

What a Few Faculty with a Shared Interest Can Accomplish

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How often do we mention in faculty meetings, at retreats, and during informal conversations the value of developing learning skills across courses? Emphasizing a particular skill in a course is fine, certainly better than no instruction, but given the skill level of many college students, these essential learning tools need to be the focus in several courses. And the focus should be developmental. Skills needed in introductory courses are not what are needed in upper-division major courses. But how often do we collaborate, join forces, and seek as a group to focus on and develop the skills needed by professionals in our fields?

Would you agree that the answer to that question is “not very often”? Part of what prevents faculty collaboration is the bureaucracy that comes with having to develop a program that does x, y, or z for students. In most cases that means hours of committee meetings, various review processes, the involvement of academic leaders, and on and on. It’s just a whole lot easier to carry on, doing what we think needs to be done in our courses with some bemoaning that what we’ve worked hard to accomplish probably isn’t going to be reinforced all that directly in subsequent courses.

That’s why I found the article referenced below so encouraging. Five faculty, all belonging to the same interdisciplinary sociology department, decided that collectively they could improve student writing skills better than they could individually. “Our approach emphasizes that a collective effort need not be a department-wide, institutionalized one. Indeed, faculty can still collaborate and students can still feel the impact of a concerted effort even if only a subgroup of like-minded faculty members participate.” (p. 131) The article tells the story of how they managed to pull this off.

Their academic backgrounds and areas of specialty were different, but they all taught core courses in the department. Their goals were straightforward: they wanted to help students produce quality papers, and they wanted to better prepare students for future employment.

Their collaboration began as “informal, hallway chats” and was helped along by a faculty retreat. They began meeting regularly (finding a time that worked for everyone was a challenge) and then started dealing with the extent to which their efforts should be standardized, with everyone in the group doing the same things in the same way. “We all want to help improve students’ writing skills, and we want to work together doing so, but we also want to maintain autonomy as instructors.” (p. 132)

They decided they could do both if they agreed on a set of writing improvement strategies they would all use and if they left the details (such as page length, opportunities for revision, kind and amount of instructor feedback) up to each teacher. The five writing strategies they agreed to use aren’t new: in-class, low-stakes (do it and get credit) writing; peer review; a library research orientation; an in-class writing workshop; and an online tutorial on plagiarism reinforced with a signed integrity statement attached to each piece of submitted work. All five faculty used these strategies. The library research orientation was tailored to the content of the course so that students learned about databases, search engines, and research-related sources in every course, but the actual resources reflected the content of the current course.

Students in the courses completed an online survey that questioned them about the extent to which they believed the activity improved their writing. Interestingly, as students experienced the activities more than once, especially the library research orientation, they became increasingly aware of their value. This student feedback allowed the instructors to make changes. For example, students complained

about having to repeat the plagiarism tutorial, so faculty created a plagiarism certificate given to students when they completed the tutorial, which they could then submit with their papers.

“Our experience affirms that a collective group approach can accomplish more than separate attempts by individual faculty to emphasize good, scholarly student writing. This observation is based on both the results of our assessment component and our own observations as faculty members.” (p. 137) And they conclude, “We perceive great value in having conversations to learn from one another’s experiences as we work to improve students’ writing.” (p. 138) The conclusions aren’t surprising. It makes perfect sense that collective efforts to improve writing are going to be better than individual ones, and it also makes sense that interaction over shared efforts is going to improve practice.

Reference: Burgess-Proctor, A., Cassano, G., Condron, D.J., Lyons, H.A., and Sanders, G. (2014). A collective effort to improve sociology students’ writing skills. *Teaching Sociology*, 42 (2), 130-139.

This article appeared in *The Teaching Professor* http://www.magnapubs.com/newsletter/the-teaching-professor/105/what_a_few_faculty_with_a_shared_interest_can_accomplish-8069-1.html

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