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The Professor as Active Learner: Lessons from the New Jersey Master Faculty Program

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The New Jersey Master Faculty Program, developed over the decade of the 1980s by the late Joseph Katz, is a simple yet comprehensive faculty development program that has, since 1988, engaged over 300 New Jersey faculty members at 21 public and private institutions (including two-year, four-year, and graduate campuses) in innovation and reflection on teaching and learning. While the Program is nominally three years old, it builds on a decade of innovation and research by Joseph Katz, Mildred Henry, and others on fifteen campuses across the country. The fruit of these efforts is an approach to faculty development that engages the intellectual and emotional energies of faculty from a wide range of academic disciplines in improving their teaching.

The Program promotes faculty collaboration through classroom observation, student interviews, and collegial reflection. Steve Golin, former Program Director, notes four strengths of the Master Faculty Program: it is ongoing, faculty-owned, decentralized, and transforming for faculty (1990). A fifth strength is its flexibility, which makes the Program "travel well"—so well, in fact, that single campuses and consortia of institutions in at least five

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*The New Jersey Institute for Collegiate Teaching and Learning, which is funded by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education and housed at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey, provides faculty development programs to all of the state's 56 college and university campuses.

states have adopted versions of the Program. This article outlines the basic Program components, briefly describes its history in New Jersey, summarizes the characteristics of particularly successful campus versions of the Program, and looks at the outcomes of those Programs.

Program Objectives and Components

Breaking Down the Walls Around Teaching

Although teaching is the main business of most faculty in higher education, it is often the least "collegial" part of their work: teaching tends to be isolated. Each component of the Master Faculty Program breaks down that isolation. In fact, the whole logic of the Program revolves around this concern. In contrast to many other faculty development approaches that try to get faculty to attend to what "experts" have to say about teaching (valuable though such information might be), the Master Faculty Program encourages faculty to attend to their *own* students, their *own* teaching practice, and the learning outcomes in their *own* classrooms. Participants reflect on their teaching together with a faculty colleague and with students. There are four essential components to the Program.

Classroom Observation

The faculty pair is the basic unit of the Program. Two faculty members agree to pair up for a period of time, ideally a year. For a semester, quarter, or a given number of weeks, one partner observes a class taught by the other; the next semester they switch roles. How often these observations occur depends upon the pair. For intense work, observations might occur every week for ten weeks; the important thing is to observe often enough to become knowledgeable about the class, its content, the students, the papers, the testing, the teacher. Katz and Henry recommend in *Turning Professors into Teachers* (1988) that members in a pair be from different disciplines so that the observations and discussions can focus on the teaching and student learning, rather than on the content of the material.

Student Interviews

Secondly, each of the "buddies" interviews two or three students from the observed class. Students are selected in a variety of ways: some faculty ask for volunteers; others look for diversity in age, race, and gender; still others look for diversity in classroom performance. (Katz and Henry recommend selecting students with a range of learning styles based on results of a learning style inventory [1988, pp. 11-12].) The student interviews, like the

faculty observations, occur regularly over time, usually lasting from 30 minutes to an hour. Questions range from the very general to the specific. Initial interviews include questions such as "Why are you enrolled here?" and "How would you rate your overall experience at this institution?"—such questions are good icebreakers. Over the course of the semester, the faculty member and student might discuss very specific questions about how a particular classroom session was received, about the student's personal motivations, or about the student's strategies for reading, note-taking, or reviewing for the particular class.

Collegial Discussion

The third aspect involves the two faculty meeting together to discuss their data—the observations and the student interviews. They do not meet as neophyte-mentor or even evaluatee-evaluator, but rather as two colleagues who have collected data on a small, applied research project: what happens in this class and how does that promote or retard student learning. The pair's collegial discussions also spill over into the monthly campus group meeting of all the pairs currently involved. On some campuses, former participants or other interested faculty attend these meetings as well. Campus meetings might focus on a particular teaching-learning issue or simply serve as an open forum for teaching concerns.

Coordination

Finally, on each campus a campus coordinator (often two co-coordinators) takes care of the logistics of pairing and scheduling campus group meetings. While the classroom observation, student interviews, and collegial discussion are central to the *process* of learning about teaching from the perspective of the participating faculty members, collegial leadership by the campus coordinators is essential to the success of the *Program* as a whole. In addition to handling the logistics and facilitating participation at the campus level, the coordinators also act as the liaison to the state director, who meets with them monthly to learn about the progress of the Program on the campuses, to discuss current educational ideas, and to plan special events of interest to the campuses.

From State Mandate to Grass Roots: Program Evolution in New Jersey

The New Jersey Master Faculty Program began at the top, through the Department of Higher Education (DHE), which extended a grant to the

Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation to support a state-wide program under the direction of Joseph Katz. DHE invited all campuses in the state to participate, and Katz began working with the academic officers who responded. Academic officers selected two campus coordinators, rewarding them with release time from teaching. They in turn recruited faculty pairs to participate. In the first semester, four institutions joined the project, seven joined the next semester, and seven more the third semester.

Though the Program in New Jersey began with a DHE initiative, it functions equally well if it grows from the bottom up. As Golin (1990) points out, "The pairs are largely autonomous. They chart their own directions. They take only what they can use from the campus coordinator or the state-wide director" (p. 10). In fact, one hallmark of the most vital campus programs is their "grass roots" appeal: they have become faculty-owned, self-perpetuating efforts.

Caldwell College in New Jersey provides an example of grass-roots program development. Mary L. Kelly, Assistant Dean for Faculty Development at Caldwell, learned of the Program and began interviewing students as part of a graduate program at Teachers College, Columbia University. As Kelly points out in her article "A Professor Confesses: Developing Trust in Accounting I" (1989), "I used to think a well-prepared lecture, great transparencies, and quality handouts assured learning .... Since reading Katz and Henry, I wonder if a lecture ever did more than cover the material" (p. 67).

Based on her own experience, Kelly organized a few pairs on her own campus and began having monthly meetings. Caldwell College is in New Jersey and did join that state-wide structure; however, their Program started independently from it and could have survived without it. What it did have was one committed person who was willing to organize the Program on campus.

At least fourteen colleges in five other states—Connecticut, Kansas, Missouri, New York, and Pennsylvania—have adopted some version of the Program. The Program was transported to the Kansas City Regional Council for Higher Education, a consortium of 19 colleges and universities. Steve Golin outlined the Program to representatives from the participating institutions. Additional campuses are experimenting with the Program as a result of the exposure of faculty leaders enrolled as doctoral students in the program in College Teaching and Academic Leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University (where a semester's participation in the colleague pairing and interviewing components of the Program were requirements for the course in College Teaching and Learning in 1988-89).

Successful Campus Programs

Campuses that have developed successful programs (i.e., those that keep growing and involve faculty members in significant teaching engagement) share three main characteristics: (1) a respected and enthusiastic campus coordinator, (2) a supportive administration, and (3) a campus culture that supports pedagogical inquiry.

The Crucial Campus Coordinator

Faculty who have been selected or have volunteered to coordinate the Program on a campus generally value teaching and are usually recognized as good teachers. These qualities, while necessary, are not sufficient in themselves. As one experienced coordinator put it, coordinators must also have the qualities of a "ward politician" in order to recruit and encourage faculty in the first weeks of observing and interviewing. One of the coordinators at Seton Hall University, who received a teaching award in 1990, spoke of her vigilant efforts to recruit new participants, to remind them of the campus meeting, to ask them how their observations and interviews were going.

In contrast, at another college the Program collapsed because the coordinator, although a respected teacher, felt uncomfortable doing the recruiting. He would willingly send out notices, but did not make the extra *personal* appeals for participation. As in fund raising for a favorite cause, one must actively recruit to persuade people to sample the Program.

Administrative Support

Administrative support comes in two forms: money and morale. At some campuses in New Jersey, coordinators are given some released time from teaching, either a course each semester or one course each academic year. On three campuses, participants are paid two or three hundred dollars per semester. On one campus, all participants are given money for research.

Even though money is a measurable form of support and recognition, promotion of the Program by top administrators is often even more important. (It is also more likely to *continue* even in hard economic times, unlike monetary support.) One community college president, who was well-informed about the Program, noted in his address to the faculty that he would be pleased if every department had at least one member participating in this Program. Department chairs, just at the suggestion of the president, felt some obligation at least to discuss the issue of participation with faculty, and

faculty, in turn, knew that the Master Faculty Program was a valued activity, one from which they would probably receive some recognition.

Several New Jersey college and university administrators have publicly praised their local programs. That praise filters back to campuses, once more giving recognition to participants. At one college the dean frequently attended the campus meetings. He came not as an evaluator, but as someone interested in discussing teaching. The personal support of even one administrator can make a crucial difference.

Campus Culture

Although teaching is a valued activity on all campuses, time spent in innovation and reflection on teaching is not always rewarded in the institution. Most of the campuses in New Jersey that have built successful Master Faculty Programs have histories of other faculty development programs. One community college with a successful Master Faculty Program had recently received a grant to support a three-year writing-across-the-curriculum initiative in which 85% of the faculty participated. One university with a successful Program had a grant for a task force on teaching, and had set up a tri-campus teaching center. Although the grant-funded teaching center was not long lived, the university showed its commitment to teaching in setting up its own center just as it joined the state-wide Master Faculty Program.

While most of the campuses where programs have flourished have a history of faculty development efforts, at least one remarkably successful Program developed on a campus with no such history. On that campus, the faculty and at least one administrator were very open to pedagogical inquiry.

Fruits of a Successful Program: Transformed Teaching

Evidence that the New Jersey Master Faculty Program is working comes from two sources. First, the Program was formally evaluated by R. Eugene Rice and Sandra I. Cheldelin (1989) in a report entitled "The Knower and the Known: Making the Connection." In addition, a selection of the 254 essays written by faculty who participated during the first three years of the project was published in *Essays by Coordinators and Participants in the New Jersey Master Faculty Program: Perspectives for Exploring the Ways in Which Faculty and Students Think and Learn*, edited by Patricia Morrissey (1990). Each of these sources documents the Program's effectiveness.

Rice and Cheldelin, who observed all aspects of the Program, read participant essays, conducted a survey, and interviewed students, partici-

pants, and coordinators, concluded that the Program had significant impact on faculty learning. "Although we were unable to quantitatively document what faculty have learned, we found extensive qualitative evidence in the faculty interviews, their essays, from observations in coordinator meetings, and the survey" (Rice & Cheldelin, 1989, p. 21). They found that faculty had

1. developed greater awareness of differences in students' levels of preparation and developmental stages;
2. broadened their repertoire of teaching techniques and become more purposeful in employing them; and
3. found new enthusiasm for the practice of teaching.

Katz and Henry (1988) note that, "[p]erhaps the most important result induced by our approach is an impetus to help students to move from being *passive* to being *active*" (p. 16). Faculty essays confirm that as faculty become more actively involved in their teaching, students are encouraged to become more active in their learning. Susan Crane of the Rutgers (New Brunswick) English Department writes about the problem of student passivity, particularly in large lecture classes. Although she provides no solutions to the problem, she notes, ". . . a professor might help students break out of their passivity, showing them where it could hamper their development" (Morrissey, 1990, p. 53).

Joan Capps of Raritan Valley Community College, at the suggestion of her observer, Stan Kopit, a teacher of theater, confronted student passivity directly by requiring students to solve a trigonometric identity in small groups. "The success of the team effort was amazing since I had mistakenly convinced myself that I was indispensable as a 'performer!' Not only was the solution that the team worked on presented, but many 'individualists' decided to do the problem in a different way" (Morrissey, 1990, p. 55).

In essay after essay professors from all types of schools write about involving students more. Jean Warner of Rider College, who had relied almost exclusively on lecturing, committed herself to a new format: "Next semester I will abandon lecturing the first four weeks. Instead I plan to involve the students actively in their learning by asking them to give oral presentations on topics covered in each chapter. I will also try some case studies and discussion groups" (Morrissey, 1990, p. 98).

Katz and Henry (1988) warn, however, that changes such as those noted above will not happen quickly. In their experience faculty made the most changes in the third semester of observing and interviewing. Rice and Cheldelin (1989) note that the Master Faculty Program multiplies when it is

implemented as part of a more inclusive multi-dimensional approach to faculty development.

Conclusion

A very important lesson emerges from the three years' experience of the New Jersey Master Faculty Program: faculty development efforts can have a very real impact on teaching and learning. As we all know, there are no quick fixes to improve the quality of postsecondary teaching. It is particularly encouraging, therefore, to see the willingness of faculty members on all types of campuses to engage actively and reflectively in a process that over time has been shown to enhance teaching efforts.

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