

We're Not in Kansas Anymore, Toto: Pulling Back the Curtain on a New Institution

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Changing institutions is a challenging adventure. Through a peer observation project, we took advantage of each other's experience and perspective to learn more about our own teaching and our new community. We were struck by interdisciplinary themes that emerged in our self-reflections. This worthwhile endeavor might be replicated by faculty learning communities that embrace openness, a focus on pedagogy rather than content, and a willingness to see teaching through a colleague's eyes.

Outcomes:

Discuss the divergent needs of experienced faculty new to an institution

Consider the benefits of formative over summative observations,

and

Appreciate the strengths of interdisciplinary faculty learning community.

Category: Innovation

Describe the planned innovation addressed in your paper and what motivates it.

Describe what you see in your students', colleagues', or institution's behavior that you want to change. Describe the learning objectives you want students or colleagues to better achieve as a result of your innovation.

The professional development needs of new faculty members within a new college are well

documented. While much of the focus is on acculturating to the new institution, a fair amount of the orientation has traditionally been dedicated to college-level teaching. Our professional development expert empowered us to identify how best to meet the challenges of our transition. In response, we created a formative peer observation project, where we attended each other's classes, provided formative feedback, and established a supportive cohort over our transition year.

The transition to Berea was more difficult than 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 of ambiguity (Bridges, 2010). Our resilient students come from low-income, sometimes troubled backgrounds, too often without the study skills necessary for higher education. Our challenges included: 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. 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).

We discovered the benefit of collegial support in:

Creating a safe space for deep reflection and honest discussion

Focusing feedback on course climate rather than disciplinary content

Observing student engagement and critical thinking in the classroom

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.

If your innovation involves a particular course or curriculum, briefly describe it, its students, and its place in the curriculum or program.

Our innovation involved the participants in a new faculty transition group, which met regularly throughout the year to discuss pedagogy and acculturation to the college. The participants were six female faculty members, all new to the institution but not to teaching. During conversation among the learning community members we found ourselves inspired by the

broad scope of teaching methods, problem solving, and the individual determination to produce a positive learning environment. We formed an interdisciplinary learning community for the purpose of leveraging our expertise. We were supported by faculty development resources in our investigation.

How is your innovation different from ones that others have tried?

The innovation of this project stems from the lack of literature on a specific population of faculty: those who have experience in teaching but who have transitioned to a new institution. 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). Neither the research on new faculty nor the research on senior faculty addressed the situation in which we found ourselves.

The six of us encountered specific challenges related more to the unique culture of the institution than to the newness of serving as a college instructor. We wanted to improve our instruction, but the traditional feedback model has been limited to summative feedback from senior faculty members responsible for tenure decisions. Research on formative peer observation as an alternative has indicated that respect and trust are essential (Cox, 1995). Our learning community members, therefore, with the support of the faculty development director, discussed and implemented alternative ways to support one another through formative evaluation methods.

Assessment and baseline: Indicate how you plan to determine the success and effectiveness of your innovation. If outcomes are not yet available, indicate when they will be (by the time of the session?).

This was a qualitative study, and, as such, we defined success as self-reported personal development and a feeling of being integrated into the college community. We assessed our project through self-reflection and group discussion. Although we did not assess student learning outcomes as a direct result of this intervention, all participants did report a better understanding of the needs of our students.

We also found that we were more motivated and more engaged in our pedagogy, our collaboration within our cohort increased, and we discovered an innovative way to contribute to faculty development within our new institution. We found this process to be a very productive tool for expanding and improving our own teaching and developing our sense of belonging to the institution.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of success is that our diverse but cohesive group found this experience so rewarding that we are continuing to engage in collaborative pedagogical work

and formative assessment with one another. We aim to share this experience with others as a means of supporting faculty through their transition to a new institution.

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Organization:

Discussion Prompt:

Consider differing developmental needs among new faculty, experienced or senior faculty who have spent their entire career at one institution, and faculty who have moved to a new institution during their careers. Participants will discuss in small groups and then share out.

Identify ourselves as third group and discuss our experiences being an interdisciplinary FLC.

Full group discussion:

Participants will be asked to share their most and least helpful in-class observation experiences.

Presenters introduce the three ingredients that made this formative assessment successful. (willingness to address pedagogy rather than content, openness to feedback, focus on faculty needs since we were outside the tenure hierarchy)

Presenters will individually and collaboratively discuss the themes that emerged in our reflections.

Keywords:

Assessment, Formative

Evaluation of Teaching

Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs)

Interdisciplinary/Multidisciplinary

New Faculty

Peer Mentoring

Peer Observation