Cultivating Community: Faculty Support for Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Emerging approaches to faculty support are moving away from a "fixing" model to a "relational" model. In this article, the author describes a program of faculty support that places trust and community-building at the center of its efforts. The result is a program in which faculty members engage in a peer-to-peer approach to mentoring, professional exchange, assessment, and reflection.

On a recent spring morning I found myself conversing with a Portland State University (PSU) capstone faculty member over tea. We had met at a popular coffee shop at the edge of campus with large windows looking out on tree-lined park blocks. The cafe has become a favorite meeting place for students, staff, and faculty at PSU. It has a relaxed yet vibrant feel to it—the kind of place where faculty and students meet to catch up on each other's lives or work on a project together.

My meeting with this particular faculty member marks a typical scene for faculty support in the capstone program. A new faculty member comes into the program, and a relationship of trust and collegiality is gradually built with faculty support facilitators. Over time, the faculty member feels comfortable enough to request a coffee date or meeting to check in about her course. Inevitably, the conversation winds toward the peculiar challenges and rewards of teaching, an exchange of ideas about new classroom resources or techniques, or the intersection of one's personal and professional life. By the end of the meeting, plans are made to meet again, and each person departs with a short list of items to send the other—a group learning assessment, a community partner evaluation form, or even a list of wildflower hikes to recommend.

This is the nature of faculty support for teaching and learning in the capstone program at PSU. While the work is ultimately about supporting transformative teaching and learning, the process by which we accomplish this is an unprescribed mix of community building, attention to each instructor s individual gifts, mutual support in the face of challenges, peer training, and a healthy dose of reflection and celebration.

Faculty Support Structure

The faculty support structure within the capstone program is an ever-evolving organism designed to meet the emerging needs of faculty in the face of educational change. This flexible approach relies on the willingness of seasoned faculty members to step into faculty support roles as the need arises. In the early years of the capstone program, its director recognized the need for a particular brand of faculty support for

capstones. In addition to the services provided by our university s central teaching and learning center, she envisioned an "embedded" approach for capstone faculty that provided a range of support options which would address the specific needs of educators teaching community-based learning courses.

With the support of the director of University Studies (PSU's general education program, the senior level of which is the capstone), the capstone program secured initial funds for a half-time faculty support position to be held by an experienced capstone faculty member. Over time, the staffing structure has expanded to include three part-time faculty support coordinators who carry paid contracts, and an additional group of seasoned faculty members who assist with faculty support in fulfillment of their service obligations to the university. The paid support team recently saw an increase in FTE with the introduction of online capstones. As of this writing, one of our faculty support facilitators focuses all of her efforts on assisting faculty in the development and implementation of online capstones. Together, this faculty support team reviews course proposals, visits capstone classes to conduct student feedback sessions, plans and facilitates workshops and retreats, and meets one-on-one with faculty members to provide targeted support or simply reflect on their teaching practice.

A key characteristic of the faculty support team is that all members are actively teaching in the classroom. This allows them to serve as both colleagues and mentors in the faculty support process. Currently, this structure supports the instructors in over 240 capstone courses offered each year. The courses span a wide range of topics and teaching approaches, including face-to-face, hybrid, and online course designs. Capstone faculty represent a range of disciplines and are made up of tenured faculty members, non-tenure-track instructors, and adjunct instructors.

The "Flow" of Faculty Support

Proposal Development and Review

Faculty support in our program takes many forms. An often overlooked but particularly effective component of our overall faculty support structure is the course proposal process. Our director often says that faculty support begins when a person walks through her door to share an idea for a new capstone course. In the capstone program, faculty have the opportunity to propose their own capstone courses based on their particular interests and awareness of community needs. A committee of five capstone faculty members reviews proposals on a quarterly basis with an eye to what will make for a successful course. Before the proposal even reaches the committee, however, individuals are encouraged to meet with the chair of the committee to review the proposal draft. The chair works with the faculty member to develop a strong proposal and shares feedback from the committee once the review process has taken place. More often than not, the committee recommends that the proposer revise portions of the proposal before receiving full approval for the course. Suggested revisions reflect the committee members' collective knowledge of the common pitfalls associated with teaching capstones. By requiring proposal revisions, the committee members use their expertise to support the proposer in designing and delivering a successful course.

Pre-course Preparation

Once a course has been approved, the committee chair meets with the instructor to orient them to the capstone program and the many resources available to instructors. This orientation includes a new hire checklist, an overview of various support services on campus, an introduction to PSU's learning management system, syllabus construction techniques, and a review of best practices for community-based learning. Faculty members are also introduced to the capstone faculty handbook and the capstone website at this time. As the first offering of the course approaches, the committee chair again offers to meet with the new instructor to review the initial syllabus for the course.

Mid-Term Feedback Sessions

Each new course is scheduled to receive a mid-term feedback session halfway through the first offering of the capstone. This is also conducted by the committee chair to provide continuity in the support process. The mid-term feedback session is a central component of our faculty support program. Each year, every new course and a random sample of our ongoing capstones receives a mid-term feedback session. The approach we use for these class visits is based on the small-group instructional diagnosis process or SGID (Angelo and Cross 1993; Black 1998). The SGID is a formative assessment strategy that allows faculty members to gain teaching insights from students' comments and to make mid-course adjustments as needed.

At the start of this process, the facilitator of the SGID meets with the faculty person to hear about the dynamics of the course from the faculty member's perspective. The facilitator then schedules a thirty-minute visit to the class to invite students into dialogue about what is going well and what could be changed to improve the course. This session takes place while the faculty member is out of the room. At the end of the session, the facilitator compiles the students' comments and again meets with the faculty member. In this meeting, the facilitator shares the students' aggregated responses and offers assistance to the faculty member in making sense of the results and initiating changes to the course. In this way, faculty are invited to get useful information about students' experiences in their course while it is operating, which also models for students what it looks like to ask for, receive, and implement formative feedback.

Faculty often report deeply meaningful experiences with the SGID. In one memorable example, the seasoned facilitator scheduled to conduct a feedback session had a very difficult time connecting with the faculty member for their pre-session conversation. Finally, after a number of failed attempts to set up a meeting with the instructor, the facilitator went to his office hours, and the two discussed his course and how he was experiencing it. The facilitator described the feedback process in detail to the instructor and asked if he had any suggestions to make for how she might best facilitate the process with his students. During their fruitful post-session conversation, the professor apologized for having made himself difficult to reach initially, saying that he had never experienced a positive interaction with a colleague relative to assessment, nor

had he ever before felt seen as an instructor, let alone encouraged to open himself up to formative feedback and collegial support for the purposes of improving his teaching (about which he cared very much).

Ongoing Faculty Support:
Workshops, Retreats, and Brown Bag Sessions

Each year, one of our faculty support professionals gathers a team of capstone instructors to plan and facilitate a one-day fall workshop that focuses on skill-building. Themes for past events have ranged from syllabus development to fostering dialogue in the classroom to teaching for hope and change. At this event, all participants are invited to share their ideas for upcoming faculty development events, including any sessions they would like to lead.

In the spring, we host an annual retreat that combines reflection and celebration with a service project to support us in "walking our talk." Last year s event found us cleaning and sorting books for a local children s literacy campaign. Our host for the day was a community partner who shared with us the challenges of providing summer reading resources to bilingual students at the neighborhood elementary school. The day opened with a poem and ended with a lunch reflection in which faculty exchanged successful teaching strategies from the past year.

Between these two events, we offer monthly brown bag sessions focused on relevant teaching topics. These sessions are often led by instructors in the program who have a particular strategy, tool, or body of research to share. Finally, with the rise of hybrid and online courses, we have worked with our university s central teaching and learning center to develop a series of workshops to foster best practices for community-based learning in the online format. (See "Online Community-Based Learning as the Practice of Freedom: The Online Capstone Experience at Portland State University" in this issue for more information about online capstones.)

Sample brown bag topics include the following:
• "Working with Multilingual Students"
• "Experiential Activities for Use in the Classroom"
• "Content and Process: How We Teach is What We Teach"
• "Supporting Final Project Teams"
• "Designing Powerful Reflective Writing Prompts"
• "A Framework for Anti-Oppression Training in the Classroom"
• "The Instructor's Role in Surfacing Intersecting Identities"
• "Anytime One-on-Ones: A Responsive Approach to Faculty Support"

Sometimes, despite everyone's best efforts to prepare for success in the classroom, a crisis arises. In our program, faculty are encouraged to reach out for support at the first sign of trouble in the classroom. This support usually takes the form of an impromptu meeting. Over the years, many faculty members have knocked on the office door of a faculty support facilitator without an appointment to request a few minutes of support.

Together, we review the issue, think collaboratively about how to respond, and plan for next steps. If the issue calls for additional support from another office on campus, we use this time to reach out to the appropriate individuals. In some cases, this has involved a longer-term strategy of hiring an outside expert to advise our faculty on a particular challenge that many faculty are facing. Faculty often come back to report on the resolution of the issues or to ask for continuing support. Above all, faculty members are assured that a challenge in the classroom does not reflect negatively on their teaching performance. In fact, addressing issues as they arise in capstone courses is viewed positively within the program, indicating an instructor's commitment to effective teaching in the dynamic environment of a community-based learning class. Therefore, it is far better to reach out for help early than to endure the challenges of an unmanaged crisis over the course of the term.

Faculty Support through Course Evaluation and Program Assessment

The SGID sessions described earlier are just one component of a larger evaluation and assessment framework within the capstone program. This framework includes formative and summative approaches designed for one purpose—to improve teaching and learning. At every step, the program reminds faculty that this is not a punitive process. Rather, the program strives to implement an assessment and evaluation approach that first establishes the trust of faculty and then allows the evaluation and assessment approaches to serve as a continuous improvement strategy.

At the end of each academic year, members of the faculty support team engage in a robust analysis of program data to evaluate the capstone program and inform faculty support efforts moving forward. The data we draw on include a large sample of student comments from final course evaluations, as well as all of the mid-term feedback session summaries. Two members of our team work together analyzing each set of data. Separately, they analyze the data for themes and then come together to generate a written summary of their findings. This summary often serves as a roadmap for faculty support offerings in the following year. For example, if the data suggests that students find many syllabi to be confusing, the program might offer a fall workshop session focusing on syllabus design.

Recently, we have experimented with a new approach to assessment that involves faculty members engaging directly in the assessment process in small learning communities. A central component of our program is a set of four learning goals that are common to each University Studies course: communication, critical thinking, appreciation of the diversity of the human experience, and social and ethical responsibility. Faculty members from a variety of courses are recruited, and sometimes compensated, when funding allows, to develop a portfolio that examines the presence of that goal in their course. The portfolio includes a copy of the course syllabus, a sample assignment that addresses the goal, and examples of student work related to the goal.

Once the portfolios have been submitted, the faculty members meet to review each other's materials, to share feedback, and to engage in dialogue about what they have

learned from each other's approach to the goal. Since the purpose of this assessment process is not to critique each other's work, but rather to learn from each other, and because the facilitator of these sessions stresses the constructive, even generative, goals of this work, faculty have offered praise for what they have experienced and are taking away from these processes. In the anonymous written feedback on the assessment process that participating faculty completed at the end of this year's session, for example, one instructor indicated that the process had "re-affirmed a sense of value in sharing with colleagues." Another reported that they had gained an "appreciation for [the] assessment process." One participant, in response to the question "How will you use your takeaway(s) in future settings?" wrote, "I'm heading to my office right now to note changes to my syllabus and assignments," with a second indicating that they would "continue to come to gatherings such as this to share, analyze, review, and learn from each other." A powerful effect of this process has been the relational ties that are emerging from bringing together faculty who might not otherwise interact.

Faculty Development from the Inside Out

A unique aspect of our faculty support program is the integration of reflective approaches that help instructors explore and nurture their individual gifts as educators. We began down this path with a series of faculty book groups focused less on the mechanics of teaching and more on the nurturing of a set of values that provide the foundation for our practice. The books we have used include *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Palmer 2007); *Teaching with Fire: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Teach* (Intrator and Scribner 2003); and *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* (Wheatley and Frieze 2011). (For more on this last text and its use in the "Effective Change Agent" capstone, see "Contagious Co-Motion: Student Voices on Being Change Agents" elsewhere in this issue.)

While these book groups center on reading a particular text, the gatherings often serve as a springboard for innovative teaching and programming which transcends the book's themes. For example, a conversation that took place in one of the *Teaching with Fire* sessions spurred one faculty member to develop a new program to support students in their continued engagement with social change work beyond graduation. This unique program (expanded upon in the article "Beyond the University: An Initiative for Creating Community-Wide Civic Agency" in this issue) drew on a website, a group of peer mentors, a series of mini-courses, and the passion and expertise of community change agents to support students to continue their social change work following the completion of the capstone. The *Walk Out Walk On* book group created a space where faculty could consider ways to courageously transform teaching and learning. An interest in further empowering students to take charge of their learning led some of the book group participants to form an affinity group that has explored various approaches in participatory pedagogy, including self-grading.

Our work with *The Courage to Teach* led to the development of a faculty retreat series based on this text and other writings by Parker Palmer. Two decades ago, Palmer

developed a retreat method based on *The Courage to Teach* which he piloted with K-12 teachers. The retreats proved successful in supporting the vocational vitality of these teachers, and a nonprofit was established to formalize the "Circle of Trust" retreat approach. Today, the Center for Courage and Renewal (http://www.couragerenewal.org/) supports facilitator training in this approach and sponsors hundreds of retreat series designed for individuals in a variety of professions each year. Since his initial work with K-12 teachers, Palmer and a network of trained facilitators have adapted this retreat approach to support university educators and a variety of service-oriented fields.

Two years ago, our program enlisted the help of a trained "Circle of Trust" facilitator to launch a retreat series for our faculty members. The series was titled "The Art of Teaching: Working from the Inside Out." In each of the past two years, approximately fifteen faculty members have gathered for a series of four day-long retreats over the course of the academic year. The retreats are held off-campus and provide a space for faculty to slow down and reflect on their professional roles. The overall focus of the retreat is to help our instructors nurture authenticity, integrity, and a sense of vitality in their professional roles. Each retreat session explores a particular theme in depth and includes time for individual reflection and collegial conversations. Sample retreat themes have included "Balancing Our Gifts and Limits," "Paradoxes of Teaching and Learning," and "Planting Seeds for Professional Growth."

Lessons Learned

In the capstone program, we've learned many lessons from experimenting with relational approaches to faculty support and engaging with the challenges in teaching intensive community-based learning courses as they arise. While many of these challenges have pushed us to improve on our approaches, other challenges have remained "sticky" problems. In the conclusion to this article, we will address the gifts that have emerged from this relational approach to faculty support. In the meantime, here are some of the challenges with which we continue to grapple.

The capstone program's faculty support efforts are constantly evolving as we adjust for mistakes and respond to the shifting educational climate in higher education. An ongoing challenge that we face is robust attendance at all of our faculty support events. Given that university educators teach at different times of the day, it is difficult to find a time for a faculty development session that matches everyone s calendar. To respond to this, we constantly rotate the day and time for faculty support events such as our brown bag sessions. We also post handouts from these sessions on our capstone website so all can access them. Over the years, this website has grown to host a large number of resources shared by capstone faculty for the benefit of their colleagues. The website allows for peer-to-peer training to continue outside of the confines of a scheduled faculty support event. The website also hosts useful forms and a set of capstone handbooks (for faculty, students, and community partners) which serve as official guides to the program.

Since our instructor pool represents a mix of tenure-line, non-tenure-track, and adjunct instructors, we find varying degrees of participation in faculty support events based on the professional demands faced by each rank. For example, a tenure-track faculty member who is preparing for her promotion and tenure process may not be able to make time for additional meetings, no matter how helpful. Similarly, adjunct instructors frequently juggle positions at multiple institutions, so they may be less likely to find themselves on campus on the day of a particular faculty support event. To address these challenges, our paid faculty support professionals work hard to nurture relationships with individual instructors and to extend personal invitations to events when appropriate. Despite our best efforts, we will never reach everyone, but at least we can ensure that everyone is warmly welcomed into our community.

Finally, the very nature of capstone courses requires that faculty facilitate deep engagement with some of the most critical issues facing our communities and our society today. As a result, faculty must develop the skills to help students engage with each other around extremely complex issues. Unlike a traditional lecture course, capstones invite students to take the driver's seat in their learning process by sharing their own lived experiences and individual perspectives as they relate to course themes. As one might imagine, this can get messy at times. Much of our faculty support effort focuses on helping faculty members develop the skills to support diverse teams of students, to gently but effectively interrupt various forms of oppression, and to create a "brave space" (Arao and Clemens 2013) where a variety of perspectives can be aired with safety and integrity.

As our student body grows and diversifies, we face new challenges that influence the design of our faculty support efforts. In recent years, faculty have asked the capstone program for support in learning more about the range of students we serve. For example, faculty have requested programming related to supporting transgender students, responding to behavioral outbursts in the classroom, engaging effectively with students experiencing mental health issues, and navigating difference in the formation of student project teams. In these cases, one faculty member's request benefits our entire faculty community by generating an event in which an outside expert shares information with us and faculty members have an opportunity to learn from each other's experiences. As the context for teaching and learning shifts, the program must be flexible enough to respond to emerging topics, needs, and concerns as they arise.

Conclusion

Over the past twenty years that the capstone program has been in operation, a relational approach to faculty support has yielded a variety of positive outcomes for faculty. Rather than speak for them, we would like to leave you with the voices of our faculty members as they speak to the impact of our faculty support efforts on their professional practice. The following quotes, received through confidential personal communications on our faculty support approaches, address some of the main themes in the feedback we have received from faculty and the outcomes generated by our community-centered faculty support processes.

- Faculty express a very real sense of camaraderie as a result of the program's focus on community building:

  I am very grateful for the spirit of camaraderie and openness established in the seminars.

  What I didn't expect, and what I have greatly come to appreciate, is that my capstone colleagues and mentors have created a work culture in which this kind of engagement and compassion extends to faculty as well.

- A collaborative approach to faculty support allows faculty to play an active role in their own professional development.

  [The program] has created opportunities for faculty to come together and share ideas and provides avenues for furthering our own education and strengthening our teaching skills.

- Continuous input from faculty allows the program to provide "just in time" support that is responsive to faculty needs and desires.

  The professional development workshops, after an attentive ear to participant requests, provide relevant and valuable assistance on several levels. In these workshops I have learned and then utilized practical strategies for serving and challenging a diverse student population, meeting the University Studies goals, building community in my classroom, and enlivening my curriculum.

- Faculty support efforts inspire faculty members to take risks and to grow as educators.

  I can count on [the program] to create a welcoming, professional space that allows me to identify and work toward my latest growing edge.

- The program's efforts to develop trust with faculty pay off in their willingness to seek help when challenges arise.

  In general, I am accustomed to working very independently and shy away from too much input into what I do. Those barriers have fallen significantly....The leadership and direction have allowed me to feel comfortable enough to ask for help when needed.

At the end of the tea date with the faculty member I described at the beginning of this article, I casually mentioned that I was working on a draft of this article. This faculty member had participated in various forms of faculty development in her two years with the program and was eager to share her reflections on our approach to faculty support. When I asked her how she felt the faculty support program had impacted her professional practice, she shared the following: "I have never experienced this level of faculty support at other institutions. This program is based on sharing ideas, on mentorship, and includes many opportunities to reflect on our work. The atmosphere is so encouraging and is rooted in personal connections" (N. Kono, personal communication).

For every faculty member who shares a comment like this, there are surely others who fall through the cracks of the program's faculty support efforts. But the work continues, with an ongoing commitment to building individual relationships with each faculty member, to cultivating a strong sense of community among our faculty, and to honoring the unique gifts and challenges that each of us bring to this work.

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