

From Isolation to Collaboration: Changing School Culture through Learning Communities

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, we investigated the effectiveness of a change in structure of faculty development, specifically the implementation of learning communities, and its impact on the culture of a university school of education. Data sources included surveys, reflections, and archival documents. Data analysis indicated positive impact on participants' perceptions of their development and the school's culture relating to four themes: reflection, communication, collaboration, and climate. Learning communities provided a vehicle for collaborative professional development. They allowed time for reflection, enhanced communication, bridged full and part-time faculty, and created a shift in culture from one of isolation to collaboration.

Keywords: faculty development; faculty learning communities; culture; collaboration

Study Purpose and Literature Review

The purpose of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of a change in structure of faculty development and its impact on the culture of a university school of education. We describe what happens when a community of faculty and staff endeavored to offer various faculty development initiatives to their peers over the course of two years. Specifically, we investigated the following research question: How does changing the faculty development structure, particularly instituting learning communities, affect the culture of a school of education? Our study is nested within two bodies of literature: professional development at the K-12 level and faculty development at the university level.

Professional Development (PD)

Prior to delving into literature related to professional development, operationalizing the term is useful. We draw from a number of different definitions but begin with Fenstermacher and Berliner (1983) who characterize staff development as, “the provision of activities designed to advance the knowledge, skills, and understanding of teachers in ways that lead to changes in their thinking and classroom behavior” (p. 4). Fullan (1995) writes, “professional development at its core is learning how to make a difference through learning how to bring about ongoing improvements” (p. 255). Professional development, therefore, involves learning, and change, that yields improvements in practice.

Furthermore, a number of scholars have investigated the effectiveness of professional development (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Guskey, 1994; Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Hargreaves, 1995; Lucilio, 2009). They determined the key elements of successful PD to be: its ongoing nature; the importance of teachers’ involvement in the PD process; opportunities for collaboration; ample time to implement and experience change; and aligning change efforts with faculty’s work in a meaningful way.

Many argue that to be highly effective, PD ought to involve learning and training that are ongoing (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Fullan, 1995; Guskey, 1994). Fullan (1995), who draws on a large body of research relating to PD, notes the importance of “continuous learning which is another way of saying that continuous professional development is essential” (p. 253). Opportunities for continual growth and learning of faculty are key issues of professional development (Fullan, 1995). To be sustained, professional development must be a process, not an event.

Another critical element of PD is the involvement of teachers, or in our case, faculty. For professional development to be successful, teachers cannot be left out of the process (Abdal Haqq, 1996; Guskey, 1994; Lucilio, 2009). Lucilio (2009), who drew on research in the field of PD makes this point strongly: “As teachers are the architects of the classroom, professional teacher development and teacher education are the architects of the teacher...Professional development must include the teacher in all phases of its advancement” (p. 53). She continues, effective PD efforts “Involve teachers in its design, development, implementation, and delivery” (Lucilio, 2009, p. 73). In essence, it is beneficial for faculty to be included at all phases of the process, from beginning to end.

Another important element of PD is the need to align the change initiative put forth in the PD with instructors’ work in a meaningful way. Fullan (1995) also notes this importance of aligning change with the teaching context: “continuous learning must be organically part and parcel of the culture of the school” (p. 258; emphasis in original), relevant to classroom practices and the school context. The faculty development initiative we outline in this study was rooted in faculty members’ desire to improve their practice; change came from within.

Faculty Development at the University Level

Scholars in the field use faculty development as a construct when referring to professional development at the university level. Although the need for this type of development is recognized, the structures are not always in place to support all faculty and staff (Engin & Atkinson, 2015). In fact, “... professional development in higher education is often expected to happen naturally, without departmental or institutional support” (Sorcinelli & August, 2006, p.1).

A review of extant literature revealed the fact that more work needs to be done at the university level. Only a limited number of studies address faculty-led development within their own school or department. Many studies describe the work of centers for teaching and learning committed to development, where the developers/trainers are not the faculty receiving the development (See Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; Sorcinelli & August, 2006; Teeter, Fenton, Nicholson, Flynn, Kim, McKay, O’Shaughnessy, & Vajoczki, 2011; Yee, 2015). However, faculty within schools or departments have a unique lens with which to identify school-level needs and effective methods for supporting the development of all faculty within the school: “While changes can be implemented university wide, the quickest and most profound changes will occur through departments and schools” (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, and Beach, 2006, p. 147).

One of the major criticisms of professional development at the university level is that it is top-down. Faculty need to be involved in meaningful and relevant activities (Engin & Atkinson, 2015). Further, faculty-driven and led professional development is essential. The first step in developing a structure for faculty development is assessing

the needs of the given faculty (Sorcinelli & August, 2006). This promotes the idea that development can be individualized for the school and helps to garner buy-in: “Faculty ownership can ensure that professional development activities remain responsive to faculty needs...faculty development programs and activities should be faculty inspired” (p. 13).

Isolation of faculty members at the university level is commonplace due to the changing landscape of faculty employment. Shifts have led to an increased number of part-time and nontenure track faculty. In fact, by 2015, 48% of the faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions has risen to 48 percent (NCES, 2017). Faculty in these positions often experience fewer professional development opportunities, leaving them to feel “isolated, alienated, invisible and powerless” (Gappa & Leslie, 1993 as cited in Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006, p. 6). Therefore, “addressing needs of adjunct and PT faculty is a primary new direction for faculty development” (Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006, p. 5). This points to a need to foster a more collaborative and collegial environment for all faculty (Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006). More purposeful, collaborative interactions would ensure that schools or departments function more “effectively as teaching and learning communities” (Felten, Kalish, Pingree, & Plank, 2007, p. 93) to develop “colleagueship, intellectual exchange, and camaraderie” (Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006, p. 5).

Learning communities are one vehicle for providing faculty-led, collaborative professional development. We draw on Wenger and Snyder’s (2000) definition of communities of practice as we reference faculty learning communities which they describe as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for joint enterprise” (p. 139). Communities of practice should promote, “a common practice, a common interest, regular joint activity, and a commitment to shared understanding” (Wenger, 1998 as cited in Engin & Atkinson, 2015, p. 165).

In sum, the limited number of studies addressing faculty-driven professional development at the university level led us to investigate the following research question: how does changing the faculty development structure, particularly instituting learning communities, affect the culture of a school of education?

Methods

Overview

We conducted the study over the course of two academic years. In year 1 of the study, we formed an eight member Faculty Development Committee (FDC) (of which the two authors were members), which remained intact for length of the study. We collected data at various points during the academic year: before the start of each school year to help us identify needs, mid-way through the school year to determine progress, and at the end of each school year to determine effectiveness. Data sources included: a needs inquiry, plan of action, mid-year reflections, end of year reflections, end of year survey, and archival documents. (See Table 1). We analyzed these data sets to both plan and organize faculty development and examine its effectiveness.

Procedure

One of the most significant tenets that underscored the FDC’s work was that faculty needs and interests would guide the faculty development. To determine needs we invited full and part-time faculty members to post, on our community website, focus areas that they wanted to develop. We analyzed all of the posts and identified a major theme (21st Century Teaching and Learning) that would guide our faculty development for the first academic year of the study and several sub-themes and topics that fell under the overarching theme.

We used interest-based learning communities, consisting of both full- and part-time faculty, as a primary engagement vehicle for providing ongoing faculty development. The committee received approval from the dean to dedicate an hour of each faculty meeting to learning communities. We asked full- and part-time faculty to join one of the three specific learning communities based on interest and need (see Table 2 for an overview of learning community topics). At the end of each learning community session, each group submitted a plan of action to record their progress. Throughout both years of the study, we gathered data on participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness of learning communities using open-ended reflective forms, discussions, and survey. We analyzed the data to determine the impact of learning communities on the culture and identify specific improvements that could be made moving forward.

We coded, and subsequently analyzed, data using an iterative process. We used qualitative analysis (Charmaz, 2000, 2003, 2005). We examined data from learning community meetings, developed codes from the data (Charmaz, 2000). Initial readings of data revealed trends that were then compared across data sources. This process allowed us to focus on the nuances of participants' experiences. To gain reliability, after developing the initial codes, we coded the results and then discussed each theme. Below we present our results.

Results

Data analysis indicated that the change of faculty development structure, specifically instituting learning communities during faculty meetings, positively impacted participants' perceptions of their own growth and development and of our school's culture. Four broad themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) reflection, 2) communication, 3) collaboration, and 4) climate.

Reflection

The learning communities allowed faculty to identify topics of interest relevant to meeting specific goals outlined in our school's strategic plan. Prior to this work, faculty and staff viewed faculty development as an individual responsibility, driven by individual interest and motivation. Learning communities provided a sense of purpose and meaning as participants engaged in "work" that was united by a common vision and set of goals in our school. Many faculty members appreciated "knowing the direction of the university and school" as they began their work in the learning communities. One participant shared, "I especially liked the fact that the full-time and part-time faculty were able to work together more closely. This helped me see the bigger picture and unite everyone at the School of Education." Although the work impacted faculty "professionally," as indicated on the end of the year surveys, one participant reported that it "led to wonderful thought-provoking discussion with great connection to our programs and professions," and helped to "generate possible solutions" to issues that emerged. In addition, the learning communities helped to "connect new ideas to school and program goals."

Connecting the work to the school goals provided a means for more "focus" and "collective reflection" as indicated on the end of the year reflections. During the debriefing session, where we discussed the learning community process, many participants revealed that "it was great to read research...around a common interest and need...and talk about it." The participants used these larger, broad school goals to generate specific topics, objectives, and a means for meeting those objectives. Each learning community completed sections of their group's action plan as they unpacked each objective and brainstormed the work needed to meet the objectives. One group delineated a process for "sharing, analyzing, and revising course rubrics to incorporate creativity criteria." Another group organized a plan for "learning about strategies for mitigating potential negative effective on groups dynamic" through research and sharing activities. Still another group's plan detailed how they "utilized the study group method to apply" learning from articles related to compassion and ultimately "create(d) a resource list for SOE [School of Education] SEL [Social Emotional Learning] learning library." The action plans documented specific objectives and steps to meet group and school goals, while the meeting reflection forms allowed groups to process each session and consider the progress they were making. Overall, these forms indicated that having reflective tools, like the action plan and debriefing sessions, built into learning communities "made us [faculty] feel collectively responsible for meeting goals and gave us time to internalize the process through reflection."

The structured time and process allowed members to act collaboratively in groups to strengthen reflective practice, which aided in deepening understanding throughout the learning process. Analysis of the reflections revealed that faculty began to rely on each other to accomplish tasks to meet group and school goals. Faculty shared that the collaborative structure supported individual "growth" while one stated that it made her "more thoughtful and feel more like a part of a team." Specifically, the ways in which learning was structured through learning communities helped members to deepen understanding and reflective practice. Sharing of varying perspectives on a given topic allowed for "Progression toward deeper and deeper levels of thinking about [that] topic," as noted on one end of the year reflection. Others responded that "the perspectives we each bring ... made it useful to think about" and "provided a nice example for content and allowed a variety of opinions to emerge." Furthermore, 16 of the 17 responses on the end of the year survey indicated that faculty strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that "participation impacted their engagement as a reflective practitioner." Ultimately, the participants found that "[The learning communities] provided opportunity for reflection and change."

Communication

Communication skills improved as faculty worked together in learning communities. Many participants valued the time to work together because they felt that the communities “provided opportunities to communicate openly with others.” Members discussed the importance of being active listeners during the mid year reflection, so that they could “more fully understand individual perspectives.” One member reported that the community setting “forced me to listen more attentively to my peers,” while another member indicated that it helped him learn “when to use humor or compassion [more appropriately] when dealing with others.” Furthermore, learning communities provided opportunities for participants to engage in “open discussion” and many shared that they “enjoyed hearing all perspectives.”

The learning communities also helped to improve communication between groups and among faculty members. At the end of each session, a representative from each learning community shared the work that the group accomplished and described the progress they made in meeting their goals. During the mid year reflection, participants raised the point that sharing was an important part of the process as it “helped to see what each group valued and how we could help each other.” In addition to sharing and reflecting during the academic year, members of each learning community presented a formal culmination of their work at the end of each academic year. In this final presentation, the groups shared the importance of their work and engaged the rest of the faculty in learning activities centered around their learning community focus. On the end of the year survey, one member stated that she enjoyed how “...we celebrated all of our accomplishments. It was so great to see so much learning coming out of each group. I plan to talk to my peers in the compassion group [a different learning community than her own] to see how they can help me with a particular class.” Communication among faculty increased as all members participated actively in their groups, and the quality of the communication improved as they listened, interacted, reflected, and shared their knowledge and insights with others. One member summarized, “We were able to raise awareness concerning our interactions with each other.”

Collaboration

Although one of the purposes of learning communities was to improve understanding of a specific topic to initiate individual professional growth and development, an additional outcome was that of improved collaboration. The collaborative format proved to be a positive aspect of the learning model as individuals found it to be “enjoyable and engaging.” One participant commented that “...the collaboration aspect of the activities was extremely valuable.” Many members of the learning communities viewed this time as “fun and lively... faculty-centered PD.” One group reported on the end of the year reflection that “collaboration was great...It was helpful to share with colleagues in this way.” Furthermore, when asked what best facilitated learning as a result of the session, one person commented, “Working in groups that model best practices and activities that foster cognitive engagement.” Another member remarked that “effective outcomes from each group exhibit(ed) productive use of the collaborative process.” Overall, 10 of the 17 respondents on the end of the year survey indicated that they strongly agreed and the other 7 respondents agreed with the statement that “participation in this professional development impacted their interactions with their colleagues.” One participant commented that “the process and offerings helped support my needs in that it was really useful to have professional discussions with my peers. We often get lost in the ‘busy-ness’ of our days and don’t create the time to have extensive conversations about bigger ideas that relate to our work.” The heart of the faculty development initiative was influencing faculty to learn and develop through a collaborative model.

One of our most significant accomplishments was structuring the faculty development opportunity, the learning communities, for full-time and part-time faculty to collaborate as a more cohesive school. Full-time and part-time faculty alike commented on how much they appreciated having the opportunity to work together as an entire school. Many of the comments on both the mid year and end of the year reflection attested to this point, as one participant shared, “It was wonderful to collaborate with others both full and part-time faculty and staff,” and another reported that it “...enabled people who don’t normally work together to work more cohesively.” 100% of the faculty indicated that this was an important outcome of the learning communities on the end of the year survey. One participant confirmed the sentiment, stating, “The inclusion of all different people - full-time, part-time faculty, administrative, staff was beneficial. It was great to include as many voices as possible.”

The learning communities also encouraged additional collaboration outside of the designated meeting time. During the mid year reflections, members shared that “we are working to organize work to be done online too, and I have found that as a part-timer I feel more connected to this learning and more of the full-time faculty at the school. I now feel part of a team.” In turn, participation increased in other aspects of our school of education because “all voices...felt more included...as everyone recognized that all faculty had valuable contributions.”

In sum, participation in learning communities helped to bridge part-time and full-time faculty at our school as evidenced by one part-time faculty member who commented, "I most appreciate how this has brought colleagues together who may not typically work together in a safe and invigorating environment." Faculty, both full-time and part-time, appreciated the chance to work together.

Climate

Engaging in learning communities in an open environment began to lead to a culture shift within the School of Education. Restructuring faculty development to include full-time and parttime faculty and staff was necessary so that all participants had the opportunity to collaborate in a safe and open environment. Many comments on the end of the year learning community reflection attested to this perception. For example, one faculty member commented, “We were open and honest with each other so that we could work on moving forward together.” Another participant noted, “The feel of the climate has changed so much here, at least from my perspective, as an adjunct. I truly feel heard and valued by everyone, and we experience high levels of trust and cooperation in our group. I feel part of a team doing worthwhile work together!"

Increased collaboration and a feeling of acceptance characterized many of the reactions of both part-time and full-time faculty. The environment that was created during learning communities was described as “energizing and inspiring.” Another participant highlighted an important outcome of learning communities which was the “...establishment of a safe environment and making the time social as well as meaningful.” Time in learning communities provided opportunities for faculty members to “share openly” and “build relationships.” When asked to describe learning communities, a few participants used the words such as “collegiality,” “cooperation,” “focus,” “acceptance,” and “genuine interest.” Ultimately, the participants viewed this time favorably as many felt that it “brought people together” and “encouraged participation” at our school.

One of the most significant results of our professional development initiative was in the reshaping of our culture. We moved from a culture of isolation to one of collaboration where all members felt included and supported in a “collegial and casual atmosphere.” This type of environment allowed members to “build a more positive rapport among all members” of the faculty “where everyone is valued.” In addition, participants felt comfortable taking risks, and one member noted, “The informal setting [during learning communities] allowed freedom to try things out and make mistakes.” As we increased our “level of trust and community” with one another, we created a more authentic collaborative learning culture. One respondent from the end of the year survey revealed, “Discussing issues related to our teaching with colleagues in a nonthreatening environment [was] an invaluable experience.” Ultimately, this helped to, “pull us together even closer as a group and develop a sense of community and belonging.” Results indicated a positive shift in culture, collaboration, and professional growth.

Discussion

In order for faculty development to be most successful at the university level, it must attend to the following five characteristics: 1) faculty involvement; 2) ample time for reflection; 3) meaningful alignment with faculty practice; 4) opportunities for collaboration; 5) ongoing opportunities to participate (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Engin & Atkinson, 2015; Guskey, 1994; Lucilio, 2009, Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006). Below, we discuss how the learning communities met each one of these qualities.

In our study, faculty development, in particular learning communities, were born out of faculty needs. As one participant noted, the process was “faculty-centered.” While many colleges and universities employ staff at centers of teaching and learning to offer faculty development (see Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; Teeter, Fenton, Nicholson, Flynn, Kim, McKay, O’Shaughnessy, & Vajoczki, 2011; Yee, 2015), our School of Education faculty development was faculty generated and faculty-led. To be most effective, this type of development must align with practitioners’ needs and include them in the process (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Guskey, 1994; Lucilio, 2009). Each academic year began with inquiry activities to identify faculty needs and interests, which served as a means to involve faculty immediately in the identification and planning processes. One participant noted that the “process

and offerings helped support my needs.” Additionally, session action plans and mid-year reflections allowed the communities to alter processes to better suit their needs and meet their goals as it provided opportunities for continuously “organize the work.”

Time for reflection and intellectual exchange are essential elements of effective faculty development practice. As noted above, faculty appreciated the time to reflect deeply on practice and link to the broader School of Education strategic goals. This was important because it allowed faculty to see the connections between the work they were doing and “the bigger picture” of the school. One participant described the “busy-ness” that is characteristic of faculty members’ schedules and noted the importance of taking time to engage in deeper conversations about work. Learning communities, as part of faculty meetings, provided members with a structured time for listening to “varying perspectives” which allowed for a “variety of opinions to emerge” and ultimately “deeper and deeper levels of thinking.”

Additionally, learning communities aligned with individual practice in a meaningful way. Many participants commented on how the faculty development impacted their teaching. One even outlined a plan to discuss a struggle in a particular class she was teaching with her learning community so that she could improve her practice. “Professional learning community meetings...have one primary purpose: improved teaching and learning in an area of identified student [and teacher] need. These meetings are about teacher professional learning and growth” (Jolly, 2008, p. 2). The time together in learning communities led to many “thought-provoking discussion(s)” that helped to “generate possible solutions” to issues that emerged in the classroom.

One of the most profound outcomes of the learning community experience was that fulltime and part-time faculty had the chance to collaborate in meaningful ways. The opportunity to “include many voices” and work with peers was beneficial in shifting the culture from one of isolation to collaboration as suggested in being a primary need of university faculty (Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006). Members of the community felt more “valued” through what one participant called the “inclusion of all different people.” Additionally, “working in groups” and building these collaborative practices helped faculty to develop collectively as they felt a “sense of community and belonging.”

Finally, learning communities provided ongoing opportunities for members to participate in faculty development. One-time faculty development workshops or sessions are not effective (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Fullan, 1995; Guskey, 1994) and time, space, and structures need to be put in place for this ongoing learning to occur (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Restructuring the faculty development to occur during monthly faculty meetings created this ongoing structure faculty and staff needed to initiate and sustain professional growth and development. The structure was integral to the effectiveness of the process and experiences as one member noted that it gave “time to internalize the [learning] process” throughout the academic year.

Participation in learning communities helped to bridge part-time and full-time faculty at our school as evidenced by one part-time faculty member who commented, “I most appreciate how this has brought colleagues together who may not typically work together in a safe and invigorating environment.” Learning communities implemented at our School of Education offered effective faculty development. In line with effective professional development, these communities involved faculty in the process, offered ample time for reflection and intellectual exchange, aligned with faculty members’ work, allowed for increased collaboration, and were ongoing.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations to our study. First, despite the FDC’s efforts to involve more part-time faculty, the timing of the meetings limited participation. Learning communities occurred after full faculty meetings each month. A number of part-time faculty are full-time K- 12 teachers and administrators, so they were unable to leave their schools to come to campus midday. Secondly, though we had a similar number of participants in the first year (18 participants) and second year (19 participants) of the study, the participants themselves changed slightly. Specifically, we had two full-time faculty retire and three new full-time faculty hired, while the part-time faculty that could join us also changed based on their other professional commitments in between the first and second years. Not all participants completed the end of the year surveys (n=9, year 1; n=17, year 2) since they were sent electronically rather than completed in person like the reflections and verbal discussions. Finally, participation in meetings was not consistent. Due to outside commitments, on occasion, there was not 100% participation at each learning community meeting.

As such, we aim to continue collecting data into the subsequent school years to confirm our findings and further investigate the potential impact that learning community participation has on the culture of our school of education. Additionally, we also hope to explore the links between learning community participation and teaching. In other words, how does participation in faculty development impact specific practices at the university level? We would also like to continue to increase participation, particularly of part-time faculty, and attend to the unique needs of this group.

Educational Implications and Conclusions

Our study has multiple implications for educators. It connects learning and application, enhances faculty practice with the intent of improving student learning and experiences, offers solutions for authentic problems of practice as part of a cycle of continuous improvement, encourages active involvement of faculty and staff, and draws from the professional knowledge that exists within our own community (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Hirsh, 2009; Killion & Roy, 2009; Lieberman, 2000). It also answers the call put forth by Engin and Atkinson (2015) that professional development is needed at the university level:

Professional development (PD) of teaching staff in K-12 education is a widely accepted part of the professional activity of teachers. However, it is not always seen as a crucial strand of academic faculty development in higher education. Teaching, research, and service comprise three components of an academic's professional duties, yet PD is not often considered part of these activities (p. 164).

Faculty learning communities provided a vehicle for collaborative and collegial professional development in higher education.

Learning communities impacted faculty at our School of Education on multiple levels. They allowed time for reflection, enhanced communication, bridged full and part-time faculty, and allowed for a shift in culture from one of isolation to one of collaboration.

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