Demonstrating the impact of educational development: The case of a course design collaborative

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ABSTRACT

While universities hold expectations that new colleagues demonstrate high levels of expertise, many recently graduated PhDs are under-prepared for their teaching roles. This case study assessed the impact of an institutionally sponsored, collaborative course design initiative on the professional learning of early-career academics in a research-intensive university in Canada. The initiative was framed as educational development: the integration of faculty, instructional, curriculum, and organizational development in a holistic approach to professional learning. The case documents the impact of a 5-day workshop on course design and teaching complemented with three cycles of classroom observation and feedback, and a monthly discussion group on teaching. Across 10 participants, three strong patterns of results emerged with respect to teaching beliefs, practices and confidence about teaching.

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Introduction

Regardless of their discipline or institutional type, early-career faculty frequently find themselves in a force field of competing personal and professional demands (Lindholm & Szelényi, 2008; McAlpine, Amundsen, & Turner, 2013; Murray, 2008; Nerad, Aanerud, & Cerny, 2004). While institutions still hold high expectations that new colleagues will "hit the ground running" (Whitt, 1991, p. 177), research demonstrates that recently graduated PhDs are frequently under-prepared for their teaching roles (Austin, 2002; Murray, 2008; Wulff & Austin, 2004). Bridging the gap between graduate studies and the teaching demands of an academic career is not a trivial task. Learning to become an effective teacher requires not only the acquisition of teaching expertise, but also an understanding of how our personal beliefs about teaching and learning, knowledge in our disciplines, and organizational contexts interact to produce our specific approaches to teaching (Fanghanel, 2007; Kahn, 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Prosser, Martin, Trigwell, Ramsden, & Lueckenhausen, 2005).

Recognizing that institutional environments influence the professional learning of academic staff with respect to teaching and learning (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012; Webster-Wright, 2009) most Canadian universities provide support for building teaching and learning capacity (Taylor & Bédard, 2010). In Canada, that support is most commonly framed as *educational development:* "all the work that is done systematically to help faculty members to do their best to foster student learning" (Knight & Wilcox, 1998, p. 98). This comprehensive concept includes faculty, instructional, curriculum, and organizational development. The case study described in this paper focuses on the professional learning of early career academics and reflects this integrative concept.

Given the pressures on individual teachers and institutions with respect to teaching quality (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012), one question for post-secondary institutions is how to most effectively support early-career colleagues in getting off to a strong start in becoming successful teachers. The case reported in this paper was part of a study conducted in three research-intensive universities in Canada to investigate the impact of an institutionally sponsored, collaborative course design initiative on the professional learning of early-career academics. The results of this case study demonstrate the positive impact of a collaborative approach to course development and implementation on teaching beliefs, knowledge and practices.

Conceptual framework

The complexity of professional competence in many domains is aptly captured by Epstein and Hundert (2002, p. 226), who state

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"professional competence is the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served." Their succinct articulation makes explicit the deeply learned, yet intentional, thought processes that guide professional practice; the diverse forms of knowledge that contribute to professional competence; the ongoing nature of professional learning based on reflection in and on practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974); and the reciprocal impact of individuals and their communities on professional practice.

In the specific context of developing competence as a teacher, Rowland (1999) argues that "the development of new practices and more developed theories" (p. 312) depends on a three-way interaction among the "personal context" of practice, the "public context" of theory, and the "shared context" of critical debate in a community of discourse. The interaction among these domains of knowing is critical. Becoming more aware of our practice is essential to learning from practice and identifying areas for development. Theory can inform practice, but by testing theory in practice it becomes meaningful in our personal conceptualizations of teaching and learning (Rowland, 1999). Further, as Palmer (1998) observes, "The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it" (p. 144) and discussions in a shared context are essential to refining both practice and theory. This integration of personal practice, theory, and learning in community guided the course design initiative reported in this article.

Rowland's conceptualization aligns closely with a model of professional learning proposed by Simons and Ruijters (2004). This model predicts that the most effective professional learning results from a synergy of learning from and in practice, from and in research, and from and in community. When faced with a situation in which learners are not thriving, we might begin by reflecting on our own practice to find the source of the problem and a possible response. If reflection does not generate a solution, we may consult the literature or even conduct an investigation to inform our thinking. When we find a solution or strategy that is effective, we often share it with our larger professional community so that our learning enhances not only our own practice, but also the practice of others. Simons and Ruijters (2004) also illustrate how this integrated cycle of professional learning shifts the valence of emotions associated with a professional challenge from anxiety to curiosity to confidence, which is a highly desirable outcome given the degree of stress reported by early-career colleagues (Lindholm & Szelényi, 2008).

In part, an appreciation for the complexity of this learning task represented by this conceptual framework is driving the evolution of educational development practice (Debowski, 2014; Gibbs, 2013). The integration of theory, practice, personal beliefs, and organizational culture takes time, and it is not surprising that sustained engagement results in a stronger impact on teaching effectiveness (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylanne, & Nevgi, 2007). Perhaps more profoundly, it also requires that educational development specialists take a contextualized approach in creating collaborative learning experiences that are based in the teaching practice of the participants (Boud & Brew, 2013; Debowski, 2014; Webster-Wright, 2009). In this process, the learning value of "co-constructing" knowledge with colleagues is a critical shift in educational development practice that is reflected in the case study described.

Intervention

The study took place in a research-intensive university with more than 18,000 students and 1000 faculty members. The University had been successful in recruiting new colleagues, to the extent that almost half the faculty complement in some faculties was pre-tenure. These colleagues were expected to meet high expectations for teaching as well as research. While a strong orientation to teaching and a broad array of educational development services were available, most new hires had no opportunity to participate in a comprehensive approach to teaching development as part of a cohort.

The educational development approach studied was based on a five-day workshop on course design and teaching (CDTW) developed at McGill University (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2004). The primary objective of the workshop is to provide academic staff with an opportunity to develop a course of their choice, reflecting on their teaching through practice and discussion with colleagues. The CDTW model was complemented with three cycles of classroom observation and feedback provided to each individual as they implemented the course they planned, and a monthly discussion group on teaching issues.

This initiative embedded an educational development experience in the teaching practice of new colleagues (Boud & Brew, 2013; Brew & Boud, 1999). The rationale was twofold: to provide an educational development experience that would have an immediate impact on the learning experiences of students, and to facilitate the development of knowledge about teaching and learning that would have high transfer potential to new teaching situations. At the heart of the initiative was the social context of the learning experience: a group of colleagues who would support each other's learning in a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998).

But how would we know if we have been successful? It is a long-standing criticism of educational development practice that the field lacks rigorous assessment of impact (Grabove et al., 2012; Levinson-Rose & Menges, 1981; Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2010; Weimer & Lenze, 1997). As educational development matures as a field of practice and scholarship, and as expectations for accountability increase, this criticism is being addressed (Grabove et al., 2012; Stefani, 2011). In this study, evidence of impact on teachers' conceptions, knowledge, skills, and behaviours was collected over a sustained period that allowed not only the participants' immediate reactions to be tracked, but also their learning and changes in practice over time (Grabove et al., 2012; Stes et al., 2010). The dimensions of teaching knowledge investigated included: *concepts and beliefs about teaching*; *pedagogical knowledge* – evidenced in alignment across teaching goals, course design and delivery; and *ability to engage in reflective practice*.

Study design and approach

Participants

Ten participants were recruited for the study, drawn from two consecutive cohorts of the CDTW project. These 10 colleagues (five males and five females) represented a spectrum of disciplines: four from Arts, two from Science, and one each from Engineering, Management, Health Professions and Medicine. All participants in the first cohort (CD1–CD7) were in their second year of employment, while all participants in the second cohort (CD8–CD10) were in their first year of employment, an outcome that was not an intentional part of the recruitment strategy.

Data collection and analysis

Primary data sources for the study included:

- Artefacts from the workshop itself, including concept maps of course content, working drafts of student learning outcomes, and a draft syllabus presented to the group on the last day of the