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Faculty Development and Adult Learning: A Model for Transforming Higher Education

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Abstract

Excerpt: Summer classes were about to begin and we sat around a table wondering what the three of us might have in common to teach the seventy master's students coming next week. Leo was a sociologist and we (Karen and Mary) are curriculum and instruction faculty. We all agreed it was going to require a transformed approach to teaching and collaborating together; that was six years and three cohorts ago. Our intent is to share...

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Faculty Development and Adult Learning: A Model for Transforming Higher Education

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Introduction

Summer classes were about to begin and we sat around a table wondering what the three of us might have in common to teach the seventy master's students coming next week. Leo was a sociologist and we (Karen and Mary) are curriculum and instruction faculty. We all agreed it was going to require a transformed approach to teaching and collaborating together; that was six years and three cohorts ago. Our intent is to share a glimpse into how we truly co-constructed a curriculum, a communication style and a deep friendship through integrated, interdisciplinary teaching.

As a collaborative teaching team we studied transformation based on three theoretical concepts: self-authorship, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and critical reflection. Using the Baxter Magolda and King (2004) framework for learning outcomes, our teaching and learning philosophy incorporated the three foundations: epistemological, intrapersonal and interpersonal. We became critically reflective of our personal assumptions and were given permission to point out those in each other. However, we realized that our experience was only half of the equation; our students were the organic voice of our teaching. Therefore, we incorporated Brookfield's (1995) critical incident model to provide a framework in which to examine teaching with feedback from our students. Lastly, collaboration was a key element. Baxter Magolda and King (2004) suggest collaboration substantiate the interpersonal factor of self-authorship and critical reflection. We began to mold and blend our ideas and understandings in light of contextual conversations. Discussions provide a continuous reshaping of perspective, articulation and fodder for reflection.

Process

The challenge in developing our model was being self-reflective of our assumptions as faculty. How did we craft our teaching experiences in a way that was productive for our students and our own professional development? An inquiry approach, situated in our personal and professional experiences, allowed us to question the taken-for-granted assumptions that undergirded our teaching practices. We were co-teaching and constructing curriculum to support the advancement of student self-authorship and our scholarship. Our goal was to deepen our understandings of teaching and learning with adult learners.

As we began to recognize that we were creating a collaborative experience with direct impact on students, we designed a way to examine our process. We used two data sources to inform our practice: semi-structured interviews of our teaching team regarding our collaboration and curriculum planning; the second was structured student feedback. As part of our curriculum, we implemented on-line class reflections using a commercial courseware (Blackboard, BB), to glean students' experiences and perceptions of learning experiences. Blackboard technology was integrated to support the principles of reflection, alternative perspectives, classroom research and critical dialogue.

Each class day (once per month) students were asked to complete an on-line survey adapted from Brookfield's Critical Incident Survey (1995) to provide us feedback on their experiences and perceptions of the eight-hour class day. We adapted the survey to elicit teachers' reflections. For example, teachers may be asked to reflect upon a particular theme, activity or discussion. Survey prompts ask teachers regarding their most engaged and distanced moments, what they found most affirming or helpful, puzzling, and what surprised them the most (Brookfield, 1995, p.115). We used feedback to critically inform our planning and structure of future class days. These data sets also facilitated individual and group research agendas. We found that critical dialogue with our students provided great depth to our discussions during our team meetings. We developed short-term and long-term planning and course syllabi in a context rich with data from our students on learning preferences, different learning contexts, and a sense of where they are in their own trajectory of development.

We analyzed these data at team meetings. The salient experiences and perspectives were shared on the following class day as a way to build community and shared understandings of others' experiences in the program. The impact of sharing these data was threefold:

- First was the importance of modeling and valuing feedback into the teaching and learning process;

- Second, illustrated to teachers that there are many different learning preferences, styles, and ways to construct knowledge within our learning community, and;

- Third, instructors also used these data to inform and shape future curriculum and class designs. All three aspects ideally shaped teachers ways of thinking about their own teaching practices and have implications for learning.

Using student feedback strengthened our commitment to model valuing student voice, building community and making transparent the collaboration of ideas to create learning opportunities. The second inherent challenge in developing our model was being self-reflective of our assumptions. That inquiry, situated in our personal and professional experiences, allowed us to question the taken-for-granted assumptions that undergrid our teaching practices. We read and discussed student feedback to identify patterns and areas where the curriculum should be adapted to meet teachers learning needs. The data from these two sources captured teaming collaboration through a curricular lens and the ways in which students experienced the delivered curriculum.

The researchers played a dual role as instructors and as researchers. In our role as instructors we provided feedback on course work as well as formative assessments of course assignments. As researchers we engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning

and began our summative data analysis after course grades had been submitted to limit power relations between instructors and students.

Themes

Two themes emerged related to the scholarship of teaching and learning and the promotion of self-authorship in students. One theme, *Cycles of Dialogue* captured the dynamics of how we internalized educational theories into practice. It also addresses the impact of dialogue students had with faculty and with their peers. The second theme, *Epistemological Foundation Meets Pedagogical Theory*, captured the essence of our teaching team examining areas which incorporated students' voices in meaningful ways.

Cycles of Dialogue

As teammates, we scaffold, promote, and value each other's teaching, research, writing, and professional development. There was a constant compromise, a commitment to quality in curriculum development, and above all a commitment to our students' learning. The non-competitive nature of our relationship built an environment for critical dialogue and meaning-making. We recognized and appreciated our differing perspectives, expertise, working and learning styles. Using a learner-centered framework for teaching, we constructed our understandings together and the outcome has been an integrated, responsive curriculum. We learned together, grappled amongst ourselves to find a workable place to situate our newly emerging sense of learner-centered teaching. We developed a shared language to theorize our work even though we come from different disciplines, perspectives, and backgrounds.

Autobiography played a key role in collaboration in that each of us comes from a distinct set of experiences and expertise. The critical issues of power and voice must be negotiated because in the final product of a class day individual expertise was required to create rich and rigorous learning experiences. We found that three elements influenced the conversations and negotiations around voice and power: area of expertise, years of experience, and K-12 teaching experience.

It was no surprise that conversations were generated around our own particular area of expertise. It was however, informative to observe to what degree we were embedded in a theory or pedagogy to the exclusion or advancement of the planning. The years of experience played a key role in voice and power. Leo had been in the program for over ten years and was at one time the coordinator, Mary for two years and Karen was a newcomer. We all came with our stories of collaboration; however Leo and Mary had more experience in the type of collaboration the program typically, or previously, had required. Some of their experiences were positive while others were negative. Each time the term "this was how we've always done it" came up in conversation it was unpacked for current relevance and for its position within our current created context. Lastly, in that we teach exclusively to practicing K-12 teachers, Mary and Karen's background as public school teachers at times carried more weight in the decision-making. For example, if a theory such as feminism was to be the springboard for a teaching session, the translation towards a teacher's personal and teaching experience would be connected to a seemingly extraneous topic.

We valued the processes of critical dialogue, the ability to see and learn from each other and talk about class activities from the perspectives we each brought. Mary spoke about

the team's ability to listen to each other with open minds and to support each other's developing understanding of new ideas. Critical dialogue provided a level of development which refined and moved our thinking forward.

One aspect of Baxter Magolda and King's developmental foundations was the aspect of intrapersonal knowing. The better people know themselves the better they are able to articulate needs and perspectives. We used multiple learning preference tools (i.e. Myers-Briggs Personality Index, True Colors, Multiple Intelligences, and adult development) that helped us more deeply understand each other as we worked together. These tools allowed us to ask probing questions without offending each other as we grappled with our own and team understandings as we talked about our collaborative work. For example, we used the Myers-Briggs Personality Index as a way to talk about our preferences. Karen needed to be logical and linear. Leo articulated his preference to write out a justification for an assignment before he wanted to talk about it. Mary often stated a desire to vary learning experiences for the students and organization of details for a class day. The Myers-Briggs index supported a safe environment for us to stretch, grow and question ourselves and added a new layer to our professional development. We engaged in a process of critical dialogue that helped each of us come to deeper understandings of ourselves as learners, teachers and professionals.

Learner-centered pedagogy addresses the importance of making instructional decisions, processes, and feedback transparent to students. We felt that we would be remiss to not share our collaborative processes and outcomes with our students. We were committed to modeling collaboration and co-operative inquiry research on our teaching practices as a form of development. We modeled for teachers how we specifically crafted our curriculum to engage them with their autobiographies, their students, colleagues and the text.

The scholarship of learning and teaching consumed the majority of our collaborative time. Early on in our teaming we talked about conducting joint research studies and writing about curriculum development. We chose to systematically collect data to document our work. We frequently shared individual and collaborative writings with each other and give each other productive feedback.

In summary, through our process of creating a developmental curriculum for our practicing teachers we discovered that the process challenged our own assumptions, teaching methods and theoretical understandings. We have discovered our collaboration provided a vocabulary to discuss our needs, differences and an expectation of being critically reflective colleagues. We promoted and valued each other's teaching, research, writing, and professional development. We have seen firsthand the value of modeling our collaborations to our students who we also ask to collaborate with their peers and with K-12 students in their classrooms.

Epistemological Foundation Meets Pedagogical Assumptions
Self-authorship required us to meet students where they begin in content knowledge and to create meaning together. Our teaching evolved from the transmission mode to the transformative mode. As a result, we were required to negotiate voice and power with our students as well. Voice was expressed in terms of class day feedback and transparent discussions about the impact of feedback on the curriculum. Over time it became clear to us that we needed to create more open spaces for teachers to contribute directly to the curriculum beyond participating in pre-designed learning experiences and discussions.

Student feedback told us what they were ready for and what we needed to change to challenge us instructionally and them professionally.

The greatest collaboration came in the second year of the program when we were confronted by our own theory of learner-centered theory and self-authorship. Our question was, if we believed in these theories, why were we doing all the teaching? Thus. we created space for students to collaboratively design a set of seminars in which they combined their content expertise and the newly acquired language. The process of creating learning partnerships discussed by Baxter Magolda and King (2004) present three guiding principles: a) to validate learners as constructors of knowledge, b) place learning within the learners' experience (outside of the experts realm; otherwise they cannot join in the process), and c) define learning as a mutual task. For instance, one set of teachers chose to learn about poverty while another did a critical examination of the state standards for their grade level and how they could incorporate the new language and theory while meeting the intended state outcomes. The collaborative aspect of creating these seminars integrated all three of Baxter Magolda's elements of self-authorship, the intrapersonal element of determining what was a valuable content area to present, and how critical pedagogy applied. Secondly, the interpersonal element of collaborating with peers to create a broader perspective than their individual views, and third was the epistemological element in which using theory to inform and impact their understandings was utilized.

Conclusion

Our purpose was to make visible the collaborative work of our graduate interdisciplinary teaching team who constructed a model that supported faculty development and self-authorship. Transforming required us to assume a leadership role in the creation of opportunities for self-authoring adults and to move teaching and learning to the forefront of scholarship. Our scholarship unites theory and praxis into an integrated knowledge construction process. Our scholarly work makes visible the knowledge construction process that involved both the researchers and students in the same learning-action process, addressing participative democratic ideals and achieving knowledge generation through learning from action.

Collaboration required a large investment of time and energy. Logistically meeting for 16 hours per week to plan an eight-hour class day per month was a large commitment to the work. We found that for the collaboration to highly impact our teaching and scholarship we needed to include three elements: 1) the creation of a common language; 2) creation of a theoretical framework to support teaching and learning that incorporated multi-faceted areas of expertise; and, 3) a commitment to reflection on the process and systematic inquiry into the scholarship of teaching and learning.

The development of a common language from our individual areas of expertise served as a springboard for the integration and interrogation of new theory. Our team chose to investigate critical reflection and pedagogy as a way to tie our multiple understandings under one broader theory. Through the process we expanded our understanding of student processing by adding learner-centered theory (Weimer, 2002) and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004) into the model. A large amount of time was spent reflecting on our interactions, soliciting and using student feedback to inform our understandings of teaching and learning, and the systematic examination of our pedagogical practice. However, the

rewards have produced a rich understanding of adult development and research agenda to inform the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Placing the scholarship of teaching and learning into practice created meaningful learning opportunities for us and our students. "Teaching is lived as one encounters self and other, individual and collective, past and future, actual and possible" (Davis, Sumara, Luce-Kapler, 2000, p. 226). Our work addressed current calls for the transformation of higher education learning. Through the scholarship of teaching and learning we engaged students in meta-cognitive conversations about learner-centered theory and we were able to develop a fluid, responsive curriculum that supported students to enter from current points of reference and build upon their understandings of teaching and learning.

Students' learning experiences were transformed by breaking down the transmission model of knowledge construction towards one of active, social knowledge construction. Students who engage in constructivist learning developed skills and dispositions and advanced towards becoming self-authoring. Our model can easily be adapted across disciplines and content areas for those seeking alternative models of instruction to support self-authorship. We began studying our team's critical reflection of our pedagogical practices and impact that those reflections had on their teaching and individual learning. A next step was to capture in a meaningful way the evidence for change beyond the students' self-report to measure engagement and learning outcomes of students. Faculty can strengthen students learning experiences by bridging theory-to-action, engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning to break down the barriers of isolation and work against the privileging of theory over practice.

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