Adult Education Research Conference   2000 Conference Proceedings (Vancouver, BC, Canada)

Creating a Centre for University Faculty Learning and Teaching: Adult Education in the Academy of the Second Millennium

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Abstract: *Although numerous attempts have been made to establish a centre for excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Toronto, none have been sustained. The author suggests that a more systemically-focused approach which uses wide consultation and collaborative planning with key stakeholders may help achieve the goal.*

The field of organization development has long emphasized the need for a "systems perspective" in organizational change. Over the last decade, these notions have echoed in the research on organizational learning, with "systems thinking" ranking foremost among the disciplines described by Senge (1990, 1999) and others. With this perspective as our framework, my colleagues and I began, a year ago, to explore the potential for establishing a centralized unit to support excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Toronto (U. of T.).

Context is Critical

One of the first questions we asked ourselves was, "Why does this centre not yet exist?" There appeared to be many systemic supports in place for such an initiative. In all of its public documents, the University claims to value the quality of teaching and learning. For instance, in a publicly issued planning paper by the office of the Vice-president and Provost, dated January 6, 1999, a large section is dedicated to priorities regarding teaching and learning. Formal structures in place include: policy guidelines regarding the evaluation of teaching effectiveness for tenure and promotion; policies regarding hiring partially on the basis of teaching skill; a recent Associate Dean hired for the Faculty of Education, whose mandate includes faculty development; an adviser on faculty development appointed to the Provost; and a university-wide merit system which allocates an equal weighting to teaching, research and community service.

Based on current research, one might assume that such systemically embedded supports for teaching would include systematic help in the development of teaching skills (Aitken & Sorcinelli, 1994; Wright, 1996). However, at U.of T. this has not been the case. Although teaching excellence

initiatives have been encouraged centrally through the Provost's office as well as locally through divisions and departments, these efforts have experienced mixed success, there is no centralized coordinating body, and overall support for faculty development has been fragmented and uneven.

This contextual reality has raised for us both an approach and a research question. The approach is based on the notion that developing a centre such as the one we envision is, in fact, a "systems change intervention," in organization development terms. This implies that the process of developing the centre is as important as the eventual outcome. The obvious question we needed to ask as part of our research was, "Why has this not worked here in the past, and what would ensure its success in the future?" As Wright (1996) notes, it is the combination of organization development and change principles with principles of instructional and professional development that will generate the broadest possible impact. With this in mind, we engaged in the following, briefly-outlined process.

The Intervention: Early Phases

1. Seeding the idea and testing the waters informally was the intention of our initial effort to create a fertile climate for the initiative. This involved several informal conversations with key decision-makers such as the Dean of the Faculty of Education and the Vice-President and Provost of the university; key actors such as faculty members who had initiated similar projects in the past, as well as those currently involved in faculty development activities and research; graduate and undergraduate students in the university. An initial discussion paper written in a very exploratory fashion facilitated these conversations, which within a month of distribution, resulted in a general buzz of excitement and

curiosity. One response, on the part of the Faculty of Education Dean, was to include "faculty development initiatives" in the job description for his new Associate Dean who was in the process of being hired.

2. Formalizing support was the next important step since, up to this point, the concept had been rich in creativity but resource-poor. I began by enlisting the collaboration of a key supporter, the new Associate Dean, and together we made a proposal to the Provost's office for funding to hire a research consultant who could do some of the preparatory legwork. An important part of this conversation included a question about the Provost's expectations for the initiative. A preliminary plan resulted in a $35,500 grant to support the intervention to the point where we could propose an actual model for faculty development at U. of T. It also resulted in a request from the Provost for the Faculty of Education (OISE/UT) to formally provide leadership for the project. This was a critically important yet daunting challenge, as faculties of education typically lack credibility in large universities. However, we recognized the credibility-building potential of this opportunity as well as a chance to make an important contribution to the community, and readily accepted the offer.

3. Enrolling key stakeholders across the University in our efforts to create a model was our first response to the challenge of credibility. We approached this task in two ways. First, we emphasized in a public letter our intention to support and expand the work already in progress, and asked for help in compiling documentation on all existing local initiatives. We supplemented this data by conducting an "external environmental scan" of programs and services offered in thirteen other Canadian and several American universities, and prepared a document summarizing their purpose, direction and infrastructure. Secondly, we established a "design team" of key players from across the University, including: graduate and undergraduate professors from various disciplines; two co-directors associated with the educational technology centre (Education Commons); the Associate Dean of Research; and several deans and directors from key faculties such as Arts and Science, Medicine and Continuing Education, all of whom had expressed a particular interest in the issue of excellence in teaching and learning.

This team, co-chaired by myself and the Associate Dean, Carol Rolheiser, and supported by an administrative assistant and a research consultant (funded through the grant), has met four times to discuss the current environment, including opportunities, challenges and possible approaches to establishing a model for the centre. A resulting 10-page discussion paper will be circulated widely across the university and used as a basis for four focus group discussions and approximately 30 individual interviews, and to solicit reactions by phone and e-mail. We expect the themes from these responses to contribute stakeholder input into a concrete proposal for action, supplemented by the previously outlined research data, all of which will have been collected and analyzed by the Design Team members. Finally, the resulting proposal, now influenced by a large-cross section of the university community, will be submitted to the Provost's Office for funding consideration. It is our hope that this kind of "action research" process will circumvent earlier obstacles to implementation, as well as exemplify the adult education/organization development approach to which the centre might aspire in its ongoing interactions with the university community.

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