Learning How to Teach: The Case for Faculty Learning Communities

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Abstract

Faculty learning communities, a specialized form of communities of practice, are not new. These communities provide opportunities for learning, feedback, and collegiality. Even with all of these benefits, many faculty have never participated in a learning community, sometimes because colleges and schools have not yet established one. This paper presents two cases in which faculty participated in a Faculty Learning Community and provides some recommendations for establishing a new community.

Keywords: Faculty Learning Communities, Communities of Practice, Scholarship of Teaching, Continuing Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Faculty learning communities are a specialized form of communities of practice. Wenger (2011, p. 1) defines communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do an learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Not all communities of practice will be purpose-built to encourage learning; however, faculty learning communities have learning as a stated goal.

Many of those teaching at colleges and universities have no formal teaching education. Ironically, the famously underpaid K-12 educators have more education about educating minds than those in the Academy. While not universally true, teaching at some research universities (where most PhD degrees are awarded) may be viewed as a necessary evil, a task that is done to pay the bills, or worse yet, a distraction from the important research. As such, prospective faculty members quickly learn to do only the bare minimum when it comes to developing and delivering courses. When given

another professor's syllabus/course materials to work with, the assumption is that they will not be making any substantive changes. They have just been saved from a new class prep.

It is little wonder that in organizations where research is celebrated and teaching is tolerated that formal education in how people learn is omitted in the curriculum. The incentives strongly support publication in top-tier journals but only require teaching to meet some minimum threshold. As such, those who want to be excellent teachers are sometimes left 'in the dark' when it comes to how to improve their teaching.

There are many good resources for learning to be more effective in teaching. Scholars in education create articles, books, provide conference presentations, and often share their research online to try to help improve the state of the art of teaching. But faculty that are constantly prepping courses, delivering those courses, grading papers and projects, and creating exams often find themselves with precious little time to keep current. And it can be lonely, hiding in an office and reading the current research in education.

Faculty may also struggle with how to solicit feedback. Universities have instructional design professionals, but they may serve an entire college or university. Most universities also have some type of instructional support system, but once again, it can be general in its scope. Feedback from peers can provide insight into what works and what does not. Bouncing ideas off colleagues provides synergistic learning – both parties think differently after the exchange. However, asking busy colleagues to sacrifice time to observe teaching or provide feedback on assignments can be an uncomfortable experience.

The academy values collegiality. Most promotion processes cite collegiality as necessary to continue employment. Working in a collegial environment is great. However, our work as academics tends to isolate us, each in our own classroom when teaching or office when researching. Further, our work environment might not currently be supportive.

One technique to keep current on educational research, obtain feedback, and increase collegiality is with a faculty learning community. Cox (2004, p. 8) defines a Faculty Learning Community as "a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members … who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building." This definition is more prescriptive than how it is intended in this paper. Layne et al. (2002) takes a more flexible approach to the activities and instead focuses on the sustained nature of the interaction, either a semester or an academic year. This contrasts with the typical professional development opportunities such as workshops and brownbag discussions that present one particular tool or technique.

This paper provides a brief overview of the research into faculty learning communities. It provides the experience of two faculty members that participated in different faculty learning communities. Next, it provides some suggestions and resources for establishing a faculty learning community.

2. THEORETICAL SUPPORT

To understand why faculty learning communities are useful constructs, this article will explore theoretical support for communities of practice in general and faculty learning communities in particular.

Communities of Practice

Organizations are successful insofar as they have the necessary resources to accomplish their work (Peteraf, 1993; Wernerfelt, 1984). Work within organizations have changed significantly because organizational knowledge is the most valuable asset (Grant, 1996, 2002). Thus, the most important work an organization can do is to generate new knowledge. This poses a problem for managers because knowledge is largely invisible.

Some type of organizational structure is needed to facilitate building and sharing knowledge. Valuable knowledge is often tacit, meaning people don't know they know it, and if they do know they possess it, they have a hard time describing it or how they came to know it (Nonaka, 1994; Reber, 1989). As such, just writing it down can be difficult; yet, such knowledge is invaluable for groups to be able to innovate (Leonard & Sensiper, 1998). How do we share knowledge we do not know we have, or cannot put into words? This is where storytelling, apprenticeship, and communities help (Mládková, 2012).

A Community of Practice (CoP) has been defined as "a flexible group of professionals, informally bound by common interests, who interact through interdependent tasks guided by a common purpose thereby embodying a store of common knowledge" (as quoted from (Jubert, 1999, p. 166) in Davenport & Hall (2002, p. 171)). Current understandings of CoP draws from the situaFtion learning, distributed cognition, and communication studies (Davenport & Hall, 2002).

A CoP does not have to be co-located, in the same organization, or even in the same industry (Davenport & Hall, 2002). They simply share some common attribute. For instance, if all of the network engineers in town meet at a bar on Tuesday nights, they can be forming a community of practice. War stories of network bugaboos will be swapped, and everyone will increase in their knowledge. Tacit knowledge, like how to troubleshoot such wicked problems, will spread between members,and across organizational boundaries. But such communities could occur on forums just as easily.

The key benefits of a community of practice is to "radically galvanize knowledge sharing, learning, and change" (E. C. Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139). Thus, organizations should nurture CoPs to help them be more competitive, such as when they need to drive strategy or start new lines of business. Some observed benefits include solving problems quickly, transferring best practices, developing professional skills, and helping organizations recruit and retain the human resources that they need (E. C. Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Faculty Learning Communities

A specialized form of CoP is the faculty learning community (FLC). In a FLC, participants gather regularly to discuss how to teach generally, sometimes with a prescribed resource, but usually for a sustained period and with participants from different disciplines (Cox, 2004; Layne et al., 2002).

The FLC has been a topic of interest since the Carnegie Foundation's Scholarship Reconsidered (Boyer, 1990) report emphasized that the scholarship of teaching has been neglected in favor of basic scientific inquiry (Richlin & Cox, 2004). As participants in this conference know, scholarly teaching (using data insights to improve our course) and the scholarship of teaching (publishing new models based on the insights we have gained) provides significant value. But this is new to much of the Academy, and FLC can be a mechanism to help spread the message of scholarship of teaching (Richlin & Cox, 2004).

In addition to evangelizing the scholarship of teaching, FLCs can help provide feedback to faculty members (Cox, 1999). The typical mentoring relationship is one-on-one, where a person asks a question and someone with different experience provides guidance to help that person improve. Not only is this a great way to work; it is a form of apprenticeship. But if we expand the circle to more than just a dyad, more opinions can be sought, and more people can learn from the exchange. The mentor is just as likely to learn from other members of the community as anyone else. So FLCs can be a mechanism to help provide peer feedback.

The third major advantage discussed in the literature about FLCs is breaking down barriers between faculty (Cox, 2004). It is easy for faculty members to feel isolated; in fact, a senior scholar warned one author that being a professor was a "lonely life" as he was applying for a PhD program. Teaching is done with students, yes, but very little peer interaction. Grading is done in a largely solitary situation. Preparing for class is likewise done alone. And much of research is completed alone, even when we will pass a draft of a paper along to a co-author. FLC creates a regularly scheduled opportunity to gain that human connection that is so easily lost.

3. EXPERIENCES IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

One of the authors experienced a faculty learning community based on a strategic vision for what the business school needed students to know to be successful. The school had created a new plan for how to imbue these characteristics with all of the likely candidates: critical thinking, acting ethically, leading, and communicating to name a few. But the question was how to operationalize these core competencies. To explore this, the business school formed a new faculty learning community, with membership open to volunteers across the departments. Faculty striving to be better teachers self-selected into the community.

The community came together and discussed goals and why we had volunteered to take part in the bi-weekly meetings. This helped build true community as we got to know each other. We set the book we would use to guide some discussion, Paul Hanstedt's *Creating Wicked*

Students. This was discussed, with each faculty member bringing in other resources. But as the community read and discussed the topics, members also created, recreated, or updated an assignment to apply the vision, use the ideas from the community, and measure success in teaching one of the major core competencies. The community lasted for the full academic year. To encourage continued participating, members of the community that persisted throughout the entire year were awarded an additional grant for teaching materials or professional development.

Another of the authors experienced a different faculty learning community with a broader goal: to get its members engaged with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) community. That engagement included both reading extant literature concerning the problems that the group members were facing in their respective classes, and trying novel approaches to solving those problems in order to ultimately publish research in that area and thus further the scholarship.

As with the first community, there was a book serving to guide our discussions (in this case it was *Inquiry into the College Classroom: A Journey towards Scholarly Teaching* by Paul Savory, Amy Nelson Burnett, and Amy Goodburn). However, whereas the formal goal of the first community was to redesign a single assignment, the formal goal of this community was to redesign an entire course. The structure of the book aided this redesign process, as the chapters laid out a sequence each member could follow.

Additionally, the faculty member who started the group (being well versed in the SoTL literature) served as a mentor to each of the members, often bringing research to their attention that was directly applicable to the sorts of problems that they were trying to solve in the redesign of their classes. This was often an eye-opening experience for members, discovering that others had encountered the same problems as them and had developed various means of addressing those issues.

As with the first community, the group was defined for a specific period. Initially, it was intended to last only a semester. However, because the group members enjoyed the interactions and the course redesign process took longer than expected, the group ended up meeting for an entire academic year. As with the other community, members were awarded a bursary for participation in the group for its duration. The monetary amounts were not large, but the members still appreciated that their efforts were supported by the college.

Both communities were formed under the auspices of formal goals. But in each, what was gained was far more: there was a sense of community, a group of peers to provide feedback on how to engage students, and problem-solving for issues each faced in the classroom. It became a support group, a sounding board, and an expert exchange all in one. Moreover, as others voiced their problems and heard how some other member solved a similar problem, the learning was shared beyond the typical one-on-one mentoring approach. In many ways, teaching can feel like a very solitary exercise, in which our successes and failures are our own. These communities served to remind each of the authors that it does not have to be this way.

4. ESTABLISHING A NEW FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITY

Cox (2004) provides a summary of the suggestions on establishing FLCs, chiefly in Appendices A and B. There are two major aspects: establishing community and architecting the FLC.

Establishing community means more than just scheduling a recurring meeting. Community is defined as a "feeling that members have belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith the members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). The sense of belonging to a community is a psychological construct. That is felt by the members of the group. To create this kind of community, Cox (2004) highlights safety and trust, openness, respect, responsiveness, collaboration, relevance, challenge, enjoyment, esprit de corps, and empowerment. Each of these is necessary but not sufficient for community; the sense of belonging and membership cannot occur unless all of these are part of the culture of the group formed.

Learning communities do not have to be face-to-face. Palloff & Pratt (1999) provides guidance for how to bring that same sense of community in computer-mediated communications. While the article does not directly address CoPs, the advice on how to build community behaviors within the online course could be adapted to help a FLC flourish in an online forum.

At a slightly more tactical level, Cox (2004) recommends that FLCs be established with a mission and purpose, a curriculum, clear administration purposes and qualities, connections, affiliated participants, meetings and activities, scholarly process, assessment, and enablers and rewards.

In addition to the FLC-specific resources mentioned, since FLCs are specialized CoPs, the general CoP advice, such as that found in Shapiro & Levine (1999) can be helpful. Table 1 summarizes recommendations for establishing a new FLC.

Table 9. Building a New FLC

Organize a small group of champions	Find a few passionate like-minded people. Too many founders will make decisions difficult.
Identify the mission	Clearly state the goals of the group.
Put building blocks in place for culture	Decide in advance what type of culture is desired and which activities promote or degrade it.
Identify the scope of the community	Will the community serve one department or school or the entire university?
Identify potential members	Know your audience and take their needs into account.
Set up a community online platform	Will resources be fully open or only to group members? How will editing rights be managed?
Make joining easy	Engage in marketing the community, make membership as easy as possible.
Keep things current	Many communities die because activities go stale.
Understand and anticipate the 90-9-1 rule	In online communities, 90% of people lurk, 9% have some minimal level of interaction, and 1% will be proactive, providing the most content and participation.

5. CONCLUSION

Regardless of which processes might be used to establish it or the myriad idiosyncratic structures under which it might operate, a FLC is simply a group of faculty that come together regularly in a sustained effort to try to improve how they teach. Any structure you choose can still help improve the knowledge of scholarship of teaching, provide peer feedback, and help faculty members feel less isolated and more part of a community. Improving our teaching should be a goal that we all share.

Successful learning communities should have enough structure to encourage collaborative discussions. Participation in FLCs can lead to unexpected results, and time limits may be exceeded if (or when) participants find the interactions to be helpful

Learning communities can be face-to-face or they can be mediated by technology. But no matter how you structure it, what your stated goals are, or how you connect, FLCs are an excellent and rewarding way to help faculty enhance their craft and to stay more connected with collegues. So what are you waiting for? Go start one today!

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