



Examining faculty questions to facilitate instructional improvement in higher education



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ABSTRACT

Many of the innovations that show promise for improving outcomes for underprepared community college students require instructors to make changes to their teaching practice. Little research explores the experiences of faculty teaching in reformed courses as related to their professional learning needs. Drawing on a multi-year qualitative study, this paper uses data from 100 faculty interviews to explore the questions they ask when teaching a new course. A key outcome of the analysis is a typology of questions that mirrors the stage of implementation. Through analysis of 20 observations of implementation activities, this paper also documents the learning opportunities made available to instructors and examines the extent to which these activities addressed their questions.

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A postsecondary credential is widely recognized as the surest path toward upward mobility, and community colleges play an essential role in providing access to students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. In the United States, community colleges serve 45 percent of all undergraduates (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014). Their low cost and open-access admission policies make them a natural choice for adult students returning to school, low-income students, and students from low-performing high schools. Unfortunately, after three years only 22 percent of full-time first-time students graduate (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Research has established that poor outcomes are related to the large numbers of students referred to developmental (i.e., remedial) coursework. Developmental classes are not credit-bearing, but are required, and some colleges offer multiple semesters of preparatory work. More than half of students in community colleges are placed in one or more developmental courses in math, reading or writing, but only about one-third complete the sequence of required courses (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010).

To address this challenge, community colleges are experimenting with altering the curriculum and structures in their developmental courses through a range of instructional

innovations (Quint et al., 2011). For example, colleges are compressing multiple levels of coursework into a single semester, linking developmental courses with credit-bearing courses, and restructuring the content of traditional courses into modules. Many of these reforms appear to show promise for improving student outcomes, but to be fully optimized they may require faculty to adjust their classroom practice (e.g., Edgecombe, Jaggars, Baker, & Bailey, 2013). For example, reforms that mainstream developmental students into college-level courses demand that faculty teach a more heterogeneous group and provide students individualized scaffolding and support. A revised math curriculum emphasizing conceptual learning suggests the need for alternatives to the traditional demonstration-practice cycle.

To effectively make these changes, faculty need opportunities to learn how to adapt their practice to the new course structure, objectives or content. Yet despite the growing body of research documenting instructional reform efforts in developmental education (e.g., Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, & Jaggars, 2012), there has been little inquiry into the experiences of faculty teaching in new courses. Research in this area has largely focused on the activities and structures of professional development programs, rather than on the learning experiences of teachers (Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Pategem, 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009). As a result, we know little about faculty members' questions, concerns, and needs.

This paper uses qualitative data from a multi-campus study of instructional reform in developmental education to present a typology of questions raised by community college faculty teaching in reformed contexts. We also document the professional

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learning opportunities made available to instructors and examine how these activities addressed their questions and met their needs. The findings presented in this paper have implications for crafting meaningful and useful learning opportunities to support faculty to teach in new ways.

Perspectives from the literature

Through classroom experiences, conversations with colleagues, and professional resources, teachers are constantly learning about students and about their teaching. While important to the work lives of teachers, research suggests these opportunities do not necessarily lead to systematic improvements to classroom practice (Lord, 1994; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Instead, researchers point to formalized professional development as a promising, albeit complicated, mechanism for changing classroom practice (Borko, 2004; Guskey, 2002). In primary and secondary school settings, features of high quality professional development programs have been extensively documented. They include coherence with everyday teaching practice, engagement with materials of practice, collaboration, mentorship, opportunities to engage with subject matter, and experiential practice (Desimone, 2009; Wilson & Berne, 1999). In the specific context of reform, research shows that teachers learn when they have the opportunity to observe the new approach, practice implementing it, and access follow-up supports well beyond initial implementation (e.g., Bennett & Bennett, 2003).

Research on high-quality professional learning about teaching in higher education echoes the findings of the broader field in many ways, suggesting the efficacy of communities of practice (Blanton & Stylianou, 2009), mentoring (Shagrir, 2012), and reflective practice (Steinert et al., 2006). Yet the context of postsecondary education presents unique challenges for developing meaningful, contextualized experiences focused on teaching and learning (e.g., Furco & Moely, 2012; McHenry, Martin, Castaldo, & Ziegenfuss, 2009). In particular, long-held professional norms, such as faculty autonomy, coupled with increased reliance on adjuncts, and weak instructional leadership, serve as barriers to meaningful or sustained professional development on teaching. Moreover, faculty have an array of responsibilities that extend beyond classroom teaching. Taylor and Rege Colet (2010) identify a range of topics that fall under what they term “educational development” for postsecondary faculty which include organizational development (institutional policies and structures), professional development (scholarly and personal development), and curriculum development (programs of study).

Historically colleges and universities primarily supported professional development activities aimed at enhancing disciplinary expertise (Brawer, 1990). The past several decades have seen a shift, as more postsecondary institutions, and community colleges in particular, structure opportunities for faculty to learn about instruction and classroom practice—what Taylor and Rege Colet (2010) term “instructional development.” Yet, many faculty members continue to need support to develop the language and habits of reflective practice and to translate knowledge about a new approach into changes in the classroom (e.g., Nakabugo & Sieborger, 2001; Wilkerson & Irby, 1998).

Existing literature points to a collection of promising practices related to professional learning about teaching, and researchers widely agree that professional development should be relevant to the needs of teachers and students and derive from instructors’ questions (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree, & Richardson 2009; Robb, 2000; Speck & Knipe, 2005). However, additional research is needed to understand when and how to implement these approaches in higher education. This is particularly true for faculty teaching in reformed contexts. This present analysis of faculty questions contributes to efforts to fill this gap by probing

deeply into faculty experiences at various stages of reform implementation. We argue these findings have applicability to instructors teaching in non-reform contexts as well.

Research design

This paper draws on data from a three-year study that explored how instructional innovations in developmental education are initiated, adapted and scaled within and across institutions. The project looks at four instructional innovations—two in developmental English and two in math. Although these reforms differ in how they attempt to improve student success in developmental education, they share a common focus on exposing students to more complex or challenging tasks. In a co-requisite model which allows students referred to developmental English to co-enroll in college composition, developmental students complete college-level work with additional support. In an accelerated integrated reading and writing reform, students complete assignments that mimic college-level work instead of practicing discrete reading or writing subskills. In both math reforms, a developmental arithmetic course that emphasizes discovery-based learning and a pre-statistics course, the focus is on conceptual understanding of mathematical concepts. To support instructors teaching these new courses, faculty leaders devised a range of learning opportunities for colleagues at their own institutions and at other colleges piloting these reforms for the first time.

Data relating to faculty questions and needs were collected through interviews with faculty members as well as observations of professional development activities. The instructors were purposively selected based on their role in the reform and recommendations from administrators and colleagues. They were identified as diverse in their professional backgrounds, perspectives on the reform, and approaches to delivering instruction. Included in the sample are faculty teaching in one of the four reforms ($N = 45$), faculty leaders responsible for designing learning opportunities for their colleagues ($N = 6$), and instructors who were not participating in the reforms ($N = 20$).

Researchers conducted 103 semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews over five academic semesters. Interviews focused on faculty experiences and perceptions of the reform as well as their pedagogical approaches. This analysis draws on a subset of questions included in the interview protocols about instructors’ prior and current professional development experiences and questions or areas for further professional development. To capture changes in faculty perceptions and experiences, researchers interviewed 25 of the participants more than once. For most, initial interviews occurred during the instructor’s first semester of teaching in the reform and follow-up interviews occurred in subsequent semesters.

Additional data sources include observations of 20 faculty learning activities occurring at different stages of implementation. These include meetings in which faculty planned for implementation and/or discussed curriculum and instruction, multi-day convenings of faculty from multiple colleges implementing new reforms, and coaching calls between a faculty leader and small groups of faculty at other campuses. Researchers also analyzed the content of 3 online platforms designed to connect faculty implementing these innovations, email exchanges among faculty, and notes from 23 faculty meetings we did not observe.

Data were analyzed using Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. After an initial round of inductive analysis (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993), we generated a draft coding list covering topics related to faculty questions, needs, and concerns. Throughout several rounds of test coding, the coding scheme was discussed and refined based on discrepancies with updated definitions and inclusion/exclusion rules. To ensure validity, these coding checks and refinements

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