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Student/Faculty Connections in the Development of Teaching

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Student/Faculty Connections in the Development of Teaching

Abstract

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Keywords

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Comments

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TEACHING BRIEF

Student/Faculty Connections in the Development of Teaching

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Abstract

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The co-authors acknowledge and appreciate financial support for the project through a Miller Faculty Fellowship from the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at Iowa State University.

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TEACHING BRIEF

Student/Faculty Connections in the Development of Teaching

Overview

In the current university teaching environment, the student voice in the instructional development process has been commonly heard only after final course grades are distributed. The purpose of our instructional development project was to help promote a culture of teaching improvement by directly involving student consultants in teaching development during the term of instruction. Students were enlisted as champions for changing the status of teaching among the faculty. The project has potential for enhancing the quality of teaching by giving business students a voice and making students direct partners in instructional development.

Background and Project Description

Students and faculty in our college worked together in two different models of instructional development. Both models assumed students should be directly involved in instructional development. The goal of both models was to help build a community dedicated to sharing perspectives about teaching and learning.

Student Consultant Model

The first model of direct student involvement was a Student Consultant program in which partnerships were created between students and faculty to help develop instruction. Faculty members using the program selected from a menu of instructional services carried out by students. Faculty members decided whether, when, and how much to use the consultant services. Because the students involved in the consultant program were not enrolled in the instructor's course, students were less constrained and offered the instructor valuable and objective information. Faculty members valued the availability of choice in services and the confidential partnership with the student consultants. A faculty member served as coordinator of Student Consultants for the entire college to manage the process and convey information to faculty about the services students could provide.

In August 2002, all members of an undergraduate business student council, an undergraduate career week steering committee, and undergraduate advising mentors were contacted and encouraged to apply as student participants in the project. (A copy of the student application form is found at:

https://www.bus.iastate.edu/gkopy/Miller_App.doc) A second, similar call for participation also went out in January 2003. From the total pool of 25 applicants, four student consultants were selected. The main selection criterion was the quality of the individual student's written response to the question "what is good teaching?" as judged by the project co-authors. The services used during the academic year included:

- attending class as an impartial observer and providing a description of what happened during the class from that same perspective
- providing feedback and discussion on specific elements of a class or course
- soliciting feedback on class learning experiences by interviewing students
- videotaping a class session for and reviewing the tape with the instructor
- evaluating course websites and suggesting changes to enhance student learning.

Teaching Seminar Model

The second model of direct student involvement was a Student Associate program in which students were pundits and assistants in a series of teaching seminars. Ten Student Associates were selected from the same applicant pool as the Student Consultants described above. Student Associates worked with the proposal co-authors to facilitate periodic discussion groups on topics of interest. The seminars helped make innovative instructional techniques visible and promoted a culture that valued the student voice in support of teaching excellence. Four to six Student Associates were selected for each seminar to serve as panelists and discussion leaders. A total of about 150 hours of Student Consultant and Student Associate time was used in the project. Approximately 80% of this time was used in student consulting activities for individual faculty.

Faculty Participants

In July 2002, each of the Department chairpersons in the college was asked to nominate a faculty member from each department for participation in the seminar series. A general call for participation from all college faculty members was also made. (A copy of the faculty application form is given at:

https://www.bus.iastate.edu/gkopy/Miller_App_Fac.doc) In addition to the five faculty leaders who received the grant and led the project, nine other college faculty members attended the seminar series for the 2002-2003 academic year. All other faculty members were invited to attend any individual seminars that interested them.

Topics for the seminars matched the interests of the project co-authors and were relevant to the college's needs. As examples of topics covered in the series, the seminars and dates offered were as follows.

- A Teaching Portfolio: What Do You Mean You Don't Have One? (October 2, 2002)
- Issues in Large Section Instruction (October 23, 2002)
- Student Feedback: Improving the Classroom Experience for Faculty and Students (November 6, 2002)
- Student Feedback: End-of-Semester Course Ratings (December 11, 2002). Our guest speaker was a student government representative, who discussed a pilot project for university-wide on-line course evaluations.
- Critical and Creative Thinking Skills: Concept Maps (January 29, 2003)
- Critical and Creative Thinking Skills: Case Studies (February 12, 2003). This seminar was held in conjunction with the university's Center for Teaching Excellence's regularly-scheduled instructional development forum.
- Critical and Creative Thinking Skills: What Do YOU Do? (March 12, 2003)
- Teaching with Teams (April 2, 2003)

Attendance at the seminar series ranged from 19 to 29 business faculty members, indicating participation by faculty who had not signed up formally and other students.

Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Because the project was based on student partnerships in faculty instructional development, the learning outcomes applied to both faculty and students. To gain insight into student outcomes, all students that participated in the seminar series were asked to write brief summaries of their experiences and to reflect on what was learned after each seminar. Specifically, the students were asked to respond to the following three questions.

- In your opinion what was the single most important issue or point raised in the seminar?
- In your opinion what is your most vivid remembrance about the seminar?
- In your opinion what was the single most unexpected thing about the seminar?

The student responses were shared, anonymously, with all faculty seminar participants after each seminar. The student impressions of a seminar discussion were then apparent to faculty participants. Although the content of the responses was not systematically analyzed, the seminars appeared to have had an impact on student awareness of faculty responsibilities. (Student responses for each seminar are found at: https://www.bus.iastate.edu/gkopp/Seminar_Student_Feedback.doc).

At the start of the fall 2002 semester and at the end of the spring 2003 semester, faculty participants in the student-assisted seminar program were surveyed to measure the effect of the various seminar interactions on their instruction and attitudes toward learner-centered education. Only the faculty members who participated in the entire seminar series were surveyed. The faculty members were asked to rate their agreement with eleven different statement pairs using a seven-point response scale. A score of 4.0 indicated indifference between the pair of statements. The faculty survey is presented in Appendix A.

On average, the faculty responses indicated indifference between the statement pairs on all but three pairs. That is, the average response was not significantly different from 4.0 on eight measures out of eleven both before the seminar series and after. Both before and after the seminar series, the faculty members were significantly more likely to agree with the statements “I emphasize the need for students to generate questions and to learn from their errors” and “The classroom culture should be cooperative and collaborative” than agreed with the statements “I emphasize the need for students to get the right answers” and “The classroom culture should be competitive and individualistic,” respectively. The only statement pair that became significant after the seminar series compared with before, is the following.

“Students are the only learners
in the classroom.”

“Both the professor and students are
learners together in the classroom.”

After the seminar series, the average faculty member was significantly more likely to agree with the statement on the right. A close look at each of the average responses also shows that the standard errors of the mean generally became smaller after the seminar series. The results were consistent with the argument that because of the seminars faculty became aware of joint learning opportunities in the classroom and were able to focus their opinions about the student–faculty partnership.

Conclusion

Involving students directly in the instructional evaluation process was an innovative idea that required the right conditions to take root. And while the continuation of the project was uncertain due to funding support for student consulting services, the effort highlighted the broader theme of searching for effective methods of faculty development. It was difficult to measure the extent of interest and level of conversation about teaching that existed in the college after the project. However, we felt certain that this discussion would not have taken place without such effort as a background. Several factors may have accounted for the similarity in average scores over time reported in Appendix A. For example, not all faculty seminar attendees participated in individual student consulting. Greater participation might have had a greater impact on faculty perceptions. Another possibility was that the faculty self-selected in deciding to participate in the seminar series, and therefore, may have been positively inclined toward the topic at the outset. Long-term change would have been more likely had the project been offered more than once and assessment of attitudes towards teaching may have required more refined measures.

Colleges of business undertaking projects such as these potentially create an atmosphere of open exchange for both students and faculty. When students and faculty collaboratively address the meaning of academic scholarship, teaching development initiatives, and the barriers to further implementing instructional development, they have a powerful effect on organizational culture.

Appendix A
Faculty Survey Responses

	<i>Mean Response*</i> <i>Oct. 2002</i>	<i>Mean Response*</i> <i>Apr. 2003</i>	
Professors transmit knowledge to students.	4.57 (0.48)	4.33 (0.44)	Students construct knowledge through gathering and synthesizing information.
Students passively receive information.	4.71 (0.52)	4.44 (0.60)	Students are actively involved in receiving information.
Classroom instruction should emphasize using and communicating knowledge effectively so that students can address issues in a variety of contexts.	4.25 (0.62)	4.56 (0.58)	Classroom instruction should emphasize acquiring knowledge so that students can address issues in the context in which the information will be used.
The professor is the primary information giver and primary evaluator.	4.00 (0.76)	4.00 (0.55)	The professor coaches and facilitates learning and evaluation.
I believe teaching and evaluation are intertwined.	3.50 (0.53)	3.22 (0.62)	I believe teaching is separate from evaluation.
I believe that papers, projects, portfolios, etc., are better ways to assess learning than objective tests.	3.13 (0.55)	3.22 (0.40)	I believe that objectively scored tests adequately assess learning.
I emphasize the need for students to get the right answers.	5.13[†] (0.44)	5.33[†] (0.37)	I emphasize the need for students to generate questions and to learn from their errors.
The classroom culture should be competitive and individualistic.	5.38[†] (0.53)	5.00[†] (0.44)	The classroom culture should be cooperative and collaborative.
Students are the only learners in the classroom.	5.25 (0.73)	5.33[†] (0.60)	Both the professor and students are learners together in the classroom.
I adjust my classroom style to student feedback during the semester when appropriate.	3.38 (0.60)	3.56 (0.58)	I don't have time during the semester to adjust my classroom style to student feedback.
I believe that the best way to manage my time is to devote extra attention to teaching efforts.	3.88 (0.52)	3.89 (0.59)	I don't believe that the best way to manage my time is to devote extra attention to teaching efforts.

*Standard errors in parentheses. Responses based on a 7-point scale. Low (high) values imply agreement with statement on left (right). †Significantly different from midpoint at the 5% level.