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What Theories Underlie the Practice of Faculty Development?

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Do we really need a theory of faculty development? Both faculty developers and those outside the enterprise have asked this question from time to time over the past few years. What I should like to do in this paper is to discuss the question of whether or not a theoretical basis of faculty development is needed and then go on to the topic of what difference a theory could make. Finally, I'll discuss what theories we started with when the faculty development movement emerged in the 1960's, and what kinds of theories we might use in the 1990's.

Do We Need a Theory?

My answer to this question is "not necessarily." I think it is quite possible to do good work in faculty development without a clearly defined theoretical basis. Most people working in the area of faculty development have some repertoire of skills and ideas about teaching they can communicate and help people to develop. In my experience, beginning college teachers need some practical suggestions for their first few classes and for classroom management.

We faculty developers can do a lot of good at a very down-to-earth level. In fact, I have a general theory of faculty development that suggests that in helping faculty members the first step is at the tips, techniques, skills level rather than at any broader theoretical level. My assumption is that if we can

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help faculty members get along in the classroom relatively comfortably with some positive feedback from their students, our colleagues will begin to find teaching intrinsically rewarding and may then be interested and capable of further development.

Once these initial skills have been developed, faculty members may then be interested in thinking about overall issues of educational goals, theories of instruction and learning, characteristics of students that may influence learning and instruction, the social psychology of the classroom, and the relationship of teaching to the broader institutional or cultural context. (Darling and Dewey [1990] report similar stages in the development of teaching assistants.) Art Sullivan (1985) of Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland suggests that these first two stages of faculty development may then be followed by a third stage in which faculty members develop an interest in carrying out research on teaching both for their own benefit and for the benefit of their disciplines (see also Cross and Angelo, 1988).

But even though I've said that theory is not necessary, I would not conclude that it is not useful and valuable. In the first place, I believe that human beings are natural theory builders. We have evolved brains that seek to understand and to find order in complexity; we are naturally curious; we try to make sense out of our experience. College and university faculty members and faculty developers have chosen their vocations because they have a highly developed desire to think about things in some systematic, reasonable way. Thus, we inevitably develop theories. The question is not so much "Should we have theory?" as "Why are theories useful?" and "What distinguishes good theories from theories that are less useful?"

Let me suggest several reasons why it is useful to have theories underlying our practice of faculty and instructional development.

1. The problems we deal with are among the most complex in human experience. The combination of teacher, student, subject matter, and the educational environment offer myriad possibilities of interactions. The human mind is limited in terms of the amount of detail it can hold at any one time. "Working memory" is generally regarded as capable of handling about seven chunks of information at any one time, and there are certainly more than seven different things going on at one time in a classroom. If we are to deal with teaching situations effectively, we need to categorize, to group, to abstract, to simplify the situation so that with a limited number of concepts we can encompass a great deal of what is involved in teaching and in teaching teachers.

2. If we are to be successful in faculty development, we need to be able

to diagnose problems and to help faculty members analyze the situations in which they are teaching. Theories give us an initial start on analysis. They may not be the ultimate answer, since individual situations may differ, but they give us an avenue through which to approach problems.

3. Theories are heuristic. One of the advantages of a theory of faculty development and of teaching and learning is that it provides a basis for thinking of alternative approaches.

So, I'm an advocate of conceptualization and theory. I advocate theory, however, with the proviso that we not become so committed to a theory that it blinds us to those aspects of problems that don't fit. Any concept or theory helps us to focus on things to the exclusion of others; there is always a danger that we'll become over-committed to a particular theory and distort the data to fit the theory we have. We need to use theories with flexibility and openmindedness. Let us be masters of the theory, not slaves to it.

What Theories Did We Start With?

The faculty development movement essentially emerged in the 1960's. Probably the first centers for faculty and instructional development (founded about 1961) were those at The University of Michigan and Michigan State University. At that time there were at least three theoretical approaches that influenced the staff of the centers which sprang up around the country during the 1960's.

The first was *behaviorism.* This was the era in which Skinnerian teaching machines were hailed as being education's equivalent to the industrial revolution. Instructional design based upon the principles of behaviorally defined goals (small learning steps in which students were virtually prevented from making any errors) and continual reinforcement reigned supreme. Thus, many of the original centers used part of their resources to help faculty members develop programmed learning materials. We at Michigan had excellent programs in statistics, anatomy, and foreign languages.

At the same time that behaviorism seemed to have triumphed, the T-Group, or *sensitivity training movement,* was also riding high. Top executives of corporations and educational institutions were flocking to Bethel, Maine or other centers to be trained to be sensitive, and many of the early centers attempted to apply the techniques of sensitivity training and organizational development to the university, working with deans and department chairs as well as with faculty members and student leaders to secure a better organizational climate for learning and teaching.

Between these two extremes was a third approach, a general, rather *eclectic application of principles of learning and individual differences*

derived from research in psychology and education. There was a growing interest in students' learning styles and methods of adapting to them. Student ratings of instruction flourished, partly as a result of pressures from students to have greater input into their own education expressed through the general student movement of the late 60's and early 70's and partly based upon the theory that feedback would result in improvement.

Some centers focused their efforts on one of these three approaches, but most used what seemed practical from each of the three along with the accumulated wisdom of faculty members who had developed effective techniques of teaching.

What of the Future?

As I see it, the dominant theories today deal with students. Our focus has shifted from instructional materials to faculty and now toward students and to the cognitive and motivational characteristics of students which are both the goals of higher education and the attributes that teachers need to consider in planning instructional strategies. But as contrasted with earlier theories of student types or learning styles, our work at the National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (NCRIPTAL) has emphasized what students are doing and what they can learn to do, rather than on an attempt to fit students into categories.

Theories of the future, I think, will focus more than in the past on goals of education going beyond communication of the kind of content knowledge emphasized in our early behavioristic days. Our new theories will need to deal with helping faculty members develop strategies for training students to be more active, mindful learners and thinkers.

I believe that the theories of the future will also deal more with interpersonal and social-psychological aspects of learning. Probably the most popular and effective method of teaching in this era of faculty development is cooperative, or peer, learning. We know that cooperative learning works under most circumstances, but we still lack very good research and theory about when to use it, with what students to use it, how to organize cooperative groups, and how to train both students and teachers to take maximal advantage of peer learning.

In addition to the social-psychology of cooperative learning groups, we need to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of intact classes as groups. *The College Classroom* by Richard Mann, et al. (1970) gave us four case histories of some of the affective aspects of classes as groups, but we have relatively little data on the impact of different aspects of groups in either small or large university classes.

The third area in which I hope we develop theory and conceptualization is with respect to discipline-specific theories of teaching and learning. Most of our research deals with learning in psychology classes and other social sciences, although we have a gradually increasing store of data and research on the natural sciences. We have very little information in the areas of clinical teaching, the teaching of art, the teaching of languages, and the teaching of humanities in general. I hope that the 1990's will see us develop a better research-based set of theories dealing with the aspects of teaching and learning in these disciplines.

Three other theoretical areas are ones which I will not deal with at length, but see as potential areas of advancement. First, the area of motivation and particularly of how we can help both students and teachers to develop stronger intrinsic motivation for learning and teaching. Second, human-technology combinations. What are the appropriate roles of teachers, students, and computers in college courses? How can we facilitate effective integration of technology into education? Finally, how are teaching and learning affected by the total university and college culture? Back in the post-Sputnik days we conducted a number of studies dealing with differing university and college cultures. However, that work has never been tied in theoretically with the research and theory at the level of the course or classroom, or with learning and teaching as it functions at the course or classroom level.

Are these theories of faculty development? Not exactly. Basically, they are theories having to do with the conditions that affect teaching and learning. We assume that if we can help faculty members understand how their strategies of teaching (and their roles in the institution) affect student learning, they will be more effective in using the skills we help them develop. At the same time we may consciously, or unconsciously, use the same theories in helping faculty members develop.

Conclusion

To sum up, I see us having made great progress in thirty years. We have gained a lot of practical wisdom. We are less naive about the ability of any one approach to solve problems of teaching and learning, and we have a substantial body of theory, research, and practice on which to build during the 1990's.

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