Can Formative Peer Review Ease the Transition for Experienced New Faculty?

***Sarah M. Jones, Beth Kelly, Connie Lamb, Maggie Robillard,
Nancy Lumpkin Sowers, C. Broughton Anderson,
and Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens
Berea College***

Authors' Contact Information

*Nancy L. Sowers, Ph.D., CFA, Associate Professor of Finance
Berea College, CPO 2193, Berea, Kentucky 40404
Phone: 859-985-3147 Email:* nancy_sowers@berea.edu

*Sarah M. Jones, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychology
Phone: 859-985-3678 (phone), Email:* sarah_jones@berea.edu

*Beth Kelly, PhD, Assistant Professor of Mathematics
Phone: 859-985-3574 (phone) Email:* beth_kelly@berea.edu

*Connie Lamb, PhD, RN, CNE, Associate Professor of Nursing
Phone: 859-985-3081 Email:* Connie_Lamb@Berea.edu

*Maggie Robillard, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education Studies
Phone: 859-985-3623 (phone) Email:* maggie_robillard@berea.edu

*Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Comparative
Literature, Director of Faculty Development and the Center for
Transformative Learning
Phone: (859) 985-3670 Email:* leslie_ortquist-ahrens@berea.edu

*C. Broughton Anderson, MEd, PhD, PiFA, FSA Scot, Assistant Professor,
Art and Art History Program
Phone: 859 985 3412 Email:* Broughton_Anderson@berea.edu

Abstract:

When experienced faculty join a new institution, the questions they have about their teaching are less general and more nuanced than those brand new to the academy. New, experienced faculty have to work to adapt established teaching pedagogy based on the needs of students within the new culture as well as manage their own particular transition issues. Out of our year-long new faculty transition seminar, six of us, together with the group's facilitator, formed an interdisciplinary learning community composed of experienced faculty members new to the institution for the purpose of leveraging our expertise. This process became a very productive tool for expanding and improving our own teaching and developing our sense of belonging to the institution. The outcome of

this process is that the interdisciplinary members of the learning community were able to provide valuable feedback at an appropriate level that was formative and that focused on teacher-student interaction and classroom environment rather than course content. This faculty learning community could be adapted by other institutions either as a supplement to a faculty transition program or across campus if one is not offered to enhance the first-year experience for faculty.

Key Words:

faculty learning community, formative peer review, reflection, interdisciplinary, entry-year teaching, mid-career faculty, career changes

Introduction

Coming into an institution as a new faculty member involves many challenges. For this reason, many colleges facilitate the adjustment to the community through formal, new faculty orientation and transition programs. Indeed, Cox (1995) provides some evidence that new faculty members improve their chances for tenure by participating in structured learning communities. At Berea College, the year-long new faculty seminar meets twice a month to engage in discussion and offer support for building effective teaching pedagogy within the culture of the institution. While the educational development professional had led transition groups for new faculty for over a decade, this year involved a new approach. Members of the community of practice were separated into two groups in an effort to better address specific needs: 1) experienced, and tenure track faculty members and 2) less experienced faculty on other contracts. What emerged, in part, were more specific needs of the different cohorts. As members of the group of more experienced faculty members, we encountered specific challenges related to the unique culture of the institution, more than to the newness of serving as a college instructor. Inspired by the conversations we were having in our tenure-track cohort, and encouraged by our new faculty leader, we created a peer observation project after the first semester to proactively address teaching issues in a new place.

The goal of our project was to improve our teaching effectiveness by attending each other's classes, providing formative feedback, and offering support to each other as we navigated our new positions. We all had a fair amount of teaching experience, but the challenge was to hone our skills with a different population of students and in the context of the particular kinds of transition we were experiencing. We didn't need to learn the basics about teaching, but we did need to acculturate to a new institution. This project provided us with insight into building sustainable professor-student relationships sensitive to the institutional culture where both students and professors thrive by leveraging and building key relationships through a voluntary peer visit project. We bridged the gap between students' needs and learning expectations, and we built a strong and supportive cohort of "critical friends" and were able to overcome what Shulman has termed "pedagogical solitude." (Handal, 1999, Shulman, 1993).

Theoretical Underpinnings

The literature behind our project draws from three distinct areas in higher-education teaching pedagogy: faculty learning communities, formative peer evaluation, and faculty

development at different career stages. Our formative peer evaluation project stemmed from the faculty learning community nurtured by the Center for Transformative Learning at Berea College. In embarking on this project we, together with the Center's director, discovered a gap in the literature: a lack of empirical research regarding the transitional needs of experienced faculty at a new institution.

Faculty Learning Communities

Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) "are cohorts of faculty members, often from different disciplines or fields of study, who ask questions about teaching and learning, try out teaching innovations, assess student learning, create new models of practice, and publish scholarship about their work. Each FLC shares a question, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic, as members deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Indiana University Bloomington, 2015). One important aspect of the FLC is that the problem addressed by the group be considered over a sustained period of time, unlike development opportunities such as workshops which might last only one to a few days (Layne, 2002). Cox (2004) categorizes FLCs as topic-based or cohort-based, identifies FLC goals, and distinguishes these from some of the standard outcomes of faculty development programming. Chief outcomes of FLCs include community development for participants, quicker progression through the intellectual stages of learning how to teach, inculcation to alternative perspectives and viewpoints, and preparation in good college governance (Cox, 2004).

There are several unexpected benefits that arise from participation in an FLC, such as interdisciplinary collaboration and sensitivity to diversity. Once FLC members are effectively integrated as a cohort, often they can identify other ways to engage the members of the cohort in peer consultation (Cox, 1999). These relationships allow the freedom to discuss controversial issues in a supportive and nonjudgmental context. Indeed, Petrone (2004) identifies the FLC as a tool to make a cultural shift to adapt to a more diverse world affecting student, staff, and faculty populations.

Formative Peer Evaluation

In attempting to attain meaningful and consistent evaluations of faculty performance, review committees often consult student evaluations, classroom visits, and faculty self-evaluation (Miller & Seldin, 2014, Seldin, 1984). Classroom visits are predominantly done by departmental colleagues and/or by faculty members involved in decisions for promotion and tenure. Such *summative* considerations can place added pressure on the observed, who are already going through stresses related to transitional issues, and the stakes of the observation can affect the dynamics of what is discussed and how it is heard (Hubball & Clarke, 2011). One outcome may be that such visits do not result in substantive, constructive feedback that can lead to instructional development.

In an effort to foster collaborative peer review, several in the academy recommend best practices for *formative* professional development (Keig & Waggoner, 1994, Lomas & Nicholls, 2005, Chism, 2007). A less hierarchical process, where a dialogue of peers is facilitated, allows for improvements in teaching pedagogy through a process of critical self-reflection and avid discussion among peers. Barlow et al. (2003) outline a

semester-long peer collaboration model developed for social worker field instructors, finding that peer participants: emerged from the process with more self-confidence in their teaching practices, felt less isolated in the field, and increased the tools at their disposal for reaching students. The conversation about teaching success and failure can be "messy" and can leave discussants feeling defensive or encourage them to describe their teaching through rose-colored glasses. Johnsen et al. (2009) argue that full engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning requires a willingness to discuss all aspects of the teaching process, including mistakes. Keig (2000) looks at the factors that promote colleague participation in such programs and found that faculty members are often open to the idea of classroom observation as a form of colleague assessment. To be effective, however, respect and trust are required components for teaching improvement within the process of formative peer observation and evaluation (Cox, 1999, Thomas et al., 2014). A safe learning community allows members to share concerns in the assurance that they will be received with respect. Rather than relying on feedback that comes solely from a more traditional, evaluative relationship where tenure is the overriding goal, interdisciplinary colleagues have an excellent resource in one another for impacting teaching development and professional vitality through formative feedback (Romano et al., 2004). The authors suggest that collegial interaction surrounding issues related to teaching, based in trust, and commitment to improvement pays off in improved teaching and teaching satisfaction.

Faculty development across career stage

The professional development needs of experienced faculty are likely to be different than those of junior faculty (Seldin, 2006). There is a plethora of research on faculty teaching experience in the first two years (Adams, 2002, Austin, 2002, Boice, 1991, 1992, 2000, Sorcinelli & Austin, 1992). Every institution wants its new faculty to teach well, and new faculty members face a host of predictable challenges. For example, they tend to worry about their teaching evaluations and put off research until more settled into their teaching, and because of resulting anxiety, new faculty are more likely to over-prepare for course loads, reducing their effectiveness (Boice, 1991). In addition, it is very common for students to challenge the professor's authority in the first year, both at the college and lower levels (Fayne & Ortquist-Ahrens, 2006).

By contrast, there is a smaller—though growing—literature on faculty at mid-career, and there are challenges in defining precisely what counts as that career phase. Generally, the literature considers mid-career faculty members as those who have achieved tenure, and mid-career represents the often extended phase after that hurdle but before looming retirement. Mid-career faculty continuing in their established career path benefit professionally from the opportunity to involve themselves in teaching development programming when their interests and experience are considered, when they are open to learning, and when their work is valued (Romano et al., 2004). Baldwin, Lunceford and Vanderlinden (2005) look specifically at the "middle years" of the academic career and find that faculty members typically are looking for better personal/professional balance, and though they may become less active in research and professional development, they generally assume more leadership on their campuses. Formative evaluations and observations offer myriad benefits for mid-career faculty. (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Having the opportunity to work with similarly

disposed colleagues and participate in instructional conversations about classroom practice supports teaching effectiveness and positive outcomes.

The developmental needs of mid-career faculty navigating the intricacies of a new institution have not been considered in the literature. Those who are experienced but new to an institution—and thus going to go through tenure—are also at mid-career; they are certainly not the same as those just starting their first tenure-track jobs. We argue that there are unique challenges for mid-career faculty who are new to an institution. Interestingly, Odell (1986) argues that experienced teachers, new to an institution, did not have remarkably different needs than brand new teachers, but this study focused on lower educational levels. Whereas Kugel (1993) identifies five stages in the process of the teaching development for college faculty, starting with self and subject-matter development and proceeding to environment creation where students learn independently. This might suggest that faculty members with some teaching experience might be working at later stages in their teaching while adapting to the cultural aspects of a new institution.

Context and Research Questions

This project was conducted by six new faculty members at Berea College, a small, private liberal arts university in the state of Kentucky. Our unique student population consists of academically promising students who come from limited economic means, with 98% of the first-year domestic students eligible for significant federal funding (Pell grants), most of which does not need to be repaid. The College is dedicated to serving the underserved, with a particular geographic focus on Appalachia, one of the poorest regions in the United States. In Berea's current overall student population, 51% are first generation college students, 23% come from the most at-risk and distressed counties in Appalachia, and 8% are international students, most of whom come from places of economic/other hardship. All students receive full tuition scholarships (worth approximately $30,000 annually), and work at least ten hours for the College in a wide range of dedicated and supervised positions. In 2015-2016, 20% of the student body self-identified as African American, 8% self-identified as "Hispanic or Latino or Spanish origin," including a number of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival) students—those undocumented students who receive renewable two-year work permits and exemption from deportation under immigration policy—and 4% reporting as "other minority."

These resilient students come from low-income, sometimes troubled backgrounds, too often without the study skills necessary for higher education. In addition, the diverse preparation level of our students can lead to extremely bimodal distributions in classes. Students are heavily scheduled at Berea with atypically long classes, required attendance at convocations, and required employment at the college or the community. Many students are unfamiliar with the traditionally elite model of liberal arts education. Faculty members often serve *in loco parentis*, to a degree not experienced at our other institutions.

The transition to Berea was more difficult for us and for our students than we first anticipated. In the process of transitioning to exciting new job challenges, we were moving from places of certainty, where we understood institutional norms, to a place

where things might work a little differently (Bridges, 2010). Some of our students expressed discomfort because they suddenly had new professors, and they did not always know what to expect from them or how to succeed with them; our classroom reputations did not travel with us to the new institution. In addition, there were other challenges: learning to teach smaller classes more actively and with less lecture, working with dramatically different student preparation levels, and acclimating to students' expectations for personal connection. Meanwhile, we were also adapting to being part of a new department, a new community, and new advising responsibilities, including mentoring teaching assistants, an added mentoring responsibility to a typical liberal arts position. Rather than gloss over or hide from one another the classroom "problems" we experienced, we decided to treat them as an opportunity for shared investigation (Bass, 1999, Johnsen et al. 2009).

The participating members in the project were part of a new faculty transition seminar, and we wanted to take advantage of our connection as new faculty to explore how best to meet the needs of our students. We decided to form a project within our seminar that involved a mutually supportive collaboration where we would observe one another's classes, give focused feedback and encouragement, and reflect on ways to address our mutual and individual concerns. We held in common one critical focus regarding improving the pedagogy among our cohort along with our secondary interest of building an increased sense of belonging to the institution.

Although we shared an overarching desire to improve pedagogically, each one of us had somewhat different questions tied to our own individual teaching goals. These goals were developed through analysis of each individual's student evaluations from the previous semester as well as participants' feedback on the evaluations. Individual questions, though, frequently intersected, and we recognized common concerns such as:

- How can we promote critical thinking?
- How can we increase student engagement?
- How can we create a course atmosphere that encourages inquiry, exploration, discussion, and debate?
- How can we support student cohorts who are unable or unwilling to push one another's thinking?
- How does our personal demeanor affect the climate in the classroom?
- How can we hold our students accountable for class preparation?
- How can we redirect off-task students?
- How can we resolve the apparent disconnect between an organic style of teaching with the students' need for specific answers and course organization?
- How can we address the difficulty of teaching from a previous faculty member's materials?

These questions shaped our observations and reverberated in our conversations over the course of the semester.

We decided to observe one another's classes two times each over the course of the semester and focus those observations on our individual questions, which were predominantly variations of those listed above.

Method

Participants

Six faculty members participated in this project during the spring semester of 2016. Participants were engaged in an ongoing new faculty transition seminar which began one semester prior to the onset of the project, and had taught an average of 3.33 (SD = 1.03) undergraduate courses at Berea College. All participants were white females who had received a doctoral degree in their respective discipline. Each faculty participant represented a different discipline (Archaeology, Education, Finance, Mathematics, Nursing and Psychology). All participants had several years of prior teaching experience at the undergraduate or graduate level (M = 8.67 years, SD = 5.92). Prior teaching experiences varied among participants, ranging from one tenured full professor at a liberal arts college, a tenured associate professor at a large regional public university, two professors with about three years of experience at small liberal arts colleges, one sessional instructor at a large university (but with over 20 years of experience in primary through secondary education), and one with several years at a state university who had also served as a visiting instructor with a year at a small private liberal arts college. Four of the six participants had never engaged in an FLC before, but each was intrigued by the prospect of improving teaching pedagogy through peer collaboration. The undergraduate background of the participants included: three educated at small, private, elite women's liberal arts colleges, two educated in larger public state universities, and one Berea alumnus.

Because we were voluntarily studying our own pedagogy, our institution did not require us to secure approval from the Institutional Review Board.

Procedure

Our work together began in the spring of 2016. We met in January to discuss our questions and areas of specific interest, plan our methods, and set the schedule, both for the project overall and for our individual observations. Participants met as a group approximately twice per month, in conjunction with meetings of the new faculty transition seminar for which we also read and discussed the book *How learning works: Seven research-based for smart teaching* (Ambrose et al., 2010). We initiated this project, with input from the group's leader, by meeting in pairs to review student evaluations from fall semester. We then decided on and shared the pedagogical goals that we wanted our colleagues to focus on during observations. Observations occurred during normally scheduled class sessions, with one participant as the instructor and one or more participants observing.

Initially, we set guidelines for observing that were modified from those set forth by the University of California at Berkeley's Committee on Teaching (2013). Although several other options were discussed, Berkeley's pre-observation form seemed to be a particularly good construct for us, first, for its consistency and, second, because it was not focused on disciplinary content but rather on more general instructional methods, class flow, and interaction with students.

We scheduled our first peer observations for February and agreed those observations should incorporate peer feedback conversations within 48 hours per the

Berkeley protocol in order to maintain the integrity of the visit. We also planned for a global feedback meeting on the completion of the first round of observations with the intention to discuss the process of the project as it progressed and identify early emergent themes.

Each individual observation was scheduled between the observing faculty member and the faculty member being observed, to last for the entirety of one class period (either 70 or 110 minutes). Prior to the observation, the faculty member being observed digitally shared information about pedagogical interests and specific questions designed to focus the observation via the pre-observation discussion. Then the observer visited the classroom, took notes on the topics suggested in the pre-observation discussion, and conducted a post-observation debrief as soon as practical after the observation. During the debriefing meeting, our protocol suggested that the observer would ask a general question such as, "How did that class go for you?" before discussing the observation based on the instructor's areas of interest. As nonjudgmental members of a faculty learning community, the observer aimed to highlight both the positive aspects of the instructor's teaching and suggestions for improvement. Whenever possible, observers attempted to identify specific alternatives for the instructor to consider. Observers did not assess the content being taught or interview students. Feedback was open-ended and covered a variety of aspects including but not limited to the issues outlined in a pre-observation communication. The goal of the observer was to provide feedback that was constructive and built upon the pre-observation discussion.

For the subsequent round of observations, we met again after spring break in order to reframe our intentions, schedule the second round of peer observations, and plan for another global feedback meeting at the semester's end. This second round of peer observations occurred in April. April observations had a broader focus of assessing change across the semester, rather than focusing on the initial issues identified from student evaluations. In February, each instructor was observed an average of 4.50 times ($SD = 0.55$). In April, each instructor was observed an average of 2.83 times ($SD = 0.75$).

Participants wrote reflectively about their experiences throughout the project, both individually and collaboratively. After the second round of observations, we attempted to establish questions for reflection inspired by group discussion. Participants were encouraged to consider the following questions while preparing their open-ended reflective writing.

- What particular aspects of your teaching have you been thinking about, reconsidering or redesigning due to this project?
- How has this experience differed from a summative observation by someone in your discipline?
- How has observing your peers in the classroom affected your view of your own teaching?
- What feedback do you think made the most impact on you?
- Describe an interesting conversation that arose due to an observation.
- Are there any classroom issues that you are now more aware of as a result of this project?

- How do you think this project will impact your courses in the future?
- What was the importance of being a new faculty member to this project?
- What was the importance of being an experienced faculty member to the project?

The reflections were then compiled to observe themes from the participants.

Results

As faculty new to an institution but not to teaching, we searched for our learning edge in the peer observation project. We found an unexpected juxtaposition between our teaching experience and the existing institutional culture. The benefits that emerged in our analysis of the project included:

- Providing feedback on student-professor interactions and on course climate
- Creating a safe space to provide that feedback made possible by our interdisciplinary group of new faculty members
- Observing student engagement and critical thinking in the classroom

The following sections expand upon these subjects and give quotes from faculty participants surrounding the topic. Individual quotations in the sections below reflect the spirit conveyed by the majority of participants.

Improving student-professor interactions in the classroom

A recurring theme across this project has been the desire to integrate our teaching strategies into the cultural norms of the institution. We want to acclimate to our students' unique perspectives to successfully create an environment where our students thrive. After our first semester, we realized from our students' feedback that some aspects of our courses needed to be altered. Many of the questions we had going into the project were based on students' higher-order thinking skills rather than content-related information. Instead, we found our feedback primarily focused on student-professor interactions.

Relationships between student and professor can often be strained given the dynamic of higher education and the transition of many of the students from adolescent to young adult. Being a new professor with no institutional reputation can exacerbate some of these tensions on the students' side, especially when the professor's teaching focus is less on content and more on creating an independent learning environment, as is often the case for teachers with experience in the classroom (Chickering and Gamson, 1999, Light, 2004). When asked what feedback made the most impact, one participant said, "Seeing my students through the eyes of others… After descriptive comments of what was happening made by my colleagues in their observations, I realized I was going to need to be more proactive…. Rather than focusing entirely on the important academic requirements of this class, I realized I would not be able to teach the students if I could not reach them." This reflection is consistent with previous findings that the most frequently cited benefit of participation in a faculty learning community is gaining a better understanding of students (Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2007).

Another participant expressed sentiments that were echoed by several in the group: "I was frustrated by the questions being asked by students. I found myself reflecting on the level of question, making the assumption that the students asking the questions had not read the material or prepared for the class. I was in fact, aggravated and ...frustrated. My body language and facial expressions clearly reflected the internal emotion. I am now making a deliberate effort to check and balance my reactions when students ask questions." Having a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses that characterize the student body at our new institution enabled us to calibrate our responses to better support student learning.

When we transitioned to our new positions, the change in the demographics and cultural heritage of the population we serve provided challenges. Sometimes it helped to be reminded who our student audience was. One participant said that the feedback that made the most impact on her was "the assumptions I make regarding my students, and how aware I need to be of the population in front of me. An observer told me that I had said something in class that could be disempowering to my students. I was discussing how low socioeconomic status is a risk factor in academic achievement. My colleague reminded me that these students don't have the world experience to be able to see the rest of the picture: their own protective factors, the agency they have to change the outcomes, the difference between acknowledging a correlation and viewing it as being doomed to failure. This feedback sparked a conversation between me and my students that both enhanced their understanding of the course content and also reestablished their sense of control over their own fate." Such reminders help us to create a safe classroom climate for our students by encouraging sensitivity and cultural awareness.

Creating a safe environment for peer observation

Faculty members consistently communicated that their deepest learning from the peer observation process came about because conversations felt comfortable even when discussing areas of improvement which may have otherwise been construed as unnecessarily negative. The social constructs of departmental culture do not naturally lend themselves to observations about demeanor and tone in the classroom unless they are a severe problem, as opposed to subtle issues. It is unlikely that a member of a tenure committee would mention facial expressions and body language for example.

Because the peer group neither held authority over individual promotion and tenure decisions nor were members of the same program, we were able to share honest, formative feedback among experienced practitioners. One faculty member described her experience best: "Primarily, I know that this group of peers has only my growth as motivation when they observe me. There are no politics, competition, assessment, or future tenure decisions framing their perception. They watch for my successes and for points of weakness, not to track or judge my progress, but to help pull me higher towards our mutual goal: to give the very best to our students that we have to offer. Consequently, I was never anxious to see them enter my classroom. It felt like an opportunity, rather than a test." Being imperfect was not seen as a failure but as an opportunity to become a better professor. Trying to learn, rather than judging or evaluating, helped us struggle through the tough comments. Difficult conversations were possible because of our mutual willingness to let our guards down with one

another and be specific with feedback. And they were difficult, primarily for those in the role of giving the feedback.

Why was this FLC a safe space in which to give feedback? Typically summative observations are one of two types: (1) they are within individual disciplines and so are primarily focused upon content or (2) they are made by an administrator (i.e. a chair or dean) who has a goal of an evaluation to put in your file. Work colleagues operating in a role of authority are more likely to make only generalized comments about classroom climate because they would not want to appear idiosyncratic in their judgments in such a high stakes situation. However, as peers in an interdisciplinary setting, we were forced to focus on course climate and student engagement. This freed the visitor to focus on the professor's pedagogy, their methods, and their interactions with the students. One participant, who sometimes found herself overlapping in others' content, said, "Being in a classroom where I was not the expert on the content, and in fact had no prior knowledge of the content, allowed me to focus on the climate in the classroom. In those classrooms where I did have prior knowledge of the subject, that was not the case. I was focusing on whether they were `getting it', meaning the content." This factor fundamentally changed the dynamic in the conversations we were able to have after a visit. "We could hear what each person was saying and not look for underlying bias or intent behind it. Do not get me wrong, sometimes the message was hard to hear. We all knew that the only intent was to help us become better teachers." We found that often being the observer was more difficult because we did not want to hurt our colleagues and honest feedback might have been perceived as critical. "On occasion, I felt awkward and uncomfortable, recognizing a moment where a mistake, an unconscious one, was made at the expense of a student, or students. At the same time, I realized that we all do it at one point or another. I debated over whether to bring it up or leave it be. I brought it up, and I believe the discussion went well." Although we found such frank honesty to be challenging, this experience has resulted in the development of friendships (a benefit commonly reported by members of faculty learning communities, Glowacki-Dudka & Brown, 2007).

One outcome of the project was the great amount of support that we were able to provide each other. We had the opportunity to provide affirmation, insight, and compassion to our colleagues during a challenging transition in our careers. "Working together on this project has helped me struggle through the institutional transition with support, and I believe has led to an easier transition. It also created a very strong feeling of solidarity among our cohort, the foundation of which was laid in new faculty orientation." The support makes the move to a new campus easier because we could see that the issues unique to our institution were actually experienced by many of us. This was much less isolating.

Observing student engagement and critical thinking in the classroom

What is student engagement? Is it different from paying attention? How do we encourage critical thinking in the classroom? These questions about higher-order processing skills were a continuing theme throughout the project. Observers commented in post-observation conversations and in group meetings that overall the students were paying attention by listening to classroom discourse, but there were still

questions about engagement. Students were passively listening and waiting for answers to be given without ownership or a sense of educational responsibility. In her reflection, one participant said, "I am reconsidering how I assess student engagement. Prior to this experience, I had not considered engagement as separate from attention. I thought that if they were attending and I could inspire interest, that <u>was</u> classroom engagement."

It took a few conversations for us to say this, but once we did, the metaphorical conversational floodgates opened. Acknowledging a lack of deep engagement led to questions about how to create a supportive environment that encourages and in fact sets the expectation for critical thinking in the classroom. Although the majority of the initial questions concerned critical thinking, having a goal to help students develop critical thinking skills and letting them do that in the classroom are two vastly different things. As one participant wrote, "If I want a learning environment that is engaged, I have to do activities in class that deserve their attention." The majority of observations concerned engagement and how we promote it. Allowing the conversations about engagement to happen gave participants time to think about what was necessary for critical thinking.

Discussion

Joining a new institution of higher education can be isolating even for the experienced educator. We found this isolation to be ameliorated significantly through our peer observation FLC. The greatest value in this project was the support developed within our cohort and the significant impact of observing peers engaged in effective, creative, and innovative teaching pedagogies. We are better teachers because of this process. It has helped us learn how to meet the unique needs of our students.

Our project and process originated from within a structured new faculty seminar, however the tools employed could easily be replicated by other institutions. Key factors to consider include forming an interdisciplinary group, having a safe and open environment, and individualizing teaching goals. It is worth expounding on the fact that this project was among new faculty members that were experienced at other institutions, some of whom had tenure at those institutions, while others had several years of teaching experience. This project may not have been as beneficial to an entry-level faculty member whose concerns are quite different. While the project had positive net benefits, the remainder of this section reflects upon the challenges experienced during the observation and post-observation process.

An important limitation to consider in this project is that qualitative research is not generalizable. There can be no external validity or any "cause and effect" outcomes, there can only be our interpretations and understandings. The knowledge that we obtained was heavily influenced by our own philosophies and interpretations. Some of the themes that emerged came about because of the questions we asked. However, choosing a self-study cleared the way for deep reflection and productive data-collection practices such as field work and focused conversation (Barlow et al., 2004, Johnsen et al., 2009).

This project has additional limitations that should be acknowledged. First it included a strong regional and economic focus; our student body is a very specific population so

emergent themes may not be applicable in other settings. Additionally, since we were focused on specific faculty members, our concerns may not be those of faculty members at other institutions. Furthermore, although many courses were observed over the course of the semester, we were not in one another's classrooms every day so the events were a snapshot of the full story. One participant brought up an interesting question, "How can singular observations be representative of a typical class? …no single day is representative."

We faced several challenges over the course of the project. Scheduling the visits and the debriefings was difficult. On the whole, each member successfully visited each other's classes, but not without struggle. "The biggest challenge I faced was the logistical scheduling problem. Doing ten observations over the course of the semester and having so many observations in my class was so difficult to schedule, especially with post-conferencing requirements." Because of scheduling difficulties, some participants were only observed once by some members. This difficulty was exacerbated towards the end of the semester, when deadlines for other job requirements became omnipresent.

Having others in the classroom, even friendly observers, was also challenging, as it may lead to feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment. One participant wrote: "Although I realize that I am not responsible for the actions of all of my students, when they did not engage or participate I felt responsible and sometimes embarrassed by their actions. This feeling also emerged when my lessons did not go as planned or when an obvious flaw in my instruction was pointed out by a colleague." Some participants spoke about how those feelings impacted how they thought about the authenticity of their instruction. One participant spoke about resisting the urge to over-prepare. This faculty member did not want to modify her teaching because she felt it was important "to actually see my weaknesses and help me address them. It was hard not to give in to the temptation to hide the things I want to improve on." This speaks to the idea that having an outside person in the classroom changes the dynamic of the classroom.

The post-observation meeting, while crucial to the overall process was, for many, the most stressful. Concerns over politeness and the feeling of defensiveness were two of the more common reactions to the debriefing. Creating safe spaces for feedback was at the core of this issue. "When giving feedback on a class as the observer, it is easy to be polite. It is much more difficult to give real feedback that is not always pleasant. I must interact with everyone beyond the scope of the project as well!" As friendships developed among the participants, the risk of hurting a colleague's feelings reduced for some and grew for others. One participant mentioned that honesty might be construed as critical which could possibly risk collegiality while another said that with increased trust came increased honesty. This concern was not an imagined risk because others participants spoke about feeling defensive when observers were critical. "I felt myself being defensive or dismissive every time someone said anything negative. It took a bit to then listen and absorb what the observer was saying."

Conclusion

The peer observation project of new but experienced faculty to an institution can be an excellent way to improve teaching. Faculty members in this situation face different,

subtler transition issues than entry-level faculty members. Taking advantage of the solidarity formed from new faculty orientation and the first semester's meetings allowed us to expand our understanding of the new student culture. We discovered an approach where we, as new but experienced faculty members, could recalibrate our teaching styles to a new student body through specific, individualized feedback. "My peers may have hit on some contributing aspects here that never would have come out in a summative observation." Operating without institutional knowledge allows a unique perspective that existing faculty lack.

As higher education institutions consolidate and faculty move across institutions, colleges need to be aware of how to accommodate new, yet experienced faculty in a different, yet acclimating way. The literature search yielded little in this area and thus yields a wealth of new research directions.

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