

## FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Jean Layne<sup>1</sup>, Jeff Froyd<sup>2</sup>, Jim Morgan<sup>3</sup> and Ann Kenimer<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract** - Professional development for teaching frequently focuses on methodology and strategy. Information and opportunities to practice techniques are often offered in one-time, interactive workshops. However, one-shot faculty development opportunities are not designed to address a critical element of the faculty role in the learning/teaching dynamic—individual beliefs, experiences, and research regarding learning.

Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) is a collaborative initiative at Texas A&M University in which interdisciplinary groups of participants examine learning. The format includes ninety-minute weekly meetings over an academic year, recommended readings on learning, reflective journaling, and individual and collaborative tasks. FLC provides an opportunity to explore learning from multiple perspectives. This process validates what participants know, while supporting the development of a common language and theoretical foundation from which to dialogue. The sustained nature of the interaction provides an increased sense of connectedness and community. Through participation in FLC, faculty members draw ideas, energy and perspective from their exchange that they incorporate into their thinking about, and practice of, learning and teaching.

**Index Terms**  $\frac{3}{4}$  faculty development, Faculty Learning Communities, sustained faculty development, workshop alternatives.

### INTRODUCTION

A variety of professional development opportunities in support of teaching are available to faculty through centralized faculty development offices, colleges, departments, and professional associations. In most cases, both those who attend and those who offer these opportunities are focused on techniques involved in successfully using a particular approach to teaching. Review of faculty development opportunity announcements and descriptions on any campus shows an emphasis on “how” to do certain things (active learning, collaborative learning, teaching portfolios, etc.) without indicating in what depth the “why” of these topics will be covered. Often, discussion regarding how an approach to teaching fits with course

learning objectives and capabilities of entering students in a particular course is brief or bypassed entirely.

One reason for minimal focus on “why” is that faculty development is designed to serve faculty. A key component of that effort is enhancing faculty productivity through facilitating improvement in their effectiveness as teachers [1]. Emphasizing teaching effectiveness focuses on faculty rather than learning or the learner. For example, workshops, probably the best known of the professional development opportunities, are typically short (2–8 hours) in duration and allow little or limited interaction with peers. They are isolated opportunities that do not occur in the context of other faculty responsibilities, and their focus is actually on the practice of a particular methodology or strategy rather than on helping faculty improve their understanding of the process of learning. In an environment with real time pressures and emphasis on results, it is not surprising that “how” often gets more attention than “why.”

Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) represents an alternative model for professional development [2]. Rather than focusing on a particular approach to teaching, it emphasizes collaborative visioning regarding what learning can be and collaborative construction of models of learning. Focusing on processes of learning allows participants to acquire information needed to make sound decisions about techniques before learning how to use them. FLC can be seen as a return to the foundation of teaching—examination and understanding of learning. However, it also represents an evolutionary step in professional development in that it presents a model based on extended interaction of peers investigating a broad question rather than trying to solve a particular problem.

### WHAT IS FLC?

Faculty Learning Communities is a sustained model for professional development. The term “sustained model” indicates that FLC provides for an extended (semester or yearlong) examination of a specific foundational topic—learning—rather than offering a one-time, limited duration opportunity focused on one or more approaches to teaching. An example of the latter model is the National Effective Teaching Institute (NETI) in which participants attend a three-day workshop that provides them with information

<sup>1</sup> Jean Layne, Texas A&M University, Faculty Learning Communities, Center for Teaching Excellence, 4246 TAMU, Blocker 232/234, College Station, TX 77843-4246, j-layne@tamu.edu.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Froyd, Texas A&M University, Dwight Look College of Engineering, Zachry Engineering Center, 3128 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-3128, froyd@ee.tamu.edu.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Morgan, Texas A&M University, Department of Civil Engineering, 3136 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-3136, jim-morgan@tamu.edu.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Kenimer, Texas A&M University, Agricultural Engineering, 2117 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-2117, a-kenimer@tamu.edu.

about proven teaching methods. FLC is designed to facilitate and support collaborative learning environments in which faculty first explore and broaden their understanding of learning and then investigate alternative approaches to teaching. Our mission is to design and support programs that validate what faculty members intuitively know about learning, assist in building a foundation for future interactions about learning, provide collaborative experiences, and build community. Using a format that is designed to promote reflection and interaction, FLC assists faculty with the identification and discovery of a foundation from which to more knowledgeably make decisions about learning—providing the “why” [3].

Structurally, FLC is a campus-wide program, with all faculty (approximately 2200) involved in the teaching function of Texas A&M University (A&M) invited to join. Participants volunteer for weekly, ninety-minute meetings that are conducted during fall and spring semesters. They are organized into interdisciplinary groups with a maximum of twelve members. The program format is one based on activities that promote reflection as well as facilitated exchange and social opportunities. There are two stages of the program. Stage 1 is a structured examination of learning and is the one in place on the A&M campus and the basis for this article. Stage 2, which allows participants who have completed Stage 1 to advance to more specialized activities with peers such as teaching improvement teams, use of technology in teaching, or book discussion groups, will begin at A&M in the fall of 2002.

FLC groups are assembled based on the schedules of participants, as well as on disciplinary, cultural, and gender diversity. Expectations of participants are stated in an informational flyer used to publicize the program and include [4]:

- Preparation for and attendance at all team meetings;
- Focus on acquiring a deeper understanding of learning as a foundation for approaching teaching;
- Sharing of experiences in the areas of learning and teaching;
- Collaborative interaction with colleagues;
- Consideration of new ideas, perspectives and techniques; and
- Willingness to serve as a resource for other faculty members.

FLC is a process-oriented model. Although groups produce artifacts as a result of their activities, these are not the goal. It is the practice with and impact of the reflective process that is most beneficial. Through this model, faculty members have an opportunity to think deeply about an activity on which they, and their students, expend great time and energy. Summary descriptions of FLC activities are listed below [5].

- **Recommended readings** on topics range from how the brain learns through evolution of learning theory to how

issues such as personal learning preferences, cultural issues, etc., can impact learning.

- **Reflective journaling** asks participants to respond to readings by considering what resonates with them, what is disconnected from their experience, and what the material leaves them wondering about.
- **Reflective dialogue** begins with participants’ personal reflections and expands to include what develops within the group. Short-duration activities are also used to encourage reflection and interaction.
- **Process checks** help the group members and the facilitator reflect on how things are going and how improvements might be made.
- **Constructing an individual statement** of learning encourages participants to articulate what they want students to know, be able to do, and wonder about as a result of their experiences with participants’ courses, disciplines, and the university.
- **Constructing an individual visual depiction of learning** moves participants past verbal definitions of learning and helps them think about what they believe and hope learning is like for students.
- **Constructing a group statement on learning** allows participants to work collaboratively to articulate what is important across disciplinary boundaries. It provides an opportunity to identify and appreciate similarities and differences.
- **Constructing a group visual depiction of learning** further enhances recognition of differences and similarities while providing a powerful visual artifact as a summary of what the group has identified as critical to learning.
- **Building a course module** provides the opportunity for participants to take what they believe about learning and ask what those beliefs should mean in terms of practice in teaching.

One of the principal foci of the facilitator is to create a safe environment in which substantive conversations on difficult topics, such as gender and ethnic diversity, can occur. An important component in helping to create a safe environment is a policy of non-attribution. Whatever is said in meetings is not revealed outside of meetings in a way that would identify and expose participants. In addition, participation is confidential unless participants themselves reveal their involvement. Some participants may be concerned about how their participation in FLC will be viewed by colleagues and department heads, so guaranteeing confidentiality is an important part of establishing trust and assuring safety.

### ORIGINS OF FLC

FLC began at A&M as a result of three influences. First, faculty members in the College of Engineering (COE) working on the Foundation Coalition [6], an engineering education coalition sponsored by NSF, were exploring new

ways to engage faculty in thinking about learning. At the same time, the Center for Teaching Excellence [7] (CTE, the faculty development office at A&M) was looking for what they had identified as the next evolutionary step in faculty development—a model that would go beyond traditional offerings and provide a sustained interaction for faculty members with their peers. The CTE had also concluded that a focus on learning would provide a strong foundation for faculty seeking to change their teaching. Third, A&M faculty members in the COE made the CTE aware of a model that had been developed at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and addressed their interests. The program is called Creating a Collaborative Learning Environment (CCLE) [8], and it focuses on learning as a foundation for teaching, collaborative experience, and community building. The influence of the CCLE was the catalyst that led to the formation of FLC. It has also inspired a similar program at the University of South Australia and a recently approved pilot program at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Subsequent research identified other sustained models at Eastern Michigan University (“The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning” seminars) [9] and Miami University (Faculty Learning Communities, <http://www.units.mu.ohio.edu/celt/communities.htm>).

CCLE is based on human factors engineering and operates on several key assumptions about faculty members including the following: they want to do their jobs well, they want to experience meaning in their work life, they will take advantage of opportunities to learn, and they feel inadequately prepared for their multiple roles and responsibilities [10]. A&M melded a faculty development perspective with the CCLE foundation. These observations reflect the experiences of faculty development professionals and their clients at A&M. The themes surface repeatedly in conversations because they describe common aspects of faculty work life.

- Learning is the one thing all faculty share in common regardless of their discipline.
- Faculty members have a great deal of knowledge about learning because of their own experience as learners in their fields—but that knowledge may be largely invisible to them because of little or no formal preparation for the teaching portion of their duties. They benefit from the opportunity to validate what they know about learning, while developing a common language and theoretical framework for talking with others about the subject.
- Faculty members want the collegial interaction of a community of scholars, but the pressures of faculty life often limit opportunities to product-focused committee interactions that end when the product is generated. They benefit from an opportunity to regularly interact with colleagues in a way that is focused on process and relates to their daily experiences and responsibilities.
- Faculty members often have limited collaborative interactions with peers. Many group projects turn out to

be more “divide and conquer” exercises, fused together upon conclusion. Working collaboratively provides an experience that can be beneficial in all other aspects of their scholarly responsibilities.

- Faculty members, as those who do the work of teaching, are in the best position to promote change in the area. Providing them a way to think deeply about learning and its implications, positions them better to be change agents.

A&M began FLC in July of 2000. A pilot Stage 1 group (13 participants) was formed and met during the 2000–01 academic year. Three Stage 1 groups (31 participants) are meeting during the 2001–02 academic year. Program participants have come from seven of the nine colleges at A&M. Slightly more than half of the participants have been involved in other A&M professional development opportunities.

### FLC KEY CHARACTERISTICS

FLC participants report that the model appeals to them for a variety of reasons that echo CCLE feedback [11]. (1) It is voluntary—there is not a required project that must be completed at the end of experience. (2) It is structured—preparation for sessions and topic flow make it easier to stay focused on thinking about learning. (3) It challenges and engages faculty – talking about these issues with their peers rather than hearing from an “expert” inspires them to question and contribute. (4) It is contextual – because it occurs in tandem with their other responsibilities, they have ready examples and experiences to relate to the material. (5) It is safe—policies of confidentiality and non-attribution mean that difficult things can be said and discussed. (6) It is interdisciplinary—participation of faculty members across the entire campus allows faculty to interact with colleagues and hear perspectives not usually available to them. (7) It is affirming—it is a place that validates what they know and demonstrates the challenges they share with colleagues across campus.

FLC operates on the assumption that there are three things that can assist faculty in thinking deeply about learning—space, time and support. The space is offered as a designated place to come together with peers and think about learning. It is located some distance from any participant’s department so that it maintains safety and privacy and is equipped with refreshments. Time at A&M (as at most campuses) is regarded as a precious resource. FLC provides time by helping faculty make it a priority to gather weekly with peers. Finally, FLC provides support through recruitment activities for the program, scheduling meetings, providing materials, sending meeting reminders, facilitating meetings, and soliciting feedback from participants.

### IMPACT OF FLC

Participant feedback comes in the forms of shared reflections, periodic process checks, and a final interview.

Feedback begins at the first meeting when participants are asked what prompted them to enroll in FLC. Three responses to that query are heard repeatedly. One is the desire to interact with other faculty. Participants note that even within their own disciplines, interaction is limited to department, committee, and project meetings. They report little time or opportunity for interaction regarding issues that do not have a deadline attached. Second, participants mention the desire to know what others on campus know and what they are doing. Their stories indicate that if there is little interaction with disciplinary peers on campus, less occurs with those in other departments. Third, participants cite their desire to continue to grow professionally in the area of teaching. FLC helps participants acquire the knowledge and interaction that they are seeking.

Early in the first semester of Stage 1, participants are asked for feedback on how things are going—what they like or have learned, what they would change or are unclear about, etc. In both years, the initial response of participants has been that early interaction meets their expectations. Participants repeatedly state how much they value hearing from and interacting with their peers. In addition, they almost immediately begin to relate topics from the meetings to what they see happening in the classroom. To provide more description about the impact of FLC, consider observations and feedback related specifically to the FLC mission and to faculty roles and responsibilities.

### **Validate What Faculty Intuitively Know About Learning**

FLC participants often express initial uncertainty regarding discussion about learning because, outside disciplines in education, they may have had no formal training in the subject. They feel they lack a common language and theory to discuss the topic and do not see themselves as “experts” in this area. What they are pleased to discover through FLC is that their experiences in terms of both their own learning and their teaching connect well with the literature on learning. Participants often express surprise at how much they know about learning and are quick to offer vignettes from their experience to illustrate and expand material. Several participants who are early in their academic careers have commented that they were pleased to feel they have as much to contribute as colleagues with much more experience.

### **Assist in Building a Foundation for Future Interaction about Learning**

As participants acquire a common foundation for thinking and talking about learning, they become more confident about what they know and more likely to share insights. The result is useful exchange—from philosophical and practical perspectives. Participants are interested both in overarching issues, such as the role of motivation in learning, and in specific issues related to their courses. They also discover that the challenges they face are similar to those faced by

their colleagues in other disciplines, and they have the opportunity to share and consider new approaches.

### **Provide Collaborative Experience**

Due to the busy nature of faculty lives, participants frequently often have committee and other experiences with peers that are planned as collaborative but end up with everyone doing a part of the project with someone smoothing it together at the end. This leaves faculty at a disadvantage in terms of professional interaction with peers and in delivery of courses. Models such as collaborative, cooperative, or team learning are more difficult to utilize if experiences have not provided similar opportunities. Faculty can better prepare students in that regard when they experience that model for themselves. In that process, participants challenge, respect, and appreciate differences and find that they are able to identify similarities and priorities to develop perspectives that are richer than individual perspectives [12].

### **Build Community**

Faculty members have repeatedly indicated that they do not feel part of a community of scholars. Their many roles and responsibilities can make them feel isolated; some have even suggested that the architecture of the buildings in which they work discourages interaction. FLC participants who have not met prior to joining the program often walk back and forth to meetings together. Others go to lunch together on meeting days. They share resources and contacts and consult each other on a variety of issues. They discuss work and family issues. The sustained nature of FLC leads quite naturally to such interactions. One participant, who characterized her/himself as “introverted and shy” indicated that she/he “felt much freer to share thoughts and experiences” in this setting than in a more traditional one, such as a workshop or conference.

### **Learning and Teaching**

The most common reaction from participants on the topic of teaching is relief that they are not alone in their struggles. The challenges faced with regard to teaching are universal and hearing the perspectives of those from different disciplines is beneficial. A participant, who had a particular philosophy of learning and teaching that she/he valued, observed that, while group members might all share conceptualizations of learning a bit differently, strong similarities between and among them were evident. The participant found this fact affirming.

The focus of FLC is learning and, through that, teaching. Rather than being a quick-fix opportunity for solving teaching challenges, FLC provides a place where answers can develop over time. For example, one participant reported keeping a course syllabus on the corner of her/his desk. Upon returning from each meeting, she/he made changes in the document to reflect how her/his vision for the

course was changing based on FLC interaction. Those changes have now been incorporated into the course, and the faculty member plans to compare achievement of course objectives under the pre- and post- FLC influenced model to determine impact. She/he is keeping their FLC colleagues current on how things are going at meetings.

Two participants, during their second semester with FLC, have shared with their group how changing from a lecture format to a problem-based format is working in their classrooms. Both have said that these changes are a direct result of their participation in FLC and the resulting changes in their thinking about learning and their role in facilitating it. They have called these changes both uncomfortable and exhilarating, and their peers are eager to hear reports of how things are progressing.

Another participant is still struggling with what specifically she/he plans to do but has indicated that talking at students from the front of the room is no longer enough—she/he wants to seek ways to engage students in the classroom.

One participant has become obsessed with learning—what it is, how they do it, and how to more effectively facilitate the process with students.

FLC provided the basis for another faculty member to restore rote memorization requirements to the class. An article on how the brain works confirmed suspicions that exercising the memory was not busy work and was important to student learning.

Another participant, who had put great time and energy into various teaching efforts, was pleased to find that FLC peers had done some of the same things and also considered them worthwhile.

One reported that that the experience had made her/him more patient with her/his students.

And, on the subject of diversity, one participant reported the belief that her/his teaching had improved because her/his awareness had been expanded. She/he believes that the climate in her/his classroom is more welcoming as a result.

### Research

Teaching changes made as a result of the FLC experience may lead to research on the impact of those efforts. Other research possibilities have already been identified or are in progress as a result of FLC.

Members of one group spent part of their time together talking about how to approach an interdisciplinary research project on learning that would combine the knowledge and perspective of several disciplines and individuals at different career stages. A summary plan was produced and circulated based on these discussions. Although no project based on that plan is currently underway, no projects can get underway without such interaction. It is extremely unlikely this set of individuals would have the opportunity to move as far as they did on planning in any other interaction opportunity on campus.

Two participants are writing together as a result of getting to know each other through FLC. Although they knew each other before, the extended interaction helped them explore common ground and led to their ongoing collaboration.

### Service

An important element of FLC is the availability of participants to others in the process. For that reason, this section will take a slightly different view of service.

One characteristic of faculty development is that it is seen as revealing institutional concern for individual faculty members [1]. In this model, participants are co-conspirators in providing a service to themselves and their peers. Many participants report that they view FLC as time they take for themselves. Some have called it refreshing or recreational, even fun. Others have repeatedly expressed gratitude for the opportunity to meet and interact through FLC and have commented on the need for such interaction. One participant called the weekly meetings relaxing—a time to deal with these issues without the stress of other pressures, a therapeutic experience that she/he believes has had a positive impact on her/his teaching. Others have called FLC motivating—a place that provides fuel for and nurtures intrinsic motivation. Several participants have reported to their groups on use of FLC activities in their classrooms and discussed the results.

Several FLC participants have also chosen to participate in other faculty development opportunities such as workshops, conferences, and retreats. One member is actively engaged in trying to change beliefs about learning and teaching within her/his unit. Another wants to work within her/his college to call the attention of members of their college to faculty development opportunities.

### KEY CHALLENGES

The two challenges consistently associated with FLC are time and value. By time, we mean the difficulty faculty members have, first, with identifying and protecting ninety minutes each week for the meetings as well as the challenge of finding a time block that works for 10 to 12 people to meet. The ninety-minute meeting time was arrived at through experiments at the CCLE. Conversations about alternative time models continue at A&M.

In terms of values, many faculty members see FLC as a poor fit with what institutions value most. This means that faculty members might not reveal their involvement in the program to peers or their department heads. If they are open about their participation, they may be questioned about that use of time during their annual evaluation.

In response to these issues, FLC currently plans the following. First, we plan to recruit for a semester at a time instead of asking for a year commitment up front. Most members of the academic community tend to think in terms of semesters, and the belief is many participants will value

their time in FLC enough to choose to sign on for the second semester. This also will allow us to begin Stage 1, Part 1 teams in both fall and spring, which may better accommodate some faculty schedules. Second, following the lead of the CCLE, A&M plans to offer groups that examine inquiry and research in the same way we explore learning and teaching. Experiments are also planned with short course modules that would last one month and give faculty with heavy travel schedules opportunities to be involved in the program in blocks and come back in when they have the chance. Finally, it is hoped that participants from the past two years who have completed Stage 1 will return for a Stage 2 experience that will be collaboratively shaped to their interests.

### FLC SNAPSHOT SAMPLE

Group Statements on Learning are collaborative responses to the following: what do we want students to know, be able to do, and wonder about (or, how do we want them to be changed) because of their experience in my class, my discipline, at A&M? Providing examples of these statements will give readers some of what participation in FLC means. FLC teams collaboratively produced the following statements after individual members constructed their own statements on learning.

*We want students to leave TAMU prepared to function in a balanced way, both in their discipline and as citizens of a global community. We want them to be able to think critically, communicate effectively, and act ethically. "We believe achieving these goals will result in individuals who are comfortable with uncertainty and are therefore able to analyze and solve problems responsibly. – FLC Pilot 00-01*

*We want students at Texas A&M University to gain an appreciation for knowledge, develop a lifelong excitement for learning, and use their knowledge effectively and ethically to enhance their chosen field and world. To accomplish this, students need a broad foundational understanding of the natural and cultural worlds, as well as a deep understanding of one topic they have chosen. Articulation and communication of this understanding is essential in the endowment of confidence within our students as to the breadth, depth, and perspective of their knowledge. –FLC 01-02*

*We want TAMU students to continue learning with a vision for their role in the world. Thus, they need to acquire a strong background of knowledge, good communication skills, awareness of self, and respect for others. We believe these attributes will help them to pursue their goals with confidence, work ethically and cooperatively with others, and be lifelong learners. – FLC 01-02*

*We want students to have a vision of their potential impact as lifelong learners and interdependent contributors to society. To accomplish this, they need to understand how*

*learning happens, possess a strong knowledge foundation, and practice critical thinking. FLC 01-02*

### CONCLUSION

FLC presents a model that allows faculty to enhance their knowledge of learning—that thing that they are constantly engaged in—in a safe and affirming environment. By supporting faculty members, the ones engaged in the day-to-day mission of the university, they will be encouraged and empowered in all aspects of their professional life. Focusing on learning, the one commonality that ties the campus together, can benefit the entire campus.

FLC provides a place where faculty can discuss the complex issues related to learning. These include the variety of ways to think about learning itself, from the biological explanation to the history of learning theory. FLC also is a place to consider variables that impact the learning process—including diversity. And, FLC is a place for faculty to think about their own roles in the learning process.

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