

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Michelle Glowacki-Dudka
Assistant Professor, Adult, Higher and Community Education
Department of Educational Studies
Ball State University

Michael P. Brown
Associate Professor
Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology
Ball State University

Abstract

Faculty learning communities (FLC) provide opportunities for professional development and personal growth within university settings. Some FLC are structured; others are unstructured. Faculty at a mid-sized Midwestern state university were asked a series of close- and open-ended questions that examined the reasons for and benefits from their participation in both structured and unstructured FLC. This exploratory study compared survey responses related to participation in structured and unstructured FLC. The reasons why faculty participated in learning communities were consistent in both structured and unstructured formats. However, while the benefits from participating in structured FLC were strongly related to professional goals with immediate application, the benefits from unstructured FLC participation were more related to personal goals with long-term application.

Faculty learning communities (FLC) take place in a variety of university settings for professional development, for personal connections with peers, and for opportunities to interact across disciplines and colleges to address issues pertaining to teaching and learning. Faculty learning communities became popular with Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990). Boyer presented an expanded concept of scholarship, including the scholarship of teaching. Faculty learning communities provided a forum in which the scholarship of teaching could be explored and developed. Although widely acknowledged in higher education, Boyer's ideas have been marginally accepted into everyday practice. For example, within the reward systems of tenure and promotion, the scholarship of teaching remains secondary to research, grants, and publications. Given the status of teaching in higher education, faculty learning communities have not evolved to promote teaching and learning as a primary goal across campuses.

One university that has taken a leadership role by prioritizing and providing resources to FLC is Miami University, in Miami, Ohio. Some faculty at Miami University has constructed a core list of long-term goals for FLC programs. These include building an interdisciplinary, collegial community of teachers and learners; providing a forum for interdisciplinary collaboration in teaching and scholarship; promulgating a philosophy for teaching that reflects

the complexity of the teaching practice; enhancing the scholarship of teaching and its application in the classroom; encouraging reflective practice; and increasing the value and importance of quality teaching (Cox, 2004).

The concept of a community of practice is central to the goals of FLC. As stated by Wegner (cited by Stamps, 1997)

What is shared by a community of practice - what makes it a community - is its practice. The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. Learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning. Indeed, practice is ultimately produced by its members through the negotiation of meaning. (pp. 38-39)

Part of the practice of a learning community is a “culture of teaching” that holds academic departments and university campuses together (Wagener, 1991). Therefore, what may actually bind faculty together are the processes of teaching and learning within faculty learning communities, regardless of discipline and academic rank (e.g., contract, adjunct, tenure track, and tenured faculty).

There are two general types of FLC: university-affiliated FLC (UFLC) and independent FLC (IFLC) (Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2006). Most FLC are affiliated with universities or professional associations. UFLC often have highly structured curricula; others give faculty participants relative autonomy in selecting topics of discussion. An example of a highly structured UFLC comes from Miami University where they define it as

A cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of 6 to 15 members who engage in an active, collaborative, year-long program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching and community building. (Cox, 2004, p. 8)

Most FLC research has been conducted on UFLC. IFLC tend to be unstructured compared with UFLC and without an institutional affiliation, thus making them difficult to identify and research. IFLC involve two or more faculty discussing issues related to teaching and learning in an informal context, such as over coffee, cocktails, or while traveling together.

Researchers have examined how FLC promote professional development through collaboration and reflective practice (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Layne, Froyd, Morgan, & Kenimer, 2002); how they strengthen collegial relationships (Boud, 1999), and how they develop faculty into better educators through a deeper understanding of pedagogy (Shulman, 1986). Most recently, researchers have focused on how FLC can facilitate life-long learning in the United States and the European Union (European Commission, 2001; Nyhan, Cressey, Tomassini, Kelleher, & Poell, 2004); promote reflective practice; discuss the complexity of teaching and learning; and elaborate upon the characteristics of quality teaching.

Many university faculty report that they do not seek support in teaching from within the university structure, but rather choose one-on-one private conversations with colleagues (Wright & O’Neil, 1995). Additionally, faculty may be reluctant to dialog about teaching philosophy or practice out of fear that others may find out that s/he has no background in pedagogy (Hodges, 2005). Due to this apprehension, public scrutiny or peer review of teaching is rarely a part of

university culture. Instead, teaching is frequently seen as a private enterprise, not subject to constructive criticism or open discussion. From this perspective, teaching is not held to traditional scholarly standards, such as those for academic research and writing (Boyer, 1990).

Consequently, when faculty seek formal assistance with their teaching, they often request stopgap measures that focus on specific techniques rather than on developing a philosophy of teaching that supports a methodological approach to teaching (Layne, Froyd, Morgan, & Kenimer 2002). A focus on the techniques of teaching, without the development of a philosophical foundation, is not likely to promote general principles of lifelong learning. This, then, impedes the transference of knowledge across contexts and hinders the advancement of the scholarship of teaching. FLC provide the forum and interdisciplinary exchanges of ideas that foster not only community but also a philosophy of teaching and learning.

Knowles (1980) argues that faculty will utilize learning communities if the environment is conducive to free and open discussions about teaching. For faculty to feel comfortable talking openly about teaching, the environment must be based upon the basic principles of adult learning. That is, learning community participants come together with rich and diverse histories of classroom experiences and different levels of knowledge related to teaching and learning (Knowles, 1989), and they must feel as though there is respect for their autonomy as learners and an emphasis upon their voluntary participation in the learning community (Knowles, 1984).

FLC that are facilitated well encourage professional development and the scholarship of teaching, leading to increased participation by faculty across campus (Richlin & Cox, 2004). Sharing common teaching and learning experiences serve to break down discipline-specific boundaries, promote interdisciplinary endeavors, and advance of the scholarship of teaching. The successes from FLC can be measured in outcomes, tasks, and relationships (Petroni & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2004).

Purpose and Design

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine to examine faculty reasons for and benefits from participation in learning communities at a mid-sized, Midwestern university. We examined both structured approaches to FLC (also known as university faculty learning communities or UFLC) and those that are unstructured in content or format, otherwise known as independent faculty learning communities (IFLC). This study did not analyze specific FLC programs. Rather, it examined and compared the overall experiences and perceptions of faculty in UFLC and IFLC.

This exploratory research used an online survey that was based on previous participation in UFLC and IFLC, as well as the assumptions promulgated by Cox (2004) as listed above. We asked faculty at a mid-sized, Midwestern university a series of close- and open-ended questions about why they participated and how they benefited from their participation in FLC. Questions relating to the reasons for participating in UFLC and/or IFLC provided insight into the expectations respondents had for participating in learning communities. Questions relating to how respondents benefited from participating in UFLC and/or IFLC provided insight into what the respondents actually gained from participating in learning communities.

The survey link was e-mailed to a convenience population of 910 teaching faculty and graduate students. We chose to use a web-based survey because it provided a vehicle through which to contact large numbers of people who are usually Internet savvy, in an inexpensive and time efficient manner. It afforded a format by which a broad spectrum of issues could be addressed anonymously. Respondents were not given a monetary incentive to participate. We obtained 173 useable surveys, about 19% of the total population. Our return rate is consistent with return rates using web-based surveys, which yield from 7 to 44 percent (Schonlau, 2002). From their responses, we believe that those who chose to answer the survey have personal experiences in FLC and were eager to share their opinions. Unfortunately, we cannot speak to the characteristics of those who did not respond to our survey.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

The survey respondents represented a cross-section of the faculty at the university studied. The survey respondents' academic and demographic characteristics were relatively consistent with the characteristics of full-time faculty from across the campus as of fall semester, 2005. Specifically, respondents were similar in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, academic credential, and tenure status.

Of the 173 participants who completed the survey, most had either received either their doctorate degree (65%) or their masters degrees (29%). The others were working on their graduate degrees (6%). Most of the participants were recent graduates of the respective programs, with half completing their degree between 1992 and 2005. More than half of the participants had been employed at the university for seven or more years (53%). Another fifth (21%) of the participants had been there for four to six years. The respondents' academic status was rather evenly divided between tenured faculty (33%); tenure-track faculty (23%); and contract faculty at (37%). The other respondents included graduate students, emeritus faculty, and administrators.

The campus is not very ethnically diverse and this limited diversity shows in the respondents to the survey, as almost all (91%) of the faculty who responded were Caucasian. The respondents were distributed rather evenly by gender with men at 51% and women at 49%. The majority of the respondents were over 46 years old (57%).

The participants represented all of the colleges across campus, yet the College of Science and Humanities dominated the survey at 50%. The next highest was the College of Applied Sciences and Technology at 17%; then Teachers College at 15%. Fewer participants came from the colleges of Communications, Information, and Media; Fine Arts; Architecture and Planning; and Business.

Analysis of the Findings

Of the 173 useable survey responses, 147 (84%) indicated they had participated in at least one FLC. Nearly all (136 of 147, 92%) of those who had experience with FLC had participated in UFLC. The most common forums for UFLC include the university's teaching and learning office ($n=105$, 77%), their academic departments ($n=102$, 75%), professional conference-related

activities ($n=94$, 69%), other-university sponsored events ($n=47$, 34%), and events sponsored by book publishers and software vendors ($n=21$, 15%). A somewhat smaller number of faculty ($n=90$, 61%) reported they had participated in an IFLC. Most IFLC took place in faculty offices ($n=79$, 87%) or off campus over coffee ($n=53$, 59%), a meal ($n=60$, 67%), or cocktails ($n=18$, 20%). As might be expected, most faculty reported that members of their IFLC included those from within their own college ($n=88$, 98%), faculty from other colleges on campus ($n=39$, 43%), colleagues at other universities ($n=34$, 38%), spouses ($n=34$, 38%), and graduate students ($n=23$, 26%).

University Faculty Learning Communities (UFLC)

Table 1 provides the five most commonly mentioned reasons for participating in and benefiting from participation in UFLC. Following the table the responses to the open-ended questions are presented.

Table 1

UFLC Participation in Faculty Learning Communities

Ranks	Top 5 Reasons	Top 5 Benefits
1.	Talk about teaching (70%)	Gained teaching strategies (73%)
2.	Gain insights into improved teaching and learning (57%)	Networked with Colleagues (57%)
3.	Peer input and sharing ideas (57%)	Understood more about students and how they learn (51%)
4.	Collegiality & connections (46%)	Developed friendships (36%)
5.	Strategies to improve teaching (45%)	Received affirmation (31%)

Note: * N=136 Percentages do not equal 100 due to multiple responses.

Reasons for participation. Respondents were asked to indicate the reasons why they participated in UFLC. Several responses were provided and respondents could select multiple responses. As can be seen in Table 1, the responses seemed to be consistent with the goals of UFLC, especially those related to (a) interdisciplinary collaboration in teaching and scholarship; (b) promulgating a personal philosophy for teaching that reflects the complexity of teaching practice; (c) enhancing the scholarship of teaching and its application in the classroom; and (d) increasing the value and importance of quality teaching.

Seventy percent of the respondents wanted to talk with colleagues about teaching and over half (57%) indicated they wanted to gain insight into improved teaching and learning, and over half (57%) also wanted to receive peer input and share their ideas about teaching. Slightly less than half (46%) indicated that a reason for their participation in UFLC was to connect with their colleagues, and build relationships, and to learn strategies to improve their teaching (45%).

When asked to elaborate on the reasons why they participated in UFLC, many stated they gained depth in their understanding of the motivations of faculty. For example, many respondents expressed that they felt pressured by their departments or other academic offices on campus to participate in UFLC. As one respondent noted: “Teaching at [this university] is very political. It's the politics of t[eaching] and l[earning]. Political correctness is an issue too. It's grounded in the local culture. [It is] required/expected within academic unit[s]”

A number of respondents mentioned being motivated by stipends or external rewards for attending UFLC. As one respondent mentioned: “. . . [the Teaching and Learning Office] used to offer stipends to those who participated. The stipends were quite good until there was a change apparently brought on by a change in the higher administration of the university.” Yet, other participants had loftier goals. As one stated, “I find it extremely beneficial to interact and share ideas not only with peers but also with the facilitators who have more experience. I believe that it not only helps to improve my teaching it also helps to keep my motivation high.” Another respondent mentioned that UFLC lead to personally arranged IFLC. That person noted that “Collegiality and connections outside of campus i.e. with faculty at other institutions...” helped to shape the direction of curriculum development and was a personal motivating force.

Benefits from participation. The benefits from participating in UFLC were also consistent with the goals. In UFLC, faculty benefited through job related activities. Most reported that they learned teaching strategies, networked with colleagues, and understood more about student learning. About a third developed friendships and received affirmation that they were doing well in the classroom. In summary, the faculty believed they benefited by achieving both academic and personal goals.

When given a chance to elaborate on other benefits, faculty discussed a wide range of issues including scholarship and collaboration. For example, one respondent said: “I have expanded my publications to include pedagogical articles, materials and textbooks.” As another respondent put it: “I collaborate with others in the development of instructional technology.” Other respondents said that UFLC provided unique opportunities that lead them to become more balanced teachers. For instance, “It is important to me to put myself in the position as a learner to balance my position as a teacher.” There are also financial benefits to participating in UFLC. It “helps put food on the table”.

Comparing the reasons for participating in UFLC with the benefits from participating in UFLC, it is noteworthy to mention that all of the reasons cited for participation are oriented toward professional development. On the other hand, the top three benefits from participation were oriented toward professionalism, while the other two were personal benefits. Interestingly, the fifth ranked reason for participation is the first ranked benefit from participation. Furthermore, the fourth ranked reason is the second ranked benefit.

Independent Faculty Learning Communities (IFLC)

Table 2 provides the five most commonly mentioned reasons for participating in and the five most common benefits from IFLC. Following the table the responses to the open-ended questions are presented.

Table 2

*IFLC Participation in Faculty Learning Communities**

Rank	Top 5 Reasons	Top 5 Benefits
1.	Talk about teaching (86%)	Understood more about students (98%)
2.	Peer input & sharing ideas (78%)	Networked with colleagues (73%)
3.	Gain insights into improved teaching and learning (51%)	Developed Friendships (65%)
4.	Collegiality & connections (50%)	Gained teaching strategies (45%)
5.	Strategies to improve teaching (35%)	Received affirmation (10%)

Note: *N =90; percentages do not equal 100 due to multiple responses.

Reasons for participation. The respondents were asked to indicate the reasons for their participation in IFLC. Each respondent could select multiple responses. As shown in Table 2, many goals of UFLC can be extended to IFLC. From the responses provided to questions about why they participated in IFLC, many of the reasons were consistent with the goals of UFLC, especially those related to (a) building an interdisciplinary, collegial community of teachers and learners; (b) providing a forum for interdisciplinary collaboration in teaching and scholarship; (c) promulgating a philosophy for teaching that reflects the complexity of teaching practice; (d) enhancing the scholarship of teaching and its application in the classroom, and (e) encouraging reflective practice.

Most of the respondents (86%) wanted to talk with colleagues about teaching, and most (78%) also wanted to receive peer input and share their ideas about teaching. One-half indicated they wanted to gain insights into improved teaching and learning and to connect with their colleagues and build relationships. Over one-third (35%) indicated that a reason for their participation in IFLC was to gain strategies to improve their teaching.

When asked to elaborate upon the reasons why they participated in IFLC, respondents discussed a wide range of issues, including the importance of supporting and mentoring one another while also encouraging dialogue and learning new approaches for teaching. Other reasons for participation in IFLC were driven more by personal improvement and connection to

other colleagues in order to think together and share ideas or even to vent concerns. For example, as one respondent stated: “Sometimes I have specific questions for a colleague who has already tried something new I’m planning or who is more familiar with a particular student population.” Or, in the words of another respondent: “I try to be a very innovative teacher and need the input of others to bounce my ideas off.” And in the words of another respondent, there is a strong desire to establish “social connections with interesting faculty colleagues who also feel passionate about being a great teacher and a great scholar/citizen.”

Benefits from participation. The benefits from participating in IFLC were also consistent with many learning community goals. Nearly all faculty (98%) who participated in IFLC said that they benefited by coming to a better understanding of the students they teach. A somewhat smaller percentage indicated they benefited by being able to network with colleagues (73%) and by building friendships (65%). About half (45%) learned teaching strategies, and only 10% said they benefited by receiving affirmation that they were doing a good job in the classroom. In general, IFLC participants believed they benefited both professionally and personally.

The benefits from IFLC participation seemed to be consistent with the core principles of life-long learning, the desire to understand students, and learning how to be successful in a dynamic and often political university environment. As one respondent aptly noted, “I think. I learn. I question. These are benefits (regardless of possible application or becoming a better teacher).” Another stated IFLC helped, “Gain insights into what is going on in teacher-student interaction and with students.” Likewise, another respondent mentioned that “I gain information on the politics of the university that I would otherwise not obtain.” Particularly beneficial for some IFLC participants are, “Discussion[s] of how to deal with difficult students (e.g., students with personal problems), classroom situations (e.g., disruptive behavior) or academic dishonesty.”

A number of faculty mentioned that they liked the unstructured nature of IFLC because it offered opportunities to probe and gain a better understanding about teaching. “I feel comfortable speaking candidly,” said one respondent. As another respondent wrote, “Participants seem to be open about their thoughts and feelings about teaching [and] . . . the priority placed on teaching at the departmental, college, and university levels. I feel freer to probe and try to understand challenges.” Some respondents have experienced how scholarship improves their teaching. One faculty member put it this way: “I am working closely with faculty from other universities on developing a [text]book . . . We have completed an article and submitted it for publication and in the course of working through these ideas [we] have all refocused our teaching . . .” Another IFLC participant mentioned that, “These discussions have led to several articles (both published and in progress) and papers presented at professional meetings and a research grant to continue our study. Often the informal discussions are extensions of formal discussions that are rekindled in other settings.” Another faculty member stated that while working with another professor, he “...developed a resource guide for undergraduate teaching instructors which forced me to organize and reflect on my teaching materials.”

The unstructured nature of IFLC can often afford the opportunity to bring students into conversations about teaching and learning. As the following statements convey, the input from students can be of great value to teachers and, importantly, such conversations often provide

opportunities to mentor future educators. For example, one respondent described the diverse benefits from having undergraduate and graduate students discuss teaching and learning. “As a woman who primarily teaches other women I want to share with them the unique difficulties and challenges that . . . females] face everyday and to mentor them to the best of my abilities beyond what I can do in the course of their normal studies. They are certainly not getting this type of attention anywhere else at . . . [this university] and I find that it makes a tremendous difference in both their self-esteem and their progress in their studies.” Another IFLC participant mentioned, “Many of my students are themselves studying to be teachers and I enjoy being able mentor them and share experiences.” And, another respondent stated, “I am further developing the mentor relationship with students to extend beyond the point of graduation.”

In summary, comparing the reasons for participating with the benefits from participating in IFLC, it is noteworthy to mention that all of the reasons cited for participation are oriented toward professional development. On the other hand, of the benefits reported by the majority of the group, the top two benefits (“understood more about students and how they learn” and “networked with colleagues”) were oriented toward professional development, while the third benefit (“developed friendships”) was personal in nature.

University Faculty Learning Communities versus Independent Faculty Learning Communities. A comparison of the reasons why faculty participated in UFLC and IFLC reveals similar expectations about their participation in both learning communities. Faculty from both UFLC and IFLC placed “talking about teaching” as the top reason for their participation. They selected the same fourth and fifth reasons as well: “collegiality and connections,” and learning “strategies to improve teaching.” The only difference between the UFLC and the IFLC is that while UFLC participants rank “gaining insights into improved teaching and learning” second, and wanting “peer input and sharing ideas” third, IFLC participants ranked wanting “peer input and sharing ideas” second and “gaining insights into improved teaching and learning” third.

While the expectations may have been similar, the benefits derived or what they actually gained differed among those participating in UFLC and IFLC. “Gained teaching strategies” was the top ranked benefit from UFLC participants. Conversely, “understanding more about students and how they learned” was the top ranked benefit among IFLC participants. This difference may be related to the formal nature of UFLC and the expectations of immediate use from formal programs. In IFLC, faculty can spend more time thinking broadly, holistically, and systematically without institutional pressure for direct benefit in the classroom.

Both UFLC and IFLC participants ranked “networked with colleagues” as the second best benefit. The third and fourth rankings for UFLC are “understanding more about students and how they learned” and “developing friendships,” respectively. Among IFLC participants, “developing friendships” was ranked third, and “gaining teaching strategies” was the fourth ranked benefit. This may speak to the more informal setting where relationship building is a significant goal. Both UFLC and IFLC placed “received affirmation” as the fifth ranked benefit from participation, supporting the view that university faculty are often self-directed and autonomous learners who do not need as much supervision or affirmation from colleagues or superiors.

Conclusions

As learning communities, UFLC and IFLC are valuable resources for professional development, fostering collegial relationships, developing personal friendships, and seeking peer input. The reasons why faculty participated in UFLC and IFLC are consistent with the goals Cox (2004) had previously articulated for faculty learning communities. Participants perceive both UFLC and IFLC as beneficial for providing insight into understanding teaching and learning. These benefits are likewise consistent with the efforts of Boyer (1990) and others to improve the quality of higher education and increase the awareness of the scholarship of teaching and learning. They are also consistent with Knowles' (1980; 1984; 1989) assertions that adult learners come together with diverse experiences and different levels of knowledge about teaching and learning; they are self-directed in their learning; and their readiness to learn is closely related to their social role (i.e., as faculty).

Why might the benefits differ among faculty who participated in UFLC and IFLC? The answers may be as diverse as the faculty who participate (i.e., it is possible that the motivations behind participants have an affect on the benefits of participation). On the other hand, the benefits from participation in UFLC and IFLC may be a function of the structure of the groups. That is, it may be that the structure of UFLC limits opportunities for growth, while IFLC have fewer limitations. Furthermore, since UFLC are organized by formal organizations, participants do not have the luxury of selecting one's peer group. Conversely, the participants of IFLC have a level of control over members of the group. IFLC are self-selected and participants may feel more comfortable discussing pedagogy and showing weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Finally, this exploratory study suggests that faculty would benefit most by participating in both UFLC and IFLC. While the reasons for participation were similar for both learning communities, the benefits from participation differed considerably. As the reader may recall, the benefits from participating in UFLC were all oriented toward professional development. Yet, the benefits from participating in IFLC were both professional and personal. Additional research is needed to provide insight into personal and professional motivations for participation in UFLC and IFLC. Future research may also find it beneficial to examine reasons for participating in and benefits from participating in on-line FLC.

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