

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

To Improve the Academy

Professional and Organizational Development
Network in Higher Education

1990

The Freshman Seminar and Faculty Development

James P. Doyle

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Doyle, James P., "The Freshman Seminar and Faculty Development" (1990). *To Improve the Academy*. 194.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/194>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in To Improve the Academy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Freshman Seminar and Faculty Development

James P. Doyle

Lyndon State College

A major concern in today's postsecondary institutions is the apparent lack of student preparation for college-level work. Indeed, students are often characterized as being "unskilled," even in basic competencies, with the chilling observation that ours is "a nation at risk."

As institutions, especially state ones, address the compelling academic needs of today's students, focus is usually directed on diagnostic testing and skills support, including remediation, tutoring, writing centers, mathematics labs, computer-aided instruction, and a host of other resources that address the individual learning styles and needs of a varied student population within the context of an institution's mission and goals. Such programs depend, unfortunately, on financial backing rarely available in today's competitive academic establishment.

If the current college student, whether "traditional" or "nontraditional," is different from yesterday's ideal, who arrived at college ready to engage in the dialogue that constitutes higher education, faculty in most cases continue to be what they have always been: discipline-based or content-oriented, often without benefit of teacher training, but supported and reinforced by professional affiliations and power structures that reward professional advancement in "the field." While the need for faculty development within our changing academic culture is acknowledged and even supported (usually for retention purposes), models for faculty development are more often than not based on traditional supports, including sabbaticals, professional conferences, discipline-based workshops, interdisciplinary experiences, release time, and improved secretarial aid. Such faculty support services, in fact, dominate the way the academy conceptualizes and implements faculty development. Traditional structures, in other words, are put into new configurations, yet the

outcomes, far from specifically addressing the current needs of students, tend to be faculty-and discipline-centered. Even though faculty readily acknowledge the changing profiles of students and the need for faculty development to meet the challenge of underprepared students, ingrained notions of power, status, privilege, reward, and professionalism limit the possibilities of aligning learning and teaching styles. If faculty feel beleaguered by new and even threatening circumstances and audiences, then the profession itself must articulate and support innovative and appropriate faculty development concepts that truly address the pressing needs of today's students and teachers alike.

The purpose of this experience-based essay is to describe one such student/faculty development project, the Freshman Seminar, that was initiated as an experiment in a traditional academic setting and that had an unexpected but profound effect on the faculty involved. Even though this study is limited in scope and the process is specific to the people involved and to our college's academic culture, it is hoped that the experience of growth we underwent has a universal quality, suggestive of those painful but exhilarating transitions that must characterize today's teaching as it attempts to redefine its goals and methods. The seminar experience not only challenged the image of the classroom professional, carrying text, shuffling notes, and balancing behind a podium, but forced faculty—in some cases for the first time in long, dedicated careers—to confront the deeply personal assumptions through which they had envisioned their roles as teachers. If the initial hope was “development,” the unintended result was transformation, development with an inner dimension, a growth not of an expert in a particular discipline, but of a responsive teaching person who was forced to let go of some old and hallowed ways of seeing and doing. As we moved from performing our usual professional tasks to embracing our newly-found vocations, the process not only revealed the vulnerability associated with the loss of traditional definitions of who we are as professionals and what roles we play in the education of students, but it gave us a renewed sense of what it is that we are actually about in the classroom, of why we are ultimately there. The experience, frankly, was agonizing for those of us who, after twenty years of discipline-dictated teaching, found ourselves unmasked in a new and utterly strange place. In retrospect, that pain symbolized an end and, most importantly, a new beginning.

Addressing the Needs of Students

Initially, no mention of faculty development per se intruded itself into planning discussions of a Freshman Seminar at Lyndon State College, a four-year, liberal arts/preprofessional institution of nine-hundred students, located in the northeast corner of Vermont, the most rural, economically deprived, and isolated area of the state. The original intent of the seminar, in fact, was to address in a creative way the academic, social, and personal needs of a mixed population of today's students, many of whom are first-generation college enrollees. Our plan was to help students negotiate successfully within a new and sometimes threatening environment, thereby minimizing the risks often involved in the awkward transition from high school or the labor force to college. Through the Freshman Seminar, a three-credit course elected as part of the regular academic schedule, students would learn "survival skills," from note-taking and time-management to college regulations and the use of academic support services. The erroneous assumption was that students alone had to change and grow if they were to be successful; faculty, of course, would remain what they have always been: vast reservoirs of information and questions.

After the creation of a Faculty/Staff/Student Seminar Committee (a radical idea in a college that had maintained clear and rigid distances among these groups), members made a cursory reading of current literature on freshman seminars and glanced at possible models. Five self-selected professors from a variety of disciplines (with a variety of personalities and idiosyncrasies) volunteered, along with two staff members, to attend a four-day national conference/training session on freshman seminars. Of course, our motley crew expected that model syllabi and curricula would be handed out; that we would listen to intense and probing lectures on fifty techniques to create the super student; that we would fill countless spiral notebooks with instructions and strategies; and that we would feel overwhelmed by being students again, thirsty for knowledge and practical applications. Thus, all expectations centered on "content." What we got instead was "process." Few of us had ever heard the word "process," nor had we been subjected to "get-acquainted games," "interpersonal encounters," or "time-management exercises." Slow learners, we kept waiting for the hard-core lectures to begin. They did not, and we squirmed: without lots of data, we had nothing to teach.

This initial experience of disappointment, which later turned into collective panic or hysteria, depending on the topic at hand, is emblematic of our progress during that summer of training and planning when we met

every two weeks for three or four hours. We had expected new content, yet another field to plough, but training sessions gave scant attention to students—or so we thought. The workshop emphasized how we as teachers perceive the world, each other, ourselves, and our students; how we talk to and behave with each other; and how we articulate and embody our values through behavior. Such thoughts seemed to have little relevance to English 101 or Elementary Functions, but if skeptical and somewhat lost in a new language, we were at least attentive.

What we slowly discerned, however, especially as we met frequently just prior to the fall semester to formulate common goals and course outlines, is that none of us knew what we were doing, what was actually expected of us, or how we were going to survive come the first week of September. It was then, when we felt most dispossessed, that we acknowledged our need for a new kind of development, something with a minimum of “content” and a maximum of “process.” We were, in effect, out of control, or to borrow some apt words from Matthew Arnold, we found ourselves “Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/The other powerless to be born....” Without the support and confidence that grows out of a deep knowledge of one’s discipline, we were virtually lost, but hesitant to admit it. Somehow, our umbrellas, briefcases, lecture outlines, and bibliographies seemed beside the point. The only surety, and a fragile one at that, was the mutual concern for each other that had begun to develop when we learned there would be no lectures and no shortcuts. We were on our own. None of us would have predicted this bonding, especially among such radically different people, long separated by departmental barriers and institutional hierarchies. The scientist in the group, for instance, known for his command of facts and his dispassionate approach to professional life, began to talk openly about the intimidation and pain he felt when talking about teaching and classroom management. In contrast, the only woman in the group delighted in the rare opportunity to talk about “women’s ways of knowing” and what constitutes “knowledge” from a feminist perspective. When going to a baseball game was suggested as a group event, however, she was there, beyond gender, cheering with “the boys.” She often suggested supplemental readings on women’s issues; the men read them and had their eyes opened. With this new willingness to listen and explore, we learned about each other and from each other. Somehow a professional working group had become a support group. Who would have thought that desirable or even possible? We were bewildered. We were friends.

From Student Development to Faculty Development

It was inside this context that we Freshman Seminar instructors really began to understand what was happening. Midst nervous laughter and manic chatter, we began to abandon our professional postures and masks, our well-worn control devices. If the nakedness was devastating, it was at least mutual; if still unprepared, we were nevertheless a unified group, somehow akin, oddly enough, to a classroom of students. If thrown onto an alien landscape, we at least began to orient ourselves, mostly by sharing or delegating the tasks at hand. One person, for example, had expertise in note-taking, so we sat back, listened, took notes, and asked questions. Another had expertise in exploring sex/gender roles in college environments. Another knew “get acquainted games,” and we memorized the rules, put on our sneakers (some of us had to buy them for the occasion), and tried the games out in the campus parking lot. We felt like fools, but grateful ones. We had something to do.

Thus, being out of our respective fields, but expected to perform successfully in a new arena, made us turn away from ourselves, from our usual sources of ideas, to each other – a radical concept for those of us who had long enjoyed the sublime and protective isolation that characterizes academic specialization. In addition, we were breaking down those well-established and often unscalable walls between faculty and staff because we acknowledged a common need. We had become, in other words, self-reflective and self-conscious, not about what we knew, but about what we could not do alone. The meteorologist and the English professor were finally learning from each other. The transformation had begun.

The need to reach consensus on possible topics, everything from “Assessing Personal and Academic Goals” to “The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator,” dominated our frequent meetings to articulate individual syllabi and common goals. We passed around outlines, made suggestions, shared ideas about possible guest lecturers, and agreed on a grading system. The exchange provided a rich chance to clarify our attitudes and objectives with immediate and caring feedback. None of us, however, felt a sense of individual ownership about the seminar. We had, in fact, created a course together, an experience few had enjoyed before.

A New Teaching Experience

Once the students arrived, twenty to a section, and once we had selected student assistants to facilitate class interaction, the true panic really began. But with it commenced the next stage of what we realized was to be, to our horror, a semester-long, painful process of growth. If five faculty and two staff had evolved into a complex but single organism, we were now asked to reach out to incorporate a hundred new faces and to reiterate in the classroom our budding sense of mutual need and empowerment. The immediate temptation was to fall back on the old patterns of behavior, on the comforts of control and domination, on lectures, on exhortations, on questions for which we already had the answers. In effect, the challenge was to avoid creating the imperious but traditional distance between teacher and student.

Because one of the faculty, a psychologist, had prior experience in “process” courses, she suggested that from the start we use the classroom as a metaphor for what was to follow. That meant, alas, no fixed focus point, no desk, certainly no podium. The classroom was to become an energized, mutual space, without power definition. We all concurred and arranged our classes into somewhat haphazard circles. For some of us, too, this would be our first teaching experience without a suit and tie, and we felt especially ridiculous in our Converse hightop sneakers! We also gave up the professorial tone and sonorous periodic sentences that so often had shaped our discourse with students.

If used to old props, and we were, the first such class can be unnerving. It was. The shrieks, moans, catatonic grimaces, and bitten nails at our meeting after the first class were hard to ignore. But no one had passed out; no one had run out the door with a feigned illness. We had stood our new ground. And if we spent more time gabbing about the class and our inadequacies than the class itself took, then we at least had ample chance to support each other’s fledgling efforts. We were exhausted, apprehensive, and, if relieved that the first class was over, the thought of thirty-four more classes filled us with fear and trembling. Some even felt nausea! At the same time and in the same breath, there was an electricity, a vibrancy, an animation in that meeting room. We were exhilarated, not because we had survived (though that must have been a factor), but because we were yet again openly admitting how threatened and intimidated we were and how uncanny the classes had been with their emphases on mutuality, intimacy, and nurture. We were actually talking about tone, about what our voices said without the cadences of the usual lecture, about the tone signaled by our bodies. We did not need to make rhetorical gestures that

bespoke the import of the lecture. Our body language, arms open wide, suggested common need; hands reached out to include, to embrace, and, without arrogance or pretension, to support and even to heal. We were no longer the same people. We were “developing” in ways few would have predicted.

Expanding the Classroom

The semester was a long one as the dialectic between old and new ways of teaching worked itself out. While we had originally created the seminar to address the need for academic and social skills, and although such learning remained central in the endeavor, other concerns soon emerged as students realized that unlike other classrooms, those of the Freshman Seminar were open in format, that personal concerns were just as valid as academic, that, in fact, academic and personal issues are inextricably bound, that academic success is dependent on personal success.

The faculty members soon noticed that classroom time, while intense, was not enough: our students needed to talk, sometimes in the group, but oftentimes in our offices. Indeed, office hours expanded; doors remained open, literally and figuratively. And if students were initially reluctant to say why they were “visiting,” as the semester went by, they became especially revealing about homesickness, fears of failure, estrangement from family and familiar values, and life in the dorms. Many expressed painful anxiety over their new sexual freedom. If students in our discipline-based classes saw us about essay topics, for example, or recommended readings and clarification of the lectures or discussions, these seminar students came just to talk, to connect, for guidance. It is not that we became parents or “buddies”; but we did become mentors. Students wanted access and any kind of supportive contact. For the first time, some of us saw the poignancy of students’ needs; we saw their openness and sincerity, their constant fear of betrayal. So much of what we saw had always been there, but until we faculty had ourselves felt it as we confronted our own fears of failure in the seminar, we could not see. If we did see, we often brushed students aside. We stayed “pleasant but distant.” In the seminar, unlike the traditional classroom where the acquisition of knowledge dominates the relationship, student need was primary, and they sensed the fact at once.

We also noticed that once a bond had developed among class members, including the instructor, the group itself became the major source of support. That is, unlike the typical classes where students often compete

for grades, status, or acknowledgment, the seminar encouraged commonality, each helping each. One student, for instance, was having difficulty with some memory techniques we were trying; immediately, another student — not the teacher — said, “See me after class, and I’ll give you a hand.” If faculty had not shared their needs in preparing the classes and during weekly meetings, there would probably not have been such mutual empowerment of students by students. Faculty development promoted student development; faculty behavior formed student behavior. We were all learning together.

Sharing Our Lives

Midpoint in the semester, instructors were exhausted and a bit on edge. We had originally agreed, midst hecklers and skeptics, that some social event, maybe a canoe trip or a hike, would be a required part of the course. For those of us who had never been in a canoe and had no desire to do so or who felt that they had done enough by purchasing sneakers, having the class over to our homes for a dinner seemed the easiest way out of a somewhat annoying course component. When students later evaluated the course, however, much to our surprise (and to the overnight campers’ chagrin), those rambunctious dinners ranked highest among course activities. The occasion got some of us to clean up our books, journals, and strewn papers. Students arrived precisely on time and as a group, almost as though waiting outside for the safety of numbers. Instructors were as nervous as they (“What about the peeling wallpaper in the bathroom? Do you think they’ll notice?”). Those of us who are parents warned our children to BEHAVE.

If the dinner pleased the students, it had a similar effect on the teachers. The charged atmosphere of each home had a universal quality about it: students seemed everywhere, playing on kids’ video games, building fantastic shapes with “lego” parts, tossing the endless bowls of salad, or poking around the house and its bookcases. Without being overly dramatic, it was a touching evening of watching the students try to figure out who the teacher was, of meeting partners and children, of stroking pets, of helping themselves to the refrigerator. They even insisted, to our delight, on doing the dishes. They brought apples, a candle, a card, a heart-shaped decoration. When it was over, the real gift had been themselves. Twenty “Thank You” notes arrived in due course. The evening was a success.

It was also a turning point in the course and in what had become our college’s first faculty development project. Once students had a concrete

sense of who we were, where we lived (really, how we lived), knew that we were indeed persons with lives outside the college, people who share basic needs, who have constructed selves, relationships, homes, and families, they talked and listened with a new attention. In some indefinable way, the evening gave both teachers and students an authority, a credibility based on intimacy, trust, and mutual respect. There was no longer a need for the power of distance. When student essays later arrived on this “social component,” they contained the best and most moving writing of the semester. Students rose to the occasion.

Living Our Values

The dinner party has thus become an image, a lasting one, through which the seminar is held in consciousness – and in memory – for students and instructors. Although classes ended, relationships did not. Students still drop by, inquire about our children, or wave across the campus pond. The faculty group also continues meeting to analyze the project, to hone some elements, and to support the new and likewise threatened colleagues who have volunteered to teach the “New Student Seminar” that has become an established part of the curriculum and, we hope, an archetype for what teaching today’s students must include.

We were engaged in the lives of our students and in the lives of other faculty. Those connections made a dramatic difference in the quality of our lives. Student performance rates, in addition, suggest, even at this stage, the success of the course; so do preliminary retention figures. What statistics can not measure or express, however, is what the Freshman Seminar did to faculty development, to the buried lives behind professional demeanor. We were, in effect, no longer dealing with students or other faculty, but with persons, persons who had CONTEXTS. As we joined together at the conference table or in the classroom, we saw each other in a new light, as persons who are more important than knowledge, though none of us, of course, would marginalize our beloved disciplines. We now see, though, that knowledge in whatever field must serve to enhance our lives and those of our students. By initiating the Freshman Seminar, we made a subtle but important statement about education in general and about teaching effectiveness in particular: that our task is ultimately a moral one; that our deepest values are expressed in our attitudes toward students, toward colleagues, toward ourselves. We also learned that what we did in the seminar, the attitudes we embraced, spills over into other classes, into our behavior, into the tones of our voices. If

education implies change, we learned it also means a growth in caring, not just growth in knowledge.