5-24-2016

Learning Communities Faculty Scholars: An Online, Targeted Faculty Development Course to Promote Scholarly Teaching

Hillary H. Steiner
Kennesaw State University, hsteiner@kennesaw.edu

Learning Communities Faculty Scholars: An Online, Targeted Faculty Development Course to Promote Scholarly Teaching

Abstract

Many learning communities instructors seek professional development opportunities that foster their growth as teacher-scholars. Learning communities programs, therefore, have an opportunity to provide targeted, "just in time" training that allows for the immediate application of knowledge to a learning community setting, maximizing benefits for both faculty and students. This paper describes an online faculty development program for learning communities faculty in which participants explored such topics as first-year student needs, basic principles of learning and course design, integrative assignments, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Designed intentionally to work alongside faculty members' busy schedules, this program provides a way to encourage *scholarly* teaching and the *scholarship* of teaching among learning communities faculty.

Introduction

Learning communities are among the ten high-impact practices (HIPs) identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities as experiences that lead to greater student outcomes (Kuh, 2008). Students who participate in learning communities programs enjoy a smoother transition to college, closer relationships with faculty and peers during their first term, and an appreciation of cross-disciplinary connections among their courses (Love, 2008). But learning communities also benefit the faculty who teach in them, helping them build connections outside their areas of expertise and offering opportunities for professional growth (Jedele, 2010). For example, at a time when many faculty are expected to produce a greater amount of scholarship while maintaining progressive and rigorous classroom practices, a learning community can provide an ideal venue in which to implement Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) initiatives to study the impact of innovative teaching techniques. The learning community thus provides a structure for the motivated faculty member to put into practice the kind of *scholarly teaching* that ultimately benefits both faculty and students.

Richlin (2001) describes scholarly teachers as those whose practice is informed by relevant literature, peer feedback, and systematic observation of their own classrooms. However, training in curriculum design, the principles of effective pedagogy, and methods of SoTL is rare in many academic disciplines (Gurung & Schwartz, 2010; Halpern & Hakel, 2003). In addition, scholarly teachers in learning communities may be aware that intentional planning and collaboration has value, but lack an understanding of exactly how (and why) rich interdisciplinary integration can foster learning. Many faculty would like to develop into the type of scholarly teachers that Richlin (2001) has described yet are often expected to use their limited free time to seek out these opportunities on their own through their Teaching and Learning Center. Online faculty development programs can address issues of access, but reviews of such programs (e.g., Cook & Steinert, 2013) indicate that their efficacy is highly dependent on how tailored the program is to the faculty's needs. Programs that provide a distinct connection between theory and practice are especially beneficial (Garrison & Vaughn, 2009). Online faculty development opportunities differ widely by institution on these characteristics, however, and very few address the unique needs of learning communities faculty.

If we are to promise high impact practices like learning communities to our students, training of faculty to teach for high impact is essential. This training should be comprehensive enough to fill in the gaps that faculty from many disciplines have in their knowledge about teaching and learning, yet personalized enough that faculty can immediately see how the knowledge applies to their own learning community. Many learning communities programs offer professional development in a particular area, for example in building integrative assignments

using the heuristic developed at the Washington Center (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). However, the Learning Communities Faculty Scholars (LCFS) program described in this paper takes a broader approach by encouraging faculty to consider the science of teaching and learning as it applies to learning community design and pedagogy. Offered as a pilot course at Kennesaw State University (KSU) in fall 2015 and delivered via the institution's learning management system, this optional-enrollment, fully asynchronous online course allowed learning communities faculty from diverse disciplines to learn about educational theory, exchange ideas and integrative assignments, and apply this new knowledge to their current learning communities.

Learning Communities at Kennesaw State University

The Learning Communities Program at (KSU) follows a faculty-driven, linked-course model. Faculty interested in teaching in learning communities propose a theme that unites two to four general education or first-year courses, at least one of which has 25 students or fewer. In the 2015-16 academic year, KSU offered 77 learning communities for first-year students, some of general interest and some geared toward a specific major, program, or group (such as athletes or state scholarship recipients). The university's Learning Communities Program strongly encourages faculty to foster integrative learning through course content that crosses curricular boundaries and to promote campus and community engagement.

Faculty who teach in the KSU Learning Communities Program are given no tangible incentives to do so; many return to teach in the Learning Communities Program because of the recognizable benefits learning communities offer students. As such, the LCFS faculty development course described in this paper had as its central goal for faculty-participants to be able to apply what they have learned to their own learning communities, with the ultimate outcome being increased learning and engagement for students. However, an additional important aim of the LCFS program was to provide faculty with a professional development opportunity that has direct implication for their growth as scholarly teachers. In other words, the LCFS Program sought to encourage faculty to commit to *scholarly teaching* and *scholarship of teaching* as they maximized the impact of these efforts on the classroom.

Program Scope

In its pilot offering, the LCFS program had five learning outcomes (see Table 1) that were met through readings, discussions, and activities (see Table 2). The outcomes were chosen through careful consideration of the essential elements that render learning communities a high-impact practice and were aligned with the goals

of our program, department, and college. Alternative methods of meeting selected learning outcomes (e.g., attending sessions at our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) were also offered when appropriate.

Table 1
LCFS Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the LCFS course, participants should be able to:
• create learning goals for their courses and learning communities based on an understanding of principles of educational psychology and course design.
• describe the unique challenges faced by first-year students and students in transition and demonstrate how these challenges will be addressed in their own classrooms.
• differentiate between learning communities and other cohort models, identify the particular learning communities model used at Kennesaw State, and explain the benefits learning communities provide to faculty and students.
• create integrative assignments to be used in their learning communities.
• design an empirical research study for conducting Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the learning community, and explain how to apply for IRB approval for this research.

Table 2
LCFS Topics and Activities

Topic	Readings and Videos	Assessment
Module One: Learning and Planning		
How Students Learn	• *How Learning Works* (Ambrose, et al., 2010), Introduction	Teaching philosophy
Learning Styles and Metacognition	• Video: "Learning Styles Don't Exist" (Willingham, 2008) • Blog Post: "Thinking about Metacognition"	Discussion post
Learning Outcomes and Backward Design	• Website: "Setting Learning Outcomes" • Blog Post: "Understanding by Design" (Vanderbilt University)	Learning outcome and assignment description
Module Two: First-Year Students		
Understanding the First Year	• "New Challenges in Working with Traditional-Aged College Students" (Keup, 2008)	Discussion board post
Module Three: Why Learning Communities?		
Learning Communities Basics	• "Learning Communities and the Quest for Quality"(Smith & McGregor, 2009)	Discussion board post
Learning Communities as High-Impact Practices	• *Five High-Impact Practices,* Chapter 2: "Learning	Discussion board post

	Communities" (Brownell & Swaner, 2010)	
Learning Community Benefits for Faculty	• "A Faculty 'C' Change: Inspired by Learning Communities" (Jedele, 2010)	Discussion board post
Module Four: Integrative Assignments		
Understanding and Designing Integrative Assignments	• "When Faculty Assess Integrative Learning" (Lardner and Malnarich, 2009) • Integrative Assignment Decision Tree (Graziano & Kahn, 2013) • Examples of Integrative Assignments	Integrative assignment with description
Module Five: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)		
Understanding SoTL and SoTL Research Design	• Websites: "What is SoTL in Higher Education?" (McKinney) and "Getting Started" (Vanderbilt University)	Discussion board posts
Understanding the IRB Process	• IRB Website	Discussion board posts
Module Six: Putting It All into Practice		
Learning and Planning		Discussion board post
First-Year Students		Discussion board post
Why Learning Communities?		Discussion board post
Integrative Assignments		Discussion board post
The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning		Optional discussion board post

The design of the LCFS program provided general context as well as a specific focus on curricular integration. First, participants studied the science of learning, creating learning goals for their learning communities based on an understanding of principles of educational psychology and course design. Second, participants learned about the unique challenges faced by first-year students and demonstrated how these challenges would be addressed in their own classrooms. Third, participants learned more about different learning communities and cohort models, developing an understanding of the benefits learning communities provide to faculty and students. Fourth, participants read research on curricular integration

and used this knowledge to create integrative assignments to be used in their learning communities. Finally, each participant sketched a design for an empirical research study for implementing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in his or her own learning community and, in the process, discovered more about applying for Institutional Review Board approval for this research.

Participants were given eight months during summer and fall semesters to complete the course. The course was offered free of charge for learning communities faculty, and there was no penalty for failing to complete the course. Participants who completed the entire course were eligible for rewards, including a certificate of completion and a Learning Communities Program polo shirt. All activities were asynchronous and were made available for the duration of the course. This timeline accommodated faculty members' varying schedules. While the Associate Director of the Learning Communities Program served as the designer and facilitator of the LCFS course, the course also relied heavily on peer review and feedback. Products and assignments were posted publicly for other participants to view, and critical discussion was encouraged. This practice reflects the spirit of the KSU Learning Communities Program, which is cross-disciplinary and highly collaborative.

Faculty Response

Upon the program's launch, 24 faculty members chose to enroll in the course. This group, comprising about 20% of the faculty teaching in learning communities, was diverse in disciplinary background, including faculty in fields such as English, Architecture, African Studies, and Construction Management. Part- and full-time faculty were represented, as were as tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure-track faculty. Eight participants finished the entire course, with other participants withdrawing due to course reassignments or unexpected time constraints. The subset of faculty completing the course was no less diverse than the larger group who initially enrolled.

The pilot implementation of the LCFS course was very small and experimental, so no formal study of its efficacy was conducted. Feedback from an anonymous survey, however, indicated that participants found the course worthwhile for improving their approach to teaching in learning communities. One faculty member suggested offering an advanced version of the course to ensure that graduates of the course stayed in touch and remained current on scholarship in the field. Selected comments from the survey included:

> Each [module] gave me new insights to grow as an instructor in a learning community. I also appreciate having access to the documents to add to my repository of resources and articles.

> I feel like I had take-aways from each module.

I was able to immediately apply some of the strategies to my LC.

Response rate for the survey was low, so perhaps better conclusions can be drawn from the nature of the discussions within the course, which provided evidence that learning outcomes were met. On average, discussion topics generated approximately twenty posts. The topics that generated the most discussion were those in the first module regarding teaching and learning. This module generated more than twice the discussion among participants (more than forty posts) than many other modules did. In part, this can be explained by course attrition—there were more participants that completed Module 1 than completed other modules. However, there were also a greater number of back-and-forth comments in this module, as faculty read and responded to one another's teaching philosophies and insights. In particular, many faculty members were struck by the simplicity and clarity of the principles of how learning works. Those without prior exposure to the science of teaching and learning found the reading for this module—Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman (2010)—especially useful for demystifying student learning.

Only the final eight participants completed the last module, which required that the newly learned information be implemented in the individual's learning community. Many of the exchanges reflected the tentativeness that faculty members often have when making changes in their pedagogy. The posts included several examples of first attempts at implementing integrative assignments as well as solicitations for feedback on how to make these assignments richer. Since incorporating integrative assignments is a key goal of many learning communities programs, more encouragement and support of faculty members as they make these initial steps toward integration may be necessary. Additionally, in subsequent versions of the course, more emphasis will be placed on encouraging peer review of integrative assignments by the more seasoned learning communities faculty.

Future Directions

Discussions with colleagues at other institutions have revealed a national need for professional development opportunities designed specifically for learning communities faculty, and evidence—for instance, Graziano and Kahn (2013) — suggests positive outcomes for universities that have them. A program such as LCFS, which is tailored to learning communities faculty needs and time constraints, may be a worthwhile option for learning communities programs to offer their faculty. Moving forward, the course will continue to be revised to better encourage discussion among time-limited participants, and content will be updated with videos and activities in addition to the reading and writing activities to accommodate varied learning preferences. Based on inquiries from learning communities colleagues at other institutions, we also are revising the course so it

may be offered to faculty outside Kennesaw State. It is our hope that as more programs like this are offered, more learning communities faculty will embrace their roles as faculty scholars, which will benefit students and faculty alike.

References

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brownell, J.E. & Swaner, L.E. (2010). *Five high-impact practices.* Washington DC: Association for American Colleges & Universities.

Cook, D.A., & Steinert, Y. (2013). Online learning for faculty development: A review of the literature. *Medical Teacher, 35*, 930-937.

Garrison, R., & Vaughn, N. (2008). *Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles, and guidelines*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Graziano, J., & Kahn, G. (2013). Sustained faculty development in learning communities. *Learning Communities Research and Practice, 1*(2), Article 5.

Gurung, R.A.R., & Schwartz, B.M. (2010). Riding the third wave of SoTL. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 4*(2), Article 5.

Halpern, D., & Hakel, M. (2003). Applying the science of learning to the university and beyond. *Change, 35*, 36-41.

Jedele, R.E. (2010). A faculty "c" change: Inspired by learning communities. *Thought and Action,* 107-114.

Keup, J. (2008). New challenges in working with traditional-aged college students. *New Directions for Higher Education, 144*, 27-37.

Kuh, G. D. (2008) *High-impact educational practices: What are they, who has access to them, and why they matter.* Washington, DC: Association for American Colleges & Universities.

Lardner, E., & Malnarich, G. (2008). A new era in learning: Why the pedagogy of intentional integration matters. *Change*, *40*(4), 30-37.

Lardner, E., & Malnarich, G. (2009). When faculty assess integrative learning: Faculty inquiry to improve learning community practice. *Change, 41*(5), 29-35.

Love, A.G. (2012). The growth and current state of learning communities in higher education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 132*, 5-18.

McKinney, K. (n.d.) What is the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education? Retrieved from http://sotl.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/definesotl.pdf

Richlin, L. (2001). Scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 86,* 57-67.

Smith, B.L., & McGregor, J. (2009). Learning communities and the quest for quality. *Quality Assurance in Education, 17*(2): 118-139.

Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Getting started. Retrieved from https://my.vanderbilt.edu/sotl/doing-sotl/getting-started/#hutchings

Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Understanding by design. Retrieved from http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/understanding-by-design/

Willingham, Daniel. (2008, August 21). Learning styles don't exist [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIv9rz2NTUk