty have become more and more “dispirited” in their work environments. The study also showed they were the most likely segment of the professoriate to feel negatively about their jobs and the fairness of their work environments (Selingo, 2008). This study strongly supports the need for differentiated support and training for midcareer faculty.

Universities such as the University of Illinois-Chicago and the University of Toronto have begun to develop specialized and targeted professional development opportunities for early-career and mid-career level faculty. Early-career training tends to focus heavily on retention and promotion needs, while mid-career programs focus more on sustaining faculty vitality, productivity, and innovation. This kind of “developmental approach” (Stevenson et al., 2005) to faculty development provides for differentiated support and training of faculty across career levels.

Incentives

Ideally, incentives for participation in faculty development would be entirely intrinsic in nature. In fact there are many intrinsic rewards such as intellectual growth, self-satisfaction, and pride to be gained from professional development. The reality, however, is that extrinsic rewards such as certificates, stipends, grants, publications, and assigned time are strong motivators as well. The rapid growth in student enrollment in the University over recent years, however, has led to a burgeoning faculty, and our challenge is to continue to expand resources and explore options for incentives for faculty across career levels. We must continue to expand opportunities to support

new faculty in earning tenure and promotion, while providing real incentives for senior faculty who also deserve recognition.

Visionary Planning

Leadership and vision are of paramount importance in guiding faculty development. The planning of faculty development programs requires a certain set of skills and a firm grounding in both pedagogy - the art and science of teaching- and technology. This kind of planning is no small challenge, particularly in light of the diversity of our faculty and the explosion of growth in technology. Fortunately, we do have dynamic support and leadership in campus technology, and we also enjoy the continual unfolding of new cyberinfrastructure such as the iLinc web conferencing suite of applications and rollout laptop and desktop computers. However, it will be difficult to sustain this momentum in the current budget climate, which seems to be moving from a state to national and even global financial crisis.

Obstacles to Faculty Development: The Formidable Challenges

The obstacles and challenges for faculty development are formidable indeed. Faculty time constraints and competing time demands of learning about and implementing good teaching practices and producing research are difficult to resolve. They often preclude faculty from taking advantage of the many opportunities that abound. Institutional budget limitations compound these faculty constraints, because funds designated for assigned time and stipends are stretched thin. Several prevailing ideological misunderstandings also pose challenges, including the notion of pedagogy as a craft, naive views of what constitutes effective online instruction, and a lack of faculty accountability for delivering engaging online instruction.

The Notion of Pedagogy as a Craft

One common false assumption in higher education is the view that knowledge of subject matter and research expertise will naturally lead

to effective pedagogy. Pedagogy, by definition, is the systematic study of both the art and science of teaching. The knowledge base is grounded in decades of research on how faculty members teach and how students learn. It includes the empirically based principles of effective teaching and learning. These principles are best “taught,” not “caught,” through rigorous instruction is research-based pedagogy. In the absence of such instruction, both in doctoral programs and among new and experienced faculty, the opportunities for professional growth and reflective practice are severely hampered.

Naïve Views of Online Instruction

Online instruction requires a skill set of specific multimedia and learning management tools that are not developed through experience in face-to-face instruction. Often, both faculty members, as well as the deans and department chairs who assign them to online instruction, lack awareness of these specific skills and their importance. Consequently, a large proportion of the courses offered online are somewhat anemic in content; they rely on online readings and PowerPoint slides that provide more sterile and less than empowering experiences for learners. Because these limited online courses predominate in higher education, students themselves are often unaware of the true potential for interactivity and engagement in online instruction.

Department chairs in particular must give careful consideration to the assignment of faculty to online courses. They must understand the learning curve involved in transitioning from traditional to online instruction and consider the heavy workload that is involved. Administrators also need to understand, value, and respect the specialized skills of accomplished online instructors who demonstrate high interest and proficiency.

These considerations are also important to personnel committees, whose members may not understand how new faculty in particular may become overwhelmed by the challenges. They must also pay close attention to such statistical trends as low response rates, higher variance, and lower means in online student evaluations.

Lack of Accountability

While it is important to exercise judgment in the assignment and evaluation of online instructors, it is also important to provide measures of accountability for such instruction. This is tricky business, however, because the boundaries between accountability and transparency as juxtaposed with academic freedom are sometimes blurry. Perhaps it would be helpful for administrators to participate in trainings to explicate qualities of effective online instruction. This training might assist them in assessing indicators of student engagement, relevance, interactivity, authentic assessment, and media richness. We might also provide faculty with exemplars and models of well-designed online instruction and make them readily accessible.

Communities of Learners

The ultimate goal of faculty development should be to establish and sustain a community of learning in which faculty collaborate and engage in growth and dialogue around areas of common interest. When such a community exists, faculty members are more inclined to initiate and continue their involvement from a perspective of intrinsic motivation. The key features of communities of learners involve ongoing collaboration, inquiry, dialogue, modeling, mentoring, and exploration. Learning communities develop out of ongoing collaboration as opposed to one-time trainings, although the latter do have their place in overall professional development programs.

Consider the potential value of such strategies as literature circles, action research teams, peer observation groups, and other ongoing forms of collaboration to empower the professoriate. For example, literature circles are groups of individuals who have chosen the same book, article, or other text to share through dialogue (Daniels, 2002). Structured roles such as discussion director, investigator, illustrator, connector, word wizard, and summarizer provide a backdrop for developing shared meaning through multiple lenses and diverse perspectives. They also ensure the active participation by all members of the group.

Pedersen and Eeds (2007) have explained the richness of dialogue that results from focused collaboration as “grand conversation.” Grand conversations are distinguished by the free expression of feelings and ideas, co-construction of meaning, and transactions and connections with personal experience to find relevance. Prior to the group discussions, individuals transact with text by connecting with their own prior knowledge and experience, with each reader abstracting his or her own personal meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). Through the grand conversations of literature groups, each individual shares his or her own meaning to contribute to a richer shared meaning through multiple perspectives.

Summary

This paper has emphasized the vital role of faculty development in the milieu of academia. It has also reviewed a variety of facilitators and obstacles for effective faculty development programs, with specific recommendations for revitalizing existing programs. These recommendations are cast within a framework of the learning orientations of net generation students, as well as the need to help digital immigrant faculty members retool to capitalize on the strengths of today’s learners. They are not intended as panaceas or simple band-aids, but simply as ideas for further discussion and debate.

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