

# ADULT EDUCATION AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT: EXPANDING THE REACH IN THE ACADEMY

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## Abstract

This evaluation study examines how faculty development courses on teaching and learning (OTLA) contribute to the “learning community” at a Midwestern University that promotes engagement “in the discovery of knowledge, the integration of learning experiences, and [faculty’s] applications through civic and professional leadership.” The study has three objectives: 1) Investigate how participation in the courses promotes collegial relationships across campus. 2) Understand the impact of the courses on faculty participants in establishing a collaborative culture around teaching. 3) Recognize the components of OTLA courses that contribute to the collaborative culture around teaching. Through this study, I seek to find ways that collaboration around teaching and learning occurs interdepartmentally at the university.

## Background Information

The Center for Teaching and Learning (now known as the Office for Teaching and Learning Advancement, OTLA) was established in 1984. Over the past six years, approximately 700 incoming and veteran faculty members have participated in professional development courses and activities. The OTLA supports faculty development through a framework that includes faculty-led seminars, orientation workshops, and technology training. The framework consists of five domains that support expert teaching: Learning, Teaching, Technology, Assessment, and Professionalism. A series of seminars with titles such as Effective Teaching, Teaching Large Classes, Pedagogy of Technologies, Essentials of Learning, Web Production for Teaching, Teaching Portfolio Essentials provide opportunities for faculty to understand and improve their own teaching philosophies and methodologies. They also meet other faculty from departments across campus and discuss common issues of teaching and pedagogy. In the courses, facilitators serve as conveners, mentors, and summarizers as well as liaisons with the OTLA. The faculty leaders do not act as teachers or expert authorities. They act as true facilitators of dialogue and ideas. In this way, they model collaborative learning techniques and democratic classroom practices.

The OTLA uses an adult education model for democratic professional development. The faculty members facilitate, contribute to, and evaluate the seminars. In most cases, there is not a specific leader assigned to the group and each member brings articles of interest on the selected topic to discuss with the other colleagues. Each group collectively determines the final applied projects from the seminars that get taken back and incorporated into their teaching preparation, practice, and coursework. Last year, this office was recognized and honored by the North Center Accreditation team as a model program for collaborative learning in a faculty development context.

## Review of Literature

Professional development for faculty members is shifting its focus from a specific event “focused on transmission of knowledge and information” to “practitioner engagement in sustained knowledge construction and collaboration involving meaningful questions” (Kerka, 2003). The sustained engagement and reflection with others around teaching creates a community of learners where ideas can be applied, discussed, and reflected on by the group. Brookfield

explains that “talking to colleagues about what we do unravels the shroud of silence in which our practice is wrapped” (1995, p. 35). Once the silence is broken and walls come down faculty can work with others to improve their practice in their own department or across the campus, yet a collaborative culture needs to be established so that faculty are willing to be honest and sincere (Glowacki-Dudka, 1999). Brookfield reminds us to be aware of the cultural barriers when reflecting and collaborating: “the culture of silence, the culture of individualism, and the culture of secrecy” (1995, p. 247). Although the rhetoric of collaboration and team teaching is present in academe, often the established culture of the university does not honor or recognize its value. Brookfield suggests that to change the culture, we need to change the system, create the structures (in job descriptions, student evaluations, and work schedules), and establish rewards (in merit and P&T portfolios) for collaboration and critical reflection of teaching (ibid, p. 252). As Senge proclaimed in the Fifth Discipline (1990), “Only by changing how we think can we change deeply embedded policies and practices. Only by changing how we interact can shared visions, shared understandings, and new capacities for coordinated actions be established” (p. xiv). In order to create a new community of learners with a focus on teaching, the organization must change and promote a culture of learning. At Ball State University, the mission statement supports such a shift claiming that BSU is a “learning community” that values “teamwork and problem solving” as well as “connection, coherence and collaboration” (BSU mission statement, April 2001).

### Purpose of the Study

Professional development for faculty members is a valuable way that adult education can contribute to the teaching culture of the academy. The OTLA has been created in collaboration with the adult education program to balance the focus of the university from the push for research, back to improving the learning in the classroom. As a new faculty member, I am working with this organization and studying its contribution to the culture of learning and teaching on the campus.

The study has three objectives: 1) Investigate how participation in the courses promotes collegial relationships across campus. 2) Understand the impact of the courses on faculty participants in establishing a collaborative culture around teaching. 3) Recognize the components of OTLA courses that contribute to the collaborative culture around teaching.

### Methods

This study will be completed in three parts. First, a pilot study survey of the new faculty for 2002 and 2003 who have participated in the first year (alpha) seminars. The researcher is inquiring into activities with other faculty members from outside their own departments or colleges related to teaching, doing research, collaborating on projects, and interacting professionally. This survey was developed with feedback from the advisory committee to the OTLA and other assessment staff on campus.

Questions relate to the extent faculty interact after working together in these seminars. They ask about areas of shared discussion and overlapping research opportunities. They inquire into how the faculty have collaborated on projects, both teaching and research. And also, to what extent they feel that these relationships were promoted or strengthened through the participation in the OTLA seminars. This survey process is currently underway.

After analyzing this data, I will survey of all participants from the OTLA seminars from the past five years. Finally, we will follow up through focus groups with a sampling of participants and

facilitators from the TLA courses. The focus groups will delve deeper into the topic of building a collaborative community for teaching at Ball State. A sample of participants will be invited to join the focus group – approximately ten participants per group up to three focus groups. The questions will focus on personal development, teaching culture, collaborating with others across campus, and the perception of teaching.

### Findings

An informal survey of OTLA participants finds that faculty who have taken the courses value the opportunities to get to know faculty from other departments. The seminars provide a place where people can express concerns, gain skills, find strategies, and ask questions that may be ridiculed in their own departments. The charter-house rules of what is said in the room stays in the room, provides a safe environment for learning and trying out new ideas. Faculty members who participate in these seminars are able to reach across departmental lines more freely for collaboration opportunities.

I expect to find that the safe environment provides a fertile ground for developing colleagues and promoting collaboration. The learning community that is shaped by such a format

I look forward to the more scientific findings of the survey to confirm these informal statements.

### Implications for Adult Education Practice

Adult educators in higher education can collaborate with designers of professional development activities on campuses in order to strengthen their position as leaders in the academy. The OTLA provides a strong model of adult education methods being applied to continue to educate faculty members. Where are other places that adult education can be visible and promote its concepts and methods to support the strategic plan of the university? Adult educators can communicate and demonstrate their strengths through collaboration with colleagues at every level. Facilitators model adult education methods in the seminars and also model collaboration around teaching. In higher education, professional development around teaching and learning is a good match for adult educators' and administrators' goals and a place for collaboration to occur around teaching and learning.

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