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Celebrate teaching and learning: A SoTL symposium at the University of the Pacific

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Abstract

This paper presents a faculty-driven teaching and learning celebration that fostered institutional cultural change. The symposium showcased exemplar instructional methods at an institution, whose mission is to “to provide a superior, student-centered learning experience integrating liberal arts and professional education.” The symposium was a grass-roots effort that attracted seventy-two faculty members from various disciplines to attend the four day symposium sessions to share, discuss, and learn about the best practices used by their colleagues. The overall evaluation and response to the symposium exceeded the expectations of the organizers. The paper contributes to both the scholarship of teaching and learning and institutional cultural change literature by providing an overview of the program, reflections on the endeavor, and four successful presentations that helped to foster an interdisciplinary community of practice committed to sustainable pedagogies.

Introduction

Over the last thirty years, higher education has seen a dramatic shift in student demographics (Vardi, 2011) and accreditation standards (Rogers, 2012) that requires educators to reconsider our individual and university practices to adapt to the new student and political reality. Institutions of higher learning may need to consider organizational changes to better align practices towards these new, dynamic stakeholders. To facilitate an institutional cultural change that is more responsive requires an opportunity for self-discovery, fostered by change agents, to bring about a re-alignment of individual and organizational identity, guided by the mission of the institution (Ginsberg & Bernstein, 2011). In our case, the University of the Pacific's mission is, "to provide a superior, student-centered learning experience integrating liberal arts and professional education and preparing individuals for lasting achievement and responsible leadership in their careers and communities." Based on our mission, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) provides a means and opportunity of developing communities of practice in higher education institutions to better facilitate the transformation of how we teach, why we teach, and who we teach (Becker & Andrews, 2011; Gilpin & Liston, 2009). To better connect our individual teaching practices with our institutional student-centered mission required engaging faculty passion for teaching and fostering an engaged community of practice around teaching and learning (Becker & Andrews, 2011; Gilpin & Liston, 2009; Simmons, 2009). Our hope was to lay the foundation for an institutional cultural shift, by developing sustainable pedagogies (Veel & Bredhauer, 2009) and an interdisciplinary network (Colbert, 2012) through a Celebration of Teaching and Learning.

To begin the process of fostering institutional cultural change, a framework for individual and organization self-discovery is necessary. At Pacific, this came about initially as a small group of faculty who wanted to share innovative pedagogy, but through the process of collaboration, transformed into a planning committee that organized a weeklong Celebration of Teaching and Learning. The symposium focused on a series of sharing studios to facilitate communities of practice focused on sustainable teaching and learning pedagogies. The four-day symposium included twelve faculty presentations and seventy-two faculty participants. The contributions included in this manuscript were drawn from these exemplary sessions in an effort to highlight scholarly teaching (Richlin & Cox, 2004) and to demonstrate our own efforts toward institutional cultural change.

The symposium was a unique endeavor for the institution for a number of reasons. First, the effort started not from a center or administrative office, but rather from a gathering of faculty change agents who expressed an interest in coordinating a grass-roots effort to foster teaching and learning. Unlike other university sponsored events, the symposium began as a faculty discussion the summer prior about how best to share what they had learned in terms of effective classroom techniques. Although the university later provided some administrative and financial support, the driving force was the faculty, drawn from different disciplines, who wanted to foster a greater dialogue regarding scholarly teaching. Second, although the mission of the school was primarily teaching, there had been limited attempts at driving an institutional culture that fostered teaching. In fact, the opposite was occurring, with the push by external accrediting bodies toward greater scholarship, sometime at the expense of teaching. The university had never held a teaching conference, our Center for Teaching and Learning was newly established, and there had been limited focus on either the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning or even just scholarly teaching. Third, the impetus for the symposium and the subsequent manuscript was a response to the tradition of bringing in named speakers to help 'educate' faculty on best practice. The focus instead, was on building sustainable pedagogies from within, using our own interdisciplinary community toward the beginning phases of organizational change. Although outside expertise may be helpful at times, we felt that as an institution, one that prides itself on whole person education, that there was enough credible talent, techniques and interest in focusing our symposium on the work of our own faculty. If as an institution, we want to embrace the principles of student-focused education, and bring about an cultural shift toward teaching and learning, than what better way to start, than to come together as equals to share our own classroom narratives with the hope of building teaching excellence through collaborative sharing of ideas. Therefore, rather than rely on administrative support or external assistance from others, we realized that collectively we had the influence, passion, and knowledge to begin the process of change.

The goal of the symposium was to develop a network of faculty interested in scholarly teaching. The process was a forum to highlighting effective teaching and active learning practices which could be shared amongst colleagues. Our strategy began as a small, but necessary step to build a community dedicated to scholarly teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning through a process dubbed

“short shots” by Simmons (2009). That is, although the conference itself ended up as a high impact endeavor, it was the small event leading up to the symposium that made the difference. From the formation of the conference committee, the call for proposals and reviewers, the review process, the conference implementation, and the one-on-one discussion that occurred before, during and after the sessions that really drove the change efforts.

Our focus was the formation of an interdisciplinary learning community that extended beyond our pedagogical and intellectual silos. The symposium provided a platform to assist in the formation of a broader professional teaching and learning network, the opportunity to share best practices, showcase collaborative work, report on student learning outcomes and connect with like-minded colleagues. A network that extended beyond the barriers of our disciplines that often prevent effective communication, into a shared space of collective practice, not just as passive observers but as active participants. In sum, the beginnings of an interdisciplinary network within the institution to provide faculty a space in which to share their experiences and feel support in their teaching, which exemplifies the teaching mission of Pacific.

In our case, the hope was that the introduction of a collaborative symposium on teaching and learning would help to foster sustainable pedagogies by sharing our own unique classroom experiences. Sustainable pedagogy is the “establishment of collaborative learning cultures that encourage risk-taking, exploration of ideas and learning” (White, 2008, p. 6). The characteristics of sustainable pedagogy include a holistic view of teaching, collaborative learning culture, achievement of learning targets, focus on teacher-learner relationships, recognition of the need for reflection, exploration of ideas, and risk-taking behavior (Veel & Bredhauer, 2009). It was through the interactive sessions where sustainable pedagogy emerged, as faculty were exposed to different methods, developed new skills, and reflected on their own learning. The symposium itself served as the means whereby sustainable pedagogy could emerge.

To build a sustainable pedagogy requires the development of an interdisciplinary professional teaching and learning network within the institution (Colbert, 2012; Lewis & Zelinsky, 1987). In general, teaching can often be a solitary work that requires faculty to work independently, isolated from colleagues, and without a lot of meaningful opportunities to reflect on our work with others. The

symposium offered an opportunity for faculty from all areas of the campus to gather together to present and discuss teaching strategies, learn new pedagogies, and foster a community of practice to support collaborative learning and offer participants the opportunity to co-construct learning activities (Parker & Chao, 2007). If the sessions themselves allowed for the consideration of sustainable pedagogy, it was the entire symposium process, from planning to implementation to review, that helped to facilitate a broader learning network.

Overall, the symposium was an opportunity to promote organizational self-discovery and engage faculty as change agents in the process. The subsequent collection of session detailed in the manuscript are intended to help disseminate information on best practices, to inspire others to consider their own teaching techniques that further the goal of student learning, and to recognize the contributions of institutions whose mission is largely teaching-oriented to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in higher education. Similar to the expectations of other local conferences of teaching and learning, our hope was that our planners, presenters and attendees would help to foster a community of engagement that would reconsider the role of educators in this new dynamic environment (Davis, Watkins & Allen, 2009; Haley, Wiessner, & Robinson, 2009).

Method

The challenge was to bring faculty and practices out of individual classrooms and into the broader university community to share, discuss, and uncover best practices that are occurring right now by fellow faculty members. In an attempt to overcome the physical and psychological barriers of sharing our own creative teaching and learning methods that excite students and educators, the University of the Pacific embarked on a call for proposals from faculty for faculty, that can be demonstrated through a series of hands-on experiential active sessions. The main criterion for submission was for faculty to consider whatever they do in the classroom that excites and inspires students.

Each session engaged other faculty members for either a 30 or 60 minute block, with the expectation that faculty will demonstrate their techniques, so that other faculty members can replicate the methods in their own classrooms. Submissions were blind peer-reviewed by two faculty members, focusing on interest to faculty, clear student learning outcomes, appropriate, clear methods, and

demonstrating significant results. The recommendations for acceptance, revision, or rejection were sent to an action team made up of faculty who made the final determination of acceptance.

Results

The symposium itself and the subsequent collection of insights provide evidence that exemplary teaching is happening across levels in higher education. Our main goals were to showcase internal effective teaching and learning methods, raise awareness of SoTL, and to further develop faculty. The symposium as a whole as well as the specific articles enclosed, highlight active and collaborative learning techniques that we believe help to foster student engagement. The contributions are (1) “Beyond our gates: Mobilizing experiential learning opportunities in physical education teacher preparation programs” by Lara Killick, Darrin Kitchen, and Gina Carbonatto, that focused on experiential learning opportunities and community partnerships being developed through Pacific’s Sport Pedagogy curricula; (2) “The whacky world of wikis” by Delores McNair that focused on the use of the wiki tool to support student work in the classroom; (3) “Thinking on your feet: Collaboration between business and forensics” by Chris Sablynski, that focused on using debate as an in-class teaching activity for conflict management; and (4) “Case studies to foster student research innovation through learning from nature” by Henghu Sun and Yuan Yao, that focused on fostering students innovation through “learning-from-nature” case studies. The purpose of the collection of contributions was to provide a template for active learning techniques that are occurring in class that others may want to consider, and to demonstrate the range of innovative techniques to foster student engagement.

To assess the impact of the symposium attendees were asked to complete a brief online survey that focused on engagement, teaching and learning, and recommendation. Out of the 72 participants, 24 responded to the survey.

1. Engaging in this Symposium was valuable to my teaching and learning

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		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Disagree		0.0%	0
Disagree		4.2%	1
Agree		29.2%	7
Strongly Agree		66.7%	16
	Optional Comments		4
	answered question		24
	skipped question		0

2. I will use ideas from the Symposium in my teaching and learning.

2. I will use ideas from the Symposium in my teaching and learning.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Disagree		0.0%	0
Disagree		0.0%	0
Agree		50.0%	12
Strongly Agree		50.0%	12
	Optional Comments		6
	answered question		24
	skipped question		0

3. I would recommend this Symposium to my colleagues.

3. I would recommend this Symposium to my colleagues.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Strongly Disagree		4.3%	1
Disagree		4.3%	1
Agree		26.1%	6
Strongly Agree		65.2%	15
	Optional Comments		4
	answered question		23
	skipped question		1

Although the response rate was fairly low (33%), the consistency of “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” across the questions and respondents provides preliminary evidence that overall, the symposium was valuable, that information may be transferred, and that participants would recommend the symposium. In other words, the survey helps demonstrate that participants were actively engaged in the process.

Perhaps more importantly, as elaborated in each contribution, are the personal reflections of the authors and the recorded reactions of the participants from each session. In particular four themes emerged from the various sessions: (a) the benefit for the presenters; (b) the lasting effects of the sessions; (c) opportunity for discussion; and (d) the consistent comments regarding the value of the symposium. These themes provide further evidence of not just engagement in the process, but toward our overall goal of beginning to develop a framework for a community of engagement around teaching and learning.

Discussion

Our Celebration of Teaching and Learning Symposium was a grass-roots efforts to change institutional culture toward scholarly teaching and SoTL through the development of sustainable pedagogies and the building of an interdisciplinary teaching and learning networks within the university. Given Pacific’s unique three campus, one university model with several professional schools, our hands-on event with 12 presentations and 72 faculty participants was a successful first step. First, as indicated in the results, participants found the event to be both valuable and useful with support for continuing the process. Second, as indicated by the experience of attendees, the event helped to foster discussions and reflections about teaching and learning across disciplines on campus. Third, as indicated in the subsequent paper sessions, there was a commitment to active, integrative learning through our program.

Our initial focus was to bring together faculty to share their own active learning strategies with colleagues, but in the end, what we discovered was that the process of bringing together a group of faculty across disciplines and programs provided an opportunity to move beyond a conference and into the beginning stages of institutional cultural change. At a minimum, the symposium fostered greater awareness (and perhaps competence) of scholarly teaching at the University of the Pacific. However, it is our belief that the symposium went farther, helping to foster sustainable pedagogies and a network of learning that provides a starting point for broader institutional cultural change. Toward that end, hopefully

our experience in planning, implementing, and reflecting on the symposium, as well as the enclosed faculty manuscripts, contributes to the dialogue of SoTL and institutional change.

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