

Workshop Proposal on Education

Session Title: Focusing Faculty Development on Student Learning

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Abstract

How can students be actively engaged in classrooms? How can faculty learn to evaluate teaching techniques based on their underlying assumptions about learning in order to determine whether a strategy is appropriate? What approaches to faculty development are available to help faculty critically question their own teaching in order to make informed choices about how to increase the potential for student learning? How can teams of faculty meet together regularly with the purpose of sharing successes, challenges and ideas in order to help each other grow as educators. This hands-on workshop describes a learning-centered approach to faculty development developed at Iowa State University that has been implemented to answer these questions.

Intended audiences: Program is appropriate for faculty, administrators, and faculty development coordinators.

Requested format: 90 minute workshop

Audiovisual needs: overhead projector and flip chart

Narrative Proposal: Focusing Faculty Development on Student Learning

Topic of the Session and Relevance to Conference Theme:

Focusing on the issues of student learning and effective teaching strategies that can be used to bring about improved student learning, our session addresses how faculty can: 1) engage students in thinking, 2) develop a “toolbox” of teaching methods and 3) learn to evaluate the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of teaching methods. In addition, our session will address the critical importance of providing instructors the opportunity to build professional learning communities where educators from diverse disciplines can come together to discuss ways to improve student learning.

To achieve these aims, we will be describing and asking participants to experience, firsthand, an approach to faculty development that we have developed at Iowa State University – Project LEA/RN™ (Learning Enhancement Action/ Resource Network). The approach has been successfully implemented for eight years on our own campus. Additionally, the project has established ongoing relationships with Kansas State University, Cedarville University, Iowa’s community colleges, and Alabama A&M University. For the session we are proposing to deliver at the Hawaii International Conference on Education, we will highlight how the model has emerged and been sustained at Iowa State University.

Why the title “focusing faculty development on student learning?” We have found that an effective place to begin efforts to improve student learning is first to provide faculty the opportunity to experience a non-traditional classroom. An array of learning opportunities have recently been developed for students – including active learning, learning communities, experiential learning, etc. But such opportunities for students are not likely to produce desired results if faculty are not first given the opportunity to apply new methods and practice using them in the classroom.

Project LEA/RN™ is a process that centers on helping teams of faculty build knowledge about learning and learners. The project provides the structure for faculty to meet regularly with the purpose of sharing successes, challenges and ideas in order to help each grow as an educator. The program offers instructors the opportunity to receive feedback from colleagues and facilitators during the implementation of new learning strategies in order to make their teaching even more effective for improving student learning.

Our model provides for ongoing learning experiences and intense reflection about learning and teaching. Its structures recognize first that learning takes time and second, that with a deep understanding of learning, there is a higher probability that faculty will maintain changes in teaching methods and curriculum development.

Project LEA/RN™ is both theoretical and practical in nature. While it provides faculty with specific strategies, it is not simply a technique program. That is, while Project LEA/RN™ offers faculty a wealth of practical strategies it does so within a broader context of helping faculty understand the learning theory underlying the strategies. These beliefs are implemented in the key structures of Project LEA/RN™:

- Volunteer faculty participation;
- Bi-weekly, large group meetings to learn about learning and teaching, experience and practice strategies, discuss progress and results, receive feedback and support;
- Interim base group meetings to: study literature about learning and teaching, discuss effects of new strategies, analyze questions and assessments, and provide feedback and support;
- Use of experiential, problem-based learning and adult learning theory in the large group learning sessions to model effective teaching and to process experiences; and
- Observation in classrooms, application of learning with feedback from and interaction with a learning partner.

Project LEA/RN™ sets high expectations for participants. Overall, the goal is to help faculty critically examine their practices so they make informed choices about how to improve student learning. Our learning-centered approach to helping faculty enhance student learning assumes faculty have had experiences with traditional models of faculty development. It further assumes that many faculty are experts in these models as well as content specialists. Project LEA/RN™ attempts to offer faculty new perspectives and new approaches to learning and the opportunity to build collegial relationships.

We believe it is the unique structures of Project LEA/RN™ which were created to help faculty understand learning in a deep way that enables them to be able to evaluate the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of strategies. Such knowledge is empowering. At root, the program was designed to be an empowerment program. Faculty are given the tools. They decide how to improve instruction. In this sense, Project LEA/RN™ builds organizational change from the bottom up -- moving from the classroom level systematically outward and upward to curricular and leadership levels.

Goals for the Hawaii International Conference on Education:

We have two goals. First, we would briefly like to introduce the model. Second, we will provide participants the opportunity to experience the model. Our aim in doing so is to prompt participants' reflection about learning and how they might use these

reflections to begin thinking about changes they might make in their classrooms or on their campus.

We will conduct the session in the same fashion that we conduct our work with faculty. That is, facilitators will model a learning-centered approach. Participants will be given practical strategies. Facilitators will work to help participants understand how each activity is carefully planned with a definite purpose in mind. After experiencing the learning tool, participants will be asked to develop a plan for their own students.

Participant Involvement:

The session will feature use of experiential and adult learning theory in order to model effective teaching and to help participants process their learning experiences.

Materials:

Copies of our model, bibliography, and practical strategies presented in the session will be available.

Session results:

Participants will be asked to complete two tasks before leaving the session: 1) to name one thing they learned as a result of the session and 2) to describe one action they will take in their classroom as a result of what they learned in the session.