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“Singing to the Choir:” The Struggle for Systemic Organizational Change in Community College Teaching

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Keywords: Professional development, systemic change, teaching improvement

Abstract: This study reports the results of a case study of a systemic change process in a community college aimed at fostering improvement of teaching practices. The results suggest that systemic change is limited by an organizational culture that is multiplistic and fragmentary.

For many years, adult and higher education have relied on professional development (PD) to address learner issues such as persistence and achievement. Within the community college, much of this effort has focused on improving teaching. These efforts, however, have had little more than short-term effects (Murray, 1999). Using ideas such as organizational climate, complexity theory and systems theory, critics suggest the need to re-frame the improvement of teaching within a broader organizational context (Murray, 1999; Zellermyer & Margolin, 2005). Informed by this perspective, a three-year professional development activity was implemented within a large Midwestern community college as a means of bringing about systemic change in teaching practice within the college. By systemic change, we mean the development of organizationally-shared beliefs, values, and actions with regard to desired teaching practices. The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how administrators and faculty within the college perceive this process and how these perceptions may either facilitate or impede systemic change.

Background and Rationale

Community colleges and similar institutions in other countries represent important locations for adult learning, requiring approaches to teaching that reflect the needs of these increasingly nontraditional students (Amey, 1999; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Many community college teachers are not prepared to adequately address their needs (Grubb & Associates, 1999; Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999). Numerous colleges have created PD programs that aim to improve faculty teaching by engaging learners more effectively through more learning-centered and active learning approaches (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Conceptually, these efforts are consistent with adult learning theory (Garrick, 1999; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

For the most part, however, these efforts have attracted those already excited about teaching and eager to learn more about how to improve what they are already doing quite well. Despite increased research and funding, these programs reach only a relatively small proportion of faculty within a given institution, largely singing to the choir. Their track record in fostering the overall improvement of practice is also, at best, checkered and short-term (Grubb & Associates, 1999; Murray, 1999). Although references to the broader organizational implications of PD are evident in such terms as learning college and learning organization (O’Banion, 1997),

the improvement of teaching in community colleges has, for the most part, focused on the practices of individual teachers. PD efforts have also had almost no effect on the culture of teaching within the broader organization.

Within recent years, however, a few scholars and practitioners have called for a reframing of PD, suggesting the need to attend to organizational dimensions involved in the improvement of teaching (McClenney, 1998; Murray, 1999). Ideas such as organizational culture (Shaw et al, 1999; Murray, 2001), complexity theory (Zellermayer & Margolin, 2005) and systems theory take us beyond contexts of individual practitioners and stress the problem of teaching improvement as an institutional or systemic problem. By systemic, proponents refer to a focus on institutionally shared expectations that reflect more learner and learning centered approaches to teaching. In many instances, systemic change demands organizational transformation (McClenney, 1998), involving the adoption by the administration, faculty, and support staff of a shared set of beliefs and assumptions about environments and methods to help adults learn and about PD practices.

How we move a community college to emphasize systemic change is not well known. In this project, we studied a faculty development process grounded in the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and using faculty learning communities (Cox & Richlin, 2004) to foster systemic change in teaching practice. In this paper, we report on the beliefs and perspectives held by faculty and administrators about PD and the improvement of teaching.

Methods

This qualitative study used a phenomenological strategy to study a voluntary faculty development project grounded in the concept of systemic change and the use of faculty learning communities or circles (Cox & Richlin, 2004). A total of 25 participants from a large Midwestern community college were purposively selected, representing administrative personnel and teachers both participating and not participating in the circles. Participants ranged in tenure with the college from a few years to more than 25 years. The majority of participants were with the college for more than ten years. The administrative group included assistant deans, deans, and the college provost and vice-president. Participating teachers represented fulltime faculty members from diverse, credit-bearing instructional programs, including developmental education, general education and workforce development. Men and women were represented in approximately equal proportions. Persons of color comprised a small proportion of both administration and faculty groups. Five teachers were purposively selected from teachers not participating in the learning circles.

Each research participant engaged in a 90 minute semi-structured interview, focusing on beliefs about and experiences in teaching and PD within the college. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observations were also conducted of learning circle meetings. Field notes from these meetings were used to transcribe descriptions of each meeting. The observational data were used to triangulate findings emerging from the individual interviews, as well as to augment the information derived from these interviews. Interview transcripts were analyzed using categorical content analysis methods.

Findings

Improving teaching through systemic change involves all members of the organization. Within the community college, the key groups of personnel responsible for fostering this level of change are members of the administrative team and the fulltime faculty. Support for the intended

outcomes of the PD project was virtually unanimous across the administrative team. Every administrator interviewed expressed the need for systemic change within the organization that would foster more diverse, learning-centered teaching practices. Yet, they also acknowledged structural barriers, largely reflecting their workload and a lack of time to adequately attend to PD of faculty. These structural barriers made it difficult for them to demonstrate commitment to the project goals in their daily practices, such as engaging in assessment and evaluation of teaching or working at the departmental levels to foster and encourage attention to teaching practices. The administrative team created policy to support systemic change through PD and provided resources necessary for faculty to engage in the process. For the most part, however, the actual process of bringing about systemic change in teaching practice was largely left to the work of participating faculty members.

The teachers' perspectives on PD revealed in this study make problematic attempts to foster improvement in teaching through systemic change. With respect to teacher formation and PD, the data suggest an organization characterized by multiple and potentially competing realities and identities. Faculty members revealed cognitive and emotional appraisals of teaching and its improvement that reflected widely differing understandings of what it means to be a community college teacher, and how one engages in processes of PD to improve teaching. These understandings fell into three broad themes of teacher as: a) member of a learning community; b) a representative of the discipline, and c) an entrepreneur. Each of these themes embodies a kind of organizational story about what it means to be a community college teacher and the processes that support and nurture the teacher's formation and PD.

Teacher as Member of an Interdisciplinary Learning Community

This theme conveys a sense of teacher as a member of an interdisciplinary community and PD as grounded in a deep sense of relationship that extends across disciplinary boundaries. Participants who reflected this sense of identity as a community college teacher expressed concern for the tendency of teachers to isolate themselves from one another, both within departments and disciplines and across program and schools within the college. For example, Lucy told us, "People are not able to work through differences very well, so they just stay apart, do their own thing and say, "Don't bother me. I won't bother you...." And that attitude, I think, keeps us somewhat at a distance."

Participants who expressed a sense of identity as part of a larger community enjoyed being able to make connections with teachers in other areas, finding such relationships valuable socially and pedagogically. For example, Anita said, "I tend to learn pretty well in interactive kinds of settings, too, so I think the learning circle is valuable for that." In reflecting on her participation in a learning circle, Mary remarked, "I'm learning from my peers in the group. Sharing an enthusiasm for a topic. Good friends, I mean. I've made some friendships in the group, people with different, from different disciplines I haven't really known before." Dan pointed out how the learning circles help the teachers come "to know each other from different – I mean, we're all pretty different, from different areas. Three of us are from English. I've gotten to know these people a lot better." Merriam described how her involvement in the group has helped her within her discipline. "Ideas that I've been trying myself that have come out of the group. I've been pulling a lot more into my own discipline of nursing." Teachers learn from and provide necessary emotional and intellectual support for one another in their processes of improving teaching. Anita suggested that the "circles give you a foundation," and Dan stressed the value of the social support the groups provided: "They're just a very open, supportive group."

Key supports. Strengths. They respect one another in the group...a willingness to say something that you don't think is politically correct...The openness is working very well.

Participants reflecting this view of themselves as teachers also perceived the power of the method to make connections beyond the discipline and program level. Merriam indicated that "I like participating in something that takes me out of my own arena." Anita said she has "learned what other departments are doing." Dan indicate that the learning circles have "been a major force for connection...I was asked to present the learning circle, my learning circle at the board of trustees. I think it's had ripples way beyond our circle."

Thus, the perceptions of a group of participants elaborated this theme of connectedness, of being part of something larger than oneself. For this group, being a teacher and learning within that role involves connecting with others who are not necessarily a part of your discipline and being able to learn important and meaningful things from them. This process of learning and PD requires support and nurturing, a safe environment in which one can explore new and challenging ideas for one's teaching.

Teacher as Disciplinary Representative

We refer to another group of faculty as *discipline representatives*. Self-described but also identified by their colleagues, these teachers saw themselves as subject matter experts and characterized effective PD as grounded within one's discipline. Without such a grounding, college activities to improve teaching made little sense and were viewed largely as a waste of time.

For example, Betty was a nonparticipant at the start of the project who later, when additional financial incentives were offered to participants, decided to join a learning circle. She observed that working with others not from her discipline always involved "a slower paced way...with people in other departments whose problems are different in so many ways wouldn't have been my choice before the learning circles because I've always gotten so much more from working with my colleagues in the English department." Despite some of the relational benefits that she enjoys from the learning circles, she admits that "the opportunity to sit around and exchange assignments or classroom tactics or something like that with people who know my work best – the opportunity doesn't happen." Participation in the learning circles, however, has not contributed to new relationships even among her colleagues: "I don't think I think any differently about my colleagues. I just don't seem them. You know, in the hallway, a little nodding, crossing arms [by] the mailbox."

Some teachers voluntarily participated within the learning circles as a means of identifying ways they could improve their own classroom teaching. They were looking for techniques, tips, and strategies that might help them address specific issues they are confronting within their own teaching. For example, Ted wanted to use the service learning learning circle experience "to find a way to measure the outcome" of this way of teaching. He wanted his class to have a service learning component and wanted to be able to assess the specific outcomes of this experience for his students. Like others with this view of PD, Ted placed more value on the circles as sources of information and techniques for teaching within his discipline, rather than for the interdisciplinary connections and relationships that this process might foster.

Teachers who approached their own development from a more interdisciplinary perspective were also aware of this other group of faculty that perceived their professional formation and development within a discipline-based focus. In describing some of the barriers the college faces in implementing systemic change to improve teaching, Lucy touched on this issue of teachers as disciplinary representatives: "I see no cooperation at the school level. I see

no cooperation among departments. Everyone's fighting for turf. It's getting better...but there's a history of having to protect your turf. Within the department a lot of contention." Lana thought that many of her colleagues sought their PD in both external and in-house programs that were discipline-based.

Teacher as Entrepreneur

A smaller group of educators in this study reflected the perspective of the teacher as entrepreneur. In this perspective, teaching is perceived to be largely a solitary act, with respect to relationships with colleagues and the classroom as the teacher's eminent domain. This perspective of teacher PD reflects the solitude of the classroom teacher yet connected to the outer world through partnerships. The teachers who manifested this entrepreneurial perspective describe PD as an individual choice of activities largely external to the college. They devoted considerable energy and time to cultivating relationships with individuals, community groups, businesses, or governmental offices. Characteristic of teachers in workforce development but also evident among some teachers in general education as well, these connections are used to cultivate knowledge and awareness of their respective disciplines or to create opportunities for learning experiences for their students.

The teacher as entrepreneur sees little role for the college in fostering development beyond providing the necessary financial support and time necessary to pursue such external activities. For them, PD involves a smorgasbord of possible opportunities and they choose from among a vast array of options. While some of these options may involve in-house activities, many teachers have relatively little confidence in the PD programming the college offers and they use PD funds provided by the college to participate in conferences and workshops in which they are interested.

Discussion and Implications

Most of the participating faculty and administrative team reflect a view of the community college teacher as a member of a learning community. The improvement of teaching occurs, in part, through teachers connecting with teachers from other disciplines and areas of the college and reflecting on common concerns, questions, and problems. The learning circle methodology was generally regarded as quite effective in fostering this view of PD and these teachers were generally enthusiastic about their involvement and in the improvement of teaching. This process, however, largely results in advocates for change "singing to the choir." Teachers who were either ambiguous about the college's efforts at faculty development or openly hostile to them tended to mirror the discipline or entrepreneur myths and were not participating in the learning circles. Subjective estimates among interviewed participants indicate about 10-20% of the college faculty are strong supporters of this PD effort, about 50-60% are indifferent, and about 10% openly hostile.

Systemic change implies a cultural perspective of the community college as an organization. Hancock and Tyler (2001) describe two broad approaches to understanding culture and organizations. Corporate culture reflects a "set of cultural values norms, and their symbolic manifestations, devised by management and transmitted both formally and informally the rest of the workforce" (p. 100). Organizational culture, on the other hand, refers "to the more organic nature of organizational life, one that grows or emerges from the lived experiences of organizations..." (p. 100), and reflects organizational members as culture makers. In this study, the vision of the administrative team for systemic change, as it is embedded in the project's

goals, suggests a sense of the corporate culture and the goal of fostering systemic change in teaching practice through PD can be understood as a kind of “cultural management.” Yet, the stories conveyed by the teachers of how they see their own professional formation and development, connects us more concretely to the organizational culture. These findings suggest that the community college educators participating in this study reflect, from the perspective of PD, a multiplistic collective identity. The findings are not at all consistent with a monolithic notion of culture that might or could characterize educators’ perceptions of the improvement of teaching and how the college contributes to their own PD and formation. Rather, the data presented here suggest groups of beliefs, values, and behaviors among the faculty that reflect something of the rich and varied cultures referred to by Shaw et. al. (1991) in their analysis of community college culture. Rather than a single, unitary or unified voice around teaching, the organization mirrors quite differing and even contradictory voices regarding the improvement of teaching and the PD of its faculty.

Each of these voices represents its own way of storying, with respect to PD and collective life within the organization. More research is needed to understand what these multiple voices mean as it pertains to faculty life within a community college. All three stories need further elaboration but particularly the teacher as disciplinary representative and teacher as entrepreneur. The improvement of teaching and, hence, organizational transformation requires a re-storying of these narratives so that space is created for the mutual elaboration of all three stories.

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