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**Assessment of Faculty Learning Communities:
Considering Social Dimensions of Participant Choice**

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Abstract

This paper describes a study of changes in scholarly practice and collegial discourse in “Teaching Labs” at Everett Community College in Washington State. A type of learning community, a Teaching Lab is a group of faculty and staff who meet regularly to study a topic related to teaching, learning, or postsecondary organization. A survey was administered to current and former participants. The findings suggest that participants gained useful knowledge. This study illustrates the need for assessment methodologies that recognize the social nature of learning in faculty learning communities.

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Thinking about teaching is not an abstract or esoteric activity. It is a disciplined, systematic approach to professional development. By reflecting on and evaluating one's own practices, either alone or in the company of a critical colleague, teachers develop ways to change and improve their practices... (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 374).

There is a growing need to assess how faculty learning communities (FLCs) influence practice in the classroom. For purposes of this discussion, we will assume that faculty learning communities are “consciously and proactively structured faculty groups organized primarily to promote faculty learning” (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999, p. 11). As this form of professional development becomes more established and institutionalized, organizers feel increasingly obligated to provide evidence that the investment of faculty effort is justified by the gains. Educators have proposed and implemented a variety of procedures for assessing the outcomes of FLCs (Hubball, Clarke & Beach, 2004). Most of these approaches involve measuring the extent to which participants meet pre-defined learning objectives. This is a rigorous and well-established means of assessing learning outcomes. However, as we will discuss, the decentralized nature of FLCs creates some limitations in utilizing this approach.

In this article, we describe an assessment project conducted at Everett Community College (EvCC) in Washington State. The study focused on participants in Teaching Labs, the college's FLC program. The purpose of this assessment was to determine the extent to which knowledge is gained from the Teaching Labs and applied in professional settings. The instrument

was developed in an EvCC Teaching Lab devoted to scholarship of teaching and learning (Goto & Davis, 2009). Jointly facilitated by EvCC and Western Washington University faculty, this Teaching Lab guided participants in conducting inquiries related to their professional work. The authors of this article were facilitators and members of this Teaching Lab.

Teaching Labs have been a centerpiece of professional development at EvCC for over four years. Drawing on Miami University's FLC model (Cox, 2004), these professional development groups are made up of faculty and other EvCC professionals who typically agree to spend thirty hours over one academic year studying a teaching-related topic as it relates to their professional practice. The focus of each laboratory is determined by a core group. To date, topics have included collaborative learning, diversity, underprepared students, scholarship of teaching and learning, advisor training, and instructional technology. These topics reflect the core learning outcomes for the college.

These FLCs were designed to be a more intensive and effective alternative to traditional professional development approaches that involve brief workshops with predetermined content. Teaching Labs allow educators to have sustained and meaningful discussions regarding teaching and learning. Participants practice concepts in front of one another, allowing peers to learn from peers. They have opportunities to integrate the training content in their classes and to assess the outcomes. Sustained exploration of one topic fosters a deep understanding of when and how to apply concepts in one's instructional situation. In summary, we believe that EvCC's Teaching Labs are innovative in that they:

- Use local input to define the topics to be studied.
- Allow sufficient time for discovery and application

- Create a safe environment in which to explore and revise new ideas before taking them to the classroom.
- Accommodate the local educational culture
- Foster cross-departmental collaboration

Like all FLCs, EvCC Teaching Labs allow participants a great deal of autonomy and personal choice. This fertile and democratic environment is necessary to attract faculty to these activities. Many find the notion of faculty development difficult to accept. More than one faculty person at EvCC has said, “I don’t need to be developed.” FLCs at EvCC have led to greater numbers of educators participating from more diverse areas of the college than previously seen in traditional workshop-based faculty development. However, this also creates certain challenges for assessing program outcomes. Our analysis attempts to take participant choice into account. This adds an important dimension to the study of transfer of learning in FLCs. In laying out our findings, we discuss broader implications for FLC assessment.

Assessing Faculty Learning Communities

Learning communities are inherently social spaces. These are gathering places where people work with each other to generate and share knowledge. One of the defining characteristics of learning communities is that, unlike traditional classes or workshop-based faculty development, they are not organized around a single leader who acts as the sole authority. Rather, facilitation duties are typically shared among multiple facilitators and, oftentimes, with participants (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). Authority, in other words, is more widely distributed in learning communities. This social dynamic is present whether the community is composed of students, faculty, administrators, staff, or some combination. Indeed,

distributed authority may be even more common in faculty learning communities than in student learning communities. While an FLC may have one lead facilitator, the curricular content and the overall direction are strongly influenced by participating faculty (Cox, 2004). The degree of participant input gives a distinctly democratic flavor to FLCs.

This social dynamic adds a layer of complication to the task of assessing outcomes in FLCs. An underlying assumption of traditional program evaluation is that any learning that occurs in a given setting is a direct result of instructional skill, program structure, and course content (although constructivists might disagree - see Zahorik, 1995). This assumption may be reasonable in settings where an educator controls these factors. The situation is not so clear-cut, however, in FLCs, where these factors are influenced by multiple parties, including participants. In an FLC, the facilitator is likely to start with specific learning outcomes in mind. However, there are no guarantees that participants will choose to go along with the original agenda. This is particularly true over the course of a year, during which time participants may very well move in directions not envisioned originally by the facilitator. This is not unexpected in democratically facilitated FLCs. It is problematic, then, to judge the success of the FLC based on the extent to which participants achieve the learning outcomes that are dictated in advance. Anticipating this sort of conundrum, Pike (2008) recommends that assessments of learning communities take these principles into account:

- The nature of the learning community influences the outcomes
- Participant characteristics influence outcomes
- Effects of learning communities on learners are indirect
- Effects of learning communities may vary among institutional types

Hubball et al (2004) are even more specific in arguing that evaluations of FLCs should “address learning that is meaningful to the learner” (p. 88) and that assessment methodologies should be “grounded in the FLC context of self-regulated learning practices” (p. 89).

To what extent have assessments sought to determine how participants define useful learning in FLCs? And how have assessments taken into account the self-regulated nature of learning in the FLC context? In approaching these questions, we find it useful to characterize an FLC as a micro-culture: a bounded social environment in which members share certain beliefs and norms. In particular, we draw on the work of Kenneth Pike (1967), who used the terms “etic” and “emic” to describe ways of viewing culture. An *etic* perspective is the point of view of an observer who examines a given culture while remaining apart from it. A key assumption is that an etic perspective is empirically objective and neutral. In contrast, an *emic* perspective is the point of view of a member of a given culture or it is an outsider’s account describing the point of view of a cultural insider. Here, there is no claim to objectivity or neutrality; emic meaning is necessarily influenced by the observer’s stance within the culture. This theoretical framework provides a useful way of thinking about the stance that an observer takes in evaluating what might be characterized as cultural practices and beliefs within an FLC.

On a related note, we also find it useful to distinguish between deductive and inductive research methodologies. *Deductive* approaches begin with a general theory (i.e., a hypothesis) and then gather specific evidence to test that theory (Wood and Fielder, 1978). This is the procedural basis of the Scientific Method. *Inductive* approaches, on the other hand, begin with the collection of specific information and then derive a general theory based on the analysis of that information (Sackmann, 1992). This is the procedural basis of Grounded Theory (Glaser and

Strauss, 1967). The distinction between deductive and inductive methodologies calls attention to the sequence that observers use in forming and testing hypotheses about FLCs.

Etic / Deductive Approaches

Typically, investigators who use deductive research methods to evaluate learning communities also view the culture of those learning communities from an etic perspective. This is evident in a study by Smith and Bath (2006), who document learning outcomes in a learning community of graduate students. The investigators start with a hypothesis that the instructional format of the learning community program fosters skills in problem solving and social sensitivity. Next, they select instruments (e.g., CEQ Good Teaching and Learning Communities Scales) that allow them to measure correlation between independent and dependent variables. This analytical approach is deductive in the sense that the process of data collection comes after the formation of the hypothesis. The perspective on learning outcomes is etic in that the indicators of problem solving and social sensitivity are defined by an outside investigator, not by the graduate students themselves.

Another study by Hord, Meehan, Orletsky, and Sattes (1999) uses etic/deductive methods to document staff perspectives on professional learning communities. Designed for K-12 education, this instrument measures “descriptors of professional learning communities” that are grouped in five areas, including “the collegial and facilitative participation of the principal” and “a shared vision that is developed from the staff’s unswerving commitment to students’ learning” (p. 3). Although the investigators do not claim to study programmatic culture, they essentially do so by examining shared beliefs that underlie habitual practices in professional learning communities. The investigators draw from the professional literature (e.g., Hord, 1997) to determine which beliefs and practices (e.g., collaborative decision making, observing each

other's classes) are benchmarks of successful learning communities. A key assumption is that these etically defined benchmarks are empirically objective and applicable to all professional learning communities within certain criteria. Starting with principles that are widely documented in the literature helps the investigators to establish the validity of the instrument. However, in emphasizing the generalizability of findings, the investigators ignore what makes each site unique in its approach to implementing a professional learning community.

Emic / Inductive Approaches

A less common approach to the assessment of learning communities is one that combines an inductive research methodology with an emic perspective on programmatic culture. This approach is illustrated by Blanchard (2008) in a qualitative study of teachers who participated in a formative assessment project led by the University of Sussex (England). This study does not attempt to measure the beliefs and practices of learning community members against a set of externally defined criteria. Rather, the investigation identifies beliefs and practices from the perspective of the educators at the participating schools. The investigative team used observation, interviews, surveys and other tools to determine how the teachers define concepts such as “qualities (that)... help teachers construct interactive classrooms” and “characteristics of interactive classrooms” (p. 140). In this respect, the study takes an emic approach to analyzing the culture of the Portsmouth Learning Community. In the process of analyzing the data, the investigative team inductively derived recommendations for conducting formative assessment in professional learning communities. This methodology is very well suited to producing a rich descriptive account of a particular FLC. However, the approach is limited in the extent to which one can generalize findings beyond that setting.

A similar emic/inductive approach is used by Geltner and Ditzhazy (1994) in a case study of university faculty who transformed their collegial relationships as they revised a program in their department. The authors use multiple means of data collection including structured interviews, critical-incident reports, reflective statements, and narrative writing. The analysis yields a fine-grained qualitative account of how the departmental culture was transformed to foster a deepened sense of professional community among the nine faculty members. Although this is not an assessment of a FLC program, this study does describe the process of creating an organic learning community. Those who wish to assess an FLC program might adapt this research methodology to add a qualitative longitudinal component to the study of programmatic change.

Mixed Approaches

Investigators have combined etic/deductive methods with select elements of emic/inductive investigation. This mixed approach is illustrated by Kincaid (in press) in a study of the Faculty and Professional Learning Community (FLPC) program at Mesa Community College. Kincaid's methodology is primarily deductive in the sense that the investigation is organized around a set of theories about how scholarly teaching influences instructional practice (see Richlin, 2001). Drawing on this theoretical base, the investigator chose an instrument (in this case, adapting a survey developed at Miami University) that best measures pertinent dimensions of instructional belief and practice. These dimensions (e.g., "interest in the teaching process" and "understanding of diversity in teaching and learning") were etically determined in that they were chosen before delving into the perspectives of participants at this site. This approach allowed the investigator to address issues of reliability and validity before

administering the instrument. Using a reliable and valid instrument allowed the investigator to gather comparable sets of data before and after faculty participated in the FPLC program.

Kincaid's survey included open-ended questions that allowed faculty to respond in ways that they deemed meaningful. For example, they were asked questions about what they "valued most about the FLPC program." In this respect, the instrument went beyond the task of measuring the extent to which faculty achieved gains in predefined areas. These open-ended questions allowed the investigator to consider faculty learning from the perspective of the participants. This aspect of the inquiry was emic and inductive.

There are other studies that go further in mixing analytical methods in the study of professional learning communities. O'Meara (2005), for instance, uses surveys, interviews, and observations to document a learning community for early-career faculty in the sciences. Stoll, McMahon, and Thomas (2006) use various means over multiple years to document perceptions of program effectiveness in professional learning communities in England. These approaches are consistent with Hubball *et al*, who recommend that the assessment of FLCs "take(s) place in a variety of carefully planned ways" (2004, p. 91).

Research Methods

In designing a study of EvCC Teaching Labs, our research team hoped that the methodology would recognize the self-regulated nature of learning in these FLCs. We decided that a mixed approach was best suited to this task. We considered the merits of pre/post studies and other designs that use multiple types of data collection. However, due to limitations of time and resources, we opted to design a single survey instrument that incorporated etic/deductive and emic/inductive elements. Our methodology was refined through faculty inquiry, a collaborative process in which educators pose questions related to their professional practice and then

systematically gather evidence to test those questions (see Huber, 2008). In particular, our procedures were consistent with Mettetal's inquiry sequence (2001), which involves:

Identifying a question or problem: We considered the primary use of the findings, which was to guide program planning. Consequently, we decided to assess the effectiveness of the Teaching Lab program as a whole rather than to assess the effectiveness of individual labs.

Reviewing literature: We found it useful to review studies of transfer of learning, a body of psychological research that measures the extent to which learning in one domain is applied in another domain (Haskell, 2000). Existing studies provided models for data collection, as well as a theoretical framework to organize our inquiry.

Planning a research strategy: We refined our survey methodology with feedback from colleagues in the Inquiry Lab. Lab mates were particularly helpful in reviewing drafts of the survey. Their input helped us to craft an instrument with scaled items and open-ended questions to yield both quantitative and qualitative data.

Gathering data: We were concerned that, in providing responses, individuals might try to please or placate the principle investigator, who coordinates the Teaching Lab program. Consequently, we decided to administer the survey via a web-based survey tool (SurveyMonkey), which would allow participants to submit responses anonymously. Moreover, we made it clear to participants that their information would be reviewed by an outside investigator not associated with EvCC.

All 61 current and former Teaching Lab members (EvCC faculty, administrators, staff) were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 27 individuals responded.

Making sense of the data: Responses were compiled by an outside investigator, who aggregated the data. Scaled items were tallied to calculate distributions (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006).

Qualitative data were coded and sorted into inductively derived categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

Taking action / sharing findings: In preparing the findings for dissemination, we removed personally identifying information, such as unique job titles. The aggregated findings were presented at a regional assessment conference and have been submitted to EvCC administration. The findings will be used by the Program Coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Cooperative to refine the EvCC Teaching Lab program.

Findings

Participants came to the Teaching Labs with widely varying expectations regarding what they wanted from the experience. We analyzed responses to open-ended questions and inductively derived four categories. We then categorized participants according to their primary expectation:

Networkers wanted to interact with colleagues in the Teaching Labs. This was the most common expectation articulated by participants. “I expected to be challenged intellectually by my colleagues,” explained one respondent. “I hoped to learn from other’s experiences.” Networkers were not looking to a central

expert to provide them with knowledge. Rather, they saw their peers as important sources of expertise. Indeed, some saw themselves as authorities who might contribute to the collective body of knowledge: “I expected that I would be able to speak freely about teaching practices and expected that other participants would do the same.”

Learners wanted to explore general concepts that may or may not have direct implications for teaching. This was the second-most common expectation. Individuals with this orientation said that they “wanted to gain additional knowledge.” They tended to be rather flexible and non-specific. As one respondent put it, “I want to learn variety of effective teaching (techniques) and why different styles work.” Learners were open practical knowledge that they could apply in the classroom, but this was not a prerequisite for participation in the Teaching Labs. Many were happy to engage in learning for the sake of learning.

Implementers wanted to gain new strategies that they could apply in their classes. Unlike “learners,” this group of participants tended to have specific applications in mind when they joined a Teaching Lab. One respondent, for instance, wanted to learn “techniques and skills for collaboration.” Another wanted to “grow as an instructor” by learning “specific techniques” fostered in the Teaching Lab. People who started with such a focused agenda were in the minority of participants.

Wait-and-see-ers weren't sure what to expect when they joined a Teaching Lab.

“(I was) open to the experience,” explained one participant. In some cases, a lack of expectations reflected the participant’s unfamiliarity with the topic or a perceived lack of direction on the part of the facilitator(s). One individual commented, “I really wasn’t sure what the expectations were when I first joined.” Wait-and-see-ers were, perhaps, the most flexible of the participants. They generally trusted that a coherent agenda would emerge in the group and that they would be able to find something meaningful.

While participants had differing expectations, they were generally positive in their views of the Teaching Labs. A strong majority reported that the experience positively influenced their “total effectiveness as a teacher” (60 percent “positive impact” plus 32 percent “somewhat positive”). What respondents actually meant by this warrants further discussion.

The most robust evidence of change relates to knowledge and attitudes fostered in the Teaching Labs. This pattern appears to be consistent across the Teaching Labs, as evident in aggregated responses to scaled items:

- A strong majority of participants indicated that their experience helped to improve their interest in the teaching process (60 percent “positive impact” plus 32 percent “somewhat positive”).
- Similar proportions said that a Teaching Lab fostered their “understanding of teaching, learning, and other aspects of higher education beyond... (their) discipline” (64 percent “positive impact” plus 32 percent “somewhat positive”).

- Many became more interested in scholarly work within their discipline (29 percent “positive impact” plus 46 percent “somewhat positive” versus 25 percent “no impact”).

Responses to open-ended questions suggest that gains in knowledge were not concentrated in any particular Teaching Lab. Most comments were general and abstract:

- (I gained) “a greater knowledge in some of the theories and research on the topic.”
- “I have heightened awareness of the multiplicity of factors that affect student learning and how to address those factors.”
- (I gained a) “broader understanding of colleges’ roll in connection to high schools.”

Among the more specific comments were a few that cited better knowledge of “leadership research.” Others commented on learning about research procedures. Still others said that they felt “more comfortable addressing diversity issues.”

In some areas, there is solid evidence that participants put their knowledge to immediate use. Most participants indicated that their teaching-related conversations with colleagues had “increased” (36 percent) or “somewhat increased” (56 percent) since becoming involved with a Teaching Lab. Additionally, almost half of participants (46 percent) reported reading “somewhat more” literature on teaching and learning, compared to the same amount (46 percent) who reported that their reading was about the “same amount.” Perhaps more revealing are responses to open-ended questions regarding changes in professional practice. Most comments referred to utilizing new collaborative teaching strategies, presumably gained from the Collaborative Learning Lab. These comments tended to be quite specific:

- “I’ve added more seminars... and I’ve used various COLTS during my classes.
- “Being in the lab has helped me to address issues of introducing group work in the lower level classes, where students may not be as familiar with collaborative learning and may not like it”
- “I now do a collaborative syllabus quiz instead of just reviewing syllabus in class.”

Aside from references to collaborative learning, the remaining comments were not clustered in any particular area. Some respondents allude generally to “change(s) in strategies.” A few refer to instructional modifications to promote diversity awareness (e.g., “I put a statement on my syllabus about how we will be discussing sensitive and controversial issues in class”). Others refer to “added assessment techniques.” Still others refer to extra-curricular activities such as working on an advising handbook or planning new Teaching Labs.

Overall, however, the findings are inconclusive regarding the extent to which participants applied knowledge gained from Teaching Labs (other than the Collaborative Teaching Lab). The survey instrument did not allow direct measurement. There is indirect evidence from one question that asked if there were “any factors... that prevented you from incorporating the ideas presented by the Teaching Labs into your practice.” Nearly 24 percent of respondents said nothing prevented them from implementing ideas. However, 43 percent said that time was a limiting factor. One individual commented that “the daily schedule and culture at EvCC doesn't allow the amount of time I believe is necessary to apply some of the lessons I've learned in labs.” Other incidentally cited factors were comfort level, administrative issues, costs, irrelevance, and lack of space in the curriculum. It is not clear from the data whether these perceived barriers

categorically prevented individuals from putting ideas into practice or whether these factors simply restricted application. Anecdotally, we believe that the growing number of EvCC educators involved in cross disciplinary discussions indicates a spreading institutional culture that promotes the adoption of promising practices on campus.

There are tantalizing hints that Teaching Labs have influenced student learning for the better. This, arguably, is the ultimate indicator of FLC success (Hubball et al, 2004). Some participants cited written feedback as evidence of improved student outcomes:

- “Many students have said in course evaluations that they have had the best group experiences ever...”
- “Based on the evaluations... they have gained more confidence in the skills they have learned during the quarter.”
- “Many students report in their final reflective essays that they have a different view on sexual orientation and racial prejudice...”

Other respondents offered general impressions that students “seem to be more engaged” and “more involved in the classes.” However, it is also important to note that the majority of comments indicate that there were no observable changes among students or that the respondents were “not sure” about impacts on student learning.

Discussion

Overall, we see two divergent patterns in the data. On one hand, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they gained useful knowledge from the Teaching Labs and that the experience improved their “total effectiveness as a teacher.” On the other hand, evidence is

spotty or inconclusive as to whether participants actually changed their professional behavior as a result of the Teaching Lab experience.

This apparent discrepancy may be due, in part, to limitations of the research methodology. The survey included only two direct questions regarding the application of knowledge. It would be useful in future studies to include additional questions that probe various ways that knowledge from Teaching Labs are applied. Another limitation is that we did not use measures independent of the self-reporting survey. We relied solely on the participants to identify how knowledge gained from the Teaching Labs influenced teaching and student learning. It is possible that respondents might apply or adapt principles learned in a Teaching Lab without being consciously aware of the origins of that knowledge. Perhaps more problematically, it is questionable whether respondents can identify a causal link between principles learned in Teaching Labs and changes in student learning outcomes. Identifying such a link would require independent documentation. One possibility would be to use the existing student feedback system (IDEA). Another option would be to use the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis process to track student perceptions of instructor behavior regarding specific instructional changes.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the reported difference between knowledge gained and knowledge applied is not entirely an anomaly or a procedural error. This distinction makes sense when considered in light of the participants' expectations. It is important to note that most participants did not come to the Teaching Labs intending to adopt new teaching strategies. The "Networkers" (who were the largest group) were drawn by the opportunity to interact with colleagues and to share their own expertise. The "Learners" and "Wait-and-See-ers" were flexible in their expectations and were not necessarily focused on gleaning applicable

knowledge. Only the “Implementers” came to Teaching Labs with specific agendas to improve their teaching, and these individuals were numerically in the minority. It is not surprising, then, that a large majority of respondents would report having gained useful knowledge from the Teaching Labs, even though a smaller proportion of participants actually put that knowledge to use in the classroom.

Considering participant expectations provides a more nuanced way to interpret participant satisfaction with the Learning Labs. While participants were generally positive about their experiences, individual satisfaction varied according to the compatibility between the participant’s expectations and the purpose of the Teaching Lab. We find it useful to distinguish between two types of curricular purposes: Some labs (e.g., Collaborative Learning Lab, Instructional Technology Lab) are *more applied* in nature. Their purpose, in other words, is to promote knowledge that faculty and staff can apply directly in working with students. Other labs (e.g., Diversity Lab, Inquiry Lab) are *more conceptual*. Their purpose is to promote particular ways of thinking which indirectly influence instructional practice. This distinction allows us to explain and predict compatibility with participant expectations. In particular, we see these patterns in the data:

- Implementers and Learners were most satisfied in more applied labs. These individuals were most likely to report examples of implementation and evidence of improved student outcomes.
- Learners, Networkers and Wait-and-See-ers were generally satisfied in more conceptual labs as long as there were opportunities to learn from each other.
- Implementers tended to be less satisfied in the more conceptual teaching labs.

From these observations, we propose the following assertions:

- Participants may derive benefits from an FLC, even if they don't incorporate the ideas directly in their teaching.
- Participant satisfaction in FLCs depends to some extent on a match between participant expectations and FLC goals.
- The match doesn't have to be exact. Even if there is somewhat of a mismatch, participants can be satisfied as long as they and the lab facilitators are flexible.

Implications for the Assessment of FLCs

Our findings suggest that knowledge gained from FLCs may take many forms. Not surprisingly, participants benefit from the official content of the curriculum, the subject matter that is determined when the group first begins to meet. In addition, a good deal of unofficial learning takes place - learning that is not planned by the organizers or identified as an outcome. Unofficial learning may involve getting to know colleagues, seeing one's role in a larger institutional context, or coming to understand how other educators view things. Quite often, self-awareness is an important component. Considering various perspectives may encourage individuals to reflect on their own assumptions about teaching and learning. Ideally participation in an FLC should encourage meta-cognition and reflective practice. Such insights can be quite profound.

It is a considerable challenge to document learning that is as complex and multi-layered as this. The central goal of program assessment is to measure the extent to which a program produces given outcomes. A common approach is to control out confounding variables so that one can identify a plausible connection between an independent variable (e.g., instructional method) and a dependent variable (e.g., learning outcomes). While this methodology is rigorous and well-established, it does not lend itself to documenting the unofficial learning that takes place in FLCs - learning that is often serendipitous and mercurial. Admittedly, our study design was not well-suited to documenting multiple forms of learning in FLCs. In retrospect, we see a need to employ multiple methodologies.

Hubball et al (2004) point out that assessment of FLCs should be “both an individual and social contextual process” (p. 91). Our experience assessing Teaching Lab participation leads us to agree strongly. Indeed, we wish to expand on this notion. Hubball et al suggest that assessment methods include both independent means (e.g., self-reflection, individual feedback) and collaborative means (e.g., focus groups, group analyses) to collect data. We would add that is important, not only to include contextually embedded assessment methods, but also to acknowledge the social-contextual nature of learning in FLCs. In particular, observers should recognize the role that participant choice plays in influencing participant outcomes. Instructors are likely to adopt new teaching strategies if that is their intention when they come to an FLC. Our findings suggest that this intention is not a given in FLCs. Participant expectations are strongly influenced by the social dynamic of the learning community. Intentions evolve over time as individuals interact with fellow participants and facilitators. One might speculate that evaluation can be a bridge to cognitive and behavioral change. Consequently, long term follow-up could be beneficial. This insight supports another assertion by Hubball et al that assessment

should “take place in a variety of carefully planned ways before, during, on completion of, and following the FLC experience” (2004, p. 91).

Faculty learning communities are a powerful means to encourage vibrant intellectual exchange and professional growth on college campuses. Moving educators out of traditional departmental and disciplinary silos helps to foster an institutional culture of collegial interaction. At their best, faculty learning communities create a safe and fertile environment where faculty can thrive as learners. After all, as Bransford *et al.* remind us, “teachers are learners and the principles of learning and transfer for student learners apply to teachers” (2000, p. 374). We are beginning to appreciate how complex and subtle this dynamic can be.

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