

Faculty Learning Communities, Institutional and Independent: Exploring How Participation Contributes to Professional Development

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Introduction

Faculty learning communities (FLC) have received considerable attention by the academy in the United States and Europe. This research has primarily examined the history of learning communities (Leigh Smith, 2001; Powell, 1981; Cronon and Jenkins, 1994), and how learning communities provide forums for professional development (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990; Layne, Froyd, Morgan, and Kenimer, 2002) and opportunities for collegial relationships (Boud, 1999). Most recently, educators have focused on how learning communities can facilitate life-long learning in the United States and the European Union (European Commission, 2001; Nyhan, Cressey, Tomassini, Kelleher, and Poell, 2004).

A review of the literature indicates that there are two general types of FLC. On one end of the spectrum is FLC that are affiliated with universities. Most FLC research has focused upon university-affiliated FLC (UFLC). These FLC may have highly structured curricula; others give faculty participants relative autonomy in selecting topics of discussion. On the other end of the spectrum is independent faculty learning communities (IFLC). IFLC have received very little scholarly attention. These learning communities are unstructured and without an institutional affiliation, thus making them difficult to identify and research.

The exploratory research reported here expands upon the FLC literature by looking at the similarities and differences that may exist between UFLC and IFLC. We were interested in gaining insight into whether faculty participated in UFLC and/or IFLC, why they participated, why they chose to not participate, and how they benefited from UFLC and/or IFLC. These issues were examined through close- and open-ended survey questions.

Literature Review

Many university faculty report that they seek assistance with their teaching from their colleagues on a one-to-one basis (Wright and O'Neil, 1995). Public scrutiny or peer review of teaching is rarely a part of university culture. Instead, teaching is frequently seen as a private enterprise, not subject to constructive criticism or open discussion. From this perspective, teaching is not held to traditional scholarly standards, such as those for scholarly research and writing (Boyer, 1990).

Why is teaching held to a lower standard than academic research? Hodges (2006) suggests that many faculty may be reluctant to enter into a dialog about teaching philosophy or teaching practice out of fear that others may find out that s/he knows very little about teaching and learning. Knowles (1980) points out another possible explanation. FLC have not been a place conducive to free and open discussions about teaching. For faculty to feel comfortable talking openly about teaching, the environment must be based upon the basic principles of adult learning. Specifically, learning community participants must feel as though there is respect for their autonomy as a learner and an emphasis upon their voluntary participation in the learning community.

When faculty requests assistance with their teaching performance, it frequently involves stopgap measures that focused on specific techniques rather than on developing a philosophy of teaching and specific techniques that matched their goals (Layne, Froyd, Morgan, and Kenimer 2002). A focus on the techniques of teaching, without the development of a philosophical foundation, is not likely to promote general principles of lifelong learning. This, then, impedes the transference of knowledge across contexts and hinders the advancement of the scholarship of teaching.

Conversely, learning communities that are facilitated properly within a university culture that encourage faculty professional development and the scholarship of teaching will likely see increased

interest in learning communities (Richlin and Cox, 2004). This would be especially true in learner-centered economies in which life-long learning skills are a valued commodity. Faculty learning communities are a principle mechanism to foster the development of “human capital” in a culture that values and supports life-long learning (Layne, Froyd, Morgan, and Kenimer, 2002). Sharing common teaching and learning experiences serve to bridge discipline-specific boundaries, promote interdisciplinary endeavors, and advance of the scholarship of teaching.

The Present Study

Methods

This research was conducted through an online survey, developed based on the literature and our experiences with different types of learning communities. The survey was piloted with several faculty and graduate students. The survey link was e-mailed to 910 teaching faculty and graduate students at Ball State University (a medium sized university in the Midwest of the U.S.). We obtained 173 useable surveys, about 19% of the total population. The survey was comprised of both close- and open-ended questions. This paper examines both the qualitative and quantitative responses related to why instructors participated in UFLC and/or IFLC, why they chose to not participate, and how they benefited.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

The survey respondents represent a cross section of the faculty at Ball State University (BSU). The survey respondents’ academic and demographic characteristics are relatively consistent with the characteristics of full-time faculty from across campus as of Fall 2005 (<http://www.bsu.edu/web/assessment/OIRfacts/FACULTY05.htm>). Specifically, respondents are similar to Ball State University faculty in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, academic credential, and tenure status. The respondents represented the University’s academic colleges.

Findings and Analysis

Of the 173 useable survey responses, 147 (84%) of them indicated that they had participated in at least one FLC. Nearly all (136 of 147, 92%) of those who had experience with FLC had participated in UFLC. The most common forums for UFLC include the university’s teaching and learning office (n=105, 77%), their academic department (n=102, 75%), professional conference-related activities (n=94, 69%), other-university sponsored events (n=47, 34%) and events sponsored by book publishers and software vendors (n=21, 15%). A somewhat smaller number of faculty (n=90, 61%) reported that they had participated in an IFLC. Most IFLC took place in faculty offices (n=79 or 87%), or off campus over coffee (n=53, 59%), a meal (n=60, 67%), or a cocktail (n=18, 20%). As might be expected, most faculty reported that members of their IFLC included those from within their own college (n=88, 98%), faculty from other colleges on campus (n=39, 43%), colleagues at other universities (n=34, 38%), spouses (n=34, 38%), and graduate students (n=23, 26%).

Reasons for Participation in Faculty Learning Communities

Respondents were asked why they participated in faculty learning communities. Several options were provided and respondents could select multiple responses. Table 1 provides the five most commonly mentioned reasons for participating in UFLC and IFLC. As can be seen, respondents had similar reasons for participating in UFLC and IFLC.

Table 1: Reasons for Participation in Faculty Learning Communities

Top 5	UFLC (n=136)	IFLC (n=90)
1.	Talk about teaching (70%)	Talk about teaching (86%)
2.	Gain insights into improved teaching and learning (57%)	Peer input and sharing ideas (78%)

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| 3. | Peer input and sharing ideas (57%) | Gain insights into improved teaching and learning (51%) |
| 4. | Collegiality & connections (46%) | Collegiality & connections (50%) |
| 5. | Strategies to improve teaching (45%) | Strategies to improve teaching (35%) |

*Percentages do not equal 100 due to multiple responses.

However, when asked to elaborate on why they participated in UFLC and IFLC, some differences emerged. For example, many respondents expressed that they felt pressured by their departments or other academic offices on campus to participate in UFLC. As one respondent noted: “Teaching at BSU is very political. It's the politics of t[eaching] and l[earning]. Political correctness is an issue too. It's grounded in the local culture. [It is] required/expected within academic unit. Occasionally I've attended because of special topics of interest within a given department.” A number of respondents mentioned being motivated by stipends or external rewards for attending UFLC. Yet, other participants had loftier goals. As one stated, “I find it extremely beneficial to interact and share ideas not only with peers but also with the facilitators who have more experience. I believe that it not only helps to improve my teaching it also helps to keep my motivation high.” Another respondent mentioned that “Collegiality and connections outside of campus i.e. with faculty at other institutions...” that would help shape the direction of curriculum development was a motivating force to participate.

Several IFLC participants found it important to support and mentor one another while also encouraging dialogue and learning new approaches for teaching. Other reasons for participation in IFLC were driven more by personal improvement and connection to other colleagues in order to think together and share ideas or even to vent concerns. For example, as one respondent state: “Sometimes I have specific questions for a colleague who has already tried something new I'm planning or who is more familiar with a particular student population.” Or, in the words of another respondent: “I try to be a very innovative teacher and need the input of others to bounce my ideas off.” And in the words of yet another respondent, there is a strong desire to establish “social connections with interesting faculty colleagues who also feel passionate about being a great teacher and a great scholar/citizen.”

Benefits from Participation in Faculty Learning Communities

Respondents were asked how they benefited from their participation in faculty learning communities. Again, several options were provided and respondents could select multiple responses. Table 2 provides the five most commonly mentioned benefits derived from participating in UFLC and IFLC. As can be seen, while there are some commonalities, respondents reported that they had derived substantively different benefits from participating in UFLC and IFLC. Perhaps the most substantive difference between UFLC and IFLC is that UFLC participants were interested in teaching strategies and IFLC participants wanted to better understand their students (i.e., learners).

Table 2: Benefits Derived from Participation in Faculty Learning Communities

Top 5	UFLC (n=136)	IFLC (n=90)
1.	Gain teaching strategies (73%)	Understand more about students (98%)
2.	Network with colleagues (57%)	Network with colleagues (73%)
3.	Understand more about students (51%)	Friendships (65%)
4.	Friendships (36%)	Gain teaching strategies (45%)
5.	Receive affirmation (31%)	Receive affirmation (10%)

*Percentages do not equal 100 due to multiple responses.

The open-ended questions further revealed how the benefits differed in the UFLC and the IFLC. For example, in UFLC, faculty benefited through job related activities. They collaborate and help others. They achieved academic and personal goals. For example, “I have expanded my publications to include

pedagogical articles materials and textbooks.” UFLC helped improve program quality. As one respondent put it: “I collaborate with others on the development of instructional technology.” Other respondents said that UFLC provided unique opportunities that lead them to become more balanced teachers. For instance, “It is important to me to put myself in the position as a learner to balance my position as a teacher.” There are also financial benefits to participating in UFLC. It “helps put food on the table”.

In IFLC, the benefits seem to be consistent with the core principles of life-long learning, the desire to understand students, and learning how to be successful in a dynamic and often political university environment. As one respondent aptly wrote: “I think. I learn. I question. These are benefits (regardless of possible application or becoming a better teacher.)” Another stated IFLC helped them “Gain insights into what is going on in teacher-student interaction and with students.” Likewise, another respondent mentioned that “I gain information on the politics of the university that I would otherwise not obtain.” And, going beyond traditional academic boundaries, another respondent stated “I am further developing the mentor relationship with student to extend beyond the point of graduation.”

Reasons for Not Participating in Faculty Learning Communities

Faculty who reported that they did not participate in faculty learning communities were asked to explain why. Several options were provided and respondents could select multiple responses. Table 3 provides the five most commonly mentioned reasons for not participating in UFLC and IFLC. As can be seen, although there are some common reasons why respondents do not participate in UFLC and IFLC, there are several intriguing differences. UFLC and IFLC are similar in two ways. First, most of the respondents who said they did not participate in UFLC said that they “do not have time” to participate. Similarly, the second most common response among those who had not participated in IFLC is that they “do not have time” to do so. Second, the fifth most common response for both the UFLC and IFLC is that “teaching is not highly valued” by the university. But this is where the similarities end. Perhaps the most striking difference is that the third most common response by those who do not participate in UFLC is that “students have the responsibility to learn.” This reason did not make the top 5 for those who said that they do not participate in IFLC. Instead, the third most common response for those who do not participate in IFLC is that they “did not know that such resources were available.” It is also noteworthy to mention that while “don’t need assistance” is the primary reason why respondents do not participate in IFLC, it is the fourth most common reason mentioned by those who do not participate in UFLC.

Table 3: Reasons for Not Participating in Faculty Learning Communities

	Top 5 UFLC (n=37)	IFLC (n=83)
	1. Do not have time (31%)	Don’t need assistance (26%)
	2. Busy research agenda (19%)	Do not have time (19%)
(16%)	3. Students are responsible for their learning (16%)	Didn't know resources were available
	4. Don’t need assistance (12%)	Busy research agenda (9%)
(8%)	5. Teaching not highly valued (11%)	Teaching not highly valued

Multiple responses reported. Percentages are based on the number of responses

The perception that one does not have the time for learning communities and that teaching is not highly valued on campus dominated the responses to open-ended questions for both the UFLC and IFLC. For example, one respondent mentioned that “Time is the biggest problem. I teach 9 hours + am researching and have a hard time fitting everything in.” Another respondent conceded that “I guess I have just been too busy with other kinds of personal development and my departmental duties.” Likewise, another respondent noted that “I have a very heavy course load and there are not enough time slots in the

day which [I] can utilize.” Yet another respondent believes that some faculty are too independent to engage in learning communities, and even if participation was desired there simply is not enough time in the day. We teachers are often too independent to work with one another well. I am in the school of nursing which requires me to teach from 8am-5pm most days...this does not allow me [time] to attend many discussions.” It was also mentioned that participating in either UFLC or IFLC was enough, and without incentives many respondents simply did not want to participate in either learning community.

The written comments sometimes go in an entirely different direction. For example, as one respondent wrote: “If I don't know how to teach well at this point in my career I shouldn't be in this profession!” Other respondents were simply unwilling to invest any more time than they already do. In one respondent's own words, “As a contract faculty I tend to NOT put a lot of extra time into extra activities on campus (I am already involved in the Freshman Reader selection committee.)” There is also the lack of respect for and a deep seeded distrust of colleagues. For example, “Sometimes these faculty meetings can turn into a bitch fest if there isn't a strong agenda at the outset. When a particular goal is set the sessions go much better!” Another respondent asserts that “There have been instances where I have chosen not to participate and the most common reason is that I do not trust the motives or integrity of my colleagues or I do not believe they are intellectually or emotionally capable of entering into such a discussion without an adverse emotional reaction.”

Conclusions

UFLC and IFLC are popular among teaching faculty. As learning communities, UFLC and IFLC are valuable resources for professional development, fostering collegial relationships, and seeking peer input. Both types of learning communities are perceived as benefiting those who participate by providing insight into student needs and teaching strategies. But this exploratory study appears to suggest that the structure of the learning communities and perhaps the motivations behind participants have an affect on the potential benefits of participation.

And what about those who choose to not participate in FLC? There appear to be those who have decided that they do not have a need for what FLC have to offer. Perhaps they may perceive themselves as being effective instructors. Or they may believe that given the relatively low status associated with teaching on campus that their abilities to educate are “good enough” and not in need of refinement. Conflicting demands on one's time, especially those associated with research endeavors, appear to have an affect on the value one places on teaching, regardless of perceived pressures by the university to publish.

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