

Faculty Orientations Toward Instructional Reform

Some of the most promising developmental education innovations require that instructors significantly change their classroom practice. For example, instructors may be asked to teach to a more heterogeneous group of students, prepare students for statistics rather than algebra, or attend more explicitly to students' nonacademic needs. Responsibility for cultivating such behavioral change usually falls on the leaders who are working to launch or scale a new approach to teaching and learning. Reform leaders often report that generating and sustaining change in classroom practice requires buy-in from faculty, and that obtaining buy-in is one of the most challenging aspects of reform implementation.

Regardless of whether a college is launching a home-grown pilot or adopting a state-mandated policy at full scale, bringing colleagues on board and supporting them during the change process is essential to the success of an initiative. Without faculty members' willingness and ability to reflect on their classroom practice and tailor their teaching strategies to a new curriculum or course structure, any effort at instructional improvement is vulnerable to lackluster implementation and possible derailment. Facilitating the reform process involves both convincing faculty members and other stakeholders that the innovation is legitimate and worthwhile and providing resources to bolster their confidence and success in carrying out the reform.

Over the course of the Scaling Innovation project,¹ we have conducted interviews with developmental education instructors and faculty leaders. We have identified among this group three orientations toward reform that consistently manifest when an innovation is introduced, regardless of its type: *ready to act*, *ambivalent*, and *reluctant to change*. In order to effectively engage all stakeholders in the process of reform, it is critical that leaders understand the perspectives that inform each of these three orientations. This issue of

Inside Out delves into these broad categories to examine the diversity of perspectives within each and the implications for faculty members' investment in instructional reform.

Three Orientations Toward Instructional Reform

When a new instructional reform is introduced, faculty members' perspectives toward participation can be broadly grouped into three categories (see figure on p. 2). These orientations are both fluid (subject to change over time) and contextual (formulated in reaction to the specific proposed reform). In this section, we describe these orientations, the variation within each category, and the factors that shape these perspectives.

The first category, those who are *ready to act*, is comprised of the faculty members who are most likely to play a role in launching or leading the reform in its early stages. However, while they may share a willingness to be early adopters, individuals in this group bring differing levels of knowledge, experience, and confidence to the reform.

Some faculty are ready to act because the proposed reform aligns with their teaching philosophy. The approach to teaching embodied in the reform may resemble their current classroom practice.

In other cases, the instructor may wholeheartedly embrace the philosophy but need significant support to successfully enact the reform. For example, many early adopters of integrated reading and writing courses reported uncertainty about how to address sentence-level skills during the comparatively limited class time. As one instructor said, "I'm no longer using [grammar] worksheets, but I'm perplexed on how to deal with grammar in this class."

A third group of early adopters might opt to participate in the reform for reasons that are unconnected to the reform principles. For example, several early adopt-

ers of an innovation that reduced class size reported that they were attracted to the reform because of the perceived benefit to their work life rather than because of a strong belief in the reform’s theory of action.

The second category includes those faculty members who are *ambivalent* toward reform. This orientation is common when a reform is introduced. Faculty who are ambivalent are neither active proponents nor opponents of the reform. While their lack of enthusiasm might be perceived as apathy, we find that their ambivalence stems from various sources and may not reflect a lack of commitment to instructional improvement.

Some ambivalent faculty may in fact be highly motivated to improve student success but may participate in other professional activities that demand a significant portion of their time. They may be experimenting with alternative instructional approaches or leading other campus initiatives. Their lack of participation in the new reform reflects different professional priorities rather than a negative opinion of the reform. Others, such as adjuncts, may find that their work lives are not conducive to participating in a change effort and thus may be unable to dedicate time and energy to adopt a new approach.

A second group of ambivalent stakeholders is awaiting evidence of the reform’s effectiveness and is likely to buy in once positive outcomes have been established. Some individuals may want to view data on course pass rates and student performance in subsequent courses before participating in a reform.

Alternatively, an instructor may be uncertain of his or her own ability to improve outcomes for students using the approach. This was the case for one instructor considering participating in a new pre-statistics course that includes group problem-solving as part of the instructional model. As he explained, “I’m not sure I have the disposition for all that group work. I’m not a group work kind of guy.” Even those who are participating in the reform can display this type of ambivalence, often to the detriment of implementation. For example, a faculty member reported that it was only after teaching for three semesters in a math class redesigned to be student-centered and participating in an in-depth professional development opportunity that he really “got” the theory of action behind the reform. He explained that up until that

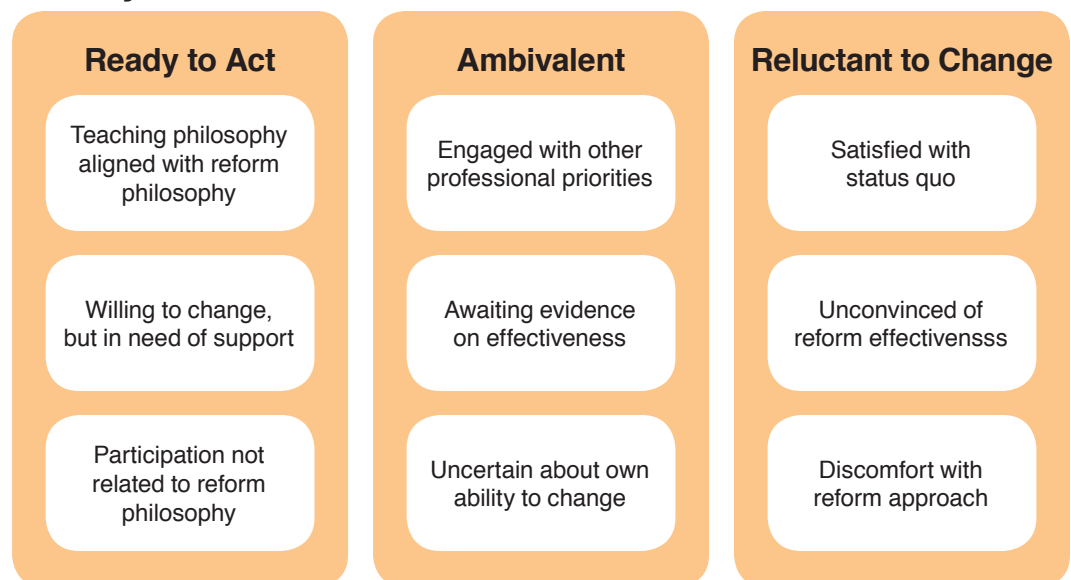
point, “I wasn’t ready to hear it.” Prior to this self-described transformative moment, he was teaching the course but relying primarily on lecture rather than using the recommended pedagogical strategies.

The final group in our typology is comprised of those who are *reluctant to change*. Individuals with this orientation differ from their ambivalent colleagues in their active resistance to the reform. Reform leaders often spend significant energy responding to this group, which at many campuses is characterized as “a vocal minority.” It is sometimes assumed that faculty in this group are resistant to any form of change. While this may be true occasionally, our data suggest more complex factors are almost always in play.

The rationale for reluctance may stem from satisfaction with the status quo or skepticism about the necessity for improvement. In developmental education, this may mean a lack of awareness of prevailing poor outcomes of students in aggregate. For example, an instructor may see no need for change if he or she is focused only on pass rates for individual courses and is unaware of low rates of persistence to the college-level course.² On the other hand, some faculty are aware of the magnitude of the problem but feel that student outcomes are largely beyond their control. They may locate “the problem” within the student, abdicate responsibility for improvement, and perceive change efforts as futile. Others may support reforms to academic or student services but resist changes in the classroom.

Alternatively, some reluctant faculty believe that instructional change is warranted but remain unconvinced that the chosen approach will be effective. Unlike their colleagues who are awaiting further data, reluctant stakeholders have fundamental questions about the reform’s ability to meet stu-

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dent needs. For example, many stakeholders who expressed resistance to the implementation of a pre-statistics pathway reported a deeply held belief that students need to learn algebra content to develop their mathematical thinking skills. Similarly, some individuals who objected to reforms that employ a student-led instructional approach stated their concerns that students would struggle and perform poorly without direct instruction. Many who oppose reforms that accelerate students' progress through developmental education are convinced that students need more instructional time to be successful.

An additional source of reluctance can often be traced to faculty members' discomfort with the reform approach—for instance, due to beliefs about instructor and student roles in the classroom. If instructors understand their responsibilities as delivering knowledge for student consumption, reforms that ask them to facilitate student discovery or attend to students' nonacademic needs will seem incompatible with their role. Likewise, if stakeholders have doubts that students will be able to take on new roles and responsibilities, they may object to a reform for fear it will harm students.

It is important to note that orientations toward reform are not inherent to the individual but formulated in reaction to specifics of the proposed change. For example, a faculty member at a college reforming its developmental reading and English sequence was reluctant to eliminate levels of developmental coursework because she was unconvinced that that students could be prepared for college-level English in one semester. However, she was extremely enthusiastic about integrating formerly separate reading and writing courses because it aligned with her teaching philosophy. Faculty orientations toward reform are contextual; if they see a likely payoff to the proposed change and feel supported in adopting the approach, even the most reluctant faculty members can become ready to act.

Moving From *Reluctant* to *Ready*

On the surface, ambivalence and reluctance can appear as apathy and obstructionism; however, our data suggest that faculty largely have rational and legitimate reactions to reform. If reform leaders understand more about their colleagues' orientations toward proposed changes, they will be in a better position to provide information, activities, and supports to increase the numbers of faculty who are ready and prepared to make changes in the classroom.

Most of the varied perspectives from ambivalent and reluctant faculty can be grouped into two broad concerns: (1) faculty are unconvinced that the reform will be effective, and (2) faculty are uncertain whether they could successfully

implement the approach. To address these concerns, reform leaders must make clear *what* the reform is designed to do and *how* it can be implemented in the classroom. To convey *the what*, reform leaders may need to make the case for change using data on the problem the reform is designed to address; clearly explain the reform's theory of action; and present an array of evidence on the efficacy of the approach, ranging from course pass rates and persistence rates to assessment results and examples of student work. To demonstrate *the how*, leaders can provide a concrete picture of implementation through videos of classroom practice, demonstration lessons, and sample course materials.

Reform leaders in the Scaling Innovation project listened carefully to uncover the source of faculty hesitation and provided targeted supports to move their colleagues from reluctance to readiness. For example, to counter critiques that particular teaching styles (such as “project-based learning” or “the discovery approach”) would be too challenging to implement in the developmental education context, reform leaders used videos of classrooms, curricular examples, and samples of student work to create what they called “a vision of the possible.” It was important for this vision to be considered achievable by the faculty participants. Reform leaders were often regarded by their colleagues as exemplary, contributing to an assumption that “average” instructors could not successfully implement the approach. In response, faculty leaders intentionally selected video clips from both novice and experienced teachers and structured conversations to highlight the strengths of each. Sharing testimonials from instructors who were initially reluctant—for example, because they were resistant to addressing students' nonacademic needs or giving up lecture-based pedagogy—was an important strategy for surfacing faculty assumptions and beliefs about teaching and student learning and for modeling how beliefs can change through engagement.

Beyond concerns about reform effectiveness and individual uncertainties about changing classroom practice, institutional factors also play an important role in promoting readiness. Faculty in departments with a history of adopting and then abandoning reforms may be reluctant to buy into what they see as the latest fad. Departments with strong cultures of collaboration and experimentation may have more individuals who are ready to act. Many faculty rightly observe that teaching in a new course takes time, effort, and energy they do not have, given their heavy teaching loads and other professional responsibilities. Departments and colleges can create the conditions to increase buy-in by providing instructors the time they need to learn about, prepare for,

and reflect on teaching a new course. This might be achieved through course released time, monetary incentives, or structured opportunities to focus on teaching in the reform in the context of regular work duties (e.g., department meetings).

The array of perspectives in the typology presented above suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to orienting faculty to reform or providing professional development is insufficient to achieve widespread buy-in. In practice, this means that leaders need time to meet with faculty to hear their perspectives and concerns throughout the reform planning, implementation, and refinement processes. Once leaders have heard from their colleagues, they can develop learning and support structures that are varied and address the dominant orientations toward reform and their underlying causes. Data we collected in interviews indicate that inquiry groups, curriculum development or improvement teams, course steering committees, and other structures that allow for conversations that are grounded in the specifics of teaching and sustained over time are valuable in helping faculty gain confidence and proficiency with the new approach.³ Reform leaders also leveraged electronic resources to catalogue basic information about the reform (e.g., outcome data, curricular resources, videos, and orientation materials).

Moving Beyond Ready

Once a faculty member is ready to act, he or she no longer needs to be convinced to participate but may still need support to ensure optimal implementation. Thus, faculty engagement activities must go beyond simply broadening participation and also strive to deepen it—helping faculty stay invested and facilitating pedagogical improvement to maximize improvements to student outcomes. Reform refinement activities (including the collaborative reviewing of data for the purposes of improvement) can provide a powerful venue to deepen engagement, as can professional learning activities that are explicitly tied to faculty members' everyday experiences in classrooms and that are seamlessly integrated into their work responsibilities. Institutional leaders and professional developers who can identify those of their faculty members who are ready to interrogate their own practice, those who are ambivalent, and those who are reluctant to experiment with

new approaches are well positioned to strategically allocate engagement resources and attend to the needs of faculty as they change over time.

Endnotes

¹ Scaling Innovation team. (2012). Doing developmental education differently. *Inside Out*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.scalinginnovation.org/doing-developmental-education-differently/>

² Hern, K. (with Snell, M.). (2010). Exponential attrition and the promise of acceleration in developmental English and math. *Perspectives*, June/July. Retrieved from <http://www.rpgroup.org/sites/default/files/Hern%20Exponential%20Attrition.pdf>

³ For more information about the limitations of one-time training sessions and the promise of long-term engagement structures such as inquiry groups, see Bickerstaff, S., Edgecombe, N., & the Scaling Innovation team. (2012). Pathways to faculty learning and pedagogical improvement. *Inside Out*, 1(3). Retrieved from <http://www.scalinginnovation.org/pathways-to-faculty-learning-and-pedagogical-improvement/>

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