Online Faculty Development and Storytelling: An Unlikely Solution to Improving Teacher Quality

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Abstract

Institutions of Higher Education are beginning to place a greater emphasis on quality teaching and student learning. However, few faculty receive any type of teacher training prior to entering the academy. As a result, faculty development is one likely solution to teacher quality issues. But faculty development is faced with serious shortcomings that impede its ability to improve teacher quality. This paper explores how moving faculty development online while at the same time incorporating the use of teacher stories could be a viable strategy to improve faculty development and teacher quality.

Keywords: Professional Development, Teacher Training, Narrative, Digital Storytelling

Introduction

Historically members of the academy have assumed that "knowing a subject well is sufficient training to teach it" (Stevens, 1988, p.64). However, with increased pressure from students, parents, and politicians, colleges and universities are being held more accountable than ever for quality teaching and student learning; as a result, more emphasis has been placed on quality teaching than ever before. Research and publishing are still the sine qua non for faculty success and institutional prestige; however, faculty are now expected to be expert teachers, as well as expert researchers (Boyer, 1990). As a result, faculty find themselves in a difficult position; they are expected to be high quality teachers even though they have received little to no training on how to teach.

In this paper, the author argues that the most logical, or perhaps most feasible, solution to the teacher quality dilemma in this new age of accountability is teacher training. At colleges and universities, teacher training has manifested itself primarily in the form of faculty development. However, traditional faculty development practices are not sufficient to meet the needs of faculty in the 21st century. In this paper, the author argues that the answer might lie in the marriage of two unlikely partners: online learning and storytelling.

The Problem

Despite the proliferation of centers for faculty development, there is little evidence whether faculty development initiatives are changing faculty teaching and student learning. While a detailed analysis of the shortcomings of faculty development is beyond the scope of this paper, the author highlights a few pervasive problems or limitations with faculty development.

Reactive Nature of Faculty Development

One shortcoming of faculty development is its reactive nature; faculty developers tend to respond to requests, rather than initiating university wide strategies for change (Fletcher & Patrick, 1998). The current overemphasis on training faculty to integrate technology into the classroom is an example of this. There is a place for technology in classrooms, but scholars have illustrated that it is the pedagogy, not the technology, that makes the difference in student learning (Clark, 1983; Reeves, 1998). Therefore, for technology to make a difference in student learning (and hence teacher quality), faculty need to have a solid understanding of teaching and learning in the first place. Being reactive is not necessarily a bad

thing. In fact, it is important to be responsive to faculty needs. For instance, Stevens (1988) explains that faculty begin to "tinker" with their teaching as the result of either reflection about their teaching or reacting to a situational problem in their teaching. However, there is a fine line between reacting to trends or problems and providing faculty with relevant and timely support to improve instruction.

Changing the World in a Day

Another problem faculty developers struggle with is aligning their methodologies and epistemologies. While research on learning espouses a learner-centered approach to learning and places high importance on the transfer of learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999), typical faculty development initiatives follow a teacher "in-service" approach of changing the world in a day. Often this is the only successful way of attracting faculty to take time out of their schedule to attend faculty development in the first place. While extended workshops are pedagogically appealing, they are expensive and seldom attract enough faculty.

Attracting Faculty

Attracting faculty to attend faculty development remains a serious obstacle for faculty developers. In a recent study, faculty claimed that lack of time and competing priorities were the two major obstacles to attending faculty development (Stevens et al., 2005). To complicate matters, colleges and universities are relying more and more on part-time faculty who often have even less formal training than full-time faculty and even more competing priorities. In fact, Stevens et al. (2005) found, in a study they conducted, that part-time faculty also claimed that lack of time and competing priorities was the number one obstacle to attending faculty development. Therefore, for any faculty development initiative to improve teacher quality it will not only have to deal with the issue of how to attract faculty but also address attracting part-time faculty as well.

Changing Faculty Behavior

Perhaps the most daunting challenge faculty developer's face is helping faculty change their teaching. Even if colleges and universities required all faculty to attend faculty development to improve their teaching, it would be a major challenge "helping teachers 'unlearn' the beliefs, values, assumptions, and cultures" they have learned about teaching and learning in the academy (Dede, 2004, p. xii). Dede (2004) explains further,

> Altering deeply ingrained and strongly reinforced rituals of schooling takes more than an informational interchange of the kind typical in conferences and 'make and take' professional development. Intellectual, emotional, and social support is essential for 'unlearning' and for transformational relearning that can lead to deeper behavior changes to create the next generation of educational practices. (p. xii)

On top of all of this, faculty developers have to contend with the issue of competing priorities; namely, why should faculty devote time to improving their teaching when promotion is typically tied more to research?

Relevance, Context, and Transfer of Learning

Finally, there are issues of relevance, context, and transfer. Some attempts at improving teacher quality have focused on isolating "best practices" or principles of good teaching. The most prominent work on best practices come from the work of Chickering and Gamson (1987, 1999) and Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001). While lists of best practices are very popular, it is unclear whether they actually help improve faculty teaching and student learning. Vrasidas and Glass (2004) and Cross (1998) have challenged the trend of making a list of best practices by arguing that they oversimplify and overcomplicate learning. However, lists like these are still plastered over countless faculty development websites. Just as good teaching requires more than content knowledge, it too requires more than a decontextualized bulleted list of best practices. Faculty cannot afford to forget the situated and specific nature of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, faculty development "must honor the complexity of teachers' practices …. [while allowing] participants to develop the reflective skills needed to gain new insights into their pedagogical approaches and teaching practice" (Vrasidas & Glass, 2004, p. 4).

Therefore, faculty development must be relevant to faculty's individual needs; further, it must be situated and contextual to help encourage the transfer of learning and changing of practice that needs to take place. Without contextualizing and making things relevant, attracting faculty and hence helping support the transfer of what faculty learn to their own classroom to improve their teaching is futile.

A Possible Solution

Given these and other shortcomings, faculty development might not appear to be the best place to start to improve teacher quality. However, given the culture of the academy (e.g., requiring teacher training is almost as unrealistic as systematically changing the reward structure), faculty development appears to be one of the only realistic and viable solutions. There is no question that each of the previously mentioned shortcomings must be addressed in part if any faculty development initiative or program is going to be successful. However, the author argues in the following pages that online learning and storytelling can help improve faculty development, which can ultimately improve teacher quality.

Online Learning

Online learning is drastically changing the face of higher education (Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Online learning was expected to come and go like other fads in education, but enrollments in online courses and programs continue to grow dramatically each year. In the fall of 2005, an estimated 3.2 million students took at least one online course—800,000 more than the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2006). As a result, a great debate surrounding the quality of online learning has arisen. An unintended consequence of this debate, as well as online learning's continued popularity, is that online learning is serving as a catalyst forcing colleges and universities to reconceptualize teaching and learning (Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Duffy & Kirkley, 2004; Speck, 2002). While, it is the pedagogy, not the technology, that makes the difference, different learning formats (e.g., the internet) have certain affordances (e.g., Ryder & Wilson, 1996). Furthermore, Wiley (2002) eloquently argues that the online learning environment influences how one teaches (i.e., teachers teach differently online than in the classroom). Therefore, given the popularity and the possibilities of online learning with students, it is surprising how little online learning—specifically facilitated asynchronous learning (the most popular form of online learning in higher education)—has been used by colleges and universities for faculty development.

Online Faculty Development

As the popularity and success of online learning continues, online faulty development is beginning to be acknowledged as a viable alternative to face-to-face faculty development (Shea, Sherer, & Kristensen, 2002; Vrasidas & Glass, 2004). Putting faculty development online addresses some of the shortcomings or limitations of faculty development. Also, as Vrasidas and Glass (2004) explain, 'the demands of work and family life for teachers [coupled with the rise in part-time faculty] . . . underline the need for professional development activities that can be delivered anytime, anywhere" (p. 4).

Online faculty development is still in its infancy, though. However, when it has been used, it has been used primarily to train faculty to use technology in some form—whether for online teaching or to integrate technology into the classroom (Irani & Telg, 2002; Padgett & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000). This focus, falls short of supporting the needs of all faculty members, and loses sight of one important issue: In this age of accountability, faculty development's primary objective should be to improve faculty teaching and student learning, both in the classroom and online.

Using online faculty development that reflects an understanding of these issues and meets the needs of the faculty at large is not an easy task; a few universities have begun to do this with mixed results (Bellows & Danos, 2002; Wood et al., 1998). The experience of these institutions, as well as the literature about online learning, suggests that putting faculty development online can address some of the problems addressed earlier in this paper.

First, by using asynchronous communication or self-paced workshops online, all faculty can access workshops at their convenience. Therefore, this format can help address attracting faculty to attend workshops by eliminating issues of time and place. Second, by putting faculty development online, faculty developers can increase "seat-time" by extending the workshop over time and avoid the problem of changing the world in a day. Third, while online faculty development has not been shown to

specifically address the challenge of changing faculty's teaching, there is reason to believe it could. For instance, Vrasidas and Glass (2004) remind us:

> Students learn best when they are actively engaged in meaningful activities; when they collaborate with peers, exchange ideas, and provide and receive peer feedback; when they reflect critically on what they are doing; when they work on real-world, challenging, authentic activities; when their work is constantly evaluated; and when they are intrinsically motivated. But we tend to forget that teachers learn best in these ways too. (p. 2)

Thus, if online faculty development workshops were approached with these same strategies in mind, there is reason to believe that in time faculty could begin to improve their practice.

But simply putting faculty development online will likely not be enough to improve teacher quality. For instance, while eliminating issues of time and place by putting faculty development online helps address part of the issue of attendance, it fails to address how the content, context, and relevance (or lack thereof) of faculty development workshops also dissuade faculty attendance. Therefore, the author argues in the remaining of this paper that the use of storytelling could be the missing ingredient needed to help improve teacher quality with online faculty development.

The Power of Stories

Stories and storytelling might seem like a strange thing to pair with online learning to improve teacher quality, but the power of stories to improve learning has been well documented (Abrahamson, 1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 1994; McDrury & Alterio, 2003). While there is very little literature specifically on the use of stories in faculty development, the literature on storytelling in education suggests that the intentional use of stories and storytelling could greatly improve faculty development by addressing among other things the issues of content, context, and relevance.

Before elaborating, it is important to highlight some of the reasons why people tell stories and why faculty should tell more. The power of stories lies in their ability to build bridges of understanding between individuals. Stories do this through using concrete examples rather than vague abstractions (or bulleted distillations). Further, "story provides the framework and context for individuals to better understand others by providing the key to their own experiences" (Abrahamson, 1998, p. 441). Stories also have the ability to build connections with personal experience, which helps facilitate meaning making and retention. For instance, Schank (1990) explains that,

> We can tell people abstract rules of thumb [e.g., the "seven principles"] which we have derived from prior experiences, but it is very difficult for other people to learn from these. We have difficulty remembering such abstractions, but we can more easily remember a good story. Stories give live to past experiences. Stories make the events in memory memorable to others and to ourselves. (p. 10)

Further, Schank adds:

> Thinking involves indexing . . . [and] the more information we are provided with about a situation, the more places we can attach it to in memory . . . . Thus, a story is useful because it comes with many indices . . . the more indices we have for a story that is being told, the more places it can reside in memory . . . and hence the greater the learning. (p. 11)

This should not surprise anyone though. Story is perhaps the oldest form of education.

Storytelling and Faculty Development

Stories come to life during the social process of sharing or telling one's story with others. The act of telling a story creates a sense of community, which fosters collaboration, which then fosters meaning making. Burk (2000) explains, "through oral storytelling, students may feel empowered as participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge" (p. 7).

It is because of these reasons, and many more, that colleges and universities need to begin intentionally integrating and leveraging the power of story and storytelling into faculty development. As Burk (2000)

points out, “storytelling is a pedagogical strategy that gives students ‘voice’ in the classroom” (p. 3). By having faculty share their own stories, while also hearing and reading the stories of others, faculty developers can begin to approach faculty development from an additive rather than a deficit or remediation model. Through sharing their own stories, faculty can begin to become part of the process and the solution rather than the problem. Further, the act of sharing stories can have a magical and humanizing effect on learners (Kreps, 1998) while at the same time contextualizing and adding relevance to learning.

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (1995) have perhaps most successfully integrated the writing and sharing of educational stories with adults. They have developed what they call the “case story.” According to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (1995), “a case story is both a written and oral description of a real life, ‘close-to-the bone’ leadership situation, written with words meant to come fully to life when discussed” (p. 1). More specifically, they have developed a case story model that involves having a group of people first free write and then write a case story; then after they have written a case story they share their story in small groups. After they share their story with their colleagues, they reflect on the writing and sharing process and then wrap up and conclude while thinking about professional practice (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 1995).

While Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski developed the case story and used it for educational administrators at the K-12 level, it could be adapted to meet the needs of higher education faculty. For instance, faculty developers could have faculty share stories about their best or most effective learning experience as a student in order to explore collective values of teaching and learning before talking about the successes or challenges of teaching (Lowenthal, Dunlap, Stevens, Wray, & Bates, 2005). While integrating faculty stories into faculty development could undoubtedly help improve face-to-face workshops, the power of online learning is needed to extend these learning opportunities to all faculty.

Online Faculty Development and Teacher Stories

Faculty, even more than students, are skeptical of online learning. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, putting faculty development online is not a panacea for faculty development. In fact, in a recent study, even faculty who taught online did not express interest in doing faculty development online (Stevens et al., 2005). Similarly, the intentional use of teaching stories is not enough to motivate and change behavior for all faculty at all times. There is not a silver bullet to improve teacher quality. The fact that teaching is often a private enterprise and not valued by many only complicates matters further. However, people share things online (whether in a discussion forum or an email) that they normally would not in person. Therefore, it is possible to think that one of the often drawbacks to online learning, the fact that learners cannot see each other, might be an asset when it comes to putting faculty development online that entails sharing personal stories about ones practice.

Digital Storytelling

Last but not least, using digital media in the form of digital storytelling can add another dimension to using teacher stories in online faculty development to improve teacher quality. Digital Storytelling is the process of using digital media (e.g., pictures, audio, video) to tell a story. This definition over simplifies what digital storytelling is just as the act of writing about digital storytelling over complicates it. According to Porter (2004), “digital storytelling takes the ancient art of oral storytelling and engages a palette of technical tools to weave personal tales using images, graphics, music and sound mixed together with the author’s own story voice” (p. 1). Despite recent trends to incorporate digital storytelling in K-12 (Banaszewski, 2002) and higher education classrooms (Lowenthal, in press; Robin & Pierson, 2005), there is an absence of literature documenting its use for faculty development. However, there is reason to believe that digital storytelling could be a very effective faculty development tool (Lowenthal, Stevens, & Dunlap, 2005).

Digital stories could and should be used like case studies (Lowenthal et al., 2005). However, unlike a case, a story does not have to begin or center on a “problem” that is to be “solved.” Rather, faculty and faculty developers could create digital stories to document both good and bad teaching experiences. But unlike a case, digital stories not only bear a higher fidelity, they also invite the listener to experience their story. The power of the voice is something that cannot be captured the same simply in text.

An example of what this might look like would be to have faculty develop their own digital stories documenting their most memorable learning experience or a recent classroom challenge. An example of this can be seen online at: http://www.patricklowenthal.com/digitalstory/digitalstories/samsara-large.mov. Through creating a digital story like this, faculty could not only indirectly receive training on how to use technology, while reflecting and connecting with colleagues about best teaching practices, but they could also reflect on best practices in action. Further, digital stories like these could be uploaded and shared online—across universities—at places like Story Circles (http://storycircles.org) or Youtube (http://www.youtube.com).

Vrasidas and Glass (2004) remind us that "research has shown that teachers tend to teach as they were taught" (p. 3); however, teachers often emulate average teachers, not the spectacular. Digital stories, whether one's own or others, have the ability to change the way faculty developers can motivate faculty to think about their teaching and to take part in faculty development. While the academy has instilled a culture in which teaching is a private, isolated, experience—digital stories coupled with online faculty development have the potential to slowly open the doors and minds by giving faculty a safe, semi-anonymous, accessible, and inviting place to learn by sharing stories about our experiences in the classroom.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education expect faculty to be exceptional teachers as well as active researchers and prolific writers. While faculty developers are expected to help faculty—who are not naturally high quality teachers or who have received previous teacher training, traditional faculty development initiatives have struggled attracting faculty to attend workshops, trying to change the world in a day, and changing the way faculty teach. As a result, some institutions have begun to explore the possibilities of putting faculty development online to address these problems. However, just because workshops are accessible from anytime and anyplace does not mean that faculty are going to make any more free time to devote to these activities. Storytelling, though, has the ability to not only attract and maintain faculty's interest by contextualizing and situating their experiences in story but also has the ability to help faculty reflect on and possibly change the way faculty teach by presenting material in a novel and fresh, yet traditional and intuitive manner. It is unclear exactly where faculty development is going, but one thing is clear—if what you are doing, is not working, then it is time to try something new; that something new should involve online learning and storytelling.

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