

Faculty Development Opportunities: Peer Coaching, Learning Communities, and Mentoring

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Abstract

The need and rationale for interactive and supportive faculty development programs in institutions of higher education has long been documented in the literature and on higher education campuses. The purpose of this research is to examine faculty development programs and concepts that engage faculty members in interactive activities while addressing individual professional development needs. This research includes a discussion of peer coaching, learning communities, and informal and formal mentoring as examples of faculty development programs. Various adult education theories and principles that can be incorporated into programs to engage faculty enriches this discussion of faculty development programs.

Key Words: Faculty Development, Higher Education, Adult Education, Self-Directed Learning, Peer Coaching, Learning Communities, Mentoring

1. Introduction

The need and rationale for interactive and supportive faculty development programs in institutions of higher education has long been documented in the literature and on higher education campuses (McAtee & Hansman, 2013).

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Barlett and Rappaport (2009) contend that when higher education institutions invest in faculty development programs, there is a robust effect on faculty members' research innovation, interdisciplinary dialogue, and university quality of life. They further suggest that there is evidence that faculty members teaching of new topics and their use of innovative teaching methods is affected by participating in faculty development programs, as well as their level of engagement in research, interdisciplinary cooperation, and personal development. Furthermore, O'Meara and Terosky (2010) discovered that faculty members' level of commitment, satisfaction and retention rates increase when they feel that their academic environments are generative and genuine places for professional growth. Despite these apparent positive outcomes for faculty development, faculty members may struggle to find development opportunities that meet their individual needs and wrestle with finding the personal motivation to engage in professional development to fuel their individual career trajectories.

In addition, many challenges of today's complex world impact faculty members in higher education institutions in the United States, thus affecting the availability of faculty development programs offered to faculty members. These challenges are the result of societal, technological, and economic changes. First, today's higher education classrooms demand university and community college faculty members to keep current with ever-changing trends in pedagogy and technology in the classroom. The constantly evolving technological developments and innovations challenge all educators to learn and adapt new applications to design academically sound courses (King & Lawler, 2003). Second, the higher education classroom, comprised of various generations and diverse students, requires faculty members to respond to the varied and complex needs of all students in their classrooms.

For example, adult learners in higher education classrooms may have dissimilar needs for stimulating and personal educational experiences than the needs of traditional aged students (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Because students from multiple generations may be present in the same classroom, faculty members need to understand that students in different generations or birth cohorts have "wide-ranging values and belief systems, varied life experiences and widely dissimilar learning and work styles, and diverse perspectives on the use and creation of knowledge, technology, and learning" (Hansman & Mott, 2010, p. 16).

Third, faculty members may struggle to understand and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population that is present on campuses that includes “minority, self-supporting, immigrant and first generation college students” (Pfahl, McClenney, O’Banion, Sullivan, & Wilson, 2010, p. 232). Fourth, in addition to developing and demonstrating knowledge in teaching methodologies, faculty members are also expected to be active researchers in their disciplines and areas of expertise. Finally, due to the current bleak economic situation in the United States and elsewhere in the world, university and community college faculty members are frequently required to continue their professional development activities with little support and funding available from their institutions to cover their expenses for travel, conference fees, and continuing education workshops.

The challenges for faculty members in institutions of higher education raise several issues for the faculty and staff members who plan faculty development opportunities and programs. The need for faculty development is broad, ranging from pedagogical techniques and technological innovations to developing research and writing skills to encourage faculty members to publish in peer reviewed journals. Further complicating these needs are the variety of faculty members’ experience levels, ranging from junior to senior faculty. Furthermore, engaging faculty members in professional development requires that the opportunities offered to them meet their individual needs for engagement with teaching and research skills. All of these challenges come at time when the complex economic and political climate around the world has resulted in reduced funding for higher education.

The primary purpose of this research is to explore examples of peer coaching, learning communities and mentoring as faculty development methods that engage faculty members in interactive activities while addressing individual professional development needs. The following research questions guide our inquiry: What does the literature inform us about best faculty development methods/ practices? What adult education theories and principles can be incorporated into faculty development programs to engage faculty members? And finally, what faculty development activities and methods can be incorporated into faculty development programs to enhance faculty members’ research and teaching skills?

2. Faculty Development

The need for faculty development programs in institutions of higher education is clear. O'Meara and Terosky (2010) contend that "Academic environments that act as generative, genuine incubators for professional growth (those that foster faculty learning, agency, professional relationships and commitments) are places with higher faculty retention rates and more satisfied and committed faculty" (p. 48). As further evidence of the necessity for faculty development programs, Barlett and Rappaport (2009) reported that a "faculty development workshop can have surprisingly robust effects on university life and faculty members' work. Evidence suggests that teaching is affected – both with new topics and new teaching methods – but also faculty research, interdisciplinary cooperation, and personal engagement ...are enhanced" (p. 73). Clearly, higher education institutions that provide faculty development opportunities are not only assisting faculty members, but also through their improved teaching and research skills, benefiting the students in classroom on their campuses.

While it may be clear that the need is present for faculty development programs, there are considerations for planners of these programs. For instance, the professional development needs of more experienced faculty members contrast with those of junior faculty members, requiring different venues for development (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Faculty members' development needs will continue to evolve, as the average age of tenured professors rises and as more non-tenured track, visiting and adjunct professors are added to faculty ranks (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Furthermore, the *Key Trends Survey*, published by the League of Innovations in the Community College, reports that a significant number of faculty and staff are expected to retire in the next three years (McClure, 2011), which may mean an influx of inexperienced faculty members onto campuses. Faculty development programs, then, have to be fluid and flexible enough to meet the needs of a changing faculty profile.

The challenges facing faculty members and their needs for professional development are many. Sorcinelli (2007) groups these into three categories; (1) the changing professorate, (2) the changing nature of the student body, (3) the changing nature of teaching, learning, and scholarship. In addition, there are other challenges to planning meaningful faculty development programs that must be acknowledged, such as the faculty members themselves and their views of faculty development.

Fenwick (2000) asserts that workers approach development opportunities with varying degrees of enthusiasm, with some feeling that training is a waste of time, while others may view it as simplistic, theoretical, or not relative to them and their needs, or perhaps worst, ignores the accumulated knowledge of faculty members. Faculty members may be asked to attend training sessions for which they see little or no value to their work as teachers and researchers. At the same time, institutions may seek outside counsel in areas of faculty expertise, hiring consultants while not considering what knowledge their own faculty members could bring to situations or issues institutions face. Thus the overall issue may not be presence or lack of training and development opportunities, but the motivation of the faculty members to attend and profit from them. A final issue in planning training programs is the dearth of attention paid to adult learning and development theories: adult educators who have the theoretical knowledge and skills necessary to plan programs for adult learners may rarely be consulted or involved in developing programs for faculty members (McAtee & Hansman, 2010).

Brookfield (1995) asserts that “much of faculty development is done to teachers by people defined as outside experts” (p.66). Further, these “experts” decide for faculty members what knowledge or skills on which to focus in faculty development sessions – instead of encouraging faculty members to critically reflect about their own experiences and use “their experiences not only as teachers and members of the academy, but also as learners become co-planners of sessions” (Lawler & King, 2000, p. 14). Engaging faculty members in discussions and encouraging them to actively participate in learning that is tailored to their individual needs may be more effective than using lectures given by outside consultants as the focus of faculty development programs. In other words, better faculty development programs are based on the relationships between facilitators and participants than on expert knowledge transmitted in a “telling” format.

The need for faculty members to share their expertise with each other is evident in emerging types of faculty development, which allows faculty members to formulate their own learning goals and to find value in the personal and professional collaborations for learning. Through relationship-based learning experiences, such as peer-coaching, learning communities, and informal and formal mentoring programs, faculty members have an opportunity to control their learning environment and the context and content of their engagement, which in turn may encourage them to be motivated and accountable for their own professional development while sharing in emerging knowledge relevant to their work as faculty members.

3. Infusing Adult Education Principles into Faculty Development Programs

Adult education strategies and theories for learning incorporate many of the principles evident in peer-coaching, learning communities and mentoring relationships. A basic tenant of adult education is self-directed learning. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) discuss self-directed learning as “a process of learning, in which people take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences” (p. 110). Knowles (1975) contends that there are at least six principles to self-directed learning, including diagnosing learning needs, formulating learning goals, applying suitable strategies for learning, and evaluating outcomes. Merriam (2001) views self-directed learning through three lenses: humanistic, transformational, and emancipatory. The first, humanist, allows learners to utilize their life experiences, existing knowledge, and motivations to learn to develop their own approaches to learning through their own or other’s direction. Through the second perspective, transformational, adult learners make meaning from their experiences through critical self-reflection (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Taylor, 2008). In the third perspective, emancipatory, learners are “positioned more for social and political action than individual learning” (Merriam, 2001, p. 9). Since self-directed learning furthers constructivist and contextual knowledge development, encouraging critical self-reflection and resourceful problem solving may assist faculty members to become more self-directed in their approaches to faculty development programs, which may be essential for their success as scholars and teachers.

Applying self-directed learning principles described above to faculty development programs may assist faculty members to be motivated to continue their professional development throughout their academic careers (Wlodkowski, 2003). Designing faculty development programs to include self-directed learning principles can be accomplished through incorporating relational activities into workshops, such as peer coaching, learning communities, and mentoring. Pata (2009) contends that workshops must address learners’ self-directed competencies by designing activities that allow for the diagnosis of learning needs; once the learners’ needs have been clarified, meaningful goals can be established which can then be addressed through a wide range of learning strategies. Finally, monitoring faculty members’ teaching and research progress can be on-going to measure learning objectives and outcomes.

Although assisting faculty members to become skilled self-directed learners may be crucial components of faculty development programs, the complex world of higher education requires that faculty members critically reflect upon their own notions of teaching and learning, as well as the needs and issues of the diverse students in their classrooms, so that they may confront whatever challenges face them (Brancato, 2003; King and Lawler, 2003; Lawler & King, 2000). Critical reflection may allow faculty members to examine their beliefs concerning their students, which in turn may lead “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), which may deepen critical self-reflection and allow faculty members to engage in reflective discourse with other faculty members, transforming and expanding cultural understandings of their students and their needs, goals, and interests.

Activities to promote critical reflection may be built into faculty development plans, using concepts such as Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice (CoPs). CoPs “involve self-directed learning by individuals as well as group learning through experiences and interactions” (Hansman, 2008, p. 294). In CoPs, “real world contexts, social relationships, and tools make the best learning environments” (p. 299). In CoP’s or learning communities, faculty members may share their experiences in the classroom and as researchers with others, communicating with each other how their “experience in learning, context, cultures, and tools” interact, thus “shaping experiential learning” (Hansman, 2008, p. 298). This can, in turn, lead faculty members into discourse and activities to nurture learning from and with each other, which may encourage improved teaching practices and enriched learning contexts for students in faculty members’ classrooms.

There are many ways in which faculty development programs can be structured to incorporate concepts of self-directed learning, critically reflective practice, and the ideas of CoPs and meet the various needs of the faculty members and their institutions in order to engage, encourage, and ultimately motivate faculty members to participate in programs continue their professional development. The following section focuses on three types of emerging faculty development methods designed to encourage faculty members’ engagement while at the same time meeting their individual needs. They are peer coaching, learning communities, and mentoring.

4. Peer Coaching

Huston and Weaver (2008) discuss peer coaching as a “collegial process whereby two faculty members voluntarily work together to improve or expand their approaches to teaching” (p. 19). They ascertain three steps typically utilized in peer coaching: identifying the area of coaching, peer classroom observations, and debriefing sessions. Through their research, McLeod & Steinert (2009) found that peer coaching “increased participants’ confidence in teaching” (p. 1044), leading to faculty members’ “ appreciation of exposure to new education ideas and an improved sense of institutional support and collegiality” (p. 1044).

Zwart, Wubbles, Bergen & Bolhuis (2007) take peer coaching a step farther and describe the concept of reciprocal peer coaching turn-taking, where the faculty members take turns, first as a teacher coach, and then as a coached teacher. As a further example of both self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975) and critically reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995), Zwart, Wubble, Bergen & Bolhuis (2007) explain that “Reciprocal peer coaching takes place in the workplace, where teachers learn by all kinds of day-to-day teaching experiences without planning. For example, they spontaneously learn by taking notes of remarks made by students or colleagues. They may also learn in non-linear ways by solving problems” (p. 167). What probably enhances learning through reciprocal peer coaching is the opportunity to self-reflect and then engage in joint reflection sessions with peer faculty members concerning the teaching/learning experience.

Institutions of higher education can plan innovative ways to incorporate peer coaching as a faculty development opportunity. For example, Michigan State University offers a faculty learning community (FLCs) program, which fosters learning through peer coaching and peer-to-peer extended conversations in areas of interest or need (O’Meara and Terosky, 2010). The program consists of a group of faculty members, administrators, and support staff from different departments who engage in year-round discussion groups around specific topics, coaching others in their learning, while engaging in reflective peer support activities. At the conclusion of the year, FLCs share their groups’ learning and knowledge by presenting at the school’s spring institute poster session and in some cases, publishing articles for research and general audiences.

5. Learning Communities

Learning communities may borrow from Wegner's (1998) concepts of communities of practice (CoP), in which participants make decisions on where to focus their learning; the decisions are made organically by the members of the community. Learning communities may provide the space and time for faculty to reflect upon their teaching and their work as researchers. The emphasis is on learning in small communities over an extended time period, focusing on targeted and measureable learning outcomes (Phelps and Waalkes, 2009). Marshall (2005) posits three elements that are crucial to learning community training programs: First, learning communities must involve scholar-teachers who are interested in examining their vocation as teachers; second, the learning communities should represent interdisciplinary and cross-institutional interests and participants; and third, they should honor the participants for their vocations and encourage appropriate self-care.

Parker Palmer's (1998) described learning communities used to structure faculty development as: "... not a model where experts come to teach the novice and amateurs about teaching; rather it is that right and talented scholars and teachers bring their gifts and graces into a new community where risk and honesty are valued highly and teaching is a form of art. In the context of these communities of teacher-scholars, faculty member talk about the struggles and pains of their own teaching experiences, as well as about the joys and celebrations" (pp. 33). As Palmer states, the learning community's goals, methods, and outcomes are set by the community members, and the knowledge "grown" out of the community is shared and developed by members. This is vastly different than planners "imposing" goals or interests on community members; rather, in learning communities, the needs of group members are paramount in determining how and what to focus attention.

Higher education institutions can develop learning communities to assist faculty members to be more effective in the classroom and to improve their research and writing skills. Learning communities can be designed to accommodate the needs of tenured or tenure track professors, lecturers, part-time, visiting, and adjunct instructors, and graduate assistants who are responsible for teaching in student learning communities. In planning learning communities as a part of faculty development programs, community members should focus on activities to encourage all members to collaborate to define their interdisciplinary interests and issues, which may be in classroom management, teaching strategies, innovative pedagogies, student development, research approaches, writing skills, or other areas of mutual concerns.

Through workshops and other interactive meetings, learning community members may engage in their own self-directed learning activities that in turn may encourage knowledge creation and growth through group critical reflection activities and discourse. More experienced faculty members may initially take the lead in discussions, but as time passes, less experienced members may play increasingly pivotal roles in leading discussions and sharing their experiences and knowledge. Through learning communities, critical self-reflection may lead to members engaging in transformational learning concerning their faculty roles of teachers, researchers, and scholars.

6. Formal and Informal Mentoring

Mentoring and coaching can be incorporated into plans for faculty development programs and reflect a culture of learning within the higher education institution. Formal and informal mentoring relationships “have been unquestioningly and uncritically accepted as fundamental to foster learning in the workplace, advance careers, help new employees learn workplace culture, and provide developmental and psychological support” (Hansman, 2002, p. 39). Formal mentoring programs can range from one-on-one pairings of more senior members with less experienced persons to peer mentoring where “two or more employees at any level mentor each other to achieve job or career objectives” (Peterson, 2010, p. 248). Since “mentors can play key roles in their protégé’s personal and professional development” (Hansman, 2009, p. 53), faculty development programs may include both formal and informal mentoring programs.

Borders et al’s (2011) research uncovered that faculty members appreciate informal and spontaneous mentoring relationships, and “these pairs are seen by some as more effective, meaningful, comfortable, relational and enduring” (p. 173) Informal mentoring relationships may be psychosocial in nature, formed through the interpersonal dynamics between mentors and protégés and their mutual interests and concerns. Informal mentoring relationships may also encompass the protégé’s and mentor’s personal as well as professional goals. Some informal mentoring relationships are comprised of peer or cohort mentor groups that may provide psychosocial as well as career help to each other. One or more of the members may have more knowledge and experience that they may use to “guide” the less experienced person or persons, perhaps focusing on the culture of the institution, teaching strategies, research skills, or student development issues.

Although informal mentoring may be preferred by faculty members, there are concerns that informal mentoring relationships may be unevenly available to provide opportunities for mentoring between disparate groups to occur, and some junior faculty members may not find mentors. In short, "Gender, race, class ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, and issues of power may affect how protégés and mentors interact and negotiate their relationships" (Hansman, 2002, p. 40).

To address the concerns of equality in mentoring relationships, formal mentoring programs may be planned within faculty development programs. In formal mentoring programs, opportunities for mentoring may be developed in a more democratic fashion, matching mentors with protégés (Hansman, 2002). Sorcinelli and Yun (2007) present an emerging model for mentoring that takes the mentoring relationship from a top-down, one-to-one relationship to associations based on "flexible networks of support, in which no single person is expected to possess the expertise required of someone to navigate the shoals of a faculty career" (p. 58). Planners of faculty development formal mentoring programs must consider various characteristics of the potential faculty participants as mentors and protégés. Cariaga-Lo, Dawkins, Enger, Schotter, & Spence (2010) assert that successful faculty mentoring programs "are attentive to differences across gender, race, ethnicity, culture and generational lines" (p. 21). The diverse characteristics of the participants in the mentoring relationship can affect how individuals participate and benefit from the mentoring experience. At the conclusion of faculty development formal mentoring programs, mentoring relationships may morph into informal structures based on the individual needs and the expertise and availability of the faculty members in the network.

One way of planning mentoring programs for faculty development may be to incorporate both aspects of informal mentoring relationships into a formal mentoring program. For example, Borders et al (2011) proposes ten principles of good practice for supporting junior faculty in their career journeys. The ten principles are: (1) communicate expectations for performance, (2) give feedback on performance, (3) enhance collegial review processes, (4) create flexible timelines for tenure, (5) encourage mentoring by senior faculty, (6) extend mentoring and feedback to graduate students who aspire to be faculty members, (7) recognize the department chair as a career sponsor, (8) support teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level, (9) support scholarly development, and (10) foster a balance between professional and personal life.

Using these ten principles as guidelines, faculty development planners may plan faculty mentoring programs that will include both formal and informal mentoring structures. These programs have the potential to encourage senior faculty members to mentor junior faculty members, while at the same time, they may also encourage all faculty members to engage in peer-to-peer mentoring for professional, and possibly personal, growth and development. Enriched faculty development programs that encourage informal or peer mentoring or support formal mentoring programs point to a culture of learning on campuses from which all may benefit.

7. Conclusion

In order to meet the development needs of faculty members, faculty development programs must be more than lecture-based workshops and “outside expert” led discussions. Evolving faculty development programs should encompass theories and principles of adult education, such as self-directed learning, critically reflective practice, transformational learning, and communities of practice concepts. Faculty development planners should incorporate adult learning concepts into their planning, and adult educators must become pro-active as program planners and teachers of adults to further develop and expand adult learning techniques and best practices in effective faculty development programs. Finally, faculty development programs should be designed that are responsive to faculty members’ needs and objectives, as well as receptive to the ever-changing world of higher education.

As culture shifts and economic downturns become reality in our fast-paced world and affect the resources available to faculty members on higher education campuses, planners of faculty development programs face many challenges in helping faculty members meet their professional development needs while at the same time balancing the scarce resources of their institutions. Faculty members may struggle to find development opportunities that meet their individual needs and the motivation to engage in professional development to continue their individual career trajectories and meet professional goals. However, program planners may design faculty development programs to include emerging concepts such as peer coaching, learning communities, and formal and informal mentoring that may provide the opportunities faculty members require for their career and personal development. In the end, these types of learning opportunities may provide the means for faculty members to critically reflect upon their practices as teachers, researchers, and scholars while engaging with other faculty members to share and grow knowledge through their collaborative interests and knowledge.

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