

Lived Experiences of New Faculty: Nine Stages of Development Toward Learner-Centered Practice

Dr. Jill O'Shea Lane

Lewis & Clark Community College
jlane@lc.edu

Abstract: Community college faculty development programs need to be designed to help faculty move beyond content expertise to become learner-centered instructors. The purpose of this qualitative study with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was to explore the experiences of new faculty participating in a systematic dialogue about learner-centered instruction in a community college setting. Specifically, this research project was designed to answer the following question: How do new faculty experience participation in a semester-long faculty development program focused on learner-centered instruction? Interviews with faculty experiencing a learner-centered training program revealed common themes as well as nine stages of faculty development related to moving toward a learner-centered approach to teaching.

Keywords: community college faculty preparation, learner-centered instruction, professional development for faculty, barriers to learner-centered instruction.

Introduction

New community college faculty need to be prepared to meet the many challenges facing community college learners as these students prepare to transfer to universities or enter the workforce. They need to move beyond their content expertise and learn to become learner-centered instructors. Faculty development programs need to be created that will offer insights into the current literature about learner-centered instruction, provide opportunities for reflection, and provide opportunities for a systematic dialogue with other faculty about learner-centered instruction.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of new faculty participating in a systematic dialogue about learner-centered instruction in a community college setting. Specifically, this research project was designed to answer the following question: How do new faculty experience participation in a semester-long faculty development program focused on learner-centered instruction? A one-semester faculty development program was designed for new faculty at a medium-sized Midwestern community college. The results of piloting this program were examined in order to explore and understand how faculty experienced participation in a faculty development program focused on learner-centered instruction.

Background

Teacher quality is the single most important factor in determining student success (Boylan, 2002; Education Trust, 1998; Haycock, 1998, Tucker & Stronge, 2005). Student performance actually declines when students are being taught by ineffective teachers (Aaronson, Barrow & Sander, 2007). The College Completion Agenda (Hughes, 2012) includes ten areas of recommendation.

Among them is a focus on improving teacher quality. The K-12 educational system has long known that teacher preparation is a key to student success; however, this notion is just beginning to permeate in higher education institutions.

As student completion rates at colleges remain low (Hechinger Report, 2013), it has been evident for the last decade that the old paradigm of providing instruction with a focus on the teachers must shift to a new paradigm of producing learning with the focus on the student. In other words, higher education faculty must be able to motivate students to play an active role in their own learning process (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Instruction must move from a teacher-centered model to a new model in which the learner is at the center of instruction. The old paradigm of the role of the faculty member as lecturer is outdated and ineffective with the contribution of technological advances that provide instant access to knowledge. The role of the faculty must move from the role of a lecturer to the role of a facilitator of student learning helping the student to access and process the information to reach deeper learning. This would involve moving from a teacher-centered model to a learner-centered model (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Weimer, 2013).

Community College Faculty Preparation

Faculty preparation and credentials in higher education are very different from teachers in the K-12 educational system. Higher education faculty are actually held to different standards for preparation than teachers in the K-12 system (Jensen, 2011). Teacher preparation in the K-12 system includes coursework and instruction in pedagogy, teaching methods, and curriculum development, culminating in an apprentice-like student teaching experience. However, college faculty receive advanced degrees, specifically in their content discipline. No matter what content community college faculty are teaching, they are generally not required to have any training in pedagogy, teaching methods, or curriculum development (Jenkins, 2010). Related, most faculty do not receive mentorship for teaching unless they have been in the role of a teaching assistant, working with another full-time faculty member. Unfortunately, deep content knowledge alone is not enough to be an effective teacher (Haycock, 1998).

As content experts, faculty members want students to learn about their own specific disciplines, and traditionally the method faculty use to relay information about their specific discipline is through lecturing; therefore, the focus of the teaching is on the faculty member. After all, this is what faculty members have experienced in earning their own college credentials. They see themselves as content experts whose job is to transmit their knowledge to the students. The student's job then is to absorb content (Berrett, 2014). With the dismal student success rates at community colleges (Hechinger Report, 2013), teaching practices need to change.

Learner-Centered Instruction

Barr and Tagg's groundbreaking 1995 article stated this notion simply:

A paradigm shift is taking hold in American higher education. In its briefest form, the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to provide instruction. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything." (p. 12)

Much of the literature defines effective teaching as being learner-centered, including how faculty can and have embraced the paradigm of learner-centered instruction (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bishop, Caston, & King, 2014; Forrest, 1997; King, 1993; Weimer, 2013). However, the literature suggests that lecturing remains the dominant teaching practice in higher education (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2011).

Learner-centered instruction is defined as making decisions about what and how students will learn based on maximizing the opportunities for students to learn the skills and content of the course by compelling them to participate (Doyle, 2011). Learner-centered instruction may include strategies such as active learning, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning (Prince, 2004). While a teacher-centered model focuses on transmitting knowledge from faculty member to students, in the learner-centered paradigm, students construct knowledge through gathering and synthesizing information and integrating it with the general skills of inquiry, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving (Huba & Freed, 2000). In order for faculty to become effective teachers of their content area, they must understand how students learn. Doyle (2011) stresses the notion that, "the one who does the work does the learning" (p. 1). The person who is working the hardest in the classroom has historically been the faculty member who is doing the lecturing. When that workload shifts to the students, greater student learning will occur (Weimer, 2013).

However, learner-centered instruction still involves work and planning on the part of the faculty member. Doyle (2011) makes a research-based case supporting learning-centered instruction as the most effective method for enhancing student learning and student success. Faculty need to talk or lecture less and get the students to carry more of the cognitive load or mental effort. This creates an environment for authentic learning in which students can focus on ideas that have value beyond the classroom and are applicable in a variety of contexts. Faculty should use scaffolding to build material into meaningful and interrelated concepts. Students need to learn to work together in a learning community where the focus is on the students rather than the teacher (Doyle, 2011; Weimer, 2013).

In addition to the benefits, barriers to learner-centered instruction exist for both faculty and students. Although learner-centered instruction is effective, applying learner-centered instruction presents a paradigm shift from a teaching-centered model. In the learner-centered environment, the student's job is to learn and the faculty member's job is to facilitate such learning (Michael, 2007). However, not all faculty are convinced or know how to adopt learner-centered approaches to teaching. The challenges faced by faculty when adopting a learner-centered approach often involve: balance of power, function of content, role of the teacher, responsibility for learning, and purpose and process of evaluation (Brackenbury, 2012; Weimer, 2002). However, Michael (2007) discovered that many of these perceived barriers are based on common misunderstandings about learner-centered instruction and are more often the result of a lack of familiarity of this approach rather than the realities of implementing this approach in the classroom. In addition, students may also resist learner-centered environments in college (Doyle, 2008). While perceived barriers to the paradigm shift to learner-centered instruction exist on behalf of faculty members and students, many studies determine that the benefits outweigh the perceived barriers. Bishop, Caston, and King (2014) examined Doyle's (2008) eight reasons that students may resist learner-centered instruction and concluded that, in spite of faculty and student resistance to learner-centered environments, there is still strong rationale for shifting from a teacher-centered model to a learner-centered model.

The role of the faculty must change based on what we know about how students best learn. However, faculty are often resistant to that change, often because they simply do not know how to make the transition (Weimer, 2013). Faculty perceptions of pedagogical issues that affect student learning are really more about a lack of experience with or knowledge of a different approach rather than the realities of the classroom. Without this knowledge, faculty are often resistant to the shift of power from teacher to student that must occur for instruction to be truly learner centered (Weimer, 2013). It is this shift of power from the faculty to the student that makes the teaching learner-centered.

Professional Development for Faculty

Many scholars agree it is the faculty member, specifically what that faculty member knows and does, that is the single most important factor in improving student success and completion (Boylan, 2002; Hattie, 2009; Weimer, 2013; Wong, Breau, & Klar, 2003). Historically, few community college faculty are hired based on teaching competencies, but most are hired based upon content expertise (Aquino, 1975; Van Ast, 1997). In 1975, Aquino declared a paucity of research on the training of college teachers. Research has shown that reform is needed to engage college faculty as learners themselves in order to transition to a learner-centered paradigm of teaching (Magno & Sembrano, 2009). Brightman's (2009) review also led to the conclusion that faculty need to develop a deep understanding of their roles as educators as they become informed about how students best learn and shift from asking "what are we teaching" to "what are our students learning and how well are they learning?" (p. 2). Other studies show that this reform will require training for faculty on how to teach in order to move away from the traditional model where faculty transmit information to students and simply test them on retention of facts and move to a model that is learner-centered (Barr & Tag, 1995; Crusetta & Cranton, 2009).

Wong, Breau, and Klar's (2003) paper on how to train, support, and retain new teachers concluded that if faculty are to effectively teach students, institutions must help faculty to move toward a learner-centered model. There is strong support in the literature for the creation of faculty development programs designed to engage faculty members in opportunities with their peers to reflect on teaching and learning. New faculty may be the most open to this paradigm shift. The literature suggests that the transition period for new faculty as they learn to teach on the job is critical. Providing training for new faculty on how to teach has historically not been considered a legitimate priority for faculty development programming (Carusetta & Cranton, 2009; Van Ast, 1997).

Professional development for faculty at community colleges must focus on motivating faculty to engage in a more learner-centered approach to enhance student success and completion. Training targeted to new faculty members would be especially effective since this would expose them to a learner-centered model of instruction early in their career. "Through careful development, teachers can build their effectiveness over time" (Haycock, 1998, p. 21). A professional development program for new faculty focused on learner-centered instruction would provide the initial training necessary to allow faculty to develop and hone these skills over time. The elements of a learner-centered paradigm need to be combined in a model that integrates these concepts into practical applications for faculty growth and development in order to enable faculty to become partners in learning with the students. A successful faculty development program in a holistic sense would require a paradigm shift in the institution providing the training. Through a gradual process of encouraging new practices, an institutional shift or structural change can occur

to move from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction (Barr and Tagg, 1995). Teachers need to take the time to reflect on their own teaching methods in order to do all they can to increase student learning (Danielson, 2011). A development program for new faculty would provide this time for reflection.

Community colleges need to assure that faculty have training in how to engage in the most effective teaching practices possible. According to Boylan (2002), “the quality of classroom instruction is the single most important contributor to the success of developmental students” (p. 69) as it is for all students in higher education. Instruction refers not only to the methods by which material is delivered, but also to factors such as the student-teacher relationship, the learning environment, and classroom organization and management. Promoting learning in order to achieve student success and completion requires faculty to closely examine their broad role in the process of student learning (Berman, 2014).

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were full-time faculty, who were considered “new faculty”, with less than five years of full-time teaching experience at any institution of higher learning, who were at the time of the study employed at a medium-sized Midwestern community college located near a large Midwestern city. As a hiring requirement at the community college, those who taught in liberal arts, science, or mathematics had a master’s degree in the content area in which they taught or a master’s degree in another area and eighteen hours of graduate credit in the content area in which they taught. However, those who taught in career and technical areas had a minimum of an associate’s degree in the content area in which they taught, plus a minimum of 2,000 hours of work experience in the content area in which they taught. Faculty from a variety of disciplines were included in the study. The participants were male and female, primarily Caucasian, between the ages of 27 and 55 years of age. Fourteen faculty, who met the participant criteria described above, were invited by the Vice President for Academic Affairs of the college to participate in a year-long New Faculty Roundtable, which served as their faculty committee assignment for the 2015-2016 academic year. All 14 of those faculty invited were eligible to participate in the study. Of those 14 invited, 12 agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection Procedure

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative research design with a hermeneutical phenomenological approach was employed. This approach was well-suited to a qualitative research frame of faculty professional development focused on learner-centered instruction because the professional development is considered a phenomenon. Phenomenological approaches are used to “describe one or more individuals’ experiences of a phenomenon” (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 424). According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research should focus on the wholeness of an experience, viewing the phenomenon and the person experiencing the phenomenon as inseparable. Through this constructivist lens, a single phenomenon can be explored through the lived experiences of the individuals experiencing the phenomenon. Phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when its method becomes interpretive, through the eyes

of the researcher experiencing the phenomenon, rather than purely descriptive (Simone & Goes, 2011).

The fall semester of New Faculty Roundtable consisted of a professional development program focused on learner-centered instruction titled, Educational Development and Training (EDTR) – Learner-Centered Instruction. All faculty enrolled in the EDTR course as part of New Faculty Roundtable received credit toward promotion. This study focused on the first semester of that training program, which was specifically focused on learner-centered instruction. The two-hour monthly meetings in August, September, October, and November were designed to meet the learning objectives of the course. The EDTR course was taught by a full-time faculty member with training in learner-centered instructional strategies. The researcher served as the Dean and administrative liaison to the New Faculty Roundtable; therefore, was part of the phenomenon. The researcher conducted interviews of the participants after the semester-long training program was completed. Standardized, open-ended questions were asked of each of the participants during the interview sessions. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to voice their experiences without being constrained by the researcher's perspectives (Cresswell, 2012). The questions were designed to explore the lived experiences of the participants over the course of the phenomenon, which was the professional development training program. Follow-up questions were necessary in order to obtain highly elaborated responses (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The follow-up questions included prompts such as: tell me more about that; can you give me an example, or please clarify.

In addition, the researcher used reflective journaling during the observational phase of the research when the New Faculty Roundtable sessions were being held. Reflective journaling created transparency in the research process by making visible the researcher's thoughts and feelings, acknowledging them as part of the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). Reflective journaling will also allowed the researcher to record insights and broad ideas or themes that emerged during the observation (Cresswell, 2012). In addition, the journals documented persistent observation, which allowed the researcher to recognize the multiple influences that impact the phenomenon in order to identify the elements of the phenomenon that are most relevant to the focus of the research (Lincoln & Guba, (2008). The reflective journal entries were completed after each of the four faculty development sessions. The reflective journaling followed the prompts consistently: What was the overall tone of the session? What was the level of engagement in the session? What could have been done differently? These reflections were used in the analysis of the data.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms. The transcripts were member checked to ensure accuracy and increase validity of the data (Cresswell, 2012; Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G., 2008). For this study, the interview questions were pilot tested on two faculty who were similar to the participants in the study. Adjustments to the questions were made in response to their feedback. The interview questions were as follows:

- 1) What experiences, interests, events, and/or people led you to pursue a career in teaching?
- 2) Tell me about the first day you taught college.
- 3) How has your teaching changed from then until now?
- 4) What does the word "teaching" mean to you?
- 5) Has the meaning changed for you over the years, and if so, how?
- 6) How would you describe learner-centered instruction?
- 7) Did the New Faculty Roundtable influence your teaching? If so, how would you describe how it has influenced your teaching?

- 8) What will you take away from the experience of the New Faculty Roundtable?
- 9) How would you explain the New Faculty Roundtable to a new faculty member?

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed and coded in an attempt to “reduce the statements to the common core or essence of the experiences as described by the research participants” (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 447.) The researcher analyzed the data looking for significant statements that led to the identification of common themes in order to construct a reality through a progressive process of discovery and find meaning in the data. The themes that emerged allowed the researcher to identify the collective response of the group as a whole in order to find meaning in the lived experiences of the participants.

An iterative and reflexive six step manual process for coding the content of the transcripts was conducted, including free reading, initial coding, negotiating and revision, further coding, negotiating and revision, final coding, categories, themes, and ultimately the emergence of stages of progression. This heuristic approach included hands on, experiential-based interpretive coding that summarized the data through the creation of themes.

The first step of the analysis included the researcher reviewing the research question and reflective journal notes, then free reading the transcripts. The second step involved a second reading with initial coding of the transcripts highlighting significant statements on the actual transcript. In the third step, the initial codes were reviewed and coding was revised by transferring the highlighted statements to a typed list of relevant statements. In the fourth step, coding was again reviewed and the coding was further revised to find emerging categories in the statements. In the fifth step, codes were then put into categories. In the sixth step the categories were reviewed and collapsed into themes. The themes were then peer reviewed to check for intra-coder reliability. Through this process the individual voices began to disappear as the voice of the group emerged. The themes represented a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experiences of the group as a whole. An analysis of the composite description of the lived experiences of the participants resulted in identification of stages of progression of faculty development.

Findings

Through the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with the faculty who had experienced the professional development program focused on learner-centered instruction, themes emerged. Not only did themes emerge from the data, but an order of progression surrounding the themes became apparent. In other words, stages of faculty professional development emerged from the data. The stages suggested progression in faculty development prior to the professional development program focused on learner-centered instruction and progression after the professional development program focused on learner-centered instruction. The data also showed potential barriers to progression as well as potential regression in the stages. The stages showed a connection to the chronological nature of the interview questions. The first three questions were tied to the past experiences of the participants. Questions four, five, six, and seven were tied more directly to the faculty experience over the course of the program focused on learner-centered instruction. Question 8 and 9 were directed toward the future. As a result, the progression of the questions likely impacted the emergence of not only themes, but themes that transferred into stages of faculty professional development. The emergence of stages may have, in part, been influenced by the

chronological nature of the interview questions; however, there was not a direct correlation between the interview questions and the stages. Pseudonyms are used in the quotes in the following sections.

Table 1. Stages of faculty development toward learner-centered practice

Stage	Description
Stage One	Random path to teaching
Stage Two	Anxiety and fear from being underprepared
Stage Three	Default to what you know
Stage Four	Crucible moment of failure
Stage Five	Seek to learn more
Stage Six	Shift cognitive load to student
Stage Seven	Student resistance
Stage Eight	Release control as flexibility emerges
Stage Nine	Persist and continue to change

Stage One – Random Path to Teaching

When faculty were asked what led them to pursue a career in teaching, many respondents mentioned becoming a faculty member was not their original career goal. Words and phrases such as, random, unintended, roundabout, change, combination of things, and spur of the moment, were used to describe their path to becoming a faculty member:

And really honestly ... I never really had the thought that I was going to go into teaching until I decided to give it a shot, for lack of a better term. That's how I got into it. I was an adjunct there for seven years and at the right place at the right time (Terry).

Dianne described her path saying she, “fell into teaching almost randomly...So I met the qualifications for the position and before I knew it I was teaching.” The concept of randomness was supported by other interviewees who described their experiences in similar ways. Linda mentioned, “I didn't start out wanting to teach,” and Steve spoke of the unexpected nature of his path by saying, “So I needed a change and just kind of spur of the moment I got onto the website. They had an opening for a teacher.”

The faculty interviewed stressed becoming a member of the faculty was not their primary or original career goal. This was made clear in how they talked about the path that led them to becoming full-time faculty members. The path they described was often very indirect, happenstance, and many times involved mention of a mentor or colleague who suggested they might think about teaching as a career.

Stage Two – Anxiety and Fear from Being Underprepared

Nearly every faculty member interviewed mentioned at some point feeling anxious, scared, or hesitant because they did not feel prepared to teach. They also spoke about a lack of support provided to them before they taught their first class, many times as an adjunct faculty member. “They handed me a syllabus, and book, and some power points. I was pretty much on my own”

(Allan). This sentiment was shared in very open terms by Dianne, who told of her feeling of being left on her own to fend for herself:

...before I knew it, I was thrown into this world. And obviously, the first year was an eye-opening experience...I had no resources easily disposable to me. And I learned the hard way how to teach...I'm scared to death. I have no idea what to do. No one said what I was supposed to do. They said, 'It's orientation day.' Okay, what does that mean? So, I would literally have to punt, and I just gave it my best. I was scared to death. These students didn't know me. I didn't know them. They were in a foreign environment. I have no idea what I am doing, and I had three classes back to back.

Chris mentioned fear in his response to how he felt on his first day of teaching, saying "terrifying would be the best word. I remember being nervous, but by the end of the day I knew it wouldn't be that bad." Kathy spoke of her first day of teaching as being "nerve racking." Others questioned the own confidence in whether or not they were actually prepared to teach on that first day and stressed the lack of preparation and support given to them by the institutions where they were teaching:

I remember being really nervous, you know, almost that realization that I wondered if I was actually qualified to do what I was about to do. I had almost no teaching instruction. I did not think I was very good at it ... here is the book you are going to teach out of, here is when you show up, you know, and you are paid this (Jonathan).

This sentiment was echoed by Linda when she said,

It was like they give you a book. All of you have to follow this book. They give you a syllabus to follow. They give you some interesting activities you could do, but the whole of how learning occurs was zero.

Jacqueline stressed the lack of materials was offered to her by the institution contributing to a sense of panic:

I was so nervous ... The school I worked for said, 'Here's your textbook. Here's your classes, and the person that taught these before you took everything he had, so we don't have anything for you.' I was just terrified and panicky ... I only had one week before classes started, so it was pretty nerve racking.

Even though fear and anxiety and a feeling of not being prepared was a prominent theme, faculty often followed up by describing how they went ahead and stepped into the classroom and taught. Fear and anxiety did not prevent them from doing something they felt woefully underprepared to do.

Stage Three – Default to What You Know

Often, after mentioning they were scared and did not think they really knew how to teach, they would refer to trying to teach like those who taught them. Many of the participants, including

Allan, referred to faculty they had admired during their own educational process by saying, "I tried to model myself after the teachers that I knew." Chris echoed this pattern of falling back to what you know in the absence of formal training by admitting, "I have no formal education background ... when I started, all of my teaching habits were based off what I had witnessed from instructors". Others actually referred to this pattern as their default, saying it was the easy way to go; however, it was mentioned the easy way was not always the most effective:

And so, the only thing I could go to was to default ... modeling my class after his class ... Honestly, rolling into the classroom and saying, 'look, there is the information, here is what you need to know', and that the test is on Tuesday. That is easy. That is easy (Jonathan).

Linda relayed a very similar strategy, which did not have positive results:

I think what I remember was that I was doing what I was seeing my teachers do, but then the process was very different because those teachers were really seasoned teachers, and it didn't pan out as well ... it was one of those things where you can see the students are not quite enjoying it, but you can't quite tell what's wrong.

While most of the participants referred to teaching the way they had witnessed another faculty member teach, they often admitted such an approach may not have worked well for them. It was the default method which got them into the classroom, but it was acknowledged to be less than ideal and often described as unsustainable. It usually led to a specific incident or period of time in the classroom they found to be particularly difficult and unsuccessful.

Stage Four – Crucible Moment of Failure

In admitting they did not feel prepared to teach, but went ahead and tried to teach as they had been taught, they often followed up with a description of an experience in which they failed miserably. Many mentioned this period of failure served as a crucible moment which forced them to make some kind of change or decision. "Just trying different models that didn't really work for me so much. So, I have to find my own way and my own style and my own way of working with students" (Allan). Another shared this very emotion experience, "I've been there. I know what it feels like. It's terrible. And, I've seen a lot of friends and peers fail because they have not had that support system" (Dianne). One faculty member described this kind of situation in which he felt he was failing as something he never wanted to experience again:

I have learned to prepare better. That is the worst fear in the world, is staying in front of a class and not being prepared. And I had that; I think we all had that. I remember ... getting caught in a situation where I was lecturing and there was a topic that we were talking about that I was not real, you know, comfortable with ... That was an experience that I am never allowing to happen again (Jonathan).

Others moved on to describe a strong desire to make a change based on a keen sense things were not working and something needed to be done differently, even if they were not sure what or how:

So, presenting that day, it was a rough go. It was rough, and I was literally learning and coming up with ideas and concepts in real time. No matter how much time I took to prep, I'm realizing, that isn't going to work. You have to come up with something else. That isn't going to work. They're not with you (Grace).

Linda referred to learning by mistakes when she said:

My initial experience with teaching wasn't fun because I was a teaching...the teaching experience was not full at all. I was just learning by asking, by seeing. It was really hit or miss. You can see things are not going well. You ask friends how they do it. So, it's really learning by mistake and refining.

Confronting a crucible moment of some kind was described in several ways. For some, it was simply a description of trying something new that was not successful. For others, it was a major approach to teaching that seemed to fail. In either case, they referenced a clear awareness that something was not working and they needed to do something about it.

Stage Five – Seek to Learn More

References were made to seeking ways to learn more through training opportunities, such as the New Faculty Roundtable they had experienced. They discussed how such training provided them with more information on how to be a better teacher. Interest in and appreciation of safe environments in which to find camaraderie and a community of other faculty in similar situations to their own was often mentioned:

And that training changed everything for me. And that is how I learned to teach actively and how I learned to address the different learning styles in my classroom ...it's a wonderful way to have a group of peers that are in the same boat as you and you can use as resources. Number one, I think it's a way to help feel connected to the campus and to all the other departments because ... we're so isolated. So, it's nice to get to meet other people...it's nice to have a familiar face and you've got some common ground ... it's a good resource to have the deans ... to get those administrative questions answered ... the commitment that this college has for me and all of us to be successful and that speaks volumes. That you're not just thrown into it and left to your own devices (Dianne).

The opportunity to participate in a faculty development program on learner-centered instruction was described by several participants in a positive way:

I get academic freedom and I enjoy it now, but I think at the time I probably would have benefitted from more structure ... It was enjoyable to hear what some of my peers had to say. There are some fantastic ideas ... we sit around and talk about these things. I do not get a chance to see the people in other disciplines who have other sets of challenges. We need to come up with a way for us to interact with those, our peers, on the other side of campus more regularly. Because there is a lot to share (Jonathan).

Jacqueline also mentioned appreciating the chance to learn and share with her peers by saying "...to go with other new faculty who are going to give you suggestions or ideas on how to better your class, better your teaching skills ... network with other new instructors ... helped me so much". Steve shared his thoughts about the faculty experience focusing on the opportunity for colleagues to learn from one another early in one's career:

It's to help you out to get started in your career, to answer questions that you may have been afraid to ask. It's an open forum to come in and ask questions. You're going to learn from each other. So, it's a learning experience for new faculty. It's a very friendly environment.

A feeling of isolation or separateness from other faculty, especially in other disciplines was often mentioned. Many spoke of an appreciation for an opportunity to share time and discussions with other faculty from across campus and how those things improved their teaching by providing new ideas and strategies. Also, many tied this back to their original feeling of being underprepared to teach and expressed a need and appreciation for training focused on teaching. It was often noted that observing the environment as a safe place to ask questions, without fear of negative judgment, was important.

Stage Six – Shift the Cognitive Load to the Student

In answering questions about their lived experience of this phenomenon, the participants spoke clearly about an awareness of the need to shift the cognitive load from the instructor to the student:

...we shift the cognitive load to the students so that they are doing the research, the study, the thinking, the figuring out, the discovering, and then presenting it so that they're in charge of the knowledge that they're learning (Allan).

This shift was described as, "putting some of the emphasis back on them as opposed to just sitting there, letting me give them every detail" (Terry). A similar description from Dianne referred to shifting the cognitive load in terms of student success. She said, "Hopefully to be successful in their class, because it's not learn and dump. They have to learn, retain, build up time, and apply it as they go along". The notion of this shift as pressure on the students was described in Jonathan's comment, "So, I put a little bit more pressure on them ...I see my job as to keep turning it, deflecting it back to the discussion". Linda pulled in the value of recognizing what the students bring to the table by saying, "I want to be a facilitator ... obviously I have some expertise, but my students also have experiences that they might apply to the content. I'm also helping student really make those connections."

Many mentioned phrases such as shifting the cognitive load, let students be in control, let students decide, putting the emphasis back on them, let students work through it themselves, apply what they learn, and make it relevant. Several also mentioned using a variety of techniques and multiple activities along with a facilitative approach to guide students along. In addition, a recognition that sometimes, when material is very new, the faculty member may have to dominate the classroom environment to introduce the initial concept.

Stage Seven – Student Resistance

In discussing shifting the cognitive load from the faculty member to the students, an acknowledgement of some kind of resistance from students was often mentioned, noting some students do not adapt well to this shift, at least initially:

Some of them seem to move in that direction more than others. Some still want to be told what to do, and I try to get them to come along and take the step where they're in control and they can decide (Allan).

A recognition that students could no longer be passive in the classroom was expressed by Dianne in the quote below:

I feel that they're not going to be sitting there passively learning. And, some of my students don't always care for that because I do encourage and require them to be active in whatever we are doing...it used to be more of a traditional style ... it's a culture shock for them. And, wait a minute, what do I have to do? And, some of them don't adapt well to that.

These passages acknowledge the difficulty that might be faced by faculty as they attempt to shift the cognitive load from faculty member to students as students struggle with this shift.

The role of the faculty member in helping students to deal with this struggle and resistance was described by Grace as she mentioned, "So, you have to figure out a way to make them care to learn it. Make them value, they have to value what you're doing." Chris further talked about trying to help the student make this shift, recognizing it is not always successful by saying, "The student has something to give, but you have to learn how to help the student recognize, 'Look, you're not going to just sit and absorb.' It works well. Sometimes it doesn't." Tom acknowledged his own skepticism about trying to shift the cognitive load with his own students. He said, "To try to implement in my class is going to be very difficult. It's going to be like pulling teeth for these students." Understanding this resistance might not be the fault of the students, but rather the educational system from which they come was clearly expressed by Jonathan when he said, "But they struggle with that because they come out of a system I think sometimes it is about, here is your word list, here is the topic list, make sure you can fill in the blanks."

The descriptions of students' resistance to the learner-centered environment focused on what students had been used to and the student resistance being in response to some kind of change. Often a lack of understanding of the ideas and that they were being forced to learn it on their own was mentioned. Many saw this as a struggle for students because they were not used to having to think so much or work so hard in the classroom and still wanted to be told what to do. The traditional classroom was described as a passive place where students could be passive rather than active participants in learning.

Stage Eight – Release Control as Flexibility Emerges

As faculty met resistance from students to participating in a learner-centered environment, they described the need to release some of the control to the students as well as the need to become flexible in an effort to better focus on student learning instead of rules and to make efforts to meet the students where they are:

I think I've mellowed in a sense in that I am not as strict as I was. Initially, if there was a deadline, it was pretty much an absolute deadline. Working with the students, especially the younger students, I found this wasn't the best approach. Maybe not emphasizing something like that, but need to work with them more in terms of their needs and try to help them from where they are coming from. I don't have many struggles or tension with the students or bad experiences. Not as many conflicts is I guess what I'm trying to say (Allan).

Releasing control was described by Steve as becoming flexible. He said, "I have to be flexible according to whom I'm presenting to ... I have to create that pathway and ensure that they get to their destination." Releasing control was often described as creating a fun and relaxed atmosphere, and one in which students saw the relevancy of what they were learning in their own lives:

And so, I am basically trying to make my class fun. I try to make it interactive. I try to make it relevant. I try to find something relevant in their life ... it has caused me to look at this differently, experiment with it, play with it (Jonathan).

Losing the need for perfection and absolute certainty about what was going on in the classroom was stressed by Dennis when he said:

I used to think I had to have this perfect assignment and this perfect reading ... Now I think I'm much more – it's about how I deliver it rather than thinking I have to have this ultimate assignment ... Don't overthink it to make it so overly detailed and almost hard to manage.

In order to adjust to student resistance to taking on more of the cognitive load, many of the faculty talked about meeting students where they are and creating a collaborative learning environment with collaboration not only among the students but with the faculty member as well. Adjusting to student needs and being flexible enough to adjust when something was not working was often mentioned.

Stage Nine – Persist and Continue to Change

This flexibility and ability to change was referenced as an ongoing activity or a new way to be as a faculty member. It was described, not as a one-time adjustment to an activity or assignment, but as an ongoing approach to teaching. It was often described as a new place of confidence from which the faculty members approached student learning:

I'm not afraid. I don't get that anxiety to where I used to. I get anxious, but in a good way. We're ready to go, kind of thing. I think for me, I was fortunate that eventually I did get some very good training on active learning" (Dianne).

Many acknowledged a willingness to try new things and recognized this would be an ongoing process of evaluation and change. "I love to try new things ... the teacher has to be ready to ask students, try something new, and maybe at the end of the semester see what the students really learned" (Linda). This ongoing process of evaluation and change was described as more work on the part of the faculty member:

Teaching it so that there are multiple ways for a student to learn it, giving them the opportunity to explore it on their own ... group projects are difficult. All of these things are difficult and add to the amount of stuff that we have to do. That is a lot of work ... If I am continuously trying to push these people to learn, then, yeah, it should not, it probably should not get easier (Jonathan).

The ability to continually adapt and adjust to the situation and to the students' needs was often mentioned. Steve said, "So, I change according to my students. The way they learn is what I need to do and change." Dennis expressed his confidence in his ability to adapt by saying, "Early on, if things got derailed, I'd probably just let them derail. Now, I can steer it back in the right direction." This confidence was very directly expressed by Grace as she described her approach to continuing to grow and change as a faculty member:

I want the good, the bad, and I want the ugly. I want somebody to tell me, 'There's going to be some ugly, but this is how you handle ugly, and it's okay today's ugly, because guess what? Monday is a new day.' You need somebody to give you that confidence.

As they discussed a recognition of the resistance from students to shifting the cognitive load and the need to become more flexible, many described a newly discovered resolve to continue on, to persist, and to persevere themselves in the ongoing need to adapt and adjust to the learners. They described a newfound comfort level with uncertainty and change, even in the moment. They spoke of being fully transparent with their students about being accountable for their own learning and wanting transparency back from their students and their colleagues so they could continue to change and adapt

Summary

An iterative process of analysis and coding of the transcripts of interviews with 12 new faculty who experienced a faculty development program focused on learner-centered instruction resulted in the emergence of themes that represented nine stages of faculty development toward learner-centered practice. The transcripts included rich descriptions of these stages as faculty moved from a random path of pursuing a career in teaching to fear and anxiety resulting from a feeling of being underprepared to teach. These two stages were followed by a need to default to what they knew, which was often to teach how they had been taught. Next, a crucible moment of failure prompted them to seek to learn more about teaching and learning and eventually begin to shift the cognitive load to the student. This shift was met by resistance from students, which was followed by a need to release control and become more flexible. This led to the last stage, which was an awareness that these were not one-time changes, and they needed to persist and continue to change and adapt to students' learning needs. A discussion of the deeper meaning and implications of these findings will be discussed in the conclusion.

Conclusion

Discussion

This study examined how new faculty experienced participation in a semester-long faculty development program focused on learner-centered instruction through interviews of 12 faculty. A hermeneutic phenomenological analysis revealed nine themes that represented stages of faculty professional development. These stages represented progression before the faculty development program as well as after the faculty development program and included barriers to progression as well as the potential for regression in the stages. The emergence of themes as stages may have, in part, been influenced by the chronological nature of the interview questions; however, there was not a direct correlation between the interview questions and the stages.

The collective faculty responses, as interpreted by the researcher who was a part of the phenomenon, support the literature which suggests that faculty need to move beyond their content expertise and learn to become learner-centered instructors. Faculty development programs need to be created that reflect the current literature about learner-centered instruction, provide opportunities for reflection, and provide opportunities for a systematic dialogue with other faculty about learner-centered instruction.

Stages of Professional Development

Stage One – Random Path to Teaching

The participants described how becoming a faculty member at a college had not been their original career goal. Unlike many faculty at research institutions, community college faculty often do not pursue advanced degrees in their discipline with the intent of become a tenured faculty member at a college or university. The decision to pursue a career in teaching was often influenced by another teacher or mentor or by simply being in the right place at the right time. Their path to teaching was explained as a combination of people and events that influenced them, often in an unexpected way, and led to what was usually first an adjunct position leading to a full-time position. The random nature of the path to becoming a full-time faculty member at a community college may be the result of a lack of programs providing credentials in higher education teaching skills, which confirms historically, few community college faculty are hired based on teaching competencies, but most are hired based upon content expertise (Aquino, 1975; Van Ast, 1997).

The way in which this serendipitous process was described was often lighthearted and full of wonder, as though they had never considered teaching college as a possible career. When another teacher or mentor had the confidence in them to suggest taking a position as a community college teacher, often as an adjunct, their surprise seemed to be followed by a sense of pride and confidence in their own abilities. They recognized they actually met the qualifications to be hired to teach at a community college; therefore, they assumed they must be prepared for the classroom. However, these positive feelings were short-lived when they actually stepped into the classroom for the first time. The participants' experiences confirmed, unfortunately, deep content knowledge alone is not enough to be an effective teacher (Haycock, 1998).

Stage Two – Anxiety and Fear from Being Underprepared

No matter what content community college faculty are teaching, they are generally not required to have any training in pedagogy, teaching methods, or curriculum development (Jenkins, 2010). The faculty interviewed were content experts in the areas in which they were currently teaching. They had all either attended graduate school and/or worked extensively in their field. This supports the findings of Aquino (1975) and Van Ast (1997) whose studies concluded few community college faculty are hired based on teaching competencies, but most are hired based upon content expertise.

The lived experiences of the participants confirm meeting the requirements to be hired as a community college faculty member was not sufficient preparation for being an effective teacher. This lack of preparation was described by the participants as leading to fear and anxiety in the classroom. They spoke of being “scared to death” and “just treading water”. The original excitement and confidence from first thinking of themselves as faculty members was quickly replaced with nervousness and a lack of confidence. They felt unsupported by the institution and described situations where they were just handed a book and syllabus and told to go forth and teach.

Stage Three – Default to What You Know

The participants confirmed Michael's (2007) findings that in the absence of training, specifically on learner-centered practices, faculty will default to teaching how they were taught. Given that lecturing remains the dominant teaching practice in higher education (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2011), it is not surprising the participants often described their early teaching experiences as standing in front of the class and lecturing, noting it often felt like it was not going well. They acknowledged they were simply doing what they had seen their own teachers do, but without knowing whether or not it was effective. In fact, Polly and Hannafin's (2011) research found little alignment between faculty perceptions of their own teaching and their actual practice. Many faculty remain unaware or unconvinced of the need for this shift to improve student learning outcomes (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, and Terenzini, 2011). As content experts, faculty members want students to learn about their own specific disciplines, and traditionally the method faculty use to relay information about their specific discipline is through lecturing; therefore, the focus of the teaching is on the faculty member. After all, this is what faculty members have experienced in earning their own college credentials. They see themselves as content experts whose job is to transmit their knowledge to the students. The student's job then is to absorb content (Berrett, 2014). With these participants, this practice was often described as leading to a deep moment of failure.

Stage Four – Crucible Moment of Failure

The lack of understanding of or familiarity with effective teaching practices can create daunting challenges for faculty who may only be familiar with traditional instructor-centered models. The participants in the study gave vivid descriptions of scenes in which they felt a deep and powerful awareness that the students were not learning and what they were doing in the classroom was obviously and painfully ineffective. This came as a crucible moment in which they realized something had to change. For some, it was change in a single practice. For others it was a larger philosophical approach to teaching that needed to change. This crucible moment became a turning

point and was the first stage where it was clear some faculty pushed through in an effort to learn and change and some regressed back to Stage Three – Default to what you know.

These findings are confirmed in the research stating the challenges faced by faculty who have a lack of training in effective teaching practices fall in areas such as: balance of power, function of content, role of the teacher, responsibility for the learning, and process of evaluation (Brackenbury, 2012; Weimer, 2002). Michael (2007) identified many challenges or barriers to creating learner-centered environments exist for faculty including fear of abandoning what they know, student resistance to the change, and concern about the amount of work required to make such a shift. This might explain why some of the participants were less interested in pushing forward and instead defaulted to a more teacher-centered approach. Bishop, Caston and King, (2014) concluded, in spite of faculty and student resistance to learner-centered environments, there is still a strong rationale for shifting from a teacher-centered model to a learner-centered model. Research shows college faculty whose backgrounds include teacher preparation training, specifically training in learner-centered instruction, are evaluated by their students as more effective teachers than those whose backgrounds lack such preparation (Aquino, 1975; Brightman, 2009; Magno & Sembrano, 2008). Such preparation may come in the form of a faculty development program.

Stage Five – Seek to Learn More

The phenomenon experienced by the participants in this study was a semester-long faculty development program focused on learner-centered instruction. For many, this training was described as an opportunity to improve their teaching effectiveness after a crucible moment of failure. However, some seemed less open to moving away from the comfort of their teacher-centered approach. Overall, the responses showed a recognition that knowledge is not a commodity that can be transferred from the faculty member to the student (Fox, 1983), and confirmed Polly and Hannafin's (2011) findings that the students must play the primary role in their own learning, and faculty members must design learning environments in which students are able to gather information, pose questions, and solve problems. Many of the participants described their own efforts to find ways to help students become more engaged in the learning process.

Brightman (2009) concluded faculty need to develop a deep understanding of their roles as educators as they become informed about how students best learn. The participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn and share with colleagues in a supportive environment. They referred to a feeling of isolation in the absence of such opportunities. This supports the notion that colleges need to assist faculty in moving to a more learner-centered model through faculty development programming (Michael, 2007; Wong, Breaux, and Klar, 2003). Carnell's (2007) study found faculty want chances to talk about their teaching and collaborate with fellow colleagues to critically examine what they do and think about ways to develop and change what they do. The faculty interviewed used vivid language to express the positive impact of the ability to collaborate with the others participating in the training in a safe and supportive environment.

Several studies of faculty development have determined critical components of faculty development programs should include discussions on learner-centered instruction (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Brightman, 2009; Crusetta & Cranton, 2009, and Van Ast, 1997). Research has shown training is needed to engage college faculty as learners themselves in order to transition to a learner-centered paradigm of teaching (Magno & Sembrano, 2009).

Stage Six – Shift Cognitive Load to Student

There is a plethora of research supporting the idea that effective teaching is learner-centered. Barr and Tagg's (1995) seminal article concluded effective teaching is learner-centered and creates "education for understanding" (p. 12). Cohen and March (1986) argued it is not the faculty member alone who is responsible for the learning; much of that responsibility should fall on the student. Polly and Hannafin's (2011) findings concurred the students must play the primary role in their own learning, and faculty members must design learning environments in which students are able to gather information, pose questions, and solve problems. In the learner-centered environment, the student's job is to learn and the faculty member's job is to facilitate the learning (Michael, 2007).

After experiencing a semester-long faculty development training program focused on learner-centered instruction, the participants' clear descriptions of learner-centered instruction demonstrated a keen knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the fundamental tenants of learner-centered instruction. They were able to clearly articulate why learner-centered instruction equated with effective teaching and were able to give detailed examples of learner-centered activities they used in their own practice. Although, they acknowledged sometimes these efforts were met with resistance from some students.

Stage Seven – Student Resistance

As students are allowed and encouraged to take more control over their learning environment and carry the majority of the cognitive load, the participants discovered what is supported by the literature, which is the one who does the work does the learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bishop, Caston, & King, 2014; Forrest, 1997; King, 1993; Weimer, 2013). Pushback from students may stem from the idea that learner-centered models may look and sound dramatically different from anything students have participated in during their previous educational experiences (Brackenbury, 2012). The participants seemed to experience much of the same pushback from some of their students when they incorporated learner-centered strategies in their classrooms. They described resistance from some students who still wanted to be told what to do and resented that they could no longer sit passively in the classroom. Doyle (2008) pointed to reasons students resist learner-centered instruction including the risk and effort required in a learner-centered environment. Some students told them they felt like they had to learn it on their own and wanted more from the instructor. The participants described this as a shift in the culture of the classroom. This was the second stage where faculty were met with a significant challenge that either pushed them back to Stage Three – Default to what you know or they were able to push forward by releasing control and becoming more flexible.

Stage Eight – Release Control as Flexibility Emerges

The participants whose descriptions demonstrated a willingness to push past student resistance indicated an acknowledgement that they had to step back and allow the students to become much more active participants in their own learning. This supports the many studies which show effective faculty create environments that include high levels of participation and interactivity

among students and faculty in order to bring material to life for students (Gardiner, 2014; Revell & Wainwright, 2009). Carnell (2007) discovered characteristics of effective teaching include learning that is transparent, dialogue that enables learning, and a community of learners that can generate knowledge. Since learner-centered instruction challenges students to play a central and active role in their own learning, it requires instructors to relinquish some control and give that control back to the student (Brackenbury, 2013; Weimer, 2001). Barr and Tagg (1995) posited the job of the faculty member is not to simply transfer knowledge, but to create an environment that includes experiences that allow students to discover and construct the knowledge themselves. Forrest (1997) and Fox (1983) confirmed learners must take responsibility for their own learning, with the faculty member playing the role of the “expert guide” (Fox, 1983, p. 152).

The participants’ stories of their journey to find this new role as the “expert guide” (Fox, 1983, p. 152) illustrate a willingness to release control and become more flexible than they had been used to being in the past. Many described letting go of old policies or rules that seemed to be interfering with the real learning. They spoke of mellowing and making class more fun, which in turn reduced the amount of struggle with students over policies and rules. They described embracing experimentation, spontaneity, and not overthinking or controlling every aspect of the classroom experience. They seemed to be willing to turn the classroom over to the students while they stepped aside to be facilitators of the students’ learning.

Stage Nine – Persist and Continue to Change

Stage nine brings the faculty full circle, back to the spark and confidence they described when they first decided to become faculty members. The collective voice of the participants sounded fearless, brave, bold, and ready to meet the students where they are. Much of the anxiety was gone and they described being ready to handle the unknowns as they arise. There was a clear recognition that learner-centered instruction was not easy, and in some ways required more work, but the payoffs in student engagement and learning were well worth it. Their stories of moving through these stages illustrated a willingness to persist and continue to change in order to continuously adapt to the students’ needs and to become partners in their students’ learning.

Research supports the idea that faculty need to think about the relevance of what they teach and what students should learn. In addition, they need to undertake the kind of reflective judgment they expect to see in students in the examination of their own teaching (Calkins & Seidler, 2011; Magno & Sembrano, 2009). They need time to reflect and consider how to integrate learner-centered strategies into their teaching (Smith & Thomas, 2012). Michael (2007), in a study of the perceptions of the role of faculty, concluded teaching should be treated like any other scholarly activity and become a part of the public forum.

Implications

Many scholars agree the faculty member is the single most important factor in improving student success and completion (Boylan, 2001; Hattie, 2009; Weimer, 2013; Wong, Breaux, & Klar, 2003). There is strong support in the literature for the creation of faculty development programs designed to engage faculty members in opportunities with their peers to reflect on teaching and learning. Providing training for new faculty on how to teach has historically not been considered a legitimate priority for faculty development programming (Carusetta & Cranton, 2009; Van Ast, 1997). New faculty need support for their teaching because they have a major learning curve as

they try to develop their own teaching (Scorinelli, 1994). With the dismal student success rates at community colleges (Hechinger Report, 2013), teaching practices need to change. One way administrators and other faculty can provide such support is through professional development (Boice, 1992; Fink, 1984; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992; Sorcinelli, 1988).

The implications for the researcher's practice as a dean assigned to professional development for faculty will be impacted by the emergence of the nine stages of faculty development toward learner-centered practice after experiencing a professional development program focused on learner-centered instruction. The results of the study provide insights into potential barriers experienced by the faculty as they begin to implement learner-centered strategies and practices and how those barriers might be mitigated through additional training. The researcher also benefited from the results of the reflections on the training and the overall participants' responses to the training in terms of ideas for new and expanded professional development offerings. In addition, potential benefits to the institution resulted as information about ideas for future professional development training for new faculty was gleaned from the research.

The finding of this study will give community college administrators and faculty useful insight into stages of faculty development and growth as they plan and develop faculty training programs. The stages and the potential barriers to progression and opportunity for regression in the development and growth of faculty provide useful insights into reasons faculty may default to a teacher-centered approach to teaching. In addition, the stages of faculty develop give practitioners a common language and understanding of faculty development and a framework for future research.

Summary

This study examined how new faculty experienced participation in a semester-long faculty development program focused on learner-centered instruction. Twelve new faculty participating in the program were interviewed. A hermeneutic phenomenological analysis revealed nine themes representing stages of faculty professional development toward learner-centered practice. These stages represented progression before, during, and after the faculty development program and included barriers to progression, as well as the potential for regression within the stages.

The collective faculty responses, as interpreted by the researcher who was a part of the phenomenon, support the body of research stating that faculty need to move beyond their content expertise and learn to become learner-centered instructors. Faculty development programs need to be created which will offer insights into the current literature about learner-centered instruction, provide opportunities for reflection, and provide opportunities for a systematic dialogue with other faculty about learner-centered instruction.

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