

Companions on the Journey

My Philosophy of Professional Development
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My own philosophy is that “every writer is a developing writer.” As a voracious reader, I know that even published authors improve with practice. Mark Twain developed significantly as a writer between the publication of Tom Sawyer and that of Huckleberry Finn. Louisa May Alcott wrote pulp fiction for years before she produced Little Women (although her early work wasn’t nearly as bad as she thought it was). Contemporary authors are much the same. If you read carefully, you can often trace the development of your favorite writer through the body of his or her work.

If [even] professional writers are always improving, don’t you think you can probably improve as well? I think you can, and my goal is to help you do just that.

--Excerpt from Syllabus, English 101.10

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Just as firmly as I believe that “every writer is a developing writer,” I believe that “every teacher is a developing teacher.” Learning to teach—like learning to write—is a developmental process to which those of us who wish to be successful—even exceptional—educators must be willing to make a life-long commitment. This belief lies at the heart of my philosophy of faculty development.

Because every teacher is a developing teacher—and because faculty developers are teachers at heart—we too are constantly developing. Each day we spend talking to and working with colleagues provides us with new insights into teaching and learning and with new opportunities for growth. Thus, we are neither “sages on stages” nor “guides by the sides” of the colleagues who seek us out. Rather, we are companions on the journey to teaching excellence.

This understanding of faculty development as a shared journey has its roots in my teaching, my work as an administrator, and my involvement with three national organizations which have professional development as their focus: the National Writing Project, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Professional Organizational Developers Network. From each of these influences I have drawn key concepts and deepened understandings that have led to the formation of the following “core beliefs” about faculty development.

CORE BELIEFS ABOUT FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

1. **The most important outcome of successful faculty development is improved student learning.**

While this is also the most difficult outcome to assess, improved student learning must be the ultimate aim of any faculty development effort. The fundamental goal of the university is the education of productive, well-informed, highly-engaged citizens capable of appreciating and

contributing to the world in which we live. This goal is best accomplished through effective instruction both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, the full range of programs, services and resources offered by the faculty development center must be developed with an eye toward promoting and supporting effective instruction in a variety of contexts.

2. Successful faculty development programs are responsive to campus climate and culture, providing support for educational initiatives at the university, college, and departmental levels.

The faculty development center cannot and must not operate in a vacuum. If it is to be effective in improving student learning, it must remain attuned to the wide range of learning initiatives occurring at any given moment. Once such initiatives have been identified, it is up to the faculty development center to highlight or create programs, services, and resources that support them.

3. Successful faculty development programs involve their constituents in an on-going process of needs assessment and are responsive to those needs.

The assessment of constituent needs must be both wide and deep, involving occasional surveys of faculty, regular conversations with deans and department chairs, the development of a network of faculty liaisons, and the solicitation of ideas and feedback from small groups and individual faculty members. Once needs have been identified—whether they be individual or campus-wide—it is incumbent upon the faculty development center to be as responsive to those needs as time and resources allow. If the center is unable to meet a need promptly, it has a responsibility to communicate with its constituents to explain why the need is not being met in a timely manner.

4. Successful faculty development programs support all teachers at every level of development and every stage of their careers.

Because becoming a master teacher is a life-long process requiring a life-long commitment to professional development, the faculty development center must not be seen as places where “bad teachers” go to be “fixed.” Rather, they must be seen as places where all teachers—from first-year faculty through seasoned veterans—can find companions willing to accompany them on the journey to their next level of development.

5. Successful faculty development programs provide a variety of programming, resources and services designed to address a range of individual professional development goals.

Like our students, our colleagues come to us with a wide range of preferred learning styles. While some may benefit from day-long symposia or showcases, interacting with dozens of their colleagues in a variety ways, others will learn more easily from one-on-one consultations, from opportunities for online dialogues via discussion boards or listservs, or from hands-on workshops in classrooms and computer labs. Thus, it is the responsibility of the faculty development center to provide programming, resources, and services with a full range of diverse learners in mind.

6. Successful faculty development is voluntary, formative, timely, confidential, and on-going.

Central to the success of on-going faculty development is a deep sense of mutual respect and confidence between faculty members and all members of the faculty development center staff. Thus, it is incumbent upon all members of the faculty development center staff to take very seriously the guidelines for ethical practice that inform our profession. Chief among these, of course, is confidentiality, but also important are the voluntary and formative nature of every interaction. Only when these conditions are met can we succeed in winning the trust of our faculty colleagues, and it is only by winning the trust and respect of our faculty colleagues that

we can hope to engage them in the sustained practice of on-going professional growth.

7. Successful faculty development programs “practice what they preach,” providing models of sound instructional design and implementation.

A lecture about active learning is the antithesis of effective faculty development. The most effective way to convince anyone of anything is through first-hand experience; and convincing faculty of the efficacy of good practice is no exception. Often, it is only through experiencing effective teaching strategies that faculty come to recognize their effectiveness. For this reason, good faculty developers integrate a variety of sound instructional strategies into their faculty development undertakings. The most successful faculty development workshop is one after which participants can say, “I learned a lot about X; do you think the activity we used in this workshop would work in my classroom?”

8. Successful faculty development programs are built on a solid foundation of theory and research.

Take a large helping of curiosity and sprinkle it liberally with healthy skepticism and you have a researcher. Because most faculty are both teachers AND researchers, it is not enough for faculty developers to be able to answer the question, “How can I do that?” We must also be prepared to answer the questions, “How do you know that?” and “Why should I do that?” The world is full of theories about and research into teaching and learning. It is the role of the faculty development center to foster practice that is informed by both.

9. Successful faculty development programs and faculty developers continually assess their own effectiveness and value.

Routine, on-going assessment lies at the heart of successful faculty development. From assessing faculty needs to assessing the effectiveness of programming and of the faculty developers who facilitate it, the faculty development center is responsible for gathering the data it needs to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of its programs, services, and resources as well as their value to the campus community.

10. Successful faculty developers engage in an on-going program of in-house professional development.

Ironically, finding the time to grow professionally can be difficult when one is in the business of promoting professional growth, but that difficulty cannot be used as an excuse for stagnation. Successful faculty development centers must set aside time for in-house professional development . . . and that time must be sacrosanct. Whether it takes the form of in-house reading circles, attendance at conferences and institutes, individual study, or in-house professional development programming, on-going professional development of the faculty development center staff must be intentional and it must be recognized and rewarded.

11. Successful faculty development promotes faculty development.

Every faculty development program, service, and resource is an opportunity to promote other faculty development programs, services, and resources. This kind of “cross-pollination” can be integral to the growth and success of a faculty development center. Successful faculty developers must remind themselves never to plan one program, service, or resource without an eye toward the promotion of another program, service, or resource. We are our own best advertisement.