

Initiating Intellectual Dialog in a Diverse Faculty

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VEXATION

Several years ago, while on sabbatical in Australia, I had the pleasure of being invited to a workshop series for secondary school science teachers being led by a group of science teacher educators from Monash University. After the sessions, while the participants were at lunch or dinner, the faculty met to dissect the workshop presentations. They discussed very openly what worked and why, what didn't and why, what needed to be tweaked for the next presentation and why. They were definitely not back-patting (even though the sessions were quite good), but really critically looking at their work as a collective whole. It was great to be part of such an interchange of ideas! I can also remember a time I was at a NARST luncheon with a number of new colleagues who asked what my specialty was. My first instinct was to say "science education" until I remembered everyone at the table was a science educator and they wanted to know on what faction of science education I focused. It is at times like these that I am reminded of my professional position. I am the sole science and mathematics educator in our School of Education. I am a generalist as much as I am a science teacher educator. I teach science methods classes, but I also teach assessment, and research, and whatever else needs covering that particular semester.

At times I really miss being a part of a whole—one science teacher educator among many--to have colleagues with whom I could share specifics about my "teaching specialty." Getting a fix at local meetings and national meetings isn't the same. However, I truly enjoy where I work and the colleagues with whom I work. Diversity has its own rewards. One is excellent at Socratic seminars, another is a whiz at statistics...each has his/her own strengths that I often avail myself of, even if they aren't on science education. These meetings, though, are one on one. Although we have monthly faculty meetings, these are for the purposes of taking care of business (or just having a mandatory monthly meeting). We don't have large group meetings just for intellectual exchange. I find this particularly interesting because the majority of our Masters of Education students take a specialty in Educational Leadership where Professional Learning Communities are explained and formed. It is obviously an example of "do as I say, not as I do" as we promote PLCs but we don't have our own in our School.

My vexation is two fold: (a) would having group sharing on general education issues (as opposed to those focused on science education) satisfy my intellectual needs; and (b) how can I get my colleagues to regularly enter into these kinds of discussions. I can't answer the first subquestion without first answering and doing the second subquestion. I believe this vexation fits nicely into this year's theme of social capital. What I would like to see is changes in how our faculty interact with each other. We all have our own strengths that we could share, thereby creating a stronger unit. The trick is in getting us to see the value in that kind of unit building.

My School of Education is part of a private, liberal arts college. We are a small faculty, numbering only about 15. We offer undergraduate programs in education, an MAT licensure program, on-campus masters programs for licensed teachers, and off-campus programs (in Oregon, Canada, Guam). We are also primarily a teaching university, so our teaching load is heavy (3 classes per semester plus student teaching supervision). Throw in committee meetings, advising, and our research needs, and our "free" time is limited. Because of the scope of our programs, some of us teach primarily during the day, others in late afternoon and evening, and some not even on campus. This makes even finding common meetings times difficult.

VENTURE

We have often talked as a faculty about ways to share. First we focused on our research—just so we would know what each of us was doing. We did this by having faculty "volunteer" for a brief sharing presentation at the start of each faculty meeting. These turned into formal presentations (think AERA) rather than informal sharing opportunities and died an early death when faculty stopped volunteering. We did small group informal sharing as

an “afterthought” at the end of the year “work days” but that only allowed us to interact with a subgroup of colleagues and did not allow for much discussion.

Some faculty tried to organize a book discussion group. The Dean offered to purchase books for those interested. They tried to have brown bag lunches, but scheduling difficulties intervened and this did not work beyond the first book—and the discussion group for that was rather small. (I was not involved as they met on the only day I did not have to report to the University.)

We do have a “Social Committee” that has tried to form bowling parties and happy hour parties, but due to conflicts in teaching schedules and proximity to campus (we live from 5 minutes to 105 minutes from campus), these were not successful. We do have a holiday breakfast party in December that is scheduled during finals week, and that is a huge success and something most, if not all, of us look forward to!

As it presently stands, faculty tend to form dyads and triads to share both teaching and research ideas. These are not static groupings, though we tend to work with and interact with the same colleagues. Depending on specific needs, we will meet with faculty on an individual or small group basis for brainstorming and learning. Nothing formal is in place. Every interaction is motivated by individual need. The School, itself, has meetings as needed for programmatic or accreditation purposes. For instance, we decided as a faculty that we needed to focus more on how to prepare our students to handle ESL students in their field classrooms. The Dean paid for all interested faculty to attend SIOP workshops in small groups (so all faculty wouldn’t vacate the SOE on any particular set of days). The Curriculum Committee then met with the methods faculty (most of us were the same—as I said, we’re a small group) and discussed how to work SIOP ideas into our methods courses with maximum coverage and minimum overlap.

So, while we do have rich discussions at the SOE, these are very focused and specifically goal oriented. Also, they tend to be held by those most invested in the outcome. I would like to see a broader discussion of the group around whatever topic happens to be on someone’s mind. That topic could be either research or teaching based. “I have an idea I would like some feedback on—or I have a new area of research I am delving into and would like some advice—or I tried something new in my class and would like to share how it worked...” Social networking systems would not work with this group (or with me). While we have the capability, not all faculty are fond of this mode of communication and I feel it would not be sustained. Other work responsibilities, I believe, would get priority and logging on to a system would not be in the forefront of anyone’s mind. I believe after an initial burst of activity, it would die a quick death (as I have seen happen with sites set up for our own preservice and inservice teacher groups).

I believe there are enough faculty who would be interested in regular sharing sessions for brainstorming of teaching and research ideas, and perhaps even doing some peer observations to help each of us continue to hone our teaching skills. However, I am not sure of the best way to try and get this off the ground. I am confident that many of us will stick with it once we see the benefits of intellectual sharing, but getting it started is the problem. I see a few preliminary and secondary steps: (a) getting faculty excited about the sharing; (b) finding a time we can commit to; and (c) keeping it going for enough sessions that we can reap the benefits and make it self-sustaining. At the start and end of the school year, we have “work days” where we plan what needs to be done for the unit. Perhaps we can schedule actual “retreat” time where we learn about each other on a different level, and build a more social (rather than professional) community, so a different type of cohesiveness can form. This may carry over to breakfast meetings. Or vice versa—we can start with a breakfast meeting a month and hope that this leads us to desire actual retreats at the start and/or end of the academic year instead of just work sessions. I really believe we have great faculty with shared values—all we need to maximize our potential are appropriate networking channels.