Critical Reflection on a Faculty Development Research Project

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Abstract: Critical reflection is imperative for the practitioner who seeks to grow and improve in the important work of teaching. This paper is a critical reflection of one author's experience in creating a faculty development initiative.

Dental educators are plucked from the ranks of exceptional clinicians and researchers, with the expectation they are able to facilitate the learning of others. They teach the way they were taught (Centra, 1978): turning out the lights, turning on the slides and telling the class or audience what they do. The expectation is that the telling deposits knowledge in the learner, which translates into skill.

Faculty development is "a tool for improving the educational vitality of our institutions through attention to the competencies needed by . . . teachers and to the institutional policies required to promote academic excellence . . . the goal of faculty development is to empower faculty members to excel in their roles as educators" (Wilkerson & Irby, 1998). Formal faculty development in colleges and universities began in the 1960s. Dental and medical schools were influenced by their parent institutions and explored faculty development as well, although informally and less intentionally (Swanson, 1993). In the early 1990s, The American Dental Education Association, recognizing the need for greater intentionality in teaching, began to sponsor a national faculty development program (Cohen, 1991).

In 1991, Cohen reflected, "We will become more sensitized to the quality of our educational programs (outcomes assessment will force us in this direction anyway) and find that existing resources are insufficient to support our educational needs." (p. 295) Although the trend was clear, the imperative was not. Few dental schools created faculty development programs (O'Neill & Taylor, 2001). As the new Director of Academic Affairs of The Pankey Institute and graduate student in adult education and human resource development, I facilitated a faculty development initiative to implement some of my new learning. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my experiences as a new faculty member who facilitated the faculty development initiative. These questions guided the reflection (a) With what expectations and assumptions did I begin the faculty development initiative? (b) What could I have done differently to further the development of the faculty? (c) What did I learn about faculty development? (d) What successes, issues, and dilemmas became apparent during the process?

The Situation

The Pankey Institute for Advanced Dental Education provides continuing education for graduate dentists but does not award degrees and is not a dental school. However, faculty is selected similar to dental schools; that is, the most talented clinicians completing the process at the Institute are asked to teach. The criteria for their selection are based on clinical ability, apparent confidence in front of people, and a desire and interest to impact others in dentistry. Faculty development is done on the job and with annual three day faculty development conferences. Faculty consist of four full time in-house faculty and 144 visiting faculty. Visiting faculty teach one to two weeks per year and are otherwise in full time private clinical practice with the exception of a small number who are also full or part time faculty in dental schools. Currently, only two of the visiting faculty have advanced degrees in education.

Faculty Development Initiative

The first step of the process was to have faculty complete the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (TPI) (Pratt & Collins, 2000). The Internet version of the TPI (http://www.teachingperspectives.com) was completed by 129 of 144 visiting faculty. Pratt and Collins collated and provided instruction on interpreting the data (personal communication, May 27, 2003). The TPI is an instrument that helps quantify the degree to which one embraces five teaching perspectives: transmission, apprenticeship, developmental, nurturing and social reform (Pratt & Collins, 2000). The second step was to present the TPI data, an explanation of the TPI, and an outline of the five perspectives at the annual Faculty Enhancement Program. The third step was to request that faculty maintain Teaching Logs (TL) (Brookfield, 1995). The teaching log is a set of six self reflective questions that form the basis of an autobiographical account of the individual as a teacher and learner. The last step was to interview the first 12 faculty completing the TPI, TL, and teaching after the enhancement workshop.

Critical Reflection

Brookfield (1990) advises adult educators to develop a "critical rationale" for their teaching. Critical rationale is a set of values, beliefs, and convictions about the essential forms and fundamental purposes of teaching (Smyth, 1986). A critical rationale for teaching guides the educator when faced with dilemmas in the teaching and learning exchange. To develop a critical rationale of teaching, the professional who has moved from the ranks of clinical dentistry with no formal training in educating adults needs a starting point. Brookfield (1995) defines critical reflection in education as having two purposes: to understand power relationships and to question assumptions and practices. The process of critical reflection occurred as the lead author considered each of the four steps immediately upon completion of the steps. These reflections were shared through e-mail exchanges, telephone and in person discussions with the co-author, who participated by asking questions and assisted with raising awareness of assumptions and the place of power in this process. These reflections have also impacted our personal teaching practices, and how we teach adults to teach. My story (lead author) of becoming a teacher and moving towards being a critically reflective teacher is presented first**;** a reflection on the faculty development process follows.

My Journey Towards Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher

I have been passionate about teaching since 1995 when I was asked to join the visiting faculty of The Institute. The appointment came with a certain amount of prestige in the dental profession and was made because I had demonstrated leadership, clinical expertise, and confidence. The appointment came with three challenges: (a) my continued learning in dentistry, (b) an expectation to act as a leader, and (c) facilitation of participants' learning. A not yet articulated fourth challenge became evident over time--I needed to move past what Brookfield (1995) calls "The Imposter Syndrome," the unvoiced fear of not being worthy of this position. My feeling of being unworthy stemmed from the fear that students would find out how little I really knew. Teaching was more about recognition for me at that point than it was about connecting with students. Considering a rationale of teaching did not occur to me; my understanding of teaching was more about show and tell than it was about facilitating learning.

Poor evaluations from students quickly caught my attention. I sought out people who had mentored me to discuss ways to improve my teaching. Improving the evaluations was paramount, and I worked to improve my presentations and PowerPoint skills because that's what I considered to be the essence of good teaching. Improved confidence in those abilities resulted in better evaluations and a certain degree of smugness. Simultaneously, a mentor joined me in

facilitating small study club workshops in my office. The smugness evaporated when I saw him pull participants into the learning process, creating mountaintop experiences without a lecture or a slide. When pushed to help me do what he was doing, he told me told go study how people learn.

Without the benefit of exposure to adult education literature, I turned to what I knew best: reflecting on my own most profound learning experiences, reading literature based in psychology, reading popular "how to" books and asking people I respected as educators how they created successful teaching experiences. In retrospect, I believed that whatever learning took place in my presence was my responsibility.

I continued to work with small groups and at the same time started to write about how my practice had grown and developed over my career. The experience of writing articles others would read became a form of journaling for me. Coalescing singular experiences in my practice into learning patterns then writing about those patterns led me to understand how I learned best. When I was in the company of individuals who could challenge my thinking and help me find my own solutions to problems, I stayed engaged. I learned the most when I was the one who defined what I wished to learn. When I focused on learning defined by other people, I lost focus.

After joining the Institute as full time faculty in 2002, full time teaching, curriculum development, and faculty development became my primary roles. Part of the employment agreement was to pursue a graduate degree in education. Early in graduate school I was exposed to Pratt's *Five Perspectives on Teaching in Adult and Higher Education* (1998)*.* This work resonated with me. When I began to relate to students as designers of their learning, they began to respond to me differently and their successful implementation of concepts increased. Reading Arseneau and Rodenburg's (1998) chapter, *The Developmental Perspective: Cultivating Ways of Thinking*, became a major milestone in my growth as an educator. There were words to concepts I was trying to formulate and I got so excited that I couldn't sleep. At 3AM I tracked Arseneau down on the Internet and e-mailed him, detailing how I was sensing that my relationships with the students were far more important than any content knowledge.

To my surprise, (I am still in awe of those who write books) he responded immediately and directed me to the TPI web site. I did the instrument and asked the rest of the full time faculty at the Institute to participate as well, just to see what we would discover. John Collins emailed wondering who we were and his query started an e-mail relationship with both Dan Pratt and himself. As I shared my excitement with Tonette Rocco, the professor who assigned the book in class, she suggested some research possibilities and that I begin to read Brookfield's work. With Brookfield's (1995) guidance on becoming a critically reflective teacher, and enlisting the help of Rocco, Collins, and Pratt, the process of the faculty development initiative began.

The Forced March: Reflections on the Faculty Development Initiative Process

Coming to an understanding of how I processed my excitement and translated it into action has been an education unto itself. What follows is a discussion of how I created an initiative based on my own learning agenda and how that led to assumptions and expectations that I did not see for myself until undertaking the process of writing up the research.

Assumptions and expectations. My interest in helping faculty develop came from my own desire to excel at teaching. I knew from my own experience as a visiting faculty member that I desperately wanted help in developing as a teacher; however, there was no system in place for that to happen. After observing colleagues struggle with issues and feelings that I experienced, my curiosity and need to help them grew. I made several assumptions about the faculty and the

process. I assumed all faculty wanted further development as teachers. I also assumed that because I was so excited about the TPI that once the faculty was exposed to the TPI, their excitement would equal mine. I sent an e-mail to the faculty expected to attend the workshop outlining the process and suggesting they read Pratt's book. I further assumed that I was clear in my communication about how the process would work and what the benefits would be, and because I was sure I was so clear, I assumed the faculty would be quick to ask for further workshops on teaching perspectives and methods.

I started the lecture believing that I had a very clear direction to guide the faculty though understanding the TPI and their individual results. I assumed they all participated willingly and with their own interests in mind. I was sure they had all read through the supplemental information supplied on the Web site and that they would rush to buy Pratt's book. My assumptions were flawed on several levels. First, I am in a position of power relative to the visiting faculty. I have influence on their future as faculty members at the Institute. Second, looking back, my understanding is that many if not most of the faculty participated in the TPI, not because they wanted to learn about themselves, but because they thought it was important to me, the Institute, or to their future with the Institute. There was some interaction during the lecture, more afterwards, and still more via e-mail in the weeks following. Faculty were interested in their results, but some saw the instrument as a test, and were concerned that it was being used to evaluate them, rather than as a snapshot of where they were at a point in time.

After thinking about the "test" response, I realized that I had failed to provide sufficient context for the faculty prior to their completing the instrument. Following the lecture, some wondered what purpose the TPI and the workshop served. This probably should not have surprised me; the lecture served as an introduction to a new topic that required a shift in thinking and learning a new vocabulary and again, I had provided minimal context. I assumed that because I told them what the instrument was and how I would use it, that they all heard and understood me. I was disappointed by the lack of excitement about a self-discovery process that had potential to enhance professional growth. My assumptions got in the way of my chance to be effective. It is ironic that during a workshop on perspective, I got caught by my own teaching and learning perspectives and let them color my ability to honor the different learning styles of the faculty.

Successes and dilemmas. Teaching logs turned out to be unexpectedly popular with the faculty. The questions forced them to focus on the experience of teaching throughout the week, rather than the mechanics of teaching and their evaluations by the students. discovered for themselves those "AHA" moments when they realized how their actions impacted student learning. When I was in their shoes, I was hungry for feedback on how I was doing. Faculty see the teaching log as providing a source of that feedback, especially since they were asked to return them to me and then to participate in a discussion about what they learned. I still see that in myself, I want feedback, reassurance, guidance, and affirmation that I am on the right path. Recognizing it in others creates a profound sense of responsibility to provide that support for those whom I am charged with developing and leading.

Rubin and Rubin define culture as "how people interpret the world around them by developing shared understandings" (1995, p. 20). Coming from the same culture, I shared what Schein (2002) calls *tacit understanding*, that body of information that permeates a culture but is not written or even talked about, so thoroughly is it embedded. I had in-depth understanding of what the participants were experiencing in their teaching, and made assumptions that may not have been accurate. Follow-up questions that could have been asked were missed because of this

assumed understanding. Not only did I have intimate knowledge of the existing culture, but I was also in a power position relative to those interviewed. I had influence over whether or not they continued to teach at the Institute. I am sure that the power relationship invaded the process and inhibited it.

Gratifying, however, was the response from those who participated in the interviews. One person said:

> I think the reviews have to be structured differently than they have been in the past. Not just to get a simple response from the students, but to really have more meaningful feedback, such as what you're doing here, for us to reflect on the experience, for us to talk about the Institute's perception of what we've done.

I have a deeply held belief that teaching is about relationships and connection and think most developmental processes are this way. The interview was affirming in that regard; the faculty will be more successful if there is always someone at the Institute who is interested in their development and committed to their success.

Insights

As I started my new job and brought additional resources to the Institute, it was clear that our faculty wanted to be developed. They wanted help in becoming better at what they do, they wanted recognition for their work and efforts and they wanted a personal relationship with a "supervisor." It was also clear that previous time constraints, demographics, and budget were challenges to making those changes occur.

Analysis of the situation, creation of a plan, and development of measurements and reassessment strategies are foundational to strategic planning. Our process is fundamentally sound but needs improvement. The interview will be rewritten and the faculty are being encouraged to retake the TPI and seek individual consultation to process the results. Changes have been instituted as a direct result of the interviews. Visiting faculty are contacted four months prior to their teaching dates to apprise them of course modifications; they meet with a resident faculty member each morning prior to class beginning for a daily "huddle" to assess the previous day and plan for the current day. At the end of the week, they spend an hour with resident faculty reviewing what went well, what didn't go well, and what could be added or changed in the course. Individuals benefit by receiving immediate feedback and the Institute benefits from additional input about course offerings that allow resident faculty to improve their planning process. The immediate result is an improved sense of community among the faculty, a feeling of recognition for their efforts and for their input, and a closer working relationships with the resident faculty.

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