

Response to “Pathways to Faculty Learning and Pedagogical Improvement”

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How do institutions of higher education promote and support faculty professional development that keeps pace with the ever-changing needs of student populations? In the *Inside Out* article “[Pathways to Faculty Learning and Pedagogical Improvement](#),” researchers at the Community College Research Center (CCRC) attempt to answer this question by exploring faculty development activities. Based on their data collection and analysis of Scaling Innovation partner sites, the authors conclude that there are a number of challenges to faculty development, ranging from the broad range of topics of discussion to issues of academic freedom and heavy faculty workloads. In order to develop more fertile ground for development and growth, they suggest that “the most productive faculty learning opportunities are tied to a clear purpose with direct linkages to the specific contexts of instructors’ everyday work of teaching and learning.”

My past experience with faculty development activities as both a college administrator and a faculty member reflects CCRC’s analysis of challenges and solutions. Specifically, due to the broad nature of the topics covered during professional development activities, the information teachers take away from these activities often has little long-term value. Recent topics include syllabus development and updates to Blackboard educational software. While these topics are important, the activities that take place at professional development sessions are rarely focused on specific disciplines or actual coursework. The session organizers tend to think and plan in terms of general information that will be relevant to a large audience. However, designing and offering a more focused experience would benefit and support greater professional growth within the classroom.

Recently, faculty teaching a redesigned arithmetic course at my institution have had the opportunity to participate in structured, ongoing faculty development. This experience—a proposed outcome of the Scaling Innovation project grant through CCRC—possesses the clear purpose often missing from professional development activities. Our group, CON-NECT (Concepts of Numbers – Networking Educators Collaborative Thought), meets every three weeks. Some of the meeting activities include sharing thoughts and concerns, discussing course revisions, and participating in collegial class visits. Early in the semester, goals for the group were created using members’ input. Each meeting has an agenda that reflects those goals and the activities needed to attain them.

As a result of having control and input into the activities, members have commented that CON-NECT is “a wonderful catalyst to the evolution of my teaching”; that it “would be great if all arithmetic teachers had access to, and would make use of, a similar forum of discussion to share information”; and that “sharing established a sense of connectedness and refreshed my outlook by allowing me to analyze my personal teaching style and see what I am doing right and what I need to enhance.” Faculty reactions have been overwhelmingly positive because of the substantive and focused nature of the group’s discussions relating to classroom development.

Having experienced a professional development activity that involves self-examination within a specific course with detailed goals for improvement, I believe that the range of positive outcomes is infinite. Our arithmetic course redesign continues to be strengthened because of increased faculty input and a broader knowledge of the pedagogy that most effectively conveys the course material. Hopefully faculty development activities across all disciplines will become more focused so that all faculty can benefit from “opportunities for learning, experimentation, and improvement related to teaching practice.”