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A Faculty Learning Community on the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning: A Case Study

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Keywords

Faculty learning community, Case study, Scholarship of teaching and learning, University

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Abstract

What happens when a group of faculty interested in SoTL gets together? This essay presents a case study of the Faculty Learning Community [FLC] on SoTL at Georgia Southern University since its inception in 2006. Included in the discussion are the history and origins of the FLC, its evolution over the last four years, the products and outcomes of the FLC, and reflections from recent members on the influence of the FLC on their teaching, scholarship, and professional development.

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History and Origins of the FLC

In the fall of 2006, as part of a campus-wide effort by Georgia Southern University's Center for Excellence in Teaching to establish Faculty Learning Communities [FLC], the FLC for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning [SoTL] was formed. This initial FLC included faculty from the fields of Child & Family Development, Health, Literature, Nursing, and the Office of the Provost. For this inaugural year, the FLC set as its primary task learning more about SoTL: what it is, how it's done, and how we could facilitate more of it on our campus. We met approximately once a month for the academic year, at first to discuss Ernest Boyer's (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered*, and then to plan an end-of-year seminar for faculty about facilitating SoTL on campus.

In the second year, beginning in the fall of 2007, the FLC continued, though only one member of the prior year's group remained (the first author). Six new faculty joined the group from the fields of Health (second author), Nursing (third author), Biology, Chemistry, Public Health, and Teaching & Learning. That year, and every year since, the FLC decided

to undertake an original interdisciplinary SoTL research project. The topic selected for investigation was student attendance—or lack thereof—during class periods after an examination, a topic completely unexplored by prior literature but which had been noticed by many in the FLC in their own classes. Again, we met approximately once a month for the academic year to design, carry out, analyze, and disseminate the results of our project.

For the third year, the FLC continued with three of its members (the first, second, and third authors), joined by two new members from the fields of Child & Family Development and Mechanical & Electrical Engineering Technology. The FLC investigated the issue of disruptive student behaviors and classroom management. We met slightly less than once a month for the academic year and increased the use of asynchronous collaboration (e.g., email). Additionally, we collaborated with the Center for Excellence in Teaching to design and propose a university-wide initiative for developing and promoting SoTL that was ultimately endorsed by the university's Provost.

Most recently, this past academic year the FLC continued with the same three “veteran” members and added three more from the fields of Nutrition (third author), Foreign Languages (fifth author), and Accountancy. Our project this year focused on perceptions of group work among faculty and students. Further, in collaboration with the Center for Excellence in Teaching, we sponsored a campus-wide SoTL Expo for faculty to display their recent SoTL work and have the opportunity to disseminate it to the campus. We plan to continue both the FLC and the Expo next academic year.

It should be noted that in the midst of this period, our university shifted from describing itself as a “teaching first” institution to a “comprehensive research university” and that the Carnegie Association reclassified us from a Masters/Comprehensive University to a Doctoral/Research University. Additionally, we were faced with bulging enrollments and drastic reductions in state appropriations. Change—away from a more learner-centered university to a more research-driven one—was in the air. Because of this, the FLC was always mindful of how we could use our work to satisfy both the increasing expectations for scholarship and the increasing demands on our time from ever-larger classes. Indeed, this guided our selection of research topics over the past three years so that we could focus on issues we had noticed in our own classrooms.

Products and Outcomes of the FLC

In its four-year history, the FLC on SoTL has produced: five peer-reviewed presentations (Maurer, Sturges, Shankar, Allen, & Akbarova, 2010; Maurer et al., 2009; Maurer, Lee, Sturges, Averette, & Allen, 2009; Maurer, Lickteig, McCollum, & Town, 2007; Sturges, Maurer, Allen, Shankar, & Akbarova, 2010), three publications (Maurer, Sturges, Shankar, Allen, & Akbarova, 2010a; Maurer et al., 2009; Maurer, Lee, Sturges, Averette, & Allen, 2009), one university-wide booklet on best practices in using group work (Maurer, Sturges, Shankar, Allen, & Akbarova, 2010b), one university-wide seminar on SoTL and how to integrate it into faculty research (Maurer, McCollum, Lickteig, & Town, 2007), one university-wide seminar on managing student behavior in large classes (Maurer & Reksulak, 2009), a university initiative to develop and promote SoTL on campus, and a university-wide expo event with nearly 30 SoTL presentations.

Perhaps more telling is how the work of the FLC has inspired additional collaborations between members outside of the FLC and in their own individual work. For example, the

first and second authors have collaborated on a SoTL project investigating the effectiveness of a class activity in an introductory Anatomy & Physiology class that has resulted in six peer-reviewed presentations (Sturges & Maurer, 2010a; Sturges & Maurer, 2010b; Sturges & Maurer, 2010c; Sturges & Maurer, 2009a; Sturges & Maurer, 2009b; Sturges & Maurer, 2009c) and a peer-reviewed publication (Sturges, Maurer, & Cole, 2009).

Additionally, the 17 current and former members of the FLC have delivered 18 peer-reviewed presentations and have published three peer-reviewed articles on SoTL topics through their own individual research agendas over the past four years.

Reflections from FLC Members

In preparation for this essay, members of the current FLC were invited to contribute their thoughts on how the FLC has fostered their own SoTL both within and beyond the group and how that work has also affected their teaching.

Padmini Shankar, Nutrition

Having taught at the university level for the last fifteen years, I was pretty confident about my skills as a teacher in effectively disseminating information to students. That is, until I started hearing about the theories, principles, and practices that encompass SoTL. This is nicely summed up by Boyer (1990), who states that the scholarship of teaching means “transforming and extending” knowledge, and not merely transmitting it. As a member of the Georgia Southern SoTL FLC, I have had the opportunity to work with an amazing group of my peers, to engage in free thought and discussion that has resulted in several positive outcomes. I have learned that there are innumerable strategies that I can use in the classroom to enhance the quality of instruction beyond traditional lecture and discussion. I feel a sense of fulfillment that comes from knowing that I am better teacher because of my SoTL involvement. Instead of using methodologies that I think will work, I now employ evidence-based teaching strategies. It is very rewarding to observe how effective these strategies are in achieving student learning outcomes. SoTL not only helps you practice your art well, it promotes a continuous process of self-evaluation. The shared interest and support of the FLC is a rich avenue to voice and discuss such concerns and queries. It has been a very beneficial experience to engage in collaborative research that was presented at this year’s SoTL Commons Conference. The knowledge and experiences gained by being a part of the SoTL FLC have truly enriched my journey as a teacher and I am looking forward to my continued involvement with this group. As they say, “it takes a village to raise a child”, I do think it takes the collaborative thoughts, words and deeds of motivated faculty to engage, stimulate, and educate the fertile minds of our youth today.

Saida Akbarova, Foreign Languages

The SoTL FLC provided me with valuable knowledge and experiences that will guide me in my profession as an educational professional developer. It helped me to bridge the concepts of teaching and scholarship in micro and macro levels, and to participate in the development of the collaborative research. On the micro level, it helped me to reflect on my teaching and explore effective strategies that I might use to promote better student learning. On the macro level, it showed how I might use a SoTL FLC as a possible model for other educators as a professional development activity because the SoTL FLC provides favorable conditions for educators from different departments to collaborate and conduct research that benefits the whole university.

Starting from the first meeting, it was clear that the SoTL FLC members were concerned greatly about how to improve student learning. The meeting discussions were thought-provoking and each member contributed to broadening my perspectives on the main research object: perceptions of students and teachers on group work. By reading literature on group work, having discussions and creating a survey, I felt a spirit of collegiality and scholarship, because it was a process of learning and understanding of unknown aspects that were clarified by colleagues.

Finally, the SoTL FLC helped me to understand further the concept of educational leadership. Our group facilitator motivated us to participate in the meetings and sent us reminders and agendas. All meetings were well-planned and organized. The group was always reminded of the set deadlines and could accomplish its goals in time. The FLC facilitator's leadership and organizational skills and the FLC participants' dedication empowered me to be a better educator and possible educational leader!

In conclusion, for an educational leader, SoTL is very important. The SoTL FLC has provided me with great tools which will help me to model a possible FLC for our faculty in the Uzbek State World Languages University (Uzbekistan). Gained experiences from the SoTL FLC will assist me in showing our faculty the ways how to implement some changes in teaching effectively and link the process with scholarship. The SoTL FLC makes a difference in the professional lives of its members!

Deborah Allen, Nursing

I like the flexibility within the FLC and the variety of members from different colleges and departments who can meet to discuss issues that we all have in common-not just those specific to nursing. Being a part of such a diverse group of faculty, it needs to be stressed that this is a VERY important endeavor for university growth especially those new to teaching. We learn from each other and help each other. I remember my first year here as I joined this FLC. I was overwhelmed with ideas and ideology of my perceptions on how students learn and how to teach them. At that time, I "went along" with the group idea because I was too new to know any different. However, as I continued working with this knowledgeable group of faculty and began teaching here, I found that I was having the same problems others had identified and begun to address. Because the projects we worked on that semester addressed some of my teaching skills and the students' perceptions of that, I changed how I was conducting class and addressing student concerns. This created an improved learning environment for my students and my evaluations reflected student interest and knowledge learned. I learned a lot that year and each year I continue to "grow" into the educator that I want to be. This learning community has helped provide me with a higher level of thinking and the implementation of new learning skills to assist students in their learning needs. I would not trade this time networking with others for other formal types of teaching seminars.

Diana Sturges, Health

Teaching and research define the activity of university faculty, yet achievement of teaching and research goals require faculty to engage in separate and distinct activities (Barnett, 1992). In this respect, SoTL offers the best of the two worlds for me, since it integrates teaching with research.

In the process of becoming a "good" and "scholarly" teacher, I aspired to use evidence based approaches to master the transmission of the content to the students, engage them in the process and improve learning. However, as I wanted to produce and disseminate new

evidence and share it with others, I needed more support and guidance. The FLC on SoTL was pivotal in this process and ultimately provided the support to go public. I had the opportunity to share my concerns about teaching and learning with colleagues from across the university, to learn more about SoTL and to reinforce the three rationales for SoTL: professionalism, pragmatism, and policy (Shulman, 2000). As the FLC worked on projects dealing with classroom management, post exam attendance and group work, I valued that we each had different approaches, but we were able to share them explicitly, honestly and with reflection. In this way, we learned about each other's different teaching and learning styles. I am a longtime advocate of the scholarship of teaching and learning, thus the FLC reinforced that interest and better equipped me to analyze, reflect and improve my own teaching.

Trent Maurer, Child & Family Development

I have been a member of the SoTL FLC since its inception four years ago and have served as the group facilitator (i.e., "chair") for the past three years. I can say without hesitation that my participation in the FLC has been the most influential and rewarding experience of my entire academic career. Through my participation in the FLC, I have had the opportunity to work with 16 different colleagues, all but one of whom came from departments other than my own. This has exposed me to so many teaching issues and ideas that were previously isolated within disciplinary silos and it has extensively broadened my knowledge of not only methods of classroom instruction but also issues for future SoTL research. As a result of my connections through the FLC, I have formed collaborations with current and former members outside of the FLC on both teaching and SoTL projects, collaborations that have advanced my career and that have enabled me to make a greater contribution to SoTL.

What has been most striking to me about the FLC every year is the ironic contradiction that so many faculty members face: many of us experience the same issues and problems in our teaching, but most of us think we are alone, that we are the only ones experiencing those problems. By bringing faculty from different disciplines together to a common group, we are able to realize how much we have in common and to work collaboratively towards a better understanding of the issues that face us all. Through this joint effort, we are able not only to improve our own teaching, but to "pay forward" what we have learned to other faculty, both at our institution and beyond, through dissemination of our results in seminars, presentations, and publications.

The future of the SoTL FLC at Georgia Southern University is bright. Every year, our group grows stronger, more collaborative, and more diverse. Every year, I anxiously await the first meeting of the FLC, where we meet our new members and decide our plan of action for the year. Every year, we learn something new about our students, our colleagues, our teaching, and ourselves.

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