Peas in a POD: Faculty Development and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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When Ernest Boyer originally wrote about SoTL, he called it the Scholarship of Teaching. The “L” part of SoTL, learning, was added later to acknowledge the deep relationship between teaching and learning that had arisen from the learning-centered revolution in higher education pedagogy (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). Since that time, SoTL has emphasized and, indeed, celebrated the primacy of student learning outcomes as evidence of effective practice. It is easy, however, to downplay the T, teaching. At the institutional level, SoTL initiative are often housed in Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs), which are focused on SoTL as part of comprehensive faculty development programs. What CTLs have found is that the production of SoTL solidifies and rewards teaching as a reflective act, and the consumption of SoTL promotes and encourages innovation and collaboration. The articles in the Spring 2013 issue of MountainRise share a focus on the “t” and highlight the contributions of SoTL work to the professional development of highly effective teachers.

In the United States, the academic organization that oversees and leads the field of faculty development is called POD (Professional and Organizational Development Network). According to POD, faculty development, and by extension faculty development centers, focus on three critical areas: the faculty member as teacher, the faculty member as a scholar and professional, and the faculty member as a person (POD, 2013). Under the heading of faculty member as teacher, the POD definition lists student evaluation of instruction. Lorraine Gilpin, in “Enhancing Teaching and Learning: Harnessing Written Comments on Evaluations”, asks the question, how are decisions about teaching and learning made? Her study argues that such decisions should be evidence driven, and that evidence can be discerned through analysis of student rating of instruction. In her piece, she writes about ways to interpret end-of-year evaluations not simply as summative assessments, but also as data for revising courses or curriculum. Her study focuses on written comments, as opposed to numerical rankings, and constructive ways to interpret student responses to effect long-term improvements in teaching and learning. Her study, while small, suggests that previous studies that called the efficacy of written comments into question may have overlooked the benefits that they can provide to an instructor willing to take the time to interpret them fully.
Similarly, Victoria Budzinski McMullen, in “An Investigation of Course Requirements and Student Motivation to Complete Required Readings”, looks at a perennial problem in student learning, i.e. getting students to complete out-of-class readings. Many faculty assume that the problem lies in student motivation (or lack thereof), but McMullen’s study suggests that the problem may lie in a lack of congruence between faculty and student expectations. For faculty, the value of completing required readings is self-evident, but to students that assumption may not always hold. When faculty at different levels of the same program implemented interventions designed to make these assumptions more explicit, student compliance with required readings rose accordingly. McMullen’s study suggests that student learning outcomes are highly intertwined with faculty expectations and assumptions and, therefore, faculty development.

Faculty development practices that support faculty members as scholars and professionals includes support for exploring and facilitating the production of new forms of scholarship, especially the scholarship of teaching and learning. Craig Seal led a team of faculty at the University of the Pacific, who together have provided a collaborative piece, “Celebrate Teaching and Learning: A SoTL Symposium at the University of the Pacific” that looks at how faculty produce, consume, and share SoTL at an institutional level. The piece describes a faculty-driven event in which instructors from across the campus presented their scholarly teaching and scholarship in a conference format that included presentations and interactive sessions. The rationale behind the symposium went beyond simple collaboration, however, but also aimed at cultural and organization change. The focus, as the authors state, was on “building sustainable pedagogies from within.” Four detailed examples of these sustainable pedagogies are included, as well as reflection on the institutional impact of the symposium and the continuing conversations that it inspired.

The third category of faculty development focuses on the well-being of the faculty member as a person. This can include something as simple as physical well-being, but it also covers areas of the affective domain, including a feeling of belonging. In their study entitled “Collaborative Teaching in a General Education Seminar: An Assessment of Faculty Outcomes”, Jeremiah Wills and Christine Allegretti surveyed faculty about their participation in interdisciplinary, team-taught general education courses and
how their participation in the program affected their perceptions of their work. Most of the faculty participants reported positive effects on their teaching practice (as expected), but Wills and Allegretti also found that there were correlations between those positive effects and other aspects of well-being, including a sense of community and stress reduction. While these effects also correlated with how closely faculty were able to teach to their disciplinary expertise, their research has considerable implications for further research into the relationship between faculty satisfaction and teaching practice.

The definition of faculty development provided by POD does not specifically mention technology, but the current popularity of integrated CTLs, also deemed “the teaching academy organized around technology”, one of the organizational types outlined by Lee Shulman, suggests that the use of instructional technology has also become inextricably intertwined into faculty development (Shulman, 1999). In this issue, Robert Crow’s review of Derek Bruff’s *Teaching with Classroom Response Systems: Creating Active Learning Environments* highlights how instructional technology enhances and facilitates innovative pedagogy. The book utilizes a question/answer format to help those new to using clickers (or related tools) determine if the technology is an appropriate fit for meeting their learning objectives, while providing concrete applications, models, and examples of how it has worked for others.

James Ullmer and Steven Miller, in “Using Blogs to Enhance the Learning Experience in Social Sciences: An Application in Economics”, discuss the use of social media tools for teaching economics, but in an innovative way. Rather than looking at having students use or develop blogs, their practice focuses on having students become consumers of blogs. Much of the research on instructional technology focuses on the ability of tools, like blogs, as enhancing engagement. Ullmer and Miller, on the other hand, examine blogs as a means of extending lifelong learning goals and showing students how to become responsible, and consistent, consumers of information and perspectives about economics. Their analysis demonstrates how the consumption of information from blogs helped to build student interest and enthusiasm for the study of economics and its relationship to their current and future goals.

The articles in this issue of MountainRise suggest that faculty development and innovation in teaching and learning go hand in hand, not unlike, as they say, two peas in a pod. In addition to focusing on the different roles that faculty play, the POD Network further suggests that faculty development take into
account not only instructional and professional development, but also organizational development. The close and symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning suggests that, from an organizational perspective, CTLS can play a pivotal role in facilitating organizational change in higher education (Schroeder, 2011); working with faculty to create a culture that nurtures and rewards both innovative teaching and exceptional learning.
References


