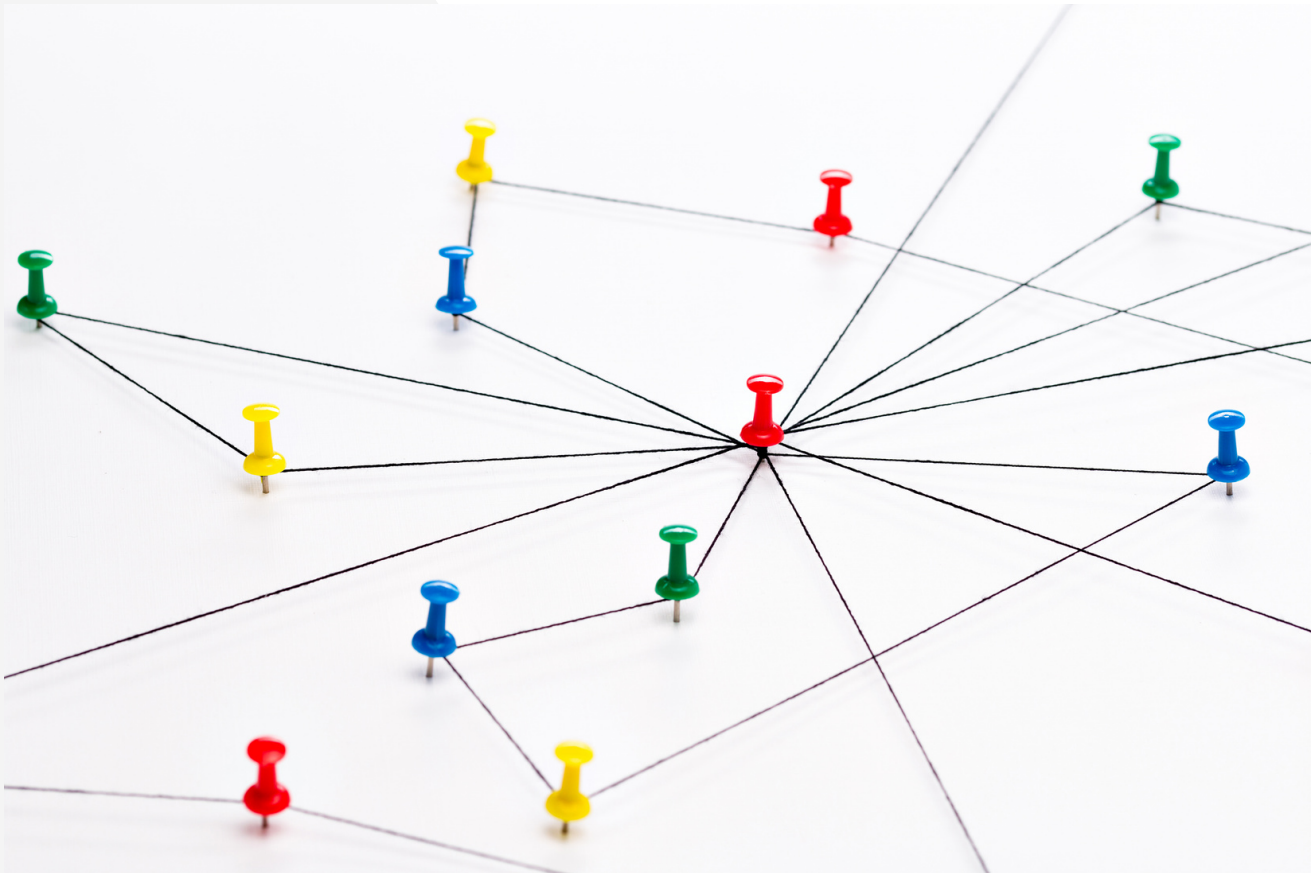


FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITIES

WHITE PAPER



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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of a faculty learning communities (FLC) is to bring faculty together across multiple disciplines and various ranks to discuss meaningful issues related to teaching and learning. The goal is to build a university-wide community interested in understanding the complexity and application of teaching and learning issues such as pedagogy, assessment, inclusive teaching practices and course design. As a result, faculty who participate in FLCs perform better, show greater excitement for teaching and their engagement in a learning community can be linked to impacts on student learning (Banasik and Dean, 2016).

The challenge embedded in FLCs is that faculty are asked to take a risk to learn and grow intellectually in a public setting. Interestingly though, research supports that faculty who fully engage in a learning community tend to have an increased knowledge of and versatility with pedagogical strategies. Because most FLCs have faculty from multiple disciplines, faculty gain a broader understanding of the institution. Lastly, but most important is that faculty cultivate a sense of community.

Faculty learning communities tend to have six to fifteen cross-disciplinary faculty and staff that voluntarily agree to participate on a regular schedule such as twice a month or twice a quarter for a designated period of time (i.e. an academic semester or year). The goal is for faculty to be active learners in a collaborative setting focused on teaching and learning.

Hubball, Clarke and Beach (2004) describe the benefits of attending to the metacognitive aspects of how faculty learning as well. It is important for the FLC facilitators to provide scaffolding to support how faculty learn the new content and to consider what their learning needs are. Attention to faculty metacognition is meant to ease the discomfort and increase the speed of learning new information. For instance, it is important for faculty to understanding their own learning preferences both individually and collaboratively.



Faculty learning communities are not casual meetings of continuously revolving faculty. For example, FLCs are not synonymous to teaching circles, book clubs, seminars or brown-bag lunch discussion groups (Cox, 2004). The goal of these types of groups is for faculty to generally play the part of learner and to learn about a topic quickly. These types of groups have great value in the university setting. However, the success and difference with an FLC is the long-term, faculty membership to a topic for a long-term (5 weeks to one academic year) commitment. The faculty member commits their time, energy, expertise and at times vulnerability to the group.

Another common group is a Community of Practice (CoP). The terms faculty learning communities and communities of practice are many times interchangeable. Table 1 in the appendix was developed by Stark and Smith (2016) to delineate the similarities and differences between these two types of professional development.

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HOW A FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITY IS ORGANIZED?



COHORT-BASED OR TOPIC-BASED FLC

Faculty Learning Communities can be organized in two ways: cohort-based and topic-based. Cohort-based FLC is made up of a specific group of faculty that choose to stay together for a year-long community experience. The topics of teaching, learning and professional development are fluid as the group determine what topics and forms of engagements they want over time. A mid-year assessment may be necessary to gain insight into the individual needs and reflections of the group members. This facilitates future planning and a means to address group dynamics. An example of a cohort-based group might be a community of junior faculty who are determining discussion topics such as tenure and promotion or other new faculty issues.

A topic-based FLC is designed around a topic that is important to teaching and learning on campus. These groups can be long-term or short-term in design. An example would include inclusive excellence or scholarship of teaching and learning. These groups tend to be led by individuals with specialized knowledge on the topic.

It is important to emphasize that FLCs are intended to be more than professional development and are utilized and designed to build deep, positive and collaborative university-wide relationships. When done well, an FLC can counter the individualism of departmental structure and the sense of alienation felt by some faculty.

ELEMENTS OF FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITIES



Qualities of a Good Facilitators

Faculty learning communities require qualified and energetic leadership. This can be a single individual or multiple faculty using a shared responsibility model. FLC facilitation involves two separate but interrelated responsibilities create spaces for faculty to safely engage in the exchanging ideas. It is important for the FLC facilitator to build faculty respect for multiple perspectives towards a topic and encourage an atmosphere in which faculty can and will challenge their own assumptions. The role of facilitator is one the requires a skill set that allows the group to move forward, stay engaged and thrive. Petrone and Ortquisht-Ahrens (2004) list that the most supportive facilitator qualities are that they are flexible, tolerant of ambiguity, a creative thinker, enthusiastic for learning, respect for diversity, and open to innovation and new ideas. Facilitators understand the university dynamics but provides a safe place for faculty to take risks. They are mindful of the group dynamics, energy level, pace, and mutual engagement.

Shared Facilitation

This format works well when a text or reading is the center of discussion. The organizer can explain in the first session that members will be expected to lead or co-lead. This is also a good format to teach faculty how to facilitate a discussion. Two useful discussion texts are Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill's books: *Discussion as a Democratic Process* (2005) and *The Discussion Book: 50 Great Ways to Get People Talking* (2016).

ELEMENTS OF FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Establishing Ground Rules

Ground rules provide a common set of expectations for facilitators and participants. The type of rules may vary based on the topic, purpose and faculty involved. Some ground rules suggested by Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan (2009) that facilitators may suggest or encourage are:

- 1 Listen and seek to understand before speaking.
- 2 Ask clarifying and probing questions.
- 3 Assume that others speak from a place of good intentions.
- 4 Be willing to challenge one another's thinking and ideas.
- 5 Separate the impact a comment has upon you from the intent of the speaker.
- 6 Be discreet about any sensitive information other participants may share.
- 7 Provide a level of encouragement and support for one another.
- 8 Assume that everyone is here in good faith and has the interests of the institution at heart.
- 9 Be sensitive about time.
- 10 Do the work and take it seriously.
- 11 Keep focused on the goals and stay on task (p. 21).

The ground rules are intended to be a framework for how the group interacts, however they must also be dynamic and open to change as the group members get to know each other better. The value in starting with a set of norms is that when conflict or discomfort arises, the facilitator can bring out the ground rules and they can be reviewed to find a positive way forward for the group.

Double Confidentiality

It is important that conversations and interactions that happen during an FLC remain confidential. This refers to the process of participants not talking about individual's personal disclosures outside the group. Double confidentiality refers to the agreement that members will not approach each other outside the meeting to discuss any confidential issues.

Evidence of Learning

It is valuable to consider ways to transfer new information from theory into practice. FLC facilitators may want to design a final project or process that captures how faculty are thinking implementing what they have learned in their teaching. For example, a faculty member may want to create a more inclusive syllabus statement or redesign an assessment.

Structured Endings

The philosophy of a well-planned FLC extends beyond the learning element, it is the relationships are the most important take-away. That is why it is important for the final session to be an acknowledgement of the time, thinking, and progress of the individuals.



POSSIBLE CHALLENGES

Meeting Time

One of the challenges of an FLC is finding a common available time for multiple faculty that meet long-term across multiple quarters or semesters. Faculty teaching schedules vary from quarter to quarter and so finding a day and time that will work can be difficult. One way to mitigate scheduling issues is to offer the FLC one day a week or month in the morning and another day in the afternoon and faculty can attend either one. This would allow for faculty to stay in the group and on topic even if their teaching assignment changes.

Power Dynamics

Faculty development through learning communities entails an understanding of the challenges around the power dynamics in higher education. The community needs to create an environment that is low risk for pre-tenured faculty in a community that also includes senior faculty. While untenured faculty can learn from a multitude of people, they may be less willing to be vulnerable if individuals with decision making power are in the room.

AUTHENTICALLY ASSESSING FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Meeting Time

How do you know if an FLC was successful? This determination is actually set up from the first meeting of the group. The process of negotiating learning outcomes is developed by the group. They also determine how they will evaluate their learning in ways that are affective and skills-based. For example, participants may determine that their consistent attendance over time is evidence of positive engagement. They may also want to see that the content of the FLC has migrated into their teaching or scholarship. For long-term FLCs, it is important to assess or revisit objectives during the life of the FLC. This can be done informally through a planned conversation in which members discuss what is working, not working and how they want to move forward.



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