A DIFFERENT WAY TO THINK ABOUT DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

Faculty Inquiry in Action

Guidelines for WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING

A Project of
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
STRENGTHENING PRE-COLLEGIATE EDUCATION
IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES
2008

More Information and Resources

Faculty inquiry and Faculty Inquiry Groups were a central component of Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC), a project of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

An action-research project focused on teaching and learning in pre-collegiate English and mathematics, SPECC is perhaps best described as a laboratory for exploring what works and what it takes to bring about real and lasting improvement. On each of the 11 participating campuses, educators have been exploring a variety of approaches to classroom instruction, academic support, assessment, and professional development. In parallel with these innovations, they have systematically examined the effects of their efforts, gathering and evaluating a wide range of data. As participants in this collaborative venture, they continue to share what they discover from their successes.

For a more detailed discussion of the faculty inquiry undertaken as part of the SPECC project, please see the essay, "The Promise of Faculty Inquiry for Teaching and Learning Basic Skills," by Carnegie Senior Scholar Mary Taylor Huber.

Also see *Windows on Learning*, an online collection of multi-media representations of SPECC work that includes several sites by campuses that employed Faculty Inquiry Groups at gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/specc.

For more information about SPECC and the work of the 11 California community colleges participating in the project, see the SPECC home page at www.carnegiefoundation.org/specc.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has been making grants since 1966 to solve social and environmental problems at home and around the world. The Foundation concentrates its resources on activities in education, environment, global development, performing arts, and population. In addition, the Foundation has programs that make grants to advance the field of philanthropy, and to support disadvantaged communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. More information may be found at www.hewlett.org.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Founded by Andrew Carnegie in 1905 and chartered in 1906 by an act of Congress, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is an independent policy and research center with the primary mission "to do and perform all things necessary to encourage, uphold, and dignify the profession of the teacher and the cause of higher education." The improvement of teaching and learning is central to all of the Foundation's work. The Foundation is located in Stanford, California. More information may be found at www.carnegiefoundation.org.

How do my students learn?
Where are they stumbling?
Where are they succeeding?

Such questions are more than a passing curiosity for teachers engaged in faculty inquiry.

Faculty inquiry is a form of professional development by which teachers identify and investigate questions about their students' learning. The inquiry process is ongoing, informed by evidence of student learning, and undertaken in a collaborative setting. Findings from the process come back to the classroom in the form of new curricula, new assessments, and new pedagogies, which in turn become subjects for further inquiry.

When faculty pursue such inquiry in the company of colleagues and students, they begin to create a "teaching commons" on their campus—a set of interconnected forums where conversations about learning take place, where innovations in curriculum and pedagogy get tried out, and where questions and answers about education are exchanged, critiqued, and built upon.

As an example of the larger scholarship of teaching and learning movement, faculty inquiry has the potential to transform higher education by making the private work of the classroom visible, studied, talked about, and valued—conditions for ongoing improvement in any enterprise.

Although these guidelines were directly informed by faculty inquiry carried out at 11 California community colleges involved in the SPECC project, they can be useful across a variety of campuses and academic settings.

The Power of Inquiry: Challenging Questions and Powerful Evidence

As part of faculty inquiry, teachers closely examine student learning in order to understand how to make learning environments more effective. In other words, the inquiry process regards the challenges of teaching as topics worthy of serious intellectual examination.

For example, faculty inquiry might focus on questions like the following:

> *Why do my mathematics students struggle with word problems?*
>
> *How does my students' writing change when they participate in a learning community that links an English composition class with a class in history or anthropology?*
>
> *What are the most important concepts in the algebra course? What do students need to know to go on to the next mathematics course and how can we be sure they know it?*
>
> *How many students start in basic skills and successfully reach transfer level courses? What is the typical pattern of progress? If students stop out, do they come back?*
>
> *Why do capable students fail? What can we do as educators to increase their chances of success?*

To answer such questions, a faculty inquiry group might explore and analyze a variety of evidence, ranging from fine grained observations in the classroom to data about campus-level trends. Examples of evidence include the following:

- Classroom assignments with examples of student work across different sections of a class
- Pre- and post-assessments given in a class
- Results of a common final exam
- A series of "think alouds" where students talk through their thought process while solving a problem
- Student interviews, focus groups, surveys or reflective essays
- Campus data about patterns of student success, retention, and persistence
- Data from research conducted by educators in other settings

The Power of Community: Inquiry as a Collaborative Process of Improvement

Teaching can be a lonely experience. Working behind closed classroom doors, educators may not know if the challenges they face are shared or idiosyncratic, whether their standards of grading and attendance are too demanding or too lax. An ongoing professional conversation can open the doors to the classroom and magnify the work of individuals. A Faculty Inquiry Group (FIG) offers powerful advantages:

Working with others in the department or program

Collaborative inquiry provides an opportunity for faculty to acknowledge common challenges and search together for solutions. Inquiry may focus on curricular development and on articulating explicit outcomes to shape course design. Members of a FIG may design and analyze common final examinations, or develop a portfolio system for assessing outcomes over time. Such work can strengthen the content and continuity of a course or sequence of courses.

Working with others around a new teaching model or approach

Inquiry groups may form around the implementation of new classroom approaches such as learning communities, the use of technology in the classroom, or reading across the disciplines. Participants in FIGs feel able to take risks and experiment with new ideas in their classrooms.

Working with educators in a variety of roles across the campus

Student support personnel, counselors, and institutional researchers may join FIGs and bring new perspectives to the process. Such interdisciplinary inquiry groups can help break down silos across campus and create a network of relationships and trust. Faculty inquiry groups are powerful settings for sharing diverse perspectives, experiences, and resources.

Suggestions for Starting and Supporting a Faculty Inquiry Group

Inviting Participation

Start with topics and questions that matter in the classroom. Think strategically about who can contribute to the conversation.

Invite participation widely, including adjunct faculty.

Involve institutional researchers and others who bring important data and perspectives from beyond the individual classroom.

Designate a group leader who can foster candid exchange, reinforce the importance of evidence, and keep the group moving toward its shared goals.

Shaping the Conversation

Student learning is always the primary focus of inquiry. Start the conversation by looking closely at examples of student work and by listening to student voices.

Identify a shared question, goal, or purpose. Doing so can strengthen the group and increase the likelihood that new insights will travel across classrooms and settings.

Think about the range of evidence and data than can inform the group's questions and deliberations. Bring evidence into the discussion early in the inquiry process.

Look outward to the research literature and to the work of others.

Document what is done and learned so that others can build on it.

Providing Support

Schedule and protect time for faculty to meet and work together on inquiry projects. Time is a precious commodity on any campus.

Build respect and trust in the group so that differing perspectives are valued. Nurture and feed people—physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

Recognize and provide opportunities for emerging leadership in teaching and learning.

The Outcomes of Inquiry

The outcomes of collaborative inquiry into teaching and learning range from tangible changes in the classroom, program, or department to intangible changes in individuals and campus culture. Outcomes may include:

Increased local knowledge about teaching and learning

Teachers come to see the classroom through the lens of student learning. They may rethink the nature of their own academic discipline through the eyes of a novice learning the subject.

Revitalized engagement in teaching

As a result of participation in inquiry groups, faculty members bring renewed excitement to the classroom and tap into new energy for ongoing improvement.

Shared responsibility for student learning

FIG participants realize that not only do they share challenges and commitments to teaching, they also share students. Students enrolled in developmental English may also be taking history or biology, often at the same time. As the isolation of the classroom breaks down through collaborative inquiry, educators move toward a more shared sense of responsibility for the learning of all students.

A more integral role for professional learning, growth and development

Typically, campus professional development has consisted of a series of workshops or conferences. When faculty become involved in inquiry, the nature of professional learning and development changes and becomes part of the texture of the educational work. Regular departmental activities, such as curriculum redesign or faculty review, can be revitalized by interweaving inquiry and using a range of evidence to continuously improve the education of students.

A culture of inquiry and evidence

As inquiry becomes a habit of mind, questioning and seeking evidence become a part of the campus culture. Questions and problems are regularly met with the response, "what information will we need in order to understand that problem and see if a solution is working?"

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