iNSIDE OUT

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Pathways to Faculty Learning and Pedagogical Improvement

One of the central purposes of Scaling Innovation is to study the processes by which community colleges implement instructional reforms in developmental education. These reforms may reconfigure course sequences or structures, refine curricula, or emphasize new or different instructional approaches. In our research, we have observed that the reform process can create powerful opportunities for colleges to engage faculty in professional learning focused on pedagogy. The instructional reform process can allow faculty to try new things in the classroom and work with colleagues to refine and improve curriculum and pedagogy. However, even in a context that fosters robust instruction-focused learning, there are impediments to creating and sustaining faculty development activities of this nature.

Institutional norms and structures in higher education do not typically foster professional learning focused on instruction. Conceptions of academic freedom discourage colleges from interfering in matters of curriculum and teaching, and heavy faculty workloads and reliance on adjuncts often deter collaborative efforts to strengthen classroom practice. Many faculty members have few opportunities to reflect on their teaching in a formal setting, and when they do, those learning experiences are not always applicable to their classrooms. Faculty development leaders may be hesitant to prescribe any single classroom strategy, which can lead to overly general discussions that are not grounded in the specific, day-to-day issues that instructors encounter in the classroom. In addition, instructors attending professional development sessions often have a variety of questions and needs, requiring a skilled facilitator with a broad range of expertise.

Despite these challenges, well-crafted faculty engagement activities can encourage experimentation and generate improvements in teaching and learning. Drawing on fieldwork with Scaling Innovation partner programs, in this issue of *Inside Out* we explore the nature of faculty learning related to instruction and argue that the most productive faculty learning opportunities have a clear purpose and create direct linkages to instructors' everyday work of classroom teaching.

Fullerton College: A Case Study of Professional Learning

During the fall 2011 semester, a team of four English faculty members at Fullerton College began developing a pilot version of an accelerated approach to developmental writing, the second course in a three-course remedial English sequence. The pilot course was designed with a level of rigor to allow successful students to skip the final developmental English course and enroll directly into college composition; students who performed less well would be referred to the subsequent developmental course.

To help students meet the objectives of the upper-level developmental course, instructors worked to integrate challenging reading and writing tasks into the curriculum. The team elected to use common course materials for the pilot semester and met several times during the fall to design the curriculum, select shared course readings, and create assignments. Four sections of the course using the accelerated approach were offered for the first time in spring 2012. Throughout that semester, the team met weekly to discuss their classroom experiences, troubleshoot challenges, and evaluate and refine the curriculum.

A full-day planning meeting we observed during the fall of 2011 illustrated the range of curricular and pedagogical issues that faculty considered. The meeting began with faculty members sharing and discussing readings that they used in previous courses. As they de-

liberated over which books and articles would be most appropriate for each course unit, a conversation emerged about how to assess students' comprehension of these texts, which were more challenging than those used in past developmental English courses. For nearly 30 minutes, the instructors discussed strategies for strengthening students' reading comprehension skills. One instructor shared that she reads aloud in class and asks students to annotate the text with comments and questions as they follow along. Others discussed pre-reading assignments and activities to help students become familiar with the concepts found in the texts.

When we observed the courses in the spring of 2012, we noted that each of the faculty members asked students to annotate their texts to foster comprehension. Instructors reported that it was challenging to keep students engaged and motivated as they completed more advanced reading assignments, and they identified a need for additional strategies for supporting struggling students. These challenges, however, were viewed as surmountable, in large part due to the support network that faculty established. In interviews, the instructors expressed appreciation for the regular communication they had through meetings and email to discuss the implementation of the curriculum in the classroom.

Creating Opportunities for Purposeful, Contextualized Faculty Learning

The course redesign process led by the four-person faculty team at Fullerton differed from typical approaches to faculty development, which often include presentations by consultants, off-site conferences, whole-college convocations, or one-time workshops on best practices. These activities may present faculty with new and useful information, but this information is often decontextualized to maintain a broad appeal and thus is unlikely to have a significant impact on any individual faculty member's classroom practice. In contrast, the Fullerton team meetings and email exchanges had clear connections to the day-to-day work of teaching the accelerated pilot sections. The course development process created opportunities for concrete, in-depth explorations and productive discussions of curricular materials, student work, and other aspects of instructional practice. Because they were grounded in immediate practical concerns, these activities and conversations did have an influence on the classroom practices of the Fullerton team.

Across the Scaling Innovation partner sites, we found that faculty who were engaged in shaping or refining elements of a reform often reported changes in their teaching practices. These changes occur as faculty engage in sustained activities and detailed conversations connected to their everyday work. For instance, reviewing curricular materials and related student work can spur discussions about how to best employ these materials and potentially improve student performance. Pedagogical experimentation can be enhanced when curriculum development groups, steering committees, or implementation teams create a sustainable infrastructure for instructors' collaboration. Instructors reported that working with their colleagues to refine developmental reforms allows them to experiment with new teaching strategies, consult with colleagues about the outcomes, and return to the classroom with specific actions to improve their pedagogical approaches. For instructors, the ongoing process of reform development and refinement seems crucial to building a deep understanding of and increasing comfort with unfamiliar or challenging pedagogies.

Faculty learning activities may be more successful when they are aligned with clearly articulated purposes, as they were at Fullerton College. Faculty members on the reform team at Fullerton were charged with developing and enhancing an approach to their course that integrated reading and writing. In response, they put into place meeting structures and communication vehicles expressly intended to support this goal. In our observations, across colleges where faculty reported that reform had significant impact on their teaching, such alignment between activities and goals was typical.

To understand this trend, we defined professional learning opportunities in terms of their purpose, activity, and venue. The *purpose* is the learning objective. This might include in-

A Three-Part Framework for Analyzing Professional Learning Opportunities

- **Purpose:** the learning objective (e.g., introducing a new pedagogical approach).
- **Activity:** the means used to reach that objective (e.g., observing a teaching demonstration).
- **Venue:** the forum for learning (e.g., monthly meeting of a faculty inquiry group).

troducing a new pedagogical approach or troubleshooting a particular challenge that is emerging in the classroom. The *activity* is the means used to reach that objective. For instance, participants might observe a teaching demonstration, listen to a presentation, or engage in interactive activities with fellow instructors. Finally, the *venue* is the forum for learning. Venues may include ongoing in-person meetings, conference calls, a one-time workshop, or online forums. Any given structure may have multiple purposes and activities, and may occur through more than one venue.

Using this framework, we examined the professional learning opportunities at Scaling Innovation partner sites. Our analysis revealed that purposes are not always clearly defined, and that activities and venues are often selected without attention to how they will achieve their purpose. For example, colleges may elect to invite a guest speaker or hold a workshop without having a clear idea of how the information imparted will help to address impediments to effective teaching and learning. The venue is often selected based on scheduling and other logistical considerations rather than on whether it facilitates faculty collaboration and learning. In contrast, the Fullerton team's activities and venues were aligned with a clearly articulated purpose: to build and then pilot new course curriculum. The team's activities were derived from this purpose and intimately tied to classroom practice. First, the instructors collaborated to select common texts and assignments, and then they examined their effectiveness during the pilot semester of implementation. In addition, the venues they employed—regular meetings supplemented with team-wide email communication—enabled them to meet their goal.

The Complexity of Creating Meaningful Faculty Learning

Generating meaningful professional learning is a complex endeavor. Even in the context of implementing a new course, it can be difficult to keep conversations grounded in classroom practice and to align activities and venues with a specific purpose. In this section, we review the challenges to creating purposeful and contextualized faculty learning opportunities and how the purpose–activity–venue framework may help to mitigate these challenges.

Our data confirm findings from previous literature that suggest that conversations about teaching are relatively rare in higher education.[1, 2] Most faculty members are disciplinary experts, and many have little formal pedagogical training and little experience talking about teaching and student learning with colleagues. Grounded conversations about teaching can be difficult to structure and maintain. In our observations, discussions about classroom practice frequently included "sharing strategies." These conversations tended to be unstructured and less useful than examining specific curricular materials or examples of student work. In our interviews with faculty members, respondents consistently characterized sharing strategies as "interesting," but they generally were unable to articulate specific activities they were trying in their classrooms as a result.

Discussions about classroom practice can be more effective when they have a skilled instructional leader, but even faculty with experience as innovators and demonstrated success teaching in reformed classrooms can feel uncomfortable and ill-prepared in taking on that role. A skilled and responsive instructional leader can structure and guide conversations to stay focused on classroom practice, employ curricular materials or student work to probe deeply into how teaching strategies might be applied in particular contexts, and scaffold supports so that faculty can try new techniques and report on their experiences. However, few instructors have had training in the leadership and facilitation skills needed to inspire and support their colleagues as they work to make changes in the classroom. Faculty leaders report apprehension about appearing prescriptive about pedagogy, particularly if more senior colleagues are involved. In some cases, this apprehension dilutes the professional learning goal and results in a preference for more unstructured, and perhaps less useful, activities or venues.

Another challenge involved in facilitating discussions about instruction is that faculty in departments that are pursuing reforms may differ in their pedagogical philosophies, their dispositions toward professional learning and collaboration, and perhaps even their willingness to participate in the reform. Faculty leaders must manage this inevitable challenge by engaging different faculty in different ways during the early stages of reform. Some faculty may want to examine how to prepare students for assessments; others may want to focus on motivating seemingly disengaged students; others may desire information on the rationale or need for reform. No single activity will address all of these issues. Reform leaders must make strategic decisions about which faculty to engage and how to do so effectively. At several colleges, we observed a small core group of faculty working intensively on course development and refinement. Typically, this group would share information at department meetings, where others not yet ready to fully engage in the reform were kept up-to-date on reform activities. One college recruited faculty members to voluntarily participate in a group focused on pedagogical im-

provement. They wrote and shared journal entries reflecting on classroom practice, reviewed and critiqued videos of each other's instruction, and conducted and debriefed peer observations of one another's classrooms. These professional learning opportunities appeared effective in part because faculty were willing participants and were not forced to engage in activities before they were comfortable doing so.

The complexity of creating meaningful faculty engagement opportunities derives from a higher education culture that has traditionally underemphasized reflection on classroom practice. Yet, when engaged in activities at a venue that is aligned with a purposeful and authentic task, faculty members are more likely to feel that discussing teaching is natural and useful. Absent the alignment of purpose, activity, and venue, it is more challenging to structure conversations grounded in pedagogy and sustain the engagement of instructors with varied needs and dispositions.

Opening Up New Possibilities for Pedagogical Improvement

The experience of the curriculum team at Fullerton College demonstrates how a new approach to a developmental education course can create opportunities for professional learning, experimentation, and improvements in teaching practice. During the reform process, practitioners must attend to the purpose, activities, and venue of professional learning opportunities in order to ground them in the day-to-day work of teaching. These opportunities are germane to the reform efforts that are the focus of Scaling Innovation, and more importantly, they reflect new ways of collaborating that can support a shift toward a culture where pedagogy is not invisible, where experimentation is expected and embraced, and where continuous improvement subject to rigorous assessment is normative. The type of faculty engagement described above—in which a relevant purpose is clearly aligned with a venue and activities—can also have additional benefits. For example, meaningful efforts to develop or refine a reform can deepen and broaden a sense of ownership among faculty and contribute to the sustainability of the innovation. Furthermore, ongoing efforts to examine classroom practice may yield improved student outcomes beyond those seen during early implementation.

Though we have focused on opportunities for faculty learning provided by instructional reform in developmental education, there are also opportunities for contextualized, purposeful faculty learning in colleges that are not implementing new reforms. By collaborating with colleagues to measure learning outcomes, reassess curriculum, or identify opportunities for improvement, instructors support each other as they learn and implement new ways of teaching. When these activities allow for in-depth discussion of classroom materials, student work, and other artifacts of practice, they have the potential to prompt a cultural shift in terms of information sharing, feedback, collaboration, and focus on pedagogy extending throughout and beyond developmental education.

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[1] Grant, M. R., & Keim, M. C. (2002). Faculty development in publicly supported two-year colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *26*(10), 793–807.

[2] Murray, J. P. (2002). The current state of faculty development in two-year colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *118*, 89–97.

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SCALING INNOVATION

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