Sustaining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A Campus-based Community of Practice

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Abstract:

This article introduces and summarizes a series of articles on the work of the scholarship of teaching and learning at a single institution and the efforts involved in sustaining an initiative. The primary factors discussed are a focus on student learning, the importance of mentoring relationships, and connections made to larger, outside scholarship communities.

Key Words:

scholarship of teaching and learning, teaching communities, institutional effectiveness.

Introduction

It can be argued that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has reached a stage of maturity in higher education. The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) has been in existence since 2004 and as of the end of 2012 will have hosted a conference for the exchange of ideas on three continents. The CASTL program (Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) nurtured scholars for 10 years through its individual fellowship program and campus initiatives. However, as with many innovations in education, one of the challenges now remaining is how to sustain the practice after the initial momentum has subsided. In their excellent book, *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact* (2011) authors Mary Huber, Pat Hutchings, and Anthony Ciccone look back on the conditions that produced the ideas beyond the scholarship of teaching and learning and make recommendations for the future of the endeavor. In their volume, they make a strong case for how the integration of SOTL into the fabric of an institution may take place through examining reports from campuses that have worked towards that goal. Future recommendations suggest that to create a culture of support for SoTL, faculty and campus leaders need to work in tandem to

recognize and support the work. Finding ways to connect SoTL to other initiatives (such as assessment or service-learning) helps to strengthen individual faculty and administrator efforts while also helping the larger campus community to see the benefits of this way of rethinking more traditional approaches to teaching and student learning.

In *The Advancement of Learning* (2005), authors Pat Hutchings and Mary Huber argue for the creation of faculty learning communities as one means for sustaining a focus on student learning in higher education.

In this article I describe a faculty community of practice that has existed at my institution, Rockhurst University, whose experiences map onto several elements of those suggested by Huber, Hutchings, and Ciccone (2011). In this sense, the experience of those at our institution can be offered as an existence proof for their recommendations and reflections. Our community has existed for a little over ten years now and is offered here as an exemplar of a sustained, working community. Like any institution of higher learning, Rockhurst University has its unique attributes but also has enough commonality with other institutions for our lessons learned to generalize. A few brief facts about our institution: the university can be found in an urban neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri, and has roughly 1200 undergraduate and 300 graduate students in a variety of academic and professional programs. It is categorized as a Master's level institution in the Carnegie classification system in the U.S. We are private and affiliated with the Jesuit tradition of Catholicism. Undergraduate students are largely in the traditional age group of 17-22 and tend to live on campus. A stated emphasis on teaching exists as well as the expectation that faculty members engage in other activities such as scholarship, faculty governance, and individual work with students. But like faculty on most campuses, ours feel busy and pulled in many different directions. The distribution of time across activities may vary from institution to institution, but the modal faculty member feels there is not room for additional work (Easthope &Easthope, 2000; Milem, Berger & Dey, 2000). Creating the time and space for any new activity is fraught with these challenges. Despite those challenges, our community was created in the hopes of finding a place for faculty to engage in this new area known as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Early Development of the Community

As exists with many new initiatives, a confluence of multiple conditions occurred that led to the creation of our faculty learning community. In the very beginning we were prompted by groups in higher education that were calling for increased attention to teaching and learning. In 1998, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching began a new program for faculty to investigate the learning of students in their classes. This program, known as CASTL, provided opportunities for campuses to consider the new ideas emerging from the scholarship of teaching and learning movement. So in 1999, like many other campuses, ours accepted an open invitation from the Carnegie Foundation to participate in their Campus Conversations program. At the same time, faculty in the Math Department had been part of a national conversation in their disciplinary societies about reforming the teaching of calculus that was addressing the same issues: shifting a focus from teaching to learning, understanding more deeply how our students learn and considerations of teaching investigations as

scholarship. So like on many other campuses, a group of interested faculty spent a year in discussion of definitions of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning that would be appropriate to the size and mission of our institution.

As these forces in national higher education pushed from the outside, there were faculty members in the university who were willing to take on leadership roles that spearheaded the campus work. One faculty member, an early CASTL scholar, led brown bag sessions about SoTL and met with Advancement Officers and potential private donors. Another faculty member served on the Rank & Tenure committee and helped other committee members to understand this new type of faculty work. A sympathetic Dean committed a small amount of start-up money until a moderate private donation was received a year or so later. Cheryl McConnell writes about these efforts in more detail in this series of papers.

Faculty members also reported that they enjoyed the camaraderie and interdisciplinary conversations that were generated by the group. We simply had fun and interesting academic exchanges that kept us in the community. These are not surprising or unusual motivations since most all of us long for that sense of belonging and pursuit of shared interests that comprise any community (see Watson, 1994, for a discussion of the roles of community). These very real human motivations can be just as important as a desire to engage issues of pedagogy and student learning outcomes.

Because of the multiple external and internal supports, a positive tone was set for our community beginnings. Faculty members from across the institution were drawn to initial meetings where they began sharing their questions related to student learning. Initially there were about 15-20 faculty members who comprised the core of the community. Disciplinary backgrounds represented included Biology, Mathematics, Communications, Management, Accounting, Psychology, and others. Partly because of this cross-institution participation, our community quickly evolved into one that was topically and experientially blended. This blending is a little different from many other faculty groups formed to address issues of student learning. Some of those faculty groups are organized around particular topics such as service-learning pedagogy or teaching the first year student, while others are organized by cohort. New faculty are often grouped together to become socialized to their new teaching homes as well as to address issues related to the classroom. See Richlin and Cox (2004) for more detailed discussions of faculty learning communities.

What does our community do today? The primary activities of our group now are actually quite similar to the ones that were engaged in during its development. Our most frequent activity is meeting to discuss faculty projects. This has always been the centerpiece of our community. But now, thanks to large-scale studies on teaching and learning, we can focus our efforts on developed scholarship of teaching and learning methodologies and high impact teaching practices (Kuh, 2008). Despite sometimes heavy preparation for these meetings (reading descriptions of faculty projects or the literature grounding the project), they are still the most popular of all of our activities. Community members also provide individual mentoring for those who request it, as well as conduct brown-bag sessions open to all. And we have found that there is work that needs to be done in faculty governance and administrative realms on an ongoing basis. As was true in the early years, the current community is one that is academically

diverse. While some of the initial members are no longer in the community, having moved on or retired, the wide range of faculty participation still exists.

While perhaps seeming less focused, the mix of teaching questions and teaching experience has proven to be a strength of this community and likely has contributed to a sustainable group. As our institution has had an ongoing faculty learning community for just over 10 years, it seemed time to reflect on its success and make public our lessons learned while also sharing examples of faculty work from those within the community.

Due to the academically diverse nature of the group, it has been useful to focus on the *campus* as a unit for analysis and an important lens in illuminating the factors that have led to community sustainability. Mary Huber and Pat Hutchings refer to this as the "campus as commons" in their book, *The Advancement of Learning* (p. 82) and provide a range of examples of the kinds of activities that seem to elicit cross-campus participation. In this sense, this volume serves as an existence proof and an exemplar of what is possible, what challenges must be tackled, and what benefits follow from the development of this kind of scholarly community on campus.

Sustaining Factors

The hope that faculty communities of practice could be a structure that helps to sustain the scholarship of teaching and learning has been written about elsewhere (see Hutchings and Shulman, 1999, for an important early discussion of the topic). Researchers who have studied faculty learning communities have pointed to important key elements that make them work (e.g., Richlin & Cox, 2004). Yet the extent to which communities are sustained over time has not received as much focus. Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone (2011) offer an important examination of this issue.

After reflecting on the creation and sustainment of our faculty community, four important elements or themes emerged: a focus on student learning, the opportunity to engage in mentoring relationships, institutional support and recognition, and ties to communities outside of our university. As you read the articles that follow, note how each author refers to at least one, if not all, of these elements as it helped them move forward with their work and shape their commitment to the group. While other elements certainly impacted individual faculty and their desire to continue, the factors listed did appear to be three key elements of the structure of our community.

1. Focus on Student Learning.

One important aspect of our community structure was its broad focus on "improving student learning." As an alternative to a topic-based community (e.g., service-learning) this wider focus seemed to allow for different people to move in and out and to examine classroom problems regardless of discipline or a faculty member's point in their career. This diversity in background and experience meant that many different perspectives and ideas could be discussed and pursued. Most faculty members experienced rich conversations full of fruitful ideas when bringing their teaching work to the group for discussion.

In addition to creating a diverse group of faculty with a wide range of expertise, a focus on student learning is a relevant one. The Association of Colleges and

Universities (AAC&U) argued that a focus on student learning in higher education is critically needed, now more than ever:

> The panel concludes that change is urgently needed. Even as college attendance is rising, the performance of too many students is faltering. Public policies have focused on getting students into college, but not on what they are expected to accomplish once there. The result is that the college experience is a revolving door for millions of students, while the college years are poorly spent by many others (*Greater Expectations Final Report*, 2006, AAC&U)

The projects described in this edition are, while on a variety of topics and pedagogical approaches, focused on improving student learning as it is defined in their courses and by their academic departments. A common theme in those articles is how faculty were often dissatisfied with the degree or type of learning in their courses and so were compelled to seek out strategies for measuring what is learned as well as strategies for enhancing that learning. In their article in this special issue, Mairead Greene and Paula Shorter (2012) address their concerns about deepening student learning in their pre-calculus courses. While certainly not universal, many faculty members do agree with the conclusions reached by AAC&U and wish to address the concerns raised.

An initiative with a focus on student learning is also one that campus administrators find they can support. While there are certainly costs to any new academic program—small stipends for workshops, reassigned time, institute or conference participation—the pay-off to campuses in terms of retaining students, improving faculty-student relationships, and creating a culture of assessment and intentionality can lead to improved accreditation processes and outcomes. These are outcomes that all stakeholders desire.

2. Mentoring relationships.

Mentoring has long been looked to as an important developmental tool in academia, especially for new faculty. The importance of mentoring new faculty has received notice as an important process that provides guidance and counseling to the new academic and one that creates relationships that can aid in retaining new faculty. Research on faculty retention has shown that an absence of mentoring can be a critical factor in a faculty member's desire to stay at an institution (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990; Klawe & Leveson, 1995; Turner, Myers & Creswell, 1999). Yet exactly the form that a mentoring program or relationship should optimally take is not always clear. Should it be a one-to-one relationship or have some other structure? There is some emerging research that group-based mentoring models are more effective when compared to dyadic models. Pololi & Knight (2005, p 866) found support for this idea in the field of academic medicine. They summarize their findings that group, peer-based mentoring models were ". . . likely to be an effective and predictably reliable form of mentoring for both men and women in academic medicine."

But our community is intergenerational in nature, not peer-based. Yet the intergenerational characteristic seems to be an important feature of our community sustainability and directly takes advantage of the differing levels of experience in the group. This feature was noted in a study of doctoral programs in the United States and

reported by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the monograph, The Formation of scholars: Rethinking doctoral education for the 21st century. In that monograph the authors suggested that one important factor of an intellectual community was one that was diverse and multigenerational.

> "An intellectual community able to stimulate new ideas and development is one with an appreciation for the generative potential of multiple perspectives. Far from requiring agreement on everything, true intellectual exchange must include a wide range of opinions that can challenge and inform thinking." (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008, p 42)

As our community was experientially diverse, a situation was created in which some members more often offered critique while others more often received such comments.

Those new to this type of inquiry into teaching and learning reported the valuable advice they received to develop their projects and in advancing and how important it was to receive early feedback and to be challenged on initial conclusions. Yet more experienced inquirers into student learning discussed how the giving of advice helped to clarify their own work while also providing a sense of "passing on the torch" to the next generation. That latter sentiment is descriptive of "mutual mentoring" (Harnish & Wild, 1994). Harnish & Wild suggested that both mentors and mentees experience positive outcomes from the mentoring process. This is an apt description of interactions experienced by faculty in our group. More experienced faculty spoke of the revitalizing nature of working with younger faculty and how working with them made them feel like more effective professionals. They also spoke some of the responsibility felt to provide sound guidance even when that meant learning about a new teaching method or grading technique used by a new member of the community.

Yet the clear roles of senior faculty always as "experts" and junior faculty always as "novices" were somewhat fluid. Because faculty are often working outside of their disciplinary expertise, even experienced community members want and benefit from the advice of others in the group. This is not a very uncommon experience as very few faculty members see themselves as experts in investigating the learning of their students. A sense of "what am I doing?" often pervades the teaching investigations of faculty even though they usually think of themselves as knowledgeable and extremely competent professionals in other domains. In fact, most of us are not experts on issues of pedagogy or teaching techniques. College and university teachers are most often experts in their discipline content only and have traditionally learned to be classroom teachers through trial and error. Feelings of doubt and insecurity are natural consequences of working in new domains of teaching and learning.

Paradoxically, these attitudes may lead group members to feel more like equal peers and that they are on a journey of discovery together. This collaborative spirit seems to be different from the experience many scholars have in their disciplinary contexts where feelings of animosity or jealousy can prevent constructive exchanges of ideas. Our community was instead characterized by an open and trusting atmosphere. As such, more healthy mentoring relationships were formed.

3. <u>Institutional support.</u>

The work of faculty focused on improving the learning of their students has inherent benefit. Yet this work also takes on additional meaning when it is explicitly valued by the institution. In her article in this special issue, Jennifer Oliver (2012) reflects on how her participation in institutional assessment efforts led to her inquiry into students' critical thinking in a psychology course. Viewed this way, her work benefits the students in her courses as well as informs the larger questions that administrators ask about teaching and learning.

4. <u>Ties to Other Communities</u>.

While our campus-based community experienced stability from within through the "big tent" approach to topics and the development of mentoring relationships, it is also strengthened by its ties and links with the larger community of teaching and learning scholars. This is the third variable noted in achieving a sustained community.

Early ties to initiatives in higher education, like those described earlier at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, set the tone that our campus work was connected to a larger national community of like-minded scholars. We maintained those connections over the ensuing 10 years by sponsoring individual scholars and through co-facilitating the National CASTL Institute. Connections expanded as several of our group members joined the new organization devoted to teaching and learning, ISSOTL. The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning serves as an important professional association for the many individuals and communities involved in teaching and learning work. Just as in their disciplinary contexts, academics typically want to connect with other scholars in their field.

Increased opportunities for critical feedback and recognition of work exist by expanding the parameters of community. Since academic diversity helped to provide the varied backgrounds and viewpoints important for quality intellectual work in our local community, it can only follow that a broader community would enhance the quality work that much more. Feedback received from conference paper reviewers, journal editors, and the many others who read and attend presentations of our work only help a project's trajectory. The direction of influence goes the other way as well as community members pass on their ideas to others, increasing the potential impact of their work. And it is not just the sharing of information that is important, but also the very real sense of recognition for work well done. Acceptances for conference papers or journal articles provide a very real currency for increased recognition on the home campus as well.

Connections to wider and wider audiences suggest that there are *circles of community* (see Figure 1). Yet the circles also interconnect to maintain vibrancy and cross-fertilization of ideas. This happens by widening the exposure of work as well as its potential impacts. Think of the smallest circle as representing the local campus community where scholars do the core of the work. At this core is where faculty members teach and investigate student learning. Outer layers or circles represent expanding regional, national, and international levels of activity. Both the individual circles as well as the intersections between the circles are where information is shared,

or what Huber & Hutchings (2005) have called the teaching commons. They describe the commons as

> An emergent conceptual space for exchange and community among faculty, students, administrators, and all others committed to learning as an essential activity of life in contemporary democratic society. (p.1)
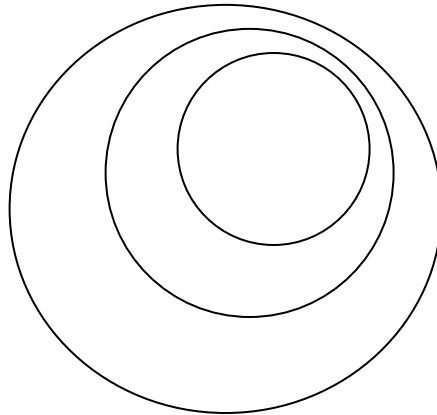
Figure 1: Circles of Community

Of course, individual faculty will inhabit different circles at different times and help to transmit knowledge between the circles of community. Steve Brown's (2012) project described in this issue benefited from visits and poster presentations of his work to consecutive ISSOTL conferences that helped to reshape his work with students' scientific literacy. Both Annie Lee's (2012) and Laura Salem's (2012) projects involve community-based learning in science courses. The existing literature and practice in that area helped them through the connections to that broader community. All of the authors represented here have benefited through a participation in a national community of scholars.

As we look back over the last ten years of our community of practice it seems likely that a blend of cohorts and a blend of specific topics created a climate for cross-disciplinary learning and healthy mentoring relationships. And connections to other communities of teaching and learning scholars strengthened the group through critical feedback and opportunities for public sharing of the work. These three broad factors have helped to sustain this community for a decade. We are looking forward to the next one.

Outline of Articles

The articles that follow represent work by each instructor in the community of practice that was informed by public discussions of their inquiries into student learning. Each contributing author both reports on their classroom inquiry and reflects on how the public critique so much part of a faculty community, impacted the progress of that inquiry. A particular focus of that reflection will be how the process of mentoring (either received or given) impacted the work. In this way readers will be able to see both

examples of work as a result of a faculty community as well as learn from the process involved to nurture and sustain that community.

Another article included here summarizes the reflections of one campus administrator who was a key player in our work (McConnell, 2012). In that piece she discusses the benefits of this work and why a campus perspective is an important and relevant one. Cheryl McConnell, Interim Dean of the Helzberg School of Business and Professor of Accounting, describes the history of this work at Rockhurst University and speaks to the central aspects of the process that could potentially be adopted and adapted by other campuses.

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