

Eastern Time: Reflections on the Evolution of a Cross-Institutional Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) Program in Atlantic Canada

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This short paper outlines the design and development of a multi-phase, cross-institution Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) program that was conceived by educational developers from five higher educational institutions in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The initiative is grounded in the belief that implementing the ISW program in the Halifax Regional Municipal (HRM) area will foster a local community of practice and further cross-institutional initiatives focused on enhancing teaching and learning approaches. This paper offers a brief historical background and rationale of the ISW program, and details of implementation. In addition, the lead coordinators share their reflections on the challenges and implications resulting from the process of adapting this established program to fit an innovative and mutually supportive cross-institutional design within the HRM.

Ce court article présente la conception et l'élaboration d'Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW), un programme interétablissement en plusieurs phases qui a été conçu par des concepteurs pédagogiques provenant de cinq établissements d'enseignement supérieur d'Halifax, en Nouvelle-Écosse. L'initiative repose sur l'idée que la mise en œuvre d'ISW dans la municipalité régionale d'Halifax encouragera le développement d'une communauté de pratique et de projets interétablissements visant à améliorer les approches d'enseignement et d'apprentissage. Nous présentons brièvement l'histoire et les raisons au fondement de l'ISW ainsi que les détails de sa mise en œuvre. De plus, les coordonnateurs en chef réfléchissent aux difficultés et aux conséquences du processus d'adaptation de ce programme bien établi au concept interétablissement novateur et solidaire au sein de la municipalité régionale d'Halifax.

The Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) Program: A Brief History

The Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) has been described as a “comprehensive three-tiered instructor development program that serves as the foundation for several professional

development activities” (iswnetwork.ca). The ISW program was originally developed during the late 1970s in British Columbia as a response to a call for more instructional skill mentorship for early career higher education-based instructors. Since then, the ISW program has been equally influential on more experienced educators in higher education institutions (HEI) in Canada and has grown internationally to over twenty countries.

The ISW program is an immersive workshop that is offered within small group settings (an optimal number is five participants per one certified ISW Facilitator) with the aim of enhancing active teaching effectiveness and reflective classroom-based practice. The program is most effectively delivered in a three- or four-day retreat setting that builds community around the concept of best practices for active classroom teaching. A central focus for participants throughout this 24-hour workshop program is designing and delivering three 10-minute lessons and receiving peer-led feedback from participants. The workshop aims to provide a highly experiential and reflective learning experience for post-secondary-level instructors by following this outline.

Foxe, Frake-Mistak, and Popovic (2017) have highlighted the great appeal and popularity of the ISW in the field of educational development despite a present dearth in existing literature that documents evidence on the effective longitudinal impact of the program on teaching practice. The exception to this observation has been the publication of a comprehensive systematic study conducted by Dawson et al. (2014) for the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Amongst some fascinating and somewhat contradictory findings, the Dawson et al. (2014) study identified an increase in reflective practice amongst teacher participants who engaged in the ISW. The educational developers involved in leading the initiative to introduce the ISW into the Halifax Regional Municipal (HRM) area referenced such findings in available literature while preparing an institutional funding proposal for the program. Since fostering an increase of reflective practice amongst faculty was a shared objective for institutional stakeholders involved in funding this initiative, the Dawson et al. (2014) report provided an evidence-based rationale for introducing this program into the HRM HEI landscape.

Foxe et al. (2017) also identify literature on the ISW that includes narrative and reflective content. These articles focus on the structural logistics required in

both conducting and implementing the workshop as well as experiential perceptions on the impact of the program based on participant reflections (e.g., Day & the ISW International Advisory Committee, 2004; Fenrich & Johnson, 2016). The literature provided structural and logistical support for the conceptual implementation and scaling of this initiative into the HRM post-secondary landscape.

In response to the dearth of research-based literature on the ISW, the lead coordinators of this pilot project initially considered collecting qualitative evidence to measure participant perceptions but ultimately decided that a research-based approach in the early development of this cross-institutional initiative may hinder progress in cultivating a shared sense of community vision and engagement around this regional pilot initiative. As a result, this paper is intended to contribute to the ISW narrative and reflective-based literature from an educational development perspective.

Implementing a Cross-Institutional ISW Program

In the fall of 2016, Halifax-based Educational Developers, William Kay (Saint Mary's University) and Chad O'Brien (Dalhousie University), partnered in efforts to begin building an integrated ISW presence within the HRM HEI landscape. Kay and O'Brien, both certified ISW Facilitators, envisioned a training model that could potentially produce two certified ISW Facilitators from each of the following five HRM-based HEIs within the span of one year: Saint Mary's University, Dalhousie University, Mount Saint Vincent University, Nova Scotia College of Arts and Design (NSCAD) University, and Nova Scotia Community College. An additional faculty member affiliated with the University of New Brunswick joined later in the project which indicated greater interest and involvement in the program throughout the wider Atlantic Canada HEI community.

By design, this program was intended to foster cross-institutional collaboration in promoting active learning and reflective teaching practice. Although these inaugural attendees were all experienced educators, having them jointly participate in this ISW Facilitator's certification process as a cohort was a strategic focus for two main reasons: first, to gain experience and understanding of the merit behind the ISW through the process of becoming a certified ISW Facilitator; and second, to create a strong foundational base for a cross-institutional community of educational developers that would continue to engage in coordinated and collaborative regional teaching and learning initiatives. The cross-institutional dimension was ultimately intended to highlight the benefits to collaborative professional engagement amongst educational developers within a community that included sharing expertise, building capacities, and expanding professional development opportunities.

During this pilot initiative, the ISW was offered three times (April, 2017, December, 2017 and April, 2018) to achieve two goals:

1. To offer the workshop experience to those educational developers who might be trained as ISW Facilitators as completing an ISW is a prerequisite in this process.
2. To showcase to fellow faculty members the transformative potential of the program so they might be 'word-of-mouth ambassadors' for the program.

Ideally, offering an FDW in May of 2018 would allow for the training of up to ten new ISW Facilitators, and also certify two new Trainers: experienced ISW Facilitators, apprenticed with existing Trainers, who complete their training *in situ*. The final phase of the pilot project resulted in the certification of eight educational developers as ISW Facilitators and two previously certified and experienced ISW Facilitators to Facilitator-level Trainers.

As a cost recovery measure for workshop expenses (e.g., resource supplies and catering), it is typical for participating HEIs to sponsor their own participants and charge a registration fee for external participants. Registration fees can be as much as \$850 for a 40-hour Facilitator Development Workshop (FDW). In leading and supporting this cross-institutional initiative, Saint Mary's University and Dalhousie University covered the costs for the three initial ISW training sessions. This funding was sponsored through each institutions' respective Teaching and Learning Centres and their related faculty development-based committees. All five institutions contributed to funding the costs of the final FDW program by sponsoring a \$500 registration fee for each participant.

Recruiting two experienced ISW trainers to assist with planning and the actual training of Trainees and Facilitators was a key consideration in the development of this program. At the 2017 Educational Developer's Caucus (EDC) in Guelph, Ontario, William Kay was introduced to Russell Day (Simon Fraser University), who is a highly regarded and experienced ISW and FDW trainer. After learning more about the ISW cross-institutional plans in Halifax, Day committed to serving as the lead ISW trainer for the project. Another experienced ISW/FDW trainer, Paula Hayden (Director of Teacher Education, Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development) assisted Russell during the final stage FDW training.

Cross-institutional partnering in supporting the development of the ISW program is certainly not a novel concept and has been a logical and inherent part of the program's successful development since the late 1970s. Morrison's (1985) early work on the development of the ISW program in Canada and Day et al.'s (2004) work in more international settings served as useful reference points in the development of this recent initiative in the HRM. The following section offers insights from the three lead designers and coordinators of this initiative. Reflections on project outcomes are offered through the lens of

educational development in the following areas: Program Design, Institutional Commitment, and Sustaining Community and Assuring Quality. Although the introduction and implementation of ISW programs in new HEI landscapes are contextually unique, the reflections shared below are intended to inform educational developers who may be involved in similar program development pilot initiatives.

Reflections

Russell Day: Program Design

I had heard news within the ISW community that William and Chad were hoping to formally introduce the ISW to the post-secondary institutions that were mostly focused in Halifax with an eye to eventually expanding into the wider Atlantic region. As a Trainer with some experience helping to establish ISW programs in new regions, I offered my services when I met William at the 2017 EDC Conference in Guelph, ON. Two things struck me from the beginning; 1) Both William and Chad had a great deal of enthusiasm about the power of the ISW program to be a community / network building mechanism; and 2) there was a clear plan about ‘capacity building’ that was tempered by the recognition that it would be a lot of work. I next met with William during the 2017 STLHE Conference in Halifax, where we also discussed the need for another Trainer moving forward. After that first meeting, I was committed to helping, and offered to travel to Halifax to train ISW Facilitators and FDW Trainers.

From my perspective 4500 km west, William was facing a number of challenges in assuming the role of the host institutional representative at Saint Mary’s University where all the ISW workshops and training sessions were held. Scheduling, offering, and completing enough ISWs to screen for potential facilitators was a roller-coaster, with the final ISW workshop completed just a week before the

scheduled FDW. William was also caught between my expectations and his on-the-ground logistical realities – the FDW host always seems to carry a particularly heavy burden that is associated with room bookings, equipment and supplies, and catering.

Furthermore, overall scheduling is always susceptible to disruption by unforeseen events and sudden participant attrition. One particular challenge for William occurred when his original strategic planning partner, Chad O’Brien, had to drop out of the project due to sudden and unexpected workload and capacity considerations within his own institution that resulted in him being reassigned to other pressing duties. Dalhousie University was able to replace Chad with another experienced ISW Facilitator and Educational Developer, Tereigh Ewert-Bauer, who provided excellent leadership and support for our reconfigured team.

Despite all these challenges, the FDW was a success resulting in two new FDW Trainers being certified (William and Tereigh) and eight new ISW Facilitators being certified from five post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia and one in New Brunswick. We all naturally learned a great deal through the process. As a Trainer invited to bring the ISW or FDW program to a new region, I would recommend several things: 1) accept that the ‘longer than expected’ time-lines are a reflection of things beyond your control; 2) seek to include all the stake-holders (and financial sponsors) in all communications to reduce potential misunderstandings; 3) accept that local conditions may require more flexibility than originally expected; and 4) be willing to ‘roll with it’ – the inherent model of the ISW and the FDW are robust enough to allow you to ‘trust the model, and model the trust’.

Chad O’Brien: Institutional Commitment

During the inaugural Regional Educational Developers meeting in Halifax in 2017, William and I met and quickly came to realise that we shared a common background (with both of us having been

previously trained as ISW Facilitators while working overseas at two HEIs located in Doha, Qatar). It was interesting to connect and share stories, and we quickly had the idea to meet and discuss the possibility of offering an ISW session together in Halifax. After meeting a number of times to discuss the possible framework design and cross-institutional benefits of offering an ISW to the local HRM HEIs, William and I worked together and delivered two ISW sessions successfully with a mix of both educational developers and other faculty members participating in the workshops.

Our respective institutions were aware of our intentions and offered both William and I the time, classroom space in-kind, and funding for catering costs to allow this initiative to gain momentum. William and I then provided oversight in managing the recruitment, scheduling, communication, preparation, and workshop facilitation tasks. Our hope to create a large enough pool of experienced candidates to participate in an FDW was realized, and this moved our project into a phase that further engaged our respective institutions.

A proposal was drafted to officially request further financial support from our respective institutions, and a positive impact of that proposal was a significant increase in the funds required to have two experienced trainers come and support the FDW event. Despite this positive turn in program funding support, there were some increasing demands in the utilization of professional staff both as FDW participants and facilitators. For example, at Dalhousie University, there were two educational developers being certified in their FDW and one facilitating. Justifying the depletion of human resources needed to engage in the FDW was complex as it now included both funding and, more critically, staff time (a full 6-day commitment per individual). This was occurring at a time when the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Dalhousie was already extremely busy. This increase in our projected Centre funding and human resource capacity required extra attention from leadership in carefully considering

budgets and operational requirements. This involvement had an impact on the overall decision making around the project's initial plans and the selection of staff who would be able to be provided the time to participate.

The increase of institutional leadership involvement and support ultimately resulted in a successful offering of the FDW event. It did, however, require a more complex level of decision making and a set of considerations for participation and ongoing support to the ISW program both at an institutional level and at a cross-institutional level. Upon the pilot project's completion, the individual institutions began to consider their own internal capacity and needs in relation to the ISW, and as a result the cross-institutional aspect of the project has momentarily become less of a focus. However, local and regional HEI committees, such as the Atlantic Association of Universities (AAU), have provided us with ongoing moral support in encouraging and promoting further cross-institutional ISW offerings in addition to other professional development collaborations.

William Kay: Sustaining Support and Assuring Quality

Community building around teaching and learning research and professional development initiatives has always been an intrinsic interest and passion of mine throughout my career as an educator and educational developer. Based on my own previous experiences as both a participant and facilitator, the ISW program has offered a rich venue for a collective exploration into the process of teaching, learning, and reflective practice. In many cases, I have witnessed the ISW experience being instrumental in building enduring professional relationships that have spanned many continents over several years. As a result, I was very eager to assist in leading a planned and coordinated introduction of the ISW program into the HRM HEI landscape.

Although I did acutely experience many of the planning and procedural challenges that Russell has

outlined above, two specific challenges emerged and were made more apparent after our one-year cross-institutional trial had ended. One of these challenges was finding an effective path in continuing to provide adequate support for our new ISW Facilitator community. As our recent community of certified ISW Facilitators were naturally eager to launch their own institutional programs, experienced members from our training team have already been called upon to assist in co-facilitating ISW programs at our partnering local HEIs. Due to professional and institutional demands, our newly certified ISW Trainers have not yet been available to assist in this co-facilitation. In one case, this unfortunately resulted in the cancellation of a scheduled ISW program. Thus, a concern moving forward is working out a feasible strategy in supporting our new ISW Facilitators. This may simply be an issue of time when further facilitator training is able to occur in order to scale our available supporting human resource mechanisms and capacity.

An interrelated challenge in sustaining adequate support is the issue of assuring program quality. Although the ISW program allows for some flexibility in the selection of content and delivery, there are important core themes and methods (e.g. drafting effective lesson outcomes using Bloom's taxonomy and active learning methods) that need to be facilitated. Having experienced FDW Trainers co-facilitate with new ISW Facilitators is an ideal quality assurance step in measuring that these standards are maintained. As this may not always be possible, measures must be established where our community can have access to some alternative means of peer program assessment. These peer assessment opportunities may come in the form of quarterly or bi-annual meetings where facilitators can debrief our community about their programs and have access to peer feedback.

Although 'communities of practice' are known to be greatly served by a convener who can lead and facilitate the process (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014), there is an understanding that a

distributed leadership model is also needed in order to ensure that our cross-institutional design remains sustainable. Moving forward, our community is now in the process of scheduling regular ISW Facilitator "socials" in maintaining our communal discourse and planning optimal ways of sharing resources and building further support capacity.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges and implications outlined above, introducing the ISW program in the HRM higher education landscape was considered a success by the coordinators, participants, and their institutional stakeholders who assisted in supporting and funding this initiative. As the trial year progressed, more interest in the ISW program became evident within the wider Atlantic region and was added as an agenda item during the Atlantic Association of Universities' (AAU) annual 2018 Coordinating Committee on Faculty Development (CCFD) meeting. Supporting mechanisms and shared cross-institutional funding models are presently being discussed and explored in order to develop more training opportunities throughout the Atlantic region. The goal of this paper is to document the process and share reflections related to the successful implementation of a cross-institutional ISW program amongst a regional educational development community and to provide the lead coordinators with a foundational platform to engage in future collaborative inquiry projects in two areas.

The first area follows a call for more research in measuring the impact of the ISW on participants. A possible and accessible focus of research in this area draws upon Dawson et al.'s (2014) recommendation in measuring the increase in teaching self-efficacy for participants who have taken the ISW. Dawson et al. (2014) have suggested that this type of research might involve utilizing a tool such as the Teacher's Sense of Self-Efficacy developed at Ohio State University (Tschannen-Moran & Wookfolk Hoy,

2001) as a pre-post study measurement. Identifying a positive change in teaching self-efficacy may serve to further highlight the benefits of the ISW program to educational developers, faculty members, and other stakeholders in both the HRM and the wider Atlantic region.

Another area of research interest from an educational development lens might involve a qualitative inquiry on the emergence of distributed leadership within a cross-institutional community of practice. Such an approach in piloting an integrated community of practice framework has been utilized as a conceptual filter in helping to identify emerging trends of distributed leadership occurring within a collaborative interprofessional teaching and learning initiative (Kay, 2018). Such an approach is transferrable in this context and might assist in informing optimal levels of educational development and institutional leadership supports needed for similar cross-institutional communities of practice.

Collaborative commitment to a shared pedagogical vision is the ultimate key to success in the development of this multi-phase cross-institutional ISW initiative. The Atlantic region was able to navigate the inherent obstacles of implementing such an initiative by way of a collective community vision. The process may be long and arduous, but the end result is a local community of practice that provides opportunities to enhance teaching and learning approaches in the higher education landscape.

Although there were inherent obstacles that needed to be navigated, it was a community's collective vision that served as a beacon shining through the fog. In many ways, a lighthouse is perhaps the most fitting visual image to reference considering the eastern Canadian context where this pilot initiative was situated. And like a lighthouse, it cannot be built quickly and takes many hands.

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