

Challenges and Successes: Faculty Reflections on a College Teaching Development Program



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Does participation in a reflective teaching development program transform educators? In a three-year teaching development program, faculty met in small interdisciplinary groups with peer facilitators and used online resources to complement their learning activities. The first two cohorts of participants found that involvement in a teaching development program encouraged them to develop self-reflective practices that they viewed as positively impacting their teaching. While valuing the collaborative and collegial relationships created through program participation, as these supported their individual growth and development, faculty also identified challenges that created barriers to their participation in the program.

Les éducateurs ressortent-ils transformés de leur participation à un programme de perfectionnement de l'enseignement réflexif? Dans un programme de trois ans visant le perfectionnement de l'enseignement, des professeurs se sont réunis en groupes interdisciplinaires animés par des collègues et ont ajouté l'utilisation de ressources en ligne à leurs activités d'enseignement. Les membres des deux premières cohortes ont estimé que leur participation à un programme de perfectionnement de l'enseignement les a incités à mettre au point des pratiques ayant, selon eux, un effet positif sur leur enseignement. Ils ont jugé que les relations collégiales et collaboratives nouées dans le cadre du programme ont contribué à leur croissance et à leur perfectionnement individuels, mais ils ont aussi souligné des difficultés qui faisaient obstacle à leur participation au programme.

Universities have a long history of developmental programs related to different aspects of faculty roles and identities (Ouellett, 2010). Though colleges in Canada and the United States share this history, there have been fewer studies focusing on the context specific to colleges (Eddy, 2005). Pamela L. Eddy found that the top three goals of faculty development programming at community colleges in the United States were:

creating/sustaining a culture of teaching excellence; advancing new teaching and learning initiatives; and responding to individual faculty goals (Eddy, 2005). If the goals of faculty development programming relate to these areas, then it is important to assess the impact of programs on faculty participants (Postareff, 2007; Postareff, 2008).

In examining the impact of a three-year teaching development program on faculty at a

comprehensive community college in Canada, we focused on two questions:

- 1) Does participation in a teaching development program influence cognition, affect, and behaviour related to teaching?
- 2) Does participation influence movement towards more learner-centred teaching?

Following approval from the Red Deer College Research Ethics Board, faculty participants in the program were invited to take part in the research study (voluntary with no remuneration) consisting of a pre-test and post-test, unstructured focus group sessions, analysis of participants' coursework, individual interviews, and student focus groups. Due to lack of participants, no student focus groups were conducted and the qualitative analysis, which is the focus of this article, was based on the faculty participant focus groups, their coursework, and individual interviews. The initial theming of the qualitative data indicates that engagement in a teaching development program, designed as an interactive program with clear outcomes and curriculum based on learner-centeredness (Weimer, 2013) and reflective practice (Rogers, 2001), positively impacted faculty, their perceptions about their teaching, and their approaches to teaching. Faculty also identified barriers to their full participation in the program.

Overview of the Program

The Excellence in Teaching and Learning Program at Red Deer College is a three-year faculty development program consisting of seven courses and a capstone project. The program was designed to support instructors by providing them with knowledge and skills to apply in their instructional roles. The institutional context informed the development of the program. The College offers programming to students that includes baccalaureate degrees, diplomas, certificates, and apprenticeship training.

Faculty are hired with a variety of qualifications including Master's degrees, Doctoral degrees, various professional qualifications, and Provincial Trades Certificates or Red Seal Certificates. Some instructors come with a great deal of teaching experience and others arrive with very little, but as industry experts. One goal of the program was to support instructors, in a peer-based environment, as they transition from content experts or practicing professionals to professional educators in their disciplines. The delivery of the program was focused on small groups, with a faculty facilitator from the Centre for Teaching and Learning, to develop communities of learners and to provide opportunity for discussion and self-reflection as well as practical application of theory to practice.

The program was created to align with the five areas of learner-centred practice, as detailed by Maryellen Weimer (2013), with an equal focus on reflective practice. Courses, called modules, consisted of face-to-face seminars mixed with online resources and assignments. All assignments were completed online and included a reflective journaling component mixed with a practical application of theory component. Developmental feedback was provided by the faculty facilitator leading the group. Though currently offered internally to faculty only, the program is credentialed through the School of Continuing Education as a Career Development Certificate and was developed using Outcomes Based Curriculum Design with Program Outcomes and, for each course, Course Learning Outcomes. Though the program has undergone curriculum changes, the information provided here describes the program as experienced by the research participants. The Program Outcomes are to:

- 1) Reflect on individual professional growth through the connection of pedagogical practice to content expertise on an ongoing basis in order to meet the needs of learners.

- 2) Create and maintain classroom environments conducive to learning which promote respect for the diversity of learners.
- 3) Practice effective collaboration and communication skills in the learning environment.
- 4) Practice ethical and professional conduct.
- 5) Examine and critically assess trends and research in the scholarship of teaching and learning for effective implementation.
- 6) Integrate technology into teaching practice in order to best serve the needs of diverse learners.
- 7) Identify individual challenges and opportunities related to teaching and learning and implement constructive solutions which incorporate appropriate pedagogy.

In the first year of the Program, faculty completed a short introductory course focused on their Teaching Philosophy and Reflective Practice before moving into three courses: Course Design and Course Outcomes; Assessment, Evaluation, and Self Reflection; and Learners and Approaches to Learning. In the second year of the Program, faculty focused on three courses: The Learning Environment (related to technological enhancements for teaching and learning); Classroom Climate; and Diversity and Inclusion. In their third year, faculty completed a capstone project related to their individual teaching context and interests as discovered through participation in the program.

During the period of the research study, the program underwent minimal alterations with the most significant being the movement of a Year 1 Module (Module 4: The Learning Environment) into Year 2 which resulted in a more balanced offering of modules across the three years of the program during the final phase of the research study.

Table 1

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Pre-Module: Reflective Practice and Teaching Philosophy (prerequisite)	Module 4: The Learning Environment (initially offered in Year 1)	Capstone Planning
Module 1: Course Design and Outcomes (prerequisite)	Module 5: Classroom Climate	Capstone Project
Module 2: Assessment, Self-Reflection, and Evaluation	Module 6: Diversity & Inclusion	Capstone Presentation
Module 3: Learners and Approaches to Learning	Capstone Planning	Graduation

Methodology of Research

We employed multiple forms of data collection and analyses using mixed methods from the Social Sciences and Humanities. This involved a qualitative analysis of written comments and assignments which is the focus of this article. As co-authors from two disciplines (Social Work and Classics), we themed the data separately using discipline specific methods: textual/content analysis (Classics/History) and modified grounded theory (Social Work).

We followed members of the first two groups of program participants who were willing to be part of the research project. Thirty-five faculty (67%) agreed to take part in the research study though not all participated in all data collection activities (see below for numbers). Faculty came from across disciplines at the College and included those who

were new to the College (34%) and those who had been at the College for several years. Teaching experience ranged from less than one year to more than 10 years of teaching experience in post-secondary in Canada.

Table 2

Teaching Experience	Percentage of Faculty Participants
Less than 1 Year	17%
1-4 Years	37%
4-8 Years	23%
10-14 Years	23%

Qualitative data was collected through the following sources:

- 1) Private Journal Assignments Completed by Participants (n=12) Journal assignments (several per participant) were accessed from consenting participants' submissions in all modules to include in analysis.
- 2) Focus Groups:
 - a) Year 1: 2 Focus Groups with Year 1 Participants (n=6)
 - b) Year 2: 1 Focus Group with Year 1 Participants and 1 Focus Group with Year 2 Participants (n=10)
 - c) Year 3: 2 Focus Groups with Year 2 Participants (n=4)
- 3) Participants were invited to focus groups in the spring of each year, and sessions were scheduled to accommodate the availability of interested individuals. Participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences with the program, allowing for a free-flowing discussion about highlights, challenges, and changes.
- 4) Individual Interviews at the end of Year 3 (n=6)

- 5) Participants provided their perspectives on the program in individual interviews in a semi-unstructured dialogue.

Data from assignments (multiple assignments per participant), focus groups, and interviews was themed separately using specific methodologies from our own disciplines: classics, involving the analysis of written and oral sources for themes and patterns; and social work, using a modified grounded theory consisting of first and second level coding allowing for emerging themes. Upon comparison, we found that our different approaches to the data resulted in agreement over the predominant themes.

Table 3

Themes: Growth and Development	Themes: Challenges
Insight and Reflective Practice	Workload
Learner-Centredness	Time
Instructor Perception of Impact on Student Learning	Online Discussions & Sense of Community
Impact on Instructor Thinking & Transformation	
Safe Spaces & Sense of Community	

Insight and Self-Reflective Practice

In our data, the theme of self-reflective practice was strongly evident. The importance of reflective practice in higher education has long been recognized in the literature (Hubball, Collins, & Pratt, 2005), is an important component of the faculty cycle at the College, and, as a result, was an embedded component in all modules and assignments (eg. journaling) throughout the program. Increased

reflection emerged as a strong theme in both focus groups and interviews:

I find I evaluate my teaching a lot more...If I do an assignment, is it really meeting the objective, are students getting from it what I really intend? I find I'm continuously doing that. Even marking assignments, I'm thinking, hmm, next year, I could do this differently. (Individual Interview)

The biggest one for me is I've got into the habit, almost every single class, of trying to do some sort of a reflection. I actually bring a little notebook with me so that at the ending of every class, if I have tried something, I will jot down how it went...the reflection thing is a big thing, I think, because it lets me assess how I feel about what I am doing well and what I am not doing well and other ways I can modify because I know I'm not going to be a perfect instructor but if I can find things that I think are being effective for the students, I can try to incorporate more of those ideas as I go along. (Focus Group Participant)

These two quotes are illustrative of this theme. Faculty reported that they were intentionally engaging in reflective practice more than they might have without taking the program. Though this reflective habit might have been "forced" by the assignments of the program, it was beneficial to their teaching. They connected their own reflective practice to their teaching approaches and indicated that they were also asking their students to be more reflective: several expressed that they were, as a result of the program, incorporating more reflective learning activities in their courses. Overall, participants indicated that the habit of engaging in self-reflective practice, required and encouraged by the program, positively impacted their teaching and

changed their approach to teaching or to thinking about teaching.

Other Forms of Accreditation

In terms of less traditional forms of institutional recognition a few institutions in the United States have implemented digital badges to recognize and incentivize participation. See, for example, Indiana University's Centre for Innovative Teaching and Learning (<https://citl.indiana.edu/>), and Texas Wesleyan University's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (<http://txwescetl.com/>). In Canada, McGill's "Skillsets" program is jointly offered through the Teaching and Learning Centre and Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. To date, there does not appear to be any similar national schemes available in the US, Australia, or elsewhere.

Learner Centredness

Learner-centredness (Weimer, 2013) was a fundamental component of the initial program design and continues to be a curricular thread. Each module of the program focuses on at least one theme of learner-centredness (e.g. Module 2 on Assessment focuses on the Purpose and Process of Assessment while Module 5 on the Classroom Climate focuses on Power-Sharing and Responsibility for Learning). While we did not ask specific questions about learner-centredness in the focus groups or in the individual interviews, faculty responses indicated that they were adopting a learner-centred approach, specifically in relation to power-sharing and responsibility for learning; they also saw this as positively impacting student learning.

Power and Responsibility

What is learner-centredness when it comes to sharing power and giving students responsibility for learning? Power can be shared with students in a variety of ways, from choice on assignments and activities through input into class norms and policies (Weimer, 2013). Creating a climate in which students take responsibility for learning is associated with interaction between the instructor and students, active involvement, student cohesiveness, instructor innovation, individualization and more (Weimer, 2013). Throughout the research project, participants indicated that the program expanded their learner-centred perspectives:

power-sharing is another big one--you know, giving students the ability to critique and grade themselves...and I went in with some skepticism as to whether [this would be used for inflating grades] but found they were honest...That was quite the most profound change that this entire program has initiated in my courses. In all of my courses I now have a fairly significant component of the grade devoted to students scoring themselves in some manner...student learning, it has a profound impact, I think, because when students have to take ownership for their grades, they have to take their studies more seriously. (Individual Interview)

Three times, the students have applauded without any prompting by me, when one of their peers said, "Ohhh, now I get it!" I was blown away the first time this happened; the student's "light-bulb" moment was rewarded with such expressive encouragement from her peers!...I was even more amazed when it happened another time, and then another time later in the semester...the students in this course face challenges with their responsibility

for their own learning where often they enter the course expecting me to feed them all they need to know. It is a challenge to help develop their responsibility for learning, but success is noticeable as this tends to build, throughout the semester, with their self-confidence in the course topic. (Private Journal Assignment)

Impact on Student Learning (from the Instructor's Perspective)

Though we, as the researchers, were unable to complete interviews or focus groups with students, the faculty in the program perceived a benefit for their students with students developing a better comprehension of course material, investing more deeply in their learning, and becoming more reflective. Faculty felt more able to make changes and take risks in their classes and received positive feedback on this from students:

My own self-awareness...has impacted how I interact with the students and how I get them to be more self-reflective. I've seen that in one [class] I teach where it's really an important component of that, and in the last couple of years as I've gone through this, I feel like I have put more emphasis on that [self-reflection] in that class....and as a result I think I've seen deeper learning from the students. When I look back at my first year teaching that course compared to now, I think that the learning experience is a lot richer now because of those self-reflective practices...I feel students have a better grasp of the content that we've gone through...I think a lot of it has to do with my greater emphasis on having them reflect more and be critical thinkers as well about the

material and about the content. (Focus Group Participant)

These comments are representative of the overall theme. Instructors enacted changes to their teaching that shared power with students or that gave students opportunity to take more responsibility for their learning. This change was viewed by the instructors and the students as positive for the classroom climate as a whole, for student cohesiveness and connections, and for learning. Participants in the research connected their learning in the program to learner-centredness and to a deeper or more engaged learning on the part of their students.

Impact on Instructor Thinking & Transformation

Transformative learning occurs when, upon critical reflection of one's usual or habitual beliefs or assumptions about something, there is a changed, more open, and inclusive perspective that is acted upon (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 2012). The qualitative data supports this with faculty transitioning from knowing how to "do" to knowing how to "teach." Faculty expressed the idea that the program helped them grow and supported them in exploring new skills and new ways of conceptualizing their teaching. This was traced back to the content of the program as well as the assignments:

...these last couple of modules have really helped with that because it has allowed me to think about these different scenarios in more detail so when students now come to me, I've now got that foundation...to help them out. Because I think we do need to be, as much as we are all educators and instructors, we do need to be mentors for the students as well to guide them along because we have all been

there and we have struggled through our education and we don't know what's going on and we're stuck and that good professor, that good instructor, who really guides you, really sticks out in your mind and can really keep you on that path to success. And I would like to be that one, that instructor, and not be the one who would be like: "get the hell out of my office." (Focus Group Participant)

what we call it in [discipline], you've got this expert mode versus novice mode, but often as an expert there are so many things that we take for granted...so I think I'm putting more articulation and maybe some definitions and ideas around what those things are, so then I can go back and gauge this is where I'm at. Then the reflection becomes more structured and purposeful and I can actually grow with it. (Focus Group Participant)

Safe Spaces and a Sense of Community: Vulnerability Leads to Transformation

The sense of community that faculty in the program developed, and the safety they felt within that community, emerged as a strong theme. This theme surfaced early in the research study and continued through the three years. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) indicate that communities of practice can develop intentionally or emerge; characteristics include members with common interests, relationships that support learning, and the development of shared resources. Faculty reported benefitting in a variety of ways from meeting in interdisciplinary groups. These included: sharing ideas; developing a community; reducing the sense that they were alone; receiving feedback; sharing commonalities between diverse disciplines; learning

from diverse experiences of faculty who were new and experienced; and creating supportive connections.

What was particularly clear was that this was connected to the safety of the space; faculty were in a supportive environment with other faculty in a peer-based environment that was non-evaluative. This supported them in stretching and developing a growth mindset. I chose to finish because I like creating this little community of learning even though we've only seen each other maybe once every couple of months or so but I just like to be able to sit and talk to other instructors with different experiences and that's why I do it because almost everything we talk about here shows up...but this is the community part. (Individual Interview)

Participant 1: "I think we learn a lot from each other too. ... I always walked away with, you know, a paragraph or so of just little things that I jotted down that other people were doing that I just thought "Hey that sounds effective and I should try that too."

Participant 2: "And it's funny because sometimes it is just the smallest thing and other times it is a whole new way of looking at what you are doing." (Focus Group Participants' Discussion)

Practical Challenges of the Program

Research participants identified two practical challenges associated with the program which negatively impacted their involvement and ability to engage in the content of the program: workload and the associated lack of time to engage with the program, and the online discussion boards, which

was tied to community building within the face-to-face seminars.

Workload and Time

The most commonly identified challenge for faculty in the program was lack of time; scarcity of time to engage with the material in the program, to complete modules, or to be as involved as they would like to be were themes that emerged. Participants expressed a desire for their involvement in the program to be "beneficial" or "meaningful;" they wanted to "carve out that time to be absorbed" in the program. They reported, however, that balancing the demands of their regular workload with their desire to engage in the program was a barrier. This ties to the institutional context in which faculty may teach four or more courses per term without release time for participation in the program. With these factors, and with each module designed to take approximately 15-25 hours over 4-6 weeks, faculty felt challenged to devote the amount of time to the program that they felt it warranted (Ouellett, 2010). This load was exacerbated in the first year of the program, during which there were four modules rather than three, and in which there was a heavier focus on lengthy, academic articles. This was subsequently addressed in the program redesign for the second year of the program and was not a theme that emerged with later participants though the overall concern over lack of time connected to workload persisted through the three years of the study.

Online Discussion Boards & Sense of Community

In focus groups and interviews, faculty indicated that the online discussion boards did not provide the same

level of interaction and community as the face-to-face meetings.

I found face-to-face, I learned way more than online. I find online discussions overwhelming...you don't have enough background and if you could talk to that person, you could have that dialogue...I don't get a lot out of online discussions (Focus Group Participant).

This sentiment emerged throughout the study. Overwhelmingly, faculty found that their level of engagement was higher in the face-to-face seminars and they felt inspired and engaged by the face-to-face seminars; they tied this to their sense of community building and relationship building through the program and did not feel this was present in the online discussion boards. Participants had a strong preference for the support and discussion found in a face-to-face environment.

Conclusion

The results to date show that the program, while challenging to participants for various reasons, positively impacted them as post-secondary instructors. The self-reflective thread was an important component of the program for faculty as they explored their teaching practice more deeply. The community of practice that emerged provided an environment for sharing strategies, challenges, and successes:

I felt that it was really supportive of improving the experience for students and instructors and I felt that it challenged the participants to try new things or to be more informed as an instructor. I was familiar with a lot of the content already and...it all just felt very supportive for goals that I would have in the

classroom and to improve the experience for the students. (Focus Group Participant)

It's a risk to try new things with your students and a lot of the topics that were being brought up, they challenged us to go beyond...what would have been familiar from the student perspective, perhaps, or what they had observed through their instructors that they had had coming into the College. I think it challenged us to go beyond that and to try new things, to be very mindful about assessment practices and the nature of the students in our classrooms, the diversity of the students. Even with the course outlines, for having us think about the outcomes...to reflect on things differently as instructors and as people bringing our own programs to life...It gave us ideas and resources for improving our practice. (Focus Group Participant)

This preliminary analysis of the data illustrates that, although there were challenges that negatively impacted faculty participation in the program, faculty valued their participation, perceived that the program positively impacted their perceptions of, and approaches to, teaching, and found that the program supported them in engaging in self-reflective and learner-centred practices. Thus, participation in a teaching development program did influence the cognition, affect, and behaviour of participants and did influence them in moving towards more learner-centred teaching practices.

A limitation of the study was our inability to collect data from students regarding the impact on their learning; thus, the connection between faculty development and student learning is an area for further research. Further analysis of the current data sources is needed to refine these themes and connect them with the quantitative data to fully illustrate the impact of teaching development programming on faculty within the Canadian college context.

However, our initial results support the perspective that faculty participation in an appropriate developmental program positively impacts faculty in the classroom.

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