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Proposal

Title: Teaching4Learning@Unipd: Promoting Faculty Development and Organizational Development and Change

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges of implementing a faculty development program that fosters active learning with a focus on the role of the organizational culture in the change process. The context is the University of Padova which has been promoting a faculty development since 2016. This paper highlights how the university's historical, institutional and national settings influence how teaching and learning is conceptualized and practiced. In response, implementing an innovative faculty development program requires a multi-prong approach, top down and bottom up, that involves inspiring the faculty, developing institutional buy-in, acquiring monetary investment, and promotion beyond the confines of the university.

Key words: Faculty Development, Organization Development, Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Organizational Change.

Teaching4Learning@Unipd: History, Framework and Impact

Teaching4Learning@Unipd, a faculty development program, at the University of Padova started in early 2016, and it represented the first university wide effort in almost 800 years to foster innovative teaching in the classroom. This effort in a large part was in response to the European Commission (2011; 2013) recommendation that encouraged university faculty to experiment with new teaching strategies, student-centered teaching, de-privatize teaching, and encourage the development of faculty learning communities. The program initially involved faculty who self-selected to participate and who had significant inclination to improve their approach to teaching and learning.

The goal of the program is to introduce active learning teaching practices reflecting a model or “an Italian way” based on contemporary research of effective practices for student centered teaching and learning. Despite the high interest among individual faculty in the program, it became apparent overtime that equal attention had to be given to organizational change to help facilitate the implementation of innovative practices. This meant putting teaching and learning at the centre of reflective discussions and creating a culture for change.

Since 2016, 375 faculty have participated in the faculty development program. A consequence of this experience has been anecdotal responses by faculty about the training. A constant among these

responses has been that most faculty found the training to be impactful in how they thought about teaching and learning. However, despite the enthusiasm for the program, there was also a general sense that implementing new teaching practices was going to be difficult, particularly concerning the institutional emphasis on covering content, which privileges a passive transmission teaching model and formal examinations. The challenge of supporting faculty in this process involves identifying related implications of fostering innovative teaching and learning and the role the organization/institutional culture plays in the development process. This emphasis on a systems approach to change is at the center of this paper, that understanding how organizationally and individually innovative teaching practices can be implemented within a particular cultural content.

To understand process of change the paper is organized around a series of topics, beginning with a discussion of how faculty learn, the power of a community of practice, organizational development and change, ending with a discussion on the reciprocal relationship between faculty development and organizational change.

How Faculty Learn: The Power of Faculty Learning Communities

Scholarship concerning faculty development has predominantly been grounded in constructivist and situated learning theories. What these two domains share is an assumption “that (human) knowledge is acquired through a process of active construction” (Fox, 2001, p. 24) in relation to others. Along with a constructivist framework, situated learning theory offers insight into how a novice learner becomes more expert (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From this perspective, faculty build new knowledge and understanding through gradual participation (informally or formally) in an academic community (e.g., teacher study groups; faculty learning communities) committed to innovative teaching and learning (Cornelius-White, 2007; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). These theories also bring the significance of learning contexts to the fore, especially the importance of creating more authentic learning environments/communities within the classroom.

A particular method that is central to fostering change is the creation of purposeful communities of practice among faculty that collaboratively exchange practices and support each other within the workplace. They are seen as “a unique combination of three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues, a community of people who care about this domain and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain” (Wenger, 1998, p. 15). The aim of a faculty learning community (FLC) is to improve teaching, promote scholarship development, and build community by engaging with peers, with emphasis on sharing and practicing teaching and learning activities within a small group (Adams & Mix, 2014; Cox, 2004, 2013; Fedeli & Taylor, 2016; Stanley, 2011).

The following characteristics are relatively consistent across different manifestations of FLC’s, they: are generally small groups of faculty volunteers (8-15); establish a symmetrical relationship among participants; and collaboratively plan meeting agendas. Group norms in the FLCs are often interdisciplinary and group members are diverse in rank. FLCs meet regularly over sustained period of time during the academic year. The process is seen as “members moving towards a de-privatization

of teaching” through an open sharing of their practice alongside recognizing the “social, emotional, and personal nature of sharing such work” (Adams and Mix, 2014, p. 41). Structurally, they can range from independent organic entities that emerge in response to a particular issue, self-manage, and dissolve over time, to institutionally established and organized, with outside persons involved as facilitators and leaders. They operate from the assumption that such groups are essential for change because they provide the ideal setting for faculty to “reinvent themselves as educators” in concert with their peers, “experimenting, reflecting, discussing, and assessing” their conceptions and approaches to teaching and learning (Sturko & Gregson, 2009, p. 36).

At present, the major research findings, although tentative at best, emerge from a variety of case studies that have had “multiple benefits for faculty members including increased feelings of support within the university setting, increasing the sense of professional identity, higher rates of achieving tenure, as well as increased skill and knowledge base” (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2014, p. 36). As a result, faculty often become more open-minded and have a greater appreciation for ambiguity; some may become more civic-minded (Cox, 2004), and many leave with greater competence and confidence concerning teaching skills (Adams & Mix, 2014; Daly, 2011).

Despite the power of purposeful communities of practice in fostering faculty development they are limited when not recognizing the larger organizational context and how it inhibits and fosters the impact of these learning communities on promoting innovative change. More specifically these FLC’s do not operate in a vacuum. They have a reciprocal relationship with the larger institution and need constant support publicly and through policy development to ensure their short and long term success. In response to this issue, the next section provides an overview of organization development and organizational change, along with its role in promoting faculty development at the University of Padova.

Organizational Development and Change

Organizational development (OD) contributes significantly to the architecture of Teaching4Learning@Unipd and the role it plays in fostering innovative teaching and learning. That said, the related scholarship encompasses many conceptual and operational definitions. “Organizational development is an effort, planned, organization wide and managed from the top, to increase the organization effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization’s processes, using behavioural sciences knowledge” (Beckhard, 1969, p. 9). More specifically, it involves planning informed action, and interventions that improve the organization and people in terms of competence and knowledge. Through this lens, faculty development can be seen as an OD process, because it promotes the growth of the organization, it reflects a series of interventions driven by knowledge management and it is based on the need for a changed culture of teaching and learning throughout the higher education institution. Therefore, organizationally, faculty development can be seen as means to both foster change in practice both among individual faculty but as well within the how the overall institutions views and conceptualizes teaching and learning.

Another fundamental concept of OD is that it is an interdisciplinary field that draws on different contributions from business to organizational psychology and human resources management to communication, sociology, and education (Anderson, 2016). This aspect is crucial in recognizing the complex nature of a university's organizational structure, especially in Italy. UNIPD exemplifies this complexity; established in 1222, its teaching and learning traditions are conservative and deeply rooted. As discussed earlier, its academic culture affirms a strong hierarchical relationship between faculty and students, reflective of both Italian higher education ideology and its larger society. This includes faculty emphasizing course content as true or privileged knowledge, versus students' experience, standpoints, and contributions, which are generally considered less important or relevant knowledge. UNIPD's scale amplifies its complexity: it is one of the largest universities in Italy, with 62,000 students, about 2500 instructors, and 32 academic departments, all of which feature their own different approaches to teaching, change, and interest in pedagogical innovation beyond the traditional didactic paradigm. From an organizational standpoint, each department also has a long history of limited interactions among other departments; they mostly function like isolated silos, even if they share a disciplinary mission and/or students.

Organizational change is the explicit purpose of most OD work (Anderson 2016). These OD practices shift from individual to group as they increase effectiveness, which in university contexts means developing a single instructor to groups of faculty to, ultimately, the entire university organization. This also means that such change has to be rooted in the culture of the organization, including its mission and its unique rules. It also means that implementing innovative in practice cannot just be an instrumental endeavour, but it has to engage/confront faculty values and beliefs about teaching and learning which are central to the change process. In response, an OD framework, titled emerging change, includes a range of tools, techniques, and processes that prepare the organization for change, plan strategic courses of action, managing the change process, and adapting it over time for the most effective outcomes (Anderson, 2016; Bierema, 2014).

This approach of emerging change is more focused on seeing the organization as the study of the processes related to organizational development and connected with individuals and groups who are living in the context. It is also more indicative of the institutional change process at UNIPD. This perspective deals "with what we experience in organization as we make sense of our activities and the actions of others" (Anderson, 2016, p. 87). The approach respects the diversity of experiences and the ambiguity of the different meanings. The roles of people are negotiated and not predetermined. This means that decisions are made on the basis of both facts and unfolding activities, and they take different factors and meanings into consideration. In the UNIPD case, for example, promoting faculty development for innovative teaching can be considered an interpretative process that characterizes the life of the university and a way to develop the institution. Decisions are taken on the basis of the results of the process, requests of faculty, and competing interest in teaching for change in higher education at the local, national and international level.

A central factor in this approach is that individual and organization respond differently to the changes. This implies that the change is not only from a top-down direction but also from a bottom-up. Faculty

voices are considered important for change; as Olson & Eoyang (2001) assert, “the role of the change agent is to use and understanding of evolving patterns to effect the self-organization path, to observe how the system responds and to design next intervention” (p. 16). This approach best captures Teaching4Learning@Unipd, recognizing the need to continuously involve faculty at various levels in the change process as actors and to listen to their voices in order to promote change. For example, in October of 2018 UNIPD a new training was begun for a selected group of faculty, referred to as change agents. These faculty, across the disciplines, represented 16 departments who were committed to fostering change and innovative teaching in their own department as organizational actors and teaching consultants.

Discussion: The Role of Faculty Development in Promoting

Organizational Change

Recognizing the role of faculty development in promoting change (individually, organizationally), the following discussion highlights areas that emerge in the change and innovation process in relationship to the three units of analysis: the individual, the community of practice (FLC), and the organization.

Scaffolding Participation: Individual to the Organization

Scaffolding, sequenced interventions from less to more difficult, participation began at the individual level by first analysing the needs of faculty concerning teaching and learning. Faculty were seen as the promoter of change in the university. The starting phase at UNIPD was small and incremental involving a group of 30 volunteer instructors who had a desire of knowing more how to innovate teaching in a more participatory way. It was a unique initiative co-financed by the School of Engineering. Despite their efforts, initiatives like this often tend to promote few changes institutionally and are likely to remain isolated events when lacking interest and support from the top administration. Furthermore, some contexts at the national and broader European level also highlighted the importance of rewards and certification for faculty teaching. In response to this, UNIPD started to offer in-house certification through open badges for tenured faculty who voluntarily participated in training.

Looking at this process through an organizational development lens, the change has also been very slow and incremental even though the program was implicitly supported. However, in approaching this most recent academic year, 2018-2019, a large change organizationally didn't begin to take place until there was a symbolic commitment from the university, that was reflected in a million Euros to be shared among departments for projects related to teaching innovation. This provision led to multiple planned trainings for a variety of different departments. Also, it began to change the way many mid-level managers (Department heads, program directors) began to perceive the import of faculty development. This financial support was a clear sign of approval by the upper administration, and people become more confident in promoting training and involving themselves in the process. Although, the monetary contribution itself was not enough to maintain a momentum of change.

Engaging Informal Networks through Communities of Practice

Since the beginning, the aim of Teaching4Learning@Unipd faculty development program was to develop two different and connected dimensions: the active teaching strategies and methods and the creation of a community of practice among faculty as a means to promote changes. At UNIPD, the community of practice that arise informally was an output of the training and was considered a means to foster innovation in the classroom and encouraged collaboration among departments.

One of the most important factors was the birth of informal networking as the result of the workshops. This included voices of the instructors both within departments and outside, sharing of practices and resources (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002), but also a lot of “corridor voices” that disseminated the good results of the training and created a sort of movement for innovation in teaching. The community of practice approach helps to remove barriers for change and to build authentic relationships that make change possible through the connections, networking and consolidation of new and possible organizational strategies, seeing the change as a continuous process rather than a specific project. (Anderson, 2016).

Merging Predictable and Unpredictable Organizational Change

The process of faculty and organization development at UNIPD offers several distinct inputs for changes, as we stated before, at individual, at group and community of practices level and at organizational level. Some of the strategies were planned, other arose along the way and come out from conversations among colleagues, from the sharing of information, and from interpretations of new insights that the change process caused. Both predictable and unpredictable changes are linked in the faculty development initiatives and policies. As previously discussed the change at the beginning of 2016 was slow and planned through regular meetings to discuss the impact of the training. However, much of the change seems to be a product of unplanned and unpredictable events, which were a consequence of relationships of various factors, internal and external, within the organization (Todnem By, 2005; Myers, Hulks, & Wiggins, 2012). For example, in November 2018 UNIPD went through a new process of quality insurance including a thorough inspection at all organizational levels with a specific focus on both research and teaching. As a result, faculty development activities were highlighted as having potentially having significant impact on the promotion innovative practices.

This unplanned approach rejects the belief that systems can be completely controlled. This view sees the organization as ever-evolving created by interactions of relevant agents (Olson & Eoyang, 2001). This approach of working from the top as well from the bottom or local level aims to anchor these new approaches to teaching within the traditional culture of the institution, motivating the need for further change and innovating the policy and the roles of the actors involved in the process.

Lessons learned and implications for next steps

In closing this discussion, it is important to reflect on future actions based on what has been learned from this initial experience of fostering faculty development. Three significant actions have been identified as a result of this program. First, it is an effort to document the impact of faculty development program on student satisfaction, grades, attendance, and level of preparation and instructors' teaching and use of new techniques. Second, there is a need to move beyond the incremental efforts so far, to a large-scale plan for faculty development at UNIPD is needed. As Anderson (2016) states: "Three characteristics of contemporary large-scale interventions are (1) the involvement of a variety of participants, (2) greater timeline of the intervention and (3) a change of the consultant's role" (p.298). In this case, a necessary intervention would be to reinvent the faculty role where there is a greater expectation of faculty for service and development of the teaching innovation. Also, this second action needs to be explored at the administrative level where successful faculty could be rewarded, not just for research, in terms of career and professional development. The third critical future action for promoting change should involve de-privatizing teaching. More specifically, this means requiring faculty to open their classrooms to their peers, sharing teaching practices also through peer observation and participation in faculty learning communities. Peer observation has been associated with improved practice and greater involvement among faculty about innovative teaching (Gosling, D. 2014; Jensen, & Aiyegbayo, 2011; Kohut, Burnap & Yon, 2007; McGrath, Monsen, 2015). Finally, sharing models for and studies of faculty development programs with peer universities, both nationally and internationally, helps promote change within the broader field of faculty development and at participating universities. The University of Padova is member of the European University Association, which facilitates cross-country collaboration among academic program managers and develops European policies and recommendations, guidelines and influencing decision makers at European, national and regional levels.

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