Improving Teaching by Design

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The matter of improving teaching must rank as a top priority in universities and colleges around the world if they are to successfully fulfill their missions as institutions of higher learning. What is more, successful teaching enhancement requires the on-going commitment of members of the academic administration and the professoriate, as well as instructional and faculty developers. At the institutional level, constant attention to teaching improvement policies, programs, and practices is required to ensure the status and quality of college and university teaching. Dalhousie University is no exception in this regard.

A wide variety of strategies may contribute to a comprehensive approach to improving teaching on a given campus. Although local conditions, climate, and cultures often prevail in matters of educational improvement and innovation, the academic community should nonetheless establish priorities when pursuing instructional development goals. Priority items for the instructional development agenda on a given campus should take into account the experience and opinions of the professoriate and professionals in the field of faculty development. This issue of *Focus* examines five key elements of an overall design for teaching improvement. The first concerns the value of teaching in personnel decisions; the second concerns the leadership of academic administrators in the realm of teaching enhancement; the third involves mentoring, consultation, and other programs for new instructors; the fourth regards programs directly supporting teaching innovation; and the fifth concerns faculty workshops and institutes with specific reference to the

teaching dossier or portfolio.

The key elements of this design to enhance university teaching spring from the results of an international survey of 331 instructional developers, an analysis of the responses to the same survey instrument completed by of over 900 faculty, deans, and department heads or chairs, and the experience of directing the instructional development program at Dalhousie University. All respondents were asked to rate their confidence, on a scale of one (low confidence) to ten (high confidence), in each of 36 items in terms of its potential to improve teaching. In the data analysis the 36 teaching improvement activities were rank ordered according to their mean ratings on the 10-point scale. The faculty/staff developers represented 331 different institutions in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australasia. The majority of the 906 faculty, deans, and chairs surveyed work at 7 universities (5 anglophone and 2 francophone) in Atlantic

Canada, while the others are employed either at a university in Quebec or in California. Table 1 shows the comparative rank order of the items for: 1) the faculty developers' group; 2) the group of faculty, deans, and heads; 3) Dalhousie University respondents (faculty, deans, and heads). Not included in the Table are the results of the same survey, completed at a meeting of university presidents and vice-presidents in Atlantic Canada. The senior administrators representing 13 institutions ranked several items in a similar fashion to other campus groups. Notably, they also rated the importance of consideration for teaching in personnel practices at the top of their list, and ranked workshops, mentoring programs, and instructional leadership on the part of deans and heads as among the top ten of 36 items relating to teaching improvement. The main differences between their rankings and those of the other campus groups were 1) they did not favor reduced workloads and grants to professors attempting to improve their teaching and 2) they rated the importance of their own leadership roles in improving teaching higher than did the deans, professors, and instructional developers.

Before examining individual components of a faculty development program, let me emphasize the fact that the instructional developers responding to our survey stressed the importance of a comprehensive approach to the problem of enhancing teaching. It is difficult, in their judgment, to evaluate certain instructional development policies in isolation.

Notwithstanding the need for a comprehensive approach to instructional development, instructional developers and faculty alike have identified preferred practices, programs, and policies via our international surveys. The items which follow should be considered carefully by all members of the academic community concerned with maximizing the impact of instructional development programs.

Personnel Decisions

Academics world wide emphasize the prime importance of valuing university teaching in institutional personnel decisions. It follows that those responsible for teaching improvement programs should consider the status of teaching in university procedures and policies with regards to hiring, contract renewal, salary increases, and merit pay, as well as tenure and promotion. (See Table 1)

Faculty in Atlantic Canada, in research universities and liberal arts colleges alike, emphasize the importance of rewarding teaching. Many of them took the initiative to comment on this matter when responding to our teaching improvement practices survey. Some faculty bemoaned the fact that research is much more prized than is teaching.

> *"Unless we reward and recognize teaching at least as equal to research, all efforts will have minimal impact."*

> *"Teaching should be given equal value as research in all career decisions."*

Other faculty members decry the fact that teaching performance makes a difference only in cases when it is done poorly, advocating rewards for outstanding teaching performance.

> *"On souligne toujours les personnes qui enseignent mal, mais on souligne pas les personnes qui enseignent bien."*

> *"Reward system must recognize excellence and improvement in teaching, not just adequate teaching. Evaluation should not be punitive, but supportive."*

Not only does ensuring tangible recognition for teaching accomplishment take an important place in an overall plan to improve university pedagogy, but many academics believe that it is a prerequisite for any instructional development program to succeed.

> *" I have tended to rank reward and recognition highly in terms of the development of good teaching. This is based on the conviction that the incentive to use workshops, libraries*

Table 1
Improving Teaching by Design
Preferred Practices by Rank

"Rate each item to indicate the confidence you have in its potential to improve the quality of teaching in your university." (Scale: 1 = least confident 10 = most confident) Note that this Table deals with the top ten of thirty six survey items.

Teaching Improvement Practice	International Faculty Developers[2] (n=331)		Faculty, Heads, & Deans[3] (n=906)		Dalhousie University (Faculty, Heads, & Deans)[4] (n=295)	
	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean
Recognition of teaching in tenure and promotion decisions	1.	8.24	1.	7.94	1.	8.02
Deans/Heads foster importance of teaching responsibility	2.	7.94	2.	7.65	2.	7.80
Deans/Heads promote climate of trust for classroom observation	3.	7.47	10.	6.41	9.	6.51
Mentoring programs and support for new professors	4.	7.38	7.	6.92	5.*	6.90
Grants to faculty to devise new approaches to teaching	5.	7.31	9.	6.51	10.	6.27
Workshops on teaching methods for targeted groups	6.	7.30	3.	7.15	4.	7.08
Deans/Heads praise and reward good teaching	7.	7.29	6.	7.11	3.	7.33
Hiring practices require demonstration of teaching ability	8.	7.21	4.	7.14	7.	6.83
Consultation on course materials with peers (formative)	9.	7.20	8.	6.84	8.	6.54
Temporary workload reduction for course improvement/revision	10.	7.13	5.	7.12	5.*	6.90

*denotes tie

See page 7: Notes for Table 1

and other resources is driven by the perception that teaching is a valued and important activity, and that the attainment of a high level of competence as a teacher will be *rewarded* in one way or another."

Almost as important as recognition for teaching in tenure and promotion decisions (in the view of many instructional developers and other academics) is the need to hire professors with attention to their proven ability or potential as teachers. Hiring practices which require a demonstration of teaching ability ranks among the top ten items for its potential to improve teaching for all categories of our respondents. (See Table 1)

One Canadian faculty developer put it this way:

> *"We need to recognize the importance of teaching and adjust our hiring practices and expectations accordingly. Applicants should be required to demonstrate teaching abilities."*

Many faculty colleagues in universities in Atlantic Canada agreed:

> *"People either love to teach or it's something that gets in the way of other interests. Hire as many of the former type as possible."*

> *"Exiger démonstration des capacités pédagogiques à l'embauche."*

Many academics are convinced that we must place more emphasis on teaching abilities during the interviewing and selection process.

Leadership of Deans and Heads

Instructional developers and faculty, as well as academic administrators themselves, emphasize the critical role department heads, chairs, and deans play in raising both the status and the quality of teaching in higher education. More specifically, some twelve hundred academics responding to our questionnaire rated the role of deans and heads in fostering the importance of teaching responsibilities second only to recognition for teaching in tenure and promotion decisions (in terms of potential impact on quality). Praise and reward for good teaching and promoting a climate of trust for classroom observation constitute additional means which deans and heads can call upon in an effort to improve university pedagogy. (See Table 1)

A faculty member in the health sciences field at Dalhousie stressed the notion that heads and directors have a greater role to play in teaching improvement than do senior administrators.

> *"I don't think rhetoric by senior administration will help faculty who need to see rewards of good teaching or consequences of poor teaching. Those who need to emphasize importance of teaching are directors/unit heads who have regular contact with faculty."*

Other Canadian faculty members underline the need for deans to reinforce quality teaching while putting the accent on "learning effectiveness," and finding a balance between teaching and research:

> *"It's not what the deans say, but how they reinforce good teaching with perks. We need to develop a "learning effectiveness" model - not "teaching effectiveness."*

> *"Administrators and Rank and Tenure committees have to praise and reward good teaching and not put so much importance on research, research, research."*

New Faculty Development : Mentoring and Consultation

The third essential area of activity in an overall scheme to improve the quality and status of university teaching involves programs for new instructors, mentoring plans for new and junior faculty, and consultation services. Mentoring and other means of support for beginning faculty are thought by instructional developers and faculty to have very high potential to enhance teaching in higher education. (See Table 1) Though not limited to involvement of junior faculty, consultation on course materials with peers achieves, potentially, similar goals to mentoring.

Structured instructional development programs generally include well received orientation to teaching events for new faculty. An instructional developer in a mid-sized university in Ontario, Canada, describes the interest in her centre's services:

> *"Over the summer, new faculty contact our office with practical issues about their teaching roles. In addition to these private consultations, the New Faculty Workshop held at the beginning of September is always popular and helpful to beginning faculty."*

Our experience at Dalhousie University supports the need for an orientation program for new faculty. Evaluations of orientation activities over the last ten years have been favorable. New professors have commented as follows:

> *"Excellent day - invaluable for encouragement as much as for facts and resource identification."*
>
> *"Terrific source of information to "Get Started." Thank you."*
>
> *"Very useful - saved a lot of time and trial and error discovery."*

Though orientation or induction activities are useful, they should be followed by 'new' or 'junior' faculty development plans. Mentoring

is a favored means of developing the beginning instructor. According to a comprehensive review of mentoring practices in higher education in the United States (Luna and Cullen, 1995), the approach has numerous benefits:

> *"Faculty career development, better teaching, quality research, and improved leadership skills can be positive outcomes of mentoring." (p. 71)*

Though faculty developers often promote interdisciplinary mentoring, many senior faculty prefer discipline-based plans. Comments submitted by our survey respondents serve to illustrate these points.

> *"I believe teaching effectiveness requires a sincere interest on the part of the faculty member. Peer assistance can be successful, immensely helpful and I like the idea of new faculty being invited to sit in on lectures of faculty with reputations for being able to teach effectively."*

Orientation activities and a mentoring program lie at the heart of a comprehensive junior faculty development program, and a successful junior faculty development program can have positive impact on faculty careers.

Support for Improvement Initiatives

A fourth element of a successful instructional development plan involves on-going programs of support for faculty making improvements to courses and teaching. The potential of grants to faculty to devise new approaches to teaching obtains a very high confidence rating from faculty developers internationally, while deans, heads, and faculty express relatively less confidence in this approach to improving teaching. On the other hand, faculty, deans, and heads favour temporary workload reductions for course improvement and revision while faculty developers express relatively less confidence in this teaching improvement practice. (See Table 1) The problem with both schemes, of course, is one of resource allocation - as resources diminish, few are the optimistic academics anticipating additional funds for teach-

ing innovation and reduced workloads for course revision. Yet many faculty responding to our survey, particularly those at Dalhousie, expressed great frustration with the lack of time to improve teaching and the competing demands on their time:

> *"One of my main constraints when it comes to teaching is time. In a system which still values research more than teaching, your professors cannot put 100% into teaching. My teaching would be better if I had more time."*

Ironically, many faculty report that they cannot ("despite my best intentions") even find time to attend workshop activities designed to help them enhance their teaching. Although there is no simple solution to the scarcity of resources on campus, administrators and faculty developers should be mindful of the fundamental need to support teaching improvement by individual faculty as an on-going institutional priority.

Workshops and Institutes

The fifth and last component among the preferred instructional development practices is workshops on teaching for targeted groups. Workshops for faculty are the 'bread and butter' activities of instructional development offices or centers. But deans, heads, and faculty (taken as a group) express even greater confidence in the potential of workshops than do the faculty developers themselves. (See Table 1)

Workshops have formed an integral part of our instructional development program at Dalhousie University over a period of ten years. Hundreds of positive comments on 'participant response forms' collected at the conclusion of dozens of workshops assess these activities as having a practical impact on the quality of teaching.

While beneficial, isolated workshops of one to three hours duration, without follow up, may have limited long term impact for some participants. Many academics recognize the benefits, however, of the extensive workshops, or institutes on teaching improvement. These events last one, two, or even several weeks.

The "Recording Teaching Accomplishment Institute" is a successful example of an event of this kind. This week-long workshop held at Dalhousie University brings faculty from a variety of disciplines and institutions together to develop their teaching portfolios. Participants come from Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean. The purpose of the Institute is to support professors in the creation of a ten page document describing their teaching approaches, accomplishments, and aims.

Longer workshops and institutes allow both the instructional developer and the faculty participants to see a project through to completion, to explore pedagogical ideas in some depth, and to gain a sense of achievement and professional progress.

Conclusion

In an era of dwindling resources, what can faculty, instructional developers, deans, directors, and unit heads do to enhance the quality and the status of teaching in a given institutional setting? They can make a concerted effort to improve university teaching by design. On the one hand, they should assess the campus teaching culture, enumerating strengths and noting weaknesses. On the other hand, they should work towards the creation of a model which gives every consideration to incorporating preferred programs, policies, and practices as identified by their academic colleagues internationally. Drawing on a thorough knowledge of both the local environment and the research findings of the broader academic milieu, campus leaders can formulate an approach to teaching improvement which promises to make a significant impact in the university community.

Notes for Table 1

1. There were 36 items ranked in the survey. Using the results from the International Faculty Developers survey as a base, a comparison is made with results of the survey of 906 Faculty, Deans, and Heads and those respondents from Dalhousie University.

2. The 331 Faculty Developers responding to the survey represent 165 universities in the United States, 82 in the United Kingdom, 51 in Canada, and 33 in Australasia. This list represents 10 of the top 12 Preferred Practices of Developers. The items omitted here concerned a "Centre to promote effective instruction" (ranked 3rd by Developers but only 22nd by Faculty, Heads, and Deans and "Senior Admin-istrators gave visibility to teaching improvement activities" (ranked 11th by Developers but only 14th by Faculty, Heads, and Deans).

3. The top 8 of the 10 items listed here were ranked among the 10 Preferred Practices by Faculty, Heads, and Deans. Those indicated as 9th and 10th are ranked *relative* to the top 8. Of the complete list of 36 items, these two items were ranked 11th and 15th by this group.

4. The top 9 of the 10 items listed here were ranked among the 10 Preferred Practices by Dalhousie University Faculty, Deans, and Heads. The item listed as 10th is ranked *relative* to the top 9. Of the complete list of 36 items, this item was ranked 15th by the Dalhousie group.

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