Evaluating a teaching development grants program: Our framework, process, initial findings, and reflections

Gregory Hum *, Cheryl Amundsen, Esma Emmioglu

Simon Fraser University, Faculty of Education, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, Canada

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the design and evaluation of a teaching development grants program that provides small grants enabling instructors to implement, and/or systematically investigate new teaching approaches, new teaching tools, or curricular processes. The program evaluation draws on multiple levels and types of evidence directly linked to our program goals. A detailed and reflective account of our ongoing evaluation process including tools and methods, preliminary findings, and challenges is provided. We also explicitly seek to connect and compare our work and findings to similar initiatives. This work provides our emerging evidence for the efficacy of grant-based initiatives, finds resonance to others' findings, and provides a foundation from which to foster further evaluation and discussion.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the Teaching and Learning Development Grants (TLDG) program, discuss how we are evaluating this program, and share our initial evaluation findings. The TLDG is based on the idea that teaching and student learning can be improved through the systematic investigation and dissemination that characterizes other scholarly work. Ernest Boyer (1990) first termed this as the *scholarship of teaching*. It is now widely referred to as the *scholarship of teaching and learning*, or simply, SoTL. The TLDG program, in concert with this notion, provides grants (up to $5000 CAD) and other support to enable instructors[1] to identify questions about teaching and learning of interest to them, conduct a systematic investigation, and share their findings with colleagues. The TLDG is conceived as a broad educational development strategy. We use the term *educational development* to describe "actions, planned and undertaken by instructors themselves or by others working with instructors,

aimed at enhancing teaching and learning" (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012, p. 90).

A prominent critique in published reviews of the educational development literature is that practice and the evaluation of practice in the field has not systematically built upon previous work. This is attributed in part to the lack of detailed and reasoned descriptions of the design of practice (Steinert et al., 2006; Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2010). Amundsen and Wilson (2012) argue further that this lack of detailed description has also led to a narrow view of evaluation or "impact", with too great a focus on outcomes based on individual surface features of educational development initiatives (e.g., workshops compared to individual consultations) without adequate consideration of the thinking underlying the design of a given program, and its particular goals. We aim to address this critique by providing a reasonably detailed description of our program goals, design and evaluation framework, the links between these elements, and by comparing our work to six similar initiatives which we identified in our review of the educational development literature (see Table 1). These studies were selected for comparison as they all report evaluations of grant-based educational development initiatives and share some similarities to our own work. We refer to these studies throughout the paper.

We have taken an intentional and scholarly approach to the design of the TLDG program and consider evaluation a key element

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 778 686 4853.
 E-mail addresses: ghum@sfu.ca (G. Hum), camundsa@sfu.ca (C. Amundsen), eemmiogl@sfu.ca (E. Emmioglu).

[1] These are full-time lecturers and professors. As is common in North American institutions, lecturers have full-time teaching responsibilities and professors have both teaching and research responsibilities. We use the term 'instructor' to refer to both.

Table 1
Six similar initiatives.

	Title
Dexter and Seden (2012)	'It's really making a difference': how small scale research projects can enhance teaching and learning
Gray et al. (2007)	Enhancing the scholarship of teaching and learning: Evaluation of a scheme to improve teaching and learning through action research
Kember (2002)	Long-term outcomes of educational action research projects
Morris and Fry (2006)	Enhancing educational research and development activity through small grant schemes: A case study
Waterman et al. (2010)	Preparing scholars of teaching and learning using a model of collaborative peer consulting and action research
Wright et al. (2011)	Facilitating the scholarship of teaching and learning at a research university

of the overall design. Three levels of impact within the institution are commonly outlined in the evaluation of educational development: individual (instructor/student), departmental/faculty, and institutional (Fanghanel, 2007; Norton, 2008). However, the majority of published evaluations focus only on self-assessments at the level of the individual instructor (Stes et al., 2010). Further, most evaluations, including those going beyond the level of the individual instructor, tend to be "atomistic", only evaluating single levels, and/or considering them separately, thus separating individuals from their context(s) (Webster-Wright, 2009). We are working towards examining multiple levels, and ultimately connecting them as we want to understand how different levels influence one another, as well as the wider impact of our educational development initiative.

Finally, there have been repeated calls in the literature for more methodological diversity and so we are using multiple sources and types of evidence and continue to seek to identify others. The more challenging critique which we are working toward addressing is the need for other measures in addition to self-report measures (Levinson-Rose & Menges, 1981; Steinert et al., 2006; Stes et al., 2010).

Broadly, we describe in this paper our ongoing efforts and struggles to address the challenges identified above. We begin with a description of the design of our program and its goals, followed by a detailed description of our evaluation framework and data sources, concluding with our preliminary evaluation findings and emergent insights.

Design of the TLDG program

Simon Fraser University is a mid-sized research and teaching focused Canadian university with approximately 30,000 undergraduate and 5300 postgraduate students. The TLDG is a collaboration within the university between the Institute for the Study of Teaching and Learning in the Disciplines (ISTLD) and the university's teaching support unit, the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC). The ISTLD is an interdisciplinary team which includes professors, a post-doctoral fellow and doctoral student researchers interested in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The authors are members of the ISTLD. The TLC provides educational consultants and administrative support.

The TLDG program, as noted above, provides grants (up to $5000 CAD) for instructors to identify questions about teaching and learning of interest to them, conduct a systematic investigation, and to share their findings with colleagues. The majority of projects investigate the effectiveness of a new teaching approach in a particular course (e.g., team-based learning), while others focus on designing and piloting an instructional tool (e.g., website to illustrate historical thinking) or support curriculum development. Since late 2011, 117 projects have been funded.

We have two main program goals:

(1) Enhance instructor knowledge and practice as related to teaching and learning.
(2) Engage instructors in teaching as a socially situated practice.

The first goal refers to the knowledge gained when an instructor systematically investigates questions they have about their own disciplinary teaching practice, most often in our case by studying the effectiveness of a "new" (to them) teaching approach. The process is consistent with what Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) describe as *professional experimentation* (p. 950), which they argue not only leads to enhanced knowledge of the specific focus of the investigation, but also can be reasonably expected to generalize to other aspects of a teacher's practice.

We draw inspiration for the second goal from the workplace learning literature, specifically Billett's theory of co-participation (Billett, 2009, 2010). Most of the literature related to the scholarship of teaching and learning focuses on the individual instructor, however our incorporation of Billett's perspective expands this focus to the pivotal role of social and contextual elements of workplace practice in building individual knowledge/practice as well as institutional/organizational knowledge/practice. Thus, we believe fostering conversations and community around teaching is as important as individual development, and is a means of enacting systemic institutional change.

The main design elements of the program are listed below with reference to the two goals; a discussion of each element follows.

- Two 2-hour proposal development workshop sessions (Goals 1 and 2).
- One-to-one feedback with facilitators until proposal is finalized (Goal 1).
- Research and methodological supports during the conduct of the project (Goals 1 and 2).
- Identification of literature relevant to the project (Goals 1 and 2).
- 2–3 luncheon meetings per year for those currently conducting projects (Goal 2).
- A final report or poster (Goal 1).
- Sharing of project findings with departmental colleagues (Goal 2).

Instructors arrive at the first *proposal development workshop* session having submitted their initial project idea via e-mail. Other instructors who are co-investigators, or postgraduate students who will be research assistants (RAs) often accompany the main applicant. The first session focuses on clarifying the questions and purposes of the project that will form the structure of the investigation. In between the first and second sessions, initial proposal drafts are submitted for feedback to all workshop attendees. Workshops are designed to support instructor discussion, networking and collaboration, between and around project ideas. Experienced educational researchers/developers facilitate each session. After the second session, *one-to-one feedback* continues between instructor and facilitators until the proposal is finalized in a *formative* rather than a competitive process (i.e., all satisfactorily completed proposals are funded).

Projects are supported by our TLDG coordination team, comprised of educational researchers, a postdoctoral fellow and PhD students from various disciplines. During the conduct of the project, our team provides support with development of data