Learning in Partnership

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The increased focus in higher education on improving teaching and learning leads to a new focus on faculty and professional development at the systems level and the creation and sustainability of a culture of teaching and learning on campuses. Assessment of student learning ultimately points to an assessment of pedagogical practice. To do this effectively, we need to move away from "pedagogical solitude" (Shulman, 1993) to pedagogical communities.

As librarians, we have become increasingly involved in teaching and learning, especially with the recognition of the importance of information literacy as a critical learning outcome. To expand our capacity as educators, we realized we needed to look outside the library community to join the broader discussions about teaching and learning in higher education.

This was the impetus behind our recent book, *Building Teaching and Learning Communities: Creating Shared Meaning and Purpose* (Gibson & Mader, 2019), which brings together insights and inspiration from leading experts in higher education pedagogy and educational development across North America on how we can move towards the conversations, collaborations, and communities that will re-energize and reshape our efforts to improve student learning. We asked each of the authors to address this question: *What do we as educators need to learn (or unlearn) and experience so we can create teaching and learning communities across disciplines and learning levels based on shared meaning and purpose?*

What we learned from reflecting on how the authors addressed this question is that we needed to expand our conception of what "faculty development" meant, from single interactions, consultations, and workshops to a broader view of professional learning and faculty as learners that encompasses many stakeholders on campus. Building community from this perspective involves moving beyond the expertise found in departmental or unit-specific "silos", embracing a willingness to share and change, and welcoming everyone to contribute to larger conversations about teaching and learning. The newer concept of "educational development"—articulated by the Professional and Organizational Development Network (POD)—is now the preferred term that represents this broader view, one that encompasses a range of disciplines and participants, including teaching faculty, librarians, educational technologists, administrators, and students themselves (POD, 2016). We learned that community-building involves cultivating networks and conversations among many stakeholders, and that changing the culture to improve teaching requires a synoptic view of many interacting structures, campus leaders, influential individuals, and emerging initiatives. Finding the right combination of all of these is the challenge and the opportunity for all those seeking to influence the culture and the larger climate for teaching improvement, and hence student learning itself.

Viewpoint

A number of themes emerge across the chapters as the authors grappled with our question. The development of partnerships, communities, and campus cultures is described, along with the role of professional development in improving teaching. The impact of pedagogical practices—most notably the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Decoding the Disciplines, and signature pedagogies—on community building is explored. Multidisciplinarity as an essential component of collaboration and community is emphasized.

The first chapter, "Building a Culture of Teaching and Learning," argues that the new focus on teaching and learning cannot be sustained by innovative classroom practices alone, but that "a campus culture . . that supports and sustains the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning" is essential for this necessary shift. The authors, Pat Hutchings and Mary Deane Sorcinelli, are two of the most recognized experts and motivators for the transformation of the teaching and learning environment and the faculty development that will push it forward.

The second chapter, "Sit a Spell: Embracing the Liminality of Pedagogical Change through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," by Linda Hodges, Director of the Faculty Development Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, explores pedagogical change for faculty through the lens of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). She explores faculty as learners in a community of practice and illustrates how faculty beliefs and conceptions about teaching act as threshold concepts, and that SoTL can be used to provide a sustaining environment for faculty as they move through the ambiguous and anxious liminal space of pedagogical change.

Nancy Chick's chapter, "The Crossroads of SoTL and Signature Pedagogies," offers an introduction to signature pedagogies, that is, "ways of being taught that require [students] to do, think, and value what practitioners in the field are doing, thinking, and valuing." She states that "this chapter presents what may at first seem like a paradox: that self-reflection and self-knowledge are prerequisites for collaboration and community."

In the next chapter, "Bottlenecks of Information Literacy," Joan Middendorf and Andrea Baer engage in a cross-disciplinary dialogue as a faculty/librarian pair to offer a unique first-time exploration of how Decoding the Disciplines can be applied to information literacy. Decoding, developed by Middendorf and colleagues at Indiana University, is a model for instructional design that begins with identifying the stuck places for student learning and offers a process for addressing these bottlenecks.

In the chapter "Developing Learning Partnerships: Navigating Troublesome and Transformational Relationships," Peter Felten, well-known in SoTL circles, especially for his work on student partnerships, has collaborated with coauthors from Elon University—Kristina Meinking, classics professor; Shannon Tennant, librarian; and Katherine Westover, undergraduate student—in order to provide a wide-angle picture of partnerships for teaching and learning. Since partnerships among librarians, disciplinary faculty, and students challenge the assumptions and norms about their respective roles and power differentials in higher education, such partnerships can be challenging to establish and maintain.

The chapter by Kateryna Schray, "When Teachers Talk to Teachers: Shared Traits between Writing across the Curriculum and Faculty Learning Communities," provides a historical perspective by recounting the evolution of the Writing across the Curriculum Program at Marshall University from a grassroots proto–faculty learning community into a fully developed multidisciplinary program across disciplines supported by the university.

Building Teaching and Learning Communities: Creating Shared Meaning and Purpose brings together insights and inspiration from leading experts in higher education pedagogy and educational development on how we can move towards the conversations, collaborations, and communities that will re-energize and reshape our efforts to improve student learning.

The lessons from these chapters point to how we can envision and create broad-based multidisciplinary teaching and learning communities beyond the classroom level and beyond the individual that will change how we view ourselves and our students, and thus how we teach and what they learn. We believe this volume poses questions and challenges assumptions that can help educators to begin "thinking together" to foster a campus culture of teaching and learning that nurtures assessment and improvement.

References

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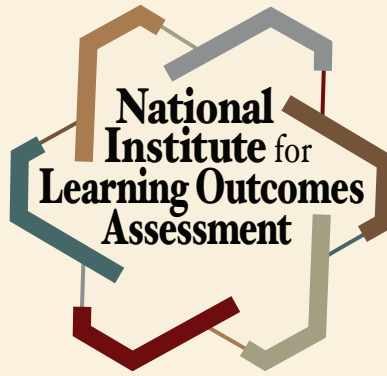
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