

Towards a Scholarship of Teaching, Learning and Leadership: A Case Study on the Use of Course Evaluation Data to Promote Collaborative Faculty Engagement

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1. Abstract:

How can academic leaders use course evaluation data to engage course faculty members in a dialogue about student learning and, subsequently, to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning? This question is examined through my experience as an academic program director in conducting action research into what students value in online course instruction. Using interpretive qualitative analysis procedures, I examined students' open-ended comments on thirty-eight course evaluations and derived five key themes from this analysis. The results were compared to findings from other studies on online learning. A key dissemination strategy was to engage faculty members in a collective dialogue on the significance and relevance of the results. In the latter half of this paper, I explore some of the lessons learned from the perspective of an academic leader actively engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning. I conclude the paper by considering the implications of promoting action research as a faculty development strategy and as a means of supporting the scholarship of teaching and learning. The study cautions that, in order to maximize the effectiveness of the action research process, it should be part of a sustained program to engage faculty members and academic leaders in ongoing evidence-based inquiry. Finally, with the appropriate institutional supports, action research by academic leaders can be a valuable tool for reinforcing the importance of the scholarship of teaching and learning across a broadly-based university community.

Key Words:

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Online Learning, Learner Satisfaction, Action Research, Academic Leadership, Course Evaluation Surveys, Faculty Development, Qualitative Analysis, Collaborative Program Planning and Review

2. Introduction

In the literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning, there has been considerable emphasis placed on two important thrusts: (1) how to directly involve faculty members, individually or collectively, in developing insightful and scholarly inquiries that provide evidence about students learning that can be used to improve practice and at the same time contribute to a broader literature base; and (2) how universities and colleges can develop the necessary campus-wide support structures to enable these inquiries to flourish. Scant attention, however, has been devoted to examining the role of academic leaders such as department chairs, program directors

and deans in engaging in and supporting this type of evidence-based pedagogical inquiry. This can be contrasted to the prolific literature base that has developed examining the role of K-12 school leaders in developing, participating in, and facilitating this kind of rigorous pedagogical inquiry in elementary and secondary schools (Glanz, 1998; Calhoun, 1994). In the K-12 context, most of this work can be classified as action research which can further be defined as “research into practice, for practitioners, by practitioners” (Grundy and Kemmis, 1988, p.87). According to Kemmis and McTaggart, (1992), action research is

a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (p.5)

In many ways, promoting action research as a valuable administrative and leadership skill aligns very well with current calls for strengthening universities’ commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning (Randall, 2004). Action research and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) have many common dimensions. First, they both emphasize the bridge between inquiry and practice. Secondly, they both focus on one’s own practice as the locus of inquiry. Thirdly, they often begin with an interest in “pragmatic questions” (Hutchins, 2000, p.2.). And fourthly, they both stress the importance of making research public and open to broader critique, evaluation, expansion, and evolution. For the purpose of this paper, I will be considering action research as one particular approach to engaging in SOTL-related practices; an approach that is well-suited to adoption by academic leaders.

Why should academic leaders in universities and colleges engage in this kind of systematic scholarly inquiry? Department chairs, program managers and deans often assume their departmental leadership roles with limited or no systematic training (Aziz, Mullins, Balzer, Grauer, Burnfield, Lodato, and Cohen-Powless, 2005). When administrators engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning, it reinforces and strengthens the value that a university places on inquiry-oriented academic growth and, as well, provides a viable leadership development strategy. As such, it may provide an important link between four key interests of the academic institution: research, scholarship, teaching, and leadership development. Furthermore, it provides academic leaders with a robust skill set that has an array of applications. In support of this perspective, Knight and Trowler (2000) contend that “learning organizations require learning managers: managers who are reflective practitioners and who apply their analytical skills to the important activity systems with which they are engaged (p.79)”.

Furthermore, taking on program director or chair positions usually means making other sacrifices such as putting aside discipline-based scholarly endeavours. This can create much angst among academic leaders who see themselves eventually returning to academic pursuits such as researching and publishing in later stages of their careers. Engaging in action research provides a means for these administrators to continue in these scholarly activities and make them relevant to issues and challenges faced in their current roles. Finally, engaging academic leaders directly in action research may help legitimize other faculty members’ interest in and efforts to engage in pedagogical scholarship.

At a pragmatic level, leaders engaging in action research can assume a more reflective and empirical perspective on phenomena related to program, curricular, and administrative processes and issues (Glanz, 1998; Calhoun, 1994). Through a more systematic analysis of themes, patterns, and trends, evidence-based inquiry can lead to better academic decisions informed by a deeper understanding of the underlying issues (Earl and Katz, 2006).

At the time of this study, I was a director of a graduate studies program. In this role, I was particularly interested in how course evaluation data could be more systematically analysed and the results used to engage faculty members in a deeper dialogue about student learning and, subsequently, to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning. Systematic inquiry that is at the heart of SOTL does not necessarily need to involve the creation and collection of new data. Routinely, university administrators have a plethora of data sources that are often available to them. Course evaluation data can provide an important source of information about students' learning experiences and how effective instruction contributes to their success. (Smith, 2004; Johnson, Stratton, and Jolly, 1989). In the study I describe in this paper, I share my experience as an academic director of a MA program in learning and technology in conducting research into what students value in online course instruction based on a systematic analysis of course evaluation data.

3. Study Background

Launched in 2000, the Master of Arts in Distributed Learning (MADL) helps educators, trainers, and other learning specialists become more aware and proficient in the application of systems and technologies that create new learning opportunities – both in conventional and unconventional educational environments (The MADL Program has been renamed Master of Arts in Learning and Technology starting in the 2006-07 academic year). MADL combines short-term on-campus residencies and more extensive online courses that both emphasize a collaborative learning model. The program employs a cohort model to ensure that learners feel engaged in a diverse and stimulating learning community.

As a result of its professional and applied orientation, the program attracts faculty members who are practising professionals with the appropriate academic qualifications and practical experience from across Canada and the United States. The majority of faculty members are private sector consultants, directors of educational technology centres in colleges and universities, and senior leaders in the private and public sectors; a smaller number are retired faculty from other universities. Except for the program director, faculty members teach in the program on a part-time basis. This places the emphasis on the program director to perform all program management duties such as marketing and promotion, student recruitment, academic research, course development and delivery, program improvement and quality assurance, and ongoing planning, budgeting and management.

End-of-term evaluations are required for every course in the MADL program, regardless of whether it is delivered on-campus or online. The evaluation consists of a web-based survey distributed electronically to students during the last week that the course is being offered. A standard set of questions is used for all courses, although

some specific questions may be added, depending on whether the course was delivered in a residency or online. In particular, I was interested in students' responses to the following four questions: (1) Please comment on the learning experience in "Course X"; (2) Please comment on the teaching effectiveness of 'X instructor; (3) Describe what you enjoyed most about the "Course X" learning experience; and (4) Describe what the MADL team can do to improve the "Course X" learning experience.

Students are strongly encouraged, although not required, to complete the anonymous evaluation. On average, there was a cohort size of 30 learners per year over the study period. The response rate for course evaluations was 65-92% within the MADL program during the study period, indicating that students appear to take the course evaluation seriously. Typically, after this file is reviewed by the program director, the course evaluation data are shared with the course instructor, and, if relevant, other university staff members such as instructional designers and university librarians.

4. Research Focus

The primary question driving my particular interest was quite straightforward: "What do our learners value in effective course instruction?" From my perspective as a program director, one of the central roles of faculty is to understand the needs and expectations of our learners and find ways to best support them in the learning process. As teaching professionals, we use a variety of sources of information to help us gain this understanding, including our direct conversations with learners, our observations of them in learning situations, and our assessment of their work.

The standard institutional practice is for program directors to share feedback from course evaluations directly with individual instructors on a course-by-course basis. The information collected is used to help make future decisions on improvements to course quality and instructional practices. This purpose is consistent with Oliver's (2000, p.5) description of "Evaluation for Quality Assurance" in online teaching contexts. Oliver indicates that the purpose for this kind of evaluation process is the enhancement or improvement of the quality of the course and is often based on the satisfaction of users of the specific services provided. The use of course evaluations as an independent measure to evaluate individual faculty performance, however, has been a more contentious subject (Smith, 2004; Arreola, 2000). One of my goals was to illustrate that a more inquiry-oriented purpose could be served when the results of course evaluations were aggregated across courses and academic years, I wanted to use these data in a collective and appreciative way to promote further understanding and inquiry regarding students' views of effective teaching that provided greater insight than what could be furnished by examining individual course evaluations independently of one another.

In my end-of-term review of course evaluations, I had begun to observe that some patterns of response were emerging across courses. As well, I realized that I had a potential wealth of information that could be reviewed more systematically – using established qualitative analysis processes – that would help me determine whether there were some overarching themes consistent with these patterns. Furthermore, I believed that a program-wide look at learners' feedback on their course instruction could serve as a launching pad for a conversation with both new and experienced faculty about overall trends, perceptions, and values around teaching and learning. Brookfield

(1995, p.93) advocates for this kind of insight in his critique of conventional summative evaluation strategies: “Knowing something of how students experience learning helps us build convincing connections between what we want them to do and their own concerns and expectations”. In many ways, it was an opportunity for me to determine what these findings meant for us as educators and what was in our sphere of control for improving our practice, both individually and at a program-wide level.

Also, by systematically analysing data that already existed, I wanted to demonstrate the value of using a more data-driven approach to program improvement. My own views on the value of using data more systematically in a post-secondary academic leadership role had been shaped by over 15 years of experience in helping school administrators and teachers adopt a more data-driven decision-making approach advocated in both the scholarly literature and educational practice as a means to guide school reform efforts (Killion and Bellamy, 2000).

Thus, the study had the following specific purposes:

1. To learn more about student perspectives on effective course instruction and delivery by examining formal course evaluation feedback provided across all courses in a program over a multi-year period;
2. To make better use of course evaluation data to help inform faculty development efforts and program improvement strategies;
3. To demonstrate the utility of systematically analysing course evaluation data at a program-wide level;
4. To strengthen the feedback loop between course evaluations and faculty instruction;
5. To promote faculty engagement and perspective-sharing within the program; and
6. To test out and model processes that promote informal mentoring, reflective inquiry, and new learning opportunities for faculty.

5. Research Framework

I adopted an action research approach to the inquiry, principally, because the ultimate purpose of the research was to improve teaching practice. By systematically and critically investigating practice, action research enables educators to increase their understanding of current realities and make further commitments to improving practice (Kemmis and McTaggart; 1992; Whitehead, 1988). Action research helps develop a creative and critical dialogue among practitioners who share common interests by making the systematic examination of practice public (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead, 1996; Whitehead, 1988). This objective provided a good fit with the purposes of my project because I was particularly interested in the views of faculty members towards students’ feedback on their course experiences.

The “Plan, Study, Act” framework, developed by Lafleur, Hamilton, and McFadden (1998), served as a useful model for conceptualizing and undertaking the study. As a faculty developer, I had used this model previously to help school administrators and teachers develop and engage in school-based inquiry processes (Hamilton and

Zaretsky, 1999; Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton and Zaretsky, 1996). The model outlines a practical sequence of activities divided into logical phases that facilitate the undertaking of the research process. Nevertheless, I have applied the model to the current study with the realization that action research is often a recursive process with significant interplay between stages or phases, and in reality, is not as rational or linear as this model might imply (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1992).

6. Method

I dedicated the “Plan” phase of the Lafleur et al. (1996) framework to developing a rigorous and practical process for gathering and analysing the course evaluation data. For the purposes of this study, I was particularly interested in analysing the open-ended data provided in the evaluation summaries for students’ comments on the effectiveness of course instruction. The web-based surveys are designed with several open-ended questions to facilitate the capture of student comments about the course. Although every course evaluation included rating scales evaluating the quality of the course and the instruction, I expected the comments provided in the open-ended questions to be illuminative of the reasons for the particular ratings. McKone (1999), based on her study of 342 student evaluations of MBA course, supports the use of open-ended questions on course evaluation forms. She argues that student evaluation ratings must also have qualitative comments about appropriate teaching practices attached in order to be truly meaningful. Lublin, Brew, and Barrie’s (1996) study of the link between student evaluation and improved teaching found that the majority of faculty members using questionnaire-based course evaluations believed that the open-ended comments were the most useful component of the feedback. Sheehan and DuPrey (1999) concur with this perspective and advocate for future research into the use of course evaluations to place more emphasis on the analysis of qualitative comments to provide further insight into what students believe are important components of instruction.

To code data and generate themes from these open-ended questions, I used an inductive analytical approach as described by Strauss & Corbin (1990), Huberman & Miles (1994), and Mason (1996) to analyse the open-ended questions provided on the survey. Once the appropriate ethical review protocols were approved, I prepared for the data analysis by assembling evaluation documents for every course in the MADL program during the 2000-2003 period. This resulted in the collection of 38 course evaluations for entry into the study. Each summary was numbered and the cohort-specific information (e.g. date, year, course number) was recorded in a separate table. After an initial reading and review of the documents, I conducted a thematic analysis of their content by generating a series of categories to describe the major themes evident in each document. The labels for these categories formed an initial cross-sectional index that I then verified by re-reading the documents and applying categorical codes to the data. Once I was satisfied that these codes provided a best-fit with the data, the text of all course summaries was tagged using the indexed categories. I found this process to be immensely helpful in distancing myself from a priori notions of response patterns that I assumed before the study began. Thus, as Mason (1996, p.112) explains, this process gave me a more “measured” perspective on the overall dataset. Additionally, the application of the codes enabled me to compare and contrast the perspectives of different learners within the same course as well as comparing perspectives of students

across different courses. Once all of the course summaries were coded, I examined the data from the entire dataset that corresponded to the indexed categories. I examined and re-examined the data until I was able to produce a set of overarching themes inductively from the categorical analysis. The themes were tested for completeness, plausibility, and rival explanations using the strategies recommended by Patton (1990).

7. Results

A. Key Themes

In the “Study” phase of the Plan, Study, Act framework, I applied the research methodology described above and generated the following themes.

1. Students value a strong, active presence by the instructor during the course, especially in discussion groups. Students highly appreciated the added wisdom that the instructor’s perspective brought to their discussions with other students and the role that faculty members played in monitoring and moving discussions forward in the online environment. As the following comments from students indicate, the establishment of an active and consistent presence by the instructor appeared to be really important in assuring students that the learning process within the course was progressing as intended. Conversely, when an instructor’s presence was not consistently apparent, students readily remarked on its absence.

Also, students appreciated a strong presence from the faculty member at the beginning of the course to introduce him or herself, set a welcoming and inviting tone, answer questions, and describe the course expectations. When this presence was lacking or absent, students recognized and made reference to this lost opportunity.

Related to an effective online presence, students also valued the opportunity for their perspectives and outlooks to be stretched in discussion groups so that they might view a particular issue differently than before. Students expressed comfort in being challenged on their viewpoints, as long as this was done in a respectful manner, such as through the use of effective questioning techniques as opposed to being “told” about another viewpoint. In fact, it appears that the ability to ask questions that stimulate different kinds of thinking, deeper levels of introspection, and openness to other perspectives was one of the most highly-valued skills that a faculty member could possess in an online environment. References by students to the importance of this skill appeared consistently throughout the course evaluations.

2. Students value learning about an instructor’s own professional experiences related to the field. In addition to having instructors who are actively engaged in the course, students wanted to get to know their faculty instructors as people who have had a variety of experiences in fields related to the course’s focus. Having a broad and relevant base of experience appeared to give students more confidence in their own learning. Also, they valued instructors’ accounts and anecdotes that point to the lessons learned through their professional experience. These stories also helped students get to know the instructor as a “real and authentic” person. This might be more important for students in a distributed learning program because it is such a new field of study and students view faculty as leaders in a new field who can share their experiences and expertise.

3. Students value proactive and responsive communication, including clear expectations around accessibility and timely and informative feedback on submissions and assignments. Teaching online can be an all-consuming process for faculty, especially when learners are based in different time zones. Students appreciated knowing upfront when a faculty member was likely to be available over the duration of the course if they wanted further help and contact. Does an instructor work on the weekend? Does he or she have a set period of online activity every night? Is there a particular time period set aside when the instructor can take phone calls? These were questions implied in the students' comments about an instructor's working style and availability. Phrases such as "constantly available", "easy to contact", "was there when I needed help", "responded quickly", "always knew when and how to reach [the instructor]" reinforced the importance of this issue for learners. Setting clear expectations around accessibility also helped to establish boundaries regarding a faculty member's time commitment to a course.

Furthermore, learners wanted to have as much clarity as possible upfront on what and how they were being assessed. What are the criteria that will be used to assess my learning? How does this assignment fit into the overall course? What are my options for re-submitting the assignment? Although the online course outline may state the learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and due dates for assignments, this information was not enough for many learners. Students appreciated some level of perspective, clarification, and confirmation by the instructor even when this information was clearly communicated in the online material. Conversely, when instructors failed to provide the necessary clarity, it was a source of anxiety for students.

Furthermore, students responded very positively when instructors provided relevant and personalized feedback. This appeared to one of the most-highly valued traits of effective teaching and even seemed to compensate when other aspects of the course were not as highly rated. Not surprisingly, learners also placed a lot of importance on receiving informative feedback that enabled them to learn from assignments and potentially make any improvements to future submissions. Conversely, when clear and insightful feedback was lacking, students were quick to remark about its absence. As well, learners expected the feedback to be provided by the instructor in a responsive fashion.

4. Students value being provided with opportunities to offer course input that will enable improvement to occur. They appreciate faculty members being flexible with this feedback and taking action to address issues when it is evident that this will enhance the learning situation. Students respected the actions of faculty members who actively pursued the gathering of feedback in a variety of formative ways that help make their learning experience better within the course. The use of feedback opportunities, such as periodic check-ins, process checks, exhibiting an openness for dialogue, and the exchange of views, and demonstrations of follow-up action indicated to students that an instructor had a genuine interest in ensuring that students had the highest-quality learning experience, that there was a demonstrated commitment to improvement, and that, via the instructors' responsiveness, there was some flexibility in the learning process. According to learners, the seeking of their input and feedback had to be done in a timely way in order for the effort to be worthwhile. Furthermore, learners had to view

tangible results from the provision of input such as modifying expectations regarding unreasonable reading or assignment expectations or substituting examples that were more relevant to the specific composition of the cohort.

5. Students valued flexibility in meeting individual learner needs. Students appreciated knowing that there was a safety net within a course if exceptional circumstances arose and that an instructor would be willing to assist them. Also, this kind of assistance reinforced the importance of establishing a personally supportive relationship with the learner. Students commented on the empathy, encouragement, and reassurance demonstrated by faculty members who helped out specific learners during periods of personal crises or significant distraction. As well, they commented on the flexibility of instructors in accommodating the unique needs of learners and the ability of extraordinary instructors to personalize instruction and feedback that took into consideration individual learning challenges, circumstances and motivations. This appreciation was extended to faculty members who were willing to alter or adjust course requirements as a result of cohort-specific circumstances.

B. Reflecting on the Results.

Implicit, and often explicit, in action research processes, is the opportunity to reflect on research findings and to consider the implications for follow-up action (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1992). The collection and analysis of empirical data in action research can serve as the basis for “reflectively improving practice” (Elliot, 1991, p.51). In considering the significance of the key themes, I was not surprised that they would be highly significant in the minds of students. From a practical perspective, it seems very logical that students would have substantive expectations for teaching performance and would be highly articulate in communicating these in their course evaluation comments. After all, MADL is a program that focuses on the design and delivery of effective online programs. Furthermore, it was quite evident from the students’ comments that, although they recognized the critical role an instructor played in their learning experience, they still felt responsible for their own learning. Consequently, there would be many factors that determined whether students found the course to be fully satisfying. This “mature” perspective may have been particularly evident with students in this program as a result of their relatively sophisticated views of learning and teaching, given the program’s focus. As well, it quite possibly could have been the result of their age and experience level. Most of the learners would be considered “mid-career” with an average age of 41 years.

Reflecting on the scholarly implications of the results, I found the key themes to be consistent with previous research on effective online teaching competencies and characteristics. Byrne and Waddell (2002), in a previous study of faculty perspectives on online teaching at RRU, found that there was a small grouping of advanced or enhanced competencies that instructors should strive to attain. These include the following characteristics, all of which were evident in the five themes found within the study:

- ❖ React to learners’ needs at various stages of learning;
- ❖ Manage the volume of discussion postings and summaries of learning;
- ❖ Promote critical thinking and transformation of learning;

- ❖ Add interest and stimulate learning when making instructional design decisions; and
- ❖ Develop and increase confidence in an online environment.

Reid's (2003) comprehensive review of the literature on online teaching competencies resulted in a framework featuring the following five categories: (1) Content Expertise; (2) Course Management; (3) Evaluation; (4) Process Facilitation; and (5) Technical Knowledge. The five dominant themes from my research study best fit with the content expertise, evaluation, and process facilitation set of competencies in Reid's study. This is not surprising because these three sets of competencies likely involve the most direct interaction between instructor and student within Reid's framework. Likewise, Simpson (2002) distinguishes between two kinds of instructional support provided by tutors or teachers: academic and non-academic. Simpson suggests that academic support includes helping students with cognitive, intellectual, and knowledge demands within a course while non-academic or counselling support focuses on helping students with the affective and organizational aspects of their studies. Interestingly enough, the fifth theme that I identified in my study – demonstrating flexibility in meeting student needs – has strong elements of this advisor/counsellor role described by Simpson.

8. Implications

A. Taking Action

The "Act" Phase of Lafleur et al.'s (1998) action research cycle involves the process of planning how the results of the research will be used to inform follow-up action, including determining who might benefit from knowing the results and how the results will be specifically shared to maximize the opportunities for action.

My previous experience in working with educators on school improvement projects helped me realize that the most powerful part of the process itself was not the generation of the findings but how these results can be collectively shared to promote faculty learning and development (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead, 1996; Hamilton and Zaretsky, 1996). Ramsden (1998) contends that the effectiveness of academic leadership is enhanced when an administrative head is able to emphasize the importance of student learning and the need to create a sense of shared responsibility among faculty to find opportunities to enhance its quality. Furthermore, Murphy (2003) suggests that creating a sense of shared experience and accountability with faculty members is one of the most valued rewards of academic leadership and assists in the attainment of important program-related goals.

In this study, I was particularly interested in learning if the results from the research resonated with MADL faculty members and whether the findings were consistent with their experiences. Also, I wanted to find a way to influence growth in teaching effectiveness that was based on mutual learning and collegial respect. Therefore, I decided to share my findings with faculty members who were going to teach in the next subsequent term. If there were any concrete follow-up actions coming out of a collective exploration of the findings, these were the faculty members who had the greatest opportunity to put them into immediate effect.

Furthermore, sharing the results with faculty members was important because I wanted to find ways to build a stronger sense of community amongst the faculty members teaching in the program, many of whom were distributed across North America and had very limited interaction with each other because they taught different courses. In fact, many faculty members had never communicated with one another and did not know what courses each other taught. The nature of the contractual relationship between part-time or “associate” faculty and the university posed an additional, ongoing challenge to faculty community building efforts because these faculty members are contracted to teach specific courses and not directly engaged in other program planning and management roles. Program directors, therefore, must use creative means to engage associate faculty in program improvement efforts and still respect contractual agreements, as well as instructors’ time and role commitments.

Murphy (2003) suggests that a key skill for academic leaders is the ability to create an environment among faculty where there is a sense of shared experience and collective purpose. This gives faculty members a common bond and frame of reference to explore issues. Citing the reflections of Schulman (1993, p. 6) on “pedagogical solitude” in his early days as a faculty member, Huber and Hutchings (2005) describe a fundamental paradox in academic culture: teaching is a public, community-based activity; yet, it is often viewed and practised as a private affair, where improvement efforts are often conducted in isolation from other colleagues and are seldom shared collectively.

Therefore, I decided to initiate a teleconference call with all the program instructors who would be teaching in the upcoming term to discuss a variety of subjects, including the summary of my findings. The purpose of the teleconference was to share new program information, answer questions, offer updates on university-wide affairs, and build a stronger sense of community amongst the instructional team. At a more fundamental level, however, I wanted the teleconference to serve as a means of connecting faculty members to one another to encourage information-sharing and mutual learning. In particular, I was hoping that some of the newer faculty members would find the perspectives of the more experienced instructors to be insightful which might set the stage for future informal peer coaching and mentoring. It also gave me an opportunity to take a significant step to counteract pedagogical solitude by making my inquiry into improving teaching effectiveness more transparent to the faculty and inviting them into the process of critique and reflection.

Bringing together faculty members to discuss important issues related to student learning was one of the strategies I was employing to demonstrate collaborative leadership. Knight and Trowler (2000) have examined the issue of the relationship between academic leadership and the quality of student learning. They attest that taking a collaborative approach to academic leadership – one which promotes teamwork, collegiality, networking, and organizational learning – is the most important means of developing a culture supportive of high quality teaching and learning. As well, by sharing my action research process and results, I wanted to demonstrate that I was committed to ongoing inquiry and exploring ways to further understand and improve the teaching process.

I chose the teleconference format for several reasons. First, it connected people in real-time and thus I felt this aspect would lead to a more interactive and immediate experience for participants. Secondly, as faculty members in a distributed learning program, we spent the majority of time communicating via email and I felt it was important to introduce a different communication medium into our conversations. And finally, the teleconference was a simple, efficient, and cost-effective way to connect people scattered through Canada and the United States.

As a result of an expanding range of faculty members' responsibilities in today's university, Knight and Trowler (2000) lament that there is limited time for collegiality to discuss effective practices in teaching and learning. There is an additional challenge when program instructors have part-time appointments and full-time careers outside of the university. To what extent would the part-time faculty be interested and committed to participating in the teleconference? In the remainder of this section, I share observations of how the teleconference transpired.

Eleven of the twelve faculty members teaching in the next term confirmed that they would participate in the teleconference. To prepare for the teleconference, I shared a two-page summary in advance so that the instructors would have time to read and review the findings from my research. As well, I included short biographies of all the faculty members to help introduce members of the group to each other, including the biography of the faculty member who could not attend (The "twelfth" faculty member was traveling for business and was unable to join the teleconference at the specified time). Although the beginning of the teleconference was dedicated to program updates, the principal purpose was to examine the summary I prepared of my research findings. This served as an important strategy for validating my action research claim and for 'going public' with my research findings. According to McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996), making the research public means "sharing the findings with other people, particularly colleagues in the work context, and checking with them whether your perceptions are reasonably fair and accurate" (p.27).

My role in introducing the findings was to invite a dialogue, not a discussion, by asking questions and facilitating responses by a wide variety of participants. Garmston and Wellman (1999) suggest that dialogue involves deliberative conversations in which participants suspend judgment, seek opportunities for reflective learning, surface ideas, and inquire into the perspectives of others. Unlike in discussion-oriented meetings, there was no intent to judge the merits of different perspectives, reach consensus, or take agreed-upon, group-based, follow-up action. To initiate the dialogue, I asked faculty members about their reactions to the summary. Did the results seem consistent with their experiences? How might the results influence how they approach their teaching in the future? Were there specific tips or strategies that they already do that seem consistent with the most important themes identified by the learners?

The exploration of the findings resulted in an engaging and very rich 90-minute conversation on teaching and learning. During the dialogue, new and experienced instructors asked questions, shared stories, and talked about what matters to them as instructors. It appeared that participants appreciated the opportunity to share their perspectives, ask questions, and receive concrete tips and advice from their peers that could have immediate impact. Faculty members talked about different strategies for

creating and maintaining presence, setting boundaries on availability to better manage expectations, creating non-directive but helpful “interventions” in discussion groups, as well as other topics.

I was quite amazed at the level of engagement of both new and experienced faculty, despite the limitations of a teleconference format and the reality that most faculty members had never interacted with each other before. I was particularly impressed with how quickly faculty members took risks to share their own experiences, both positive and negative. As well, I was hoping that this experience would open the door to informal mentoring and peer-to-peer coaching that recognized the valuable expertise of all instructors.

I consciously did not build any activities into the teleconference that focused on group decisions regarding follow-up action. From my vantage point, this activity seemed inconsistent with the focus on promoting dialogue. Furthermore, I made the assumption that all the faculty members would determine their own sources of learning from the conversation and make any necessary changes to their teaching that seemed appropriate. Nevertheless, as the program director, I took several follow-up actions that had been informed by the dialogue, including the following:

- ❖ I developed a short brief outlining formative check-in strategies that faculty members could use with learners and shared this list with new faculty;
- ❖ I shared this list with other university faculty at a subsequent, university-wide professional development session;
- ❖ I noted several tips and insights provided by faculty members that I could communicate in orientation sessions with new faculty members; and
- ❖ I shared a summary of my research findings with faculty in other programs and agreed to be “interviewed” for an article prepared by staff in the university’s Centre for Teaching and Learning on the action research process.

9. Conclusions

A. Lessons Learned

This inquiry has served as a case study on how an action research process, using readily available institutional data, can be used to help encourage collegial engagement in one academic setting. It provides one example of how the systematic analysis and collective examination of evaluation data by academic leaders can enhance its value as a means of determining and understanding student perspectives on teaching effectiveness.

Taking the time to conduct this research and write up the results has served as a cathartic means of determining the most important benefits from the experience. As McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (1996) contend, the writing process in action research serves as a dialectical interchange between reflection on action (what I did in my study) and reflection in action (what I am writing about).

From the perspective of a program director, one of the key lessons I have learned was the value in systematically examining data that are already available but are not being fully utilized. This analysis process helped me to confirm some patterns in the

student comments that I was noticing informally as well as dismissing other patterns that I could not confirm empirically. Therefore, the collection and systematic analysis of aggregated course evaluation data was a rich source of information about program-wide trends and patterns regarding student perspectives on learning not available by other means. By virtue of its availability and use, it ensured that the needs and expectations of learners examined across all courses in the program figured prominently in the follow-up discussions about teaching and learning.

Secondly, I was very delighted that a relatively simple technology such as a teleconference could serve so effectively as a means of connecting geographically-distributed faculty members to one another and enable them to engage in such a substantive conversation about teaching and learning. This conclusion helped me reinforce the value of matching appropriate technologies to appropriate uses – a point that I believe is important to emphasize in a field of study that focuses on technology-enhanced learning.

Also, I was very impressed with the level of commitment of the eleven participants to the exploration of some important issues related to the teaching and learning process – all of whom were part-time faculty who were not being directly compensated for their involvement in the teleconference. The process confirmed for me the value that reasonably simple and relatively unsophisticated professional development tools like the teleconference can serve in engaging faculty in fundamental explorations of teaching impact and instructional quality.

Fourthly, I was pleased that serving in the role of conversation enabler and facilitator helped me to avoid the bonds of judgment and hasty action that may have otherwise shut down the active and insightful sharing of participants' perspectives. It was my 'personal stretch' to create conversation space that enabled a dialogue to develop. Nevertheless, by assuming this role, I found that I listened more effectively to the perspectives of my program's faculty members. Additionally, it encouraged me to be more open to changing my own perspectives and views. For instance, in thinking about the importance of the theme of establishing an effective online presence, one faculty member described how she liked to be highly engaged and more directive with students at the beginning of a course but gradually reduce her degree of active involvement as students became more comfortable with the course materials and felt more ownership over the learning process. I had never thought about this strategy before but it was consistent with our university's views on empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning, so it provided me with an additional tip that I could share with new faculty or instructors who were looking to enhance their skills.

Additionally, it is likely that my past experience and expertise with action research made it easier for me to engage in this process compared to program directors who might not have this background. One of my intentions for using the action research model was to practise and refine my own action research skills. Having said this, an important reason to share the results of my experience is to communicate to others that using an action research framework such as the Plan, Study, Act model can make the process more straightforward and manageable.

Finally, in their recent book on campus-wide support strategies for the scholarship of teaching and learning, Huber and Hutchings (2005, p. 114) make a strong case for intentionally “inviting students into the teaching commons” by engaging them in discussions exploring their own views of learning or involving them integrally in the scholarship process as co-inquirers. As well, Jenkins, Breen, and Lindsay (2003) argue for closer links between teaching and research to promote mutual enhancement. One of my lessons learned from this study is to take advantage of the opportunity to share the findings in the study as part of a formal learning activity in one of the program’s courses. MADL is a graduate program that, at its heart, focuses on learning about learning. Thus, sharing results in this manner provides a timely and powerful way to integrate highly-relevant, research-based findings into the curriculum.

B. Limitations

Despite the self-observed benefits above, there are noteworthy limitations to this study that are worth discussing. From my perspective, one of the most critical limitations was the inability for me to make the ‘conversational process’ a regular part of future faculty teleconferences. As a result of an internal promotion two months after the teleconference, I assumed another role outside of the MADL program and, therefore, had no opportunity for sustained follow-up with faculty. I had originally conceptualized the initial data analysis and teleconference as part of a recursive and ongoing process similar to that described by Noffke and Stevenson (1995):

As a research method, action research is cyclical, that is, it does not progress from an initial question to the formulation of data collection, analysis, and conclusion. Rather, it assumes that understandings and actions emerge in a constant cycle, one that always highlights the ways in which educators are partially correct, yet in continual need of revision, in their thoughts and actions. The process does not end, as with traditional notions of research, with richer understandings of education for others to implement; rather it aids in the ongoing process of identifying contradictions, which, in turn, help to locate spaces for ethically defensible, politically strategic action. (p.4)

Thus, the success of the research process was limited by its lack of continuity and sustained practice.

A related limitation is associated with the nature of the faculty model in use within the MADL program. Although the program benefits from having course instructors with substantive and current professional experience, who, in the words of Bianco-Mathis and Chalofsky (1996, p. ix), are “living their disciplines daily”, the overarching reliance on associate faculty limits their engagement in sustained program planning efforts. A more powerful program improvement and faculty development process might have resulted from the use of collaborative action research model like Sagor (1993) describes to engage faculty members in the entire process of defining the problem in the inquiry, gathering and analysing the data, and determining the implications and follow-up action. Being the sole full-time academic in the program regrettably limited the way that I could integrally involve interested faculty members in a more collaborative inquiry process.

An additional limitation exists in the characteristics of the study's data and analysis process that I chose for the study. In this study, I relied solely on the data provided in the open-ended responses of the course evaluation surveys. There was no opportunity for me to expand the analysis by asking clarifying interview questions with students and/or seeking corroboration with other sources of data. This limits the overall depth of the analysis unless other measures are used to help in the triangulation of the data sources. Nevertheless, I still believe that one of my major objectives was reached – to demonstrate that this kind of routinely-generated data can yield reasonably comprehensive insights into student perspectives on teaching effectiveness.

Furthermore, my subsequent interactions with faculty members who participated in the teleconference anecdotally indicated that the opportunity to contribute to the conversation was very well-received by participants and was a meaningful way to engage with other program faculty. Nevertheless, methodologically, my study would have benefited from the addition of data gathering measures that could have empirically confirmed this conclusion. Follow-up interviews or even short post-conference response surveys with participating faculty members might have yielded further data that augmented the analysis of the student comments. As well, this process would have contributed to the action research spiral, providing another cycle of Plan, Study, and Act. Furthermore, interviews conducted later in the term might have helped me determine if and what changes in practice occurred as a result of instructors' participation in the teleconference. The potential downside of this additional research is the possibility that the teleconference conversation would have been less open and free-flowing if it had been more formalized as part of a research study involving requests for consent and structured research instruments.

Finally, there is one other direction for future research that would be insightful. In this study, I was unable to discern a relationship between the relative presence of the five themes and students' assessment of course quality. Instructor presence and timely feedback appeared to be the most highly-valued characteristics related to effective instruction mentioned by students. A follow-up study that correlated the themes with course quality ratings might prove insightful to faculty members, course designers, and faculty developers.

10. Considerations for the Scholarship of Teaching, Learning and Leadership

Leadership supportive of the scholarship of teaching and learning often is framed in terms of how to develop institutional supports, reward structures, research grants, mentoring programs, and other means (Cambridge, 2004). There is no question that this kind of building of institutional capacity enables SOTL to flourish (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). Nevertheless this project has explored and advocates that another form of leadership – the direct involvement of academic leaders in scholarly inquiry related to teaching and learning – has the potential to play an equally important role in encouraging faculty engagement in SOTL-related practices. Ramsden (1998) suggests that one of the most effective leadership practices in enabling academic change in higher education involves modelling the way for others. In addition to serving as a means of linking scholarship, professional engagement, and ultimately program improvement, SOTL-based academic leadership demonstrates a personal commitment

to investigating substantive questions related to student learning that ultimately can help to communicate the significance of the teaching enterprise and encourages a collective commitment to SOTL among faculty.

These two kinds of leadership are inter-connected; leadership in the practice of SOTL requires leadership in support of SOTL. As a concluding statement, I offer the following strategies for supporting the engagement of academic leaders in SOTL at the campus-wide level:

1. Use interactive workshops, research circles, or problem-based learning activities for administrators to examine the pragmatic questions that link program improvement, teaching effectiveness, and student success;
2. Sponsor small-scale action research grants that encourage administrators and faculty members to collaborate on inquiries that focus on issues directly related to enhancing student learning;
3. Encourage organizational development units or teaching and learning centres to develop programs supporting action research as an effective organizational, leadership and faculty development strategy;
4. Hold university-wide forums for administrators to share their findings and methodologies;
5. Build in the requirement for ongoing and systematic professional inquiry into recruitment and promotional processes for academic administrators; and
6. Create opportunities for institutional research offices and administrators to collaborate on action research projects that make effective use of data already routinely gathered at the departmental and university-wide levels.

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