DON'T WAIT...COLLABORATE!

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration is encouraged in workplaces, but there are often barriers to working together to meet organizational goals. In higher education, faculty have obligations to students, leadership, and other departments that may hinder collaboration between their peers. This article discusses how four full-time faculty members at a large Christian university in the Southwest United States overcame time constraints and organizational structure to build a collaborative working environment across several departments. With student success in mind, the faculty members focused on collaboration to improve course curriculum, build relationships with other departments and colleges, increase the use of technology tools in their classrooms, and complete academic research. While there were challenges, leadership support and positive student experiences encouraged faculty members to push on. Although collaboration does require flexibility and creativity that may be new to faculty members that are used to working individually, the benefits can be astounding.

Keywords: Classroom assessment techniques (CATS), classroom technology, classroom technology tools, collaboration, course content, full-time faculty, higher education, feedback, group development, leadership, online faculty, online learning, scholarship of teaching and learning, technology.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Collaboration by nature seems to be a straightforward, easy to achieve process—working with others to create or produce—yet, in higher education, both the opportunity and desire for such cooperative efforts may not always be as abundant as one might think. Lortie (as cited in Frank, 2017) noted, "the work of teaching is generally marked by individualism" (para. 4). This is odd, given the frequent use of teacher-led classroom activities designed around student teamwork as a common teaching strategy. It would seem to follow that teachers employ this same tactic in working together in building, creating, and collective growth. Universities are complex organizations with many stakeholders including students, the community, the faculty, staff, and even political leaders. Each of these stakeholders possess competing priorities, focuses, interests, and perspectives. University leadership has the unenviable task of satisfying each stakeholder while at the same time preserving the university's mission and vision. Institutions of higher education tend to be bureaucratic organizations; they are founded on logic, order, and legitimate authority (Schermerhorn, 2014). The complexity of the bureaucracy within the university can lead to slow reaction to environmental changes, lack of creative solutions, and ultimately to issues in the educational experience.

McGowan, Goode, and Manley (2016) described higher education organizations as a combination of hierarchical, top-down authority and "a galaxy of individual stars" in which each member is focused on their own interests. Universities, like all other organizations, have

a structure. At the top is the governing board followed by the university president and executive staff. Next are the colleges that include a college dean, ranked faculty members, and administration and staff. Each works toward creating a vibrant and rigorous learning environment for the students. According to Schieffer (2016), leaders in higher education are advised to find ways to create opportunities for faculty collaboration, define clear roles for participants, and connect collaborators.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

It all started in the fall of 2017, when the faculty chair for online faculty in the College of Business, announced an eight-week research activity called "Think" (Think Program, n.d.). A quick glance around the room indicated few were elated. Among all of the tasks faced by faculty were grading, teaching, lesson plans, working as faculty advisors on student clubs, and serving both their individual college and the university at large on committees (Hardre & Cox, 2009); so, quite frankly when would one find time?

The faculty chair continued on, explaining the ebbs and flows of scholarship, and began to set the stage for what would eventually be presented by the college dean; a consistent and intentional effort of teaching, service, and scholarship. While service had been an emphasis for these faculty, scholarship had not. The faculty chair then explained what it was all about. The "Think" program is designed specifically for faculty who are interested in researching aspects of teaching and learning and would like to further develop their ideas (Think Program, n.d.). An additional program assists with writing up results and is called "Ink" (Ink Program, n.d.), both of which focus on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) research.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Educational reformer, John Dewey, echoed concerns about the waste and loss that occurs when teachers remain confined and do not share their contributions and gifts beyond that of their students to foster a common efficacy of experience (Frank, 2017). In fact, he advocated that teachers who continually raise the level of common resources benefit from a greater and more robust shared wisdom of teaching (para. 6). Viewing collaboration among university colleagues and beyond through Dewey's reflective lens allowed this group of faculty to better understand the associated challenges and subsequently, identify solutions for others to overcome similar barriers.

Even with a strong desire to work with others, it can feel overwhelming to actually do so. Simply being aware of potential barriers does not easily translate into a mental leap in which we suddenly have all the answers on how to overcome concomitant issues to collaboration. Thus, a reflective period proved vital using Dewey's seminal work, including democratic experimentalism, as a means to further explore concerns as well as the desired outcome to help others achieve similar collaborative success. Vo and Kelemen (2017) attest to Dewey's view of knowledge as "deeply intertwined with experience and inquiry," arguing for a democratic form of collaboration to advance practical consequences for humanity (p. 858).

In this case, a group of four initially reluctant faculty collaborators ultimately transformed into a tightly knit research group with a desire to relay this success to others. It is noteworthy, however, that this transformation was no overnight feat. Through day-to-day interactions and shared experience, a slow shift developed as each member of the group gained confidence as knowledge and skills increased.

Significantly, Dewey stressed the concept of experimental inquiry, noting the connection between scientific and common-sense inquiry, ultimately discoverable in ordinary experience (Vo and Kelemen, 2017). With this lens, the practice of reflection is intended to share these ordinary experiences in conjunction with experimental inquiry, to provide practical solutions for other faculty wishing to engage in collaborative endeavors. As educators we must remember that we, too, are students, life-long learners, benefitting from shared knowledge, insight, and varied perspective.

ACTIVITY

A group of four online full-time faculty at a large, private university in the Southwest United States began collaborative efforts on a small scale, as teachers of the same Organizational Behavior and Management course. What began as a method to share and generate course materials to deliver a consistent student experience, developed over

time to include collaborative projects for faculty presentations, research publications, and more. It is with this cooperative spirit that best practices in the art of collaboration will be shared through the observations, experiences, and recommendations of this faculty group.

Course Content Collaboration: Where to Start

Part of the challenge of any collaboration is the problem of just where to start. Faculty teaching the same or similar courses may find it beneficial to begin by sharing or comparing materials to get new ideas and generate a collective toolbox. These problem-solving efforts thus "allow teachers to gain new strategies and skills to improve and energize their teaching and classrooms" (Taylor, n.d., para. 8). Questions to consider might include: What could make my/our class better? Are others experiencing similar gaps or problems? How are they being addressed? By sharing materials, practices, and ideas, faculty partners can identify weaknesses and subsequently capitalize on the strengths of individuals within the group to seek ways to improve.

Starting small can help faculty from feeling overwhelmed with the process. In this case, the materials for the course the instructors teach were all created and developed using a course shell in conjunction with the faculty members and the curriculum department. When assignments are consistent in each section of a course, regardless of instructor, students and faculty benefit.

Another opportunity to add consistency to the course is creating similar feedback comments, all while adding more substance to an instructor's feedback on assignments, discussion questions, and participation. Instructors in this case created specific comments that addressed assignment requirements, while still allowing for personalization as well. Lowe and Shaw (2019) found that students respond well to increased personalization in feedback comments, and by creating general feedback comments that address requirements, instructors have more time to address specific items with student assignments. Students want more than generic comments with a point total (Lowe & Shaw, 2019). Creating shared feedback comments ahead of time allows more time for personalization and creates consistency among instructors teaching the same course. Students should expect the same type of grading in each class, eliminating the comparison of instructor grading that sometimes happens among students.

Classroom Assessment Techniques

Another opportunity for collaboration is the creation of Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATS). Classroom Assessment Techniques allow instructors an "in the moment snapshot" of a student's knowledge about a particular idea or topic (Li & van Lieu, 2018). CATS can be posted in a discussion forum by the instructor and completed by students at any point during the course and may or may not be graded. For traditional, face-to-face classes, instructors can pose questions during class time and students respond during class. In the online environment, CATS can be posted early in the course week to allow an instructor to gauge what students know before a graded assignment is due (Li & van Lieu, 2018). When faculty actively use CATS, they can improve student learning and make adjustments to materials as needed throughout the course (Hudson, 2015).

The four faculty in this case equally divided work for an eight-week course and assigned two weeks each to create CATS for each discussion question (DQ). The same model was followed for writing each CAT that helped refer students back to important concepts and the textbooks. Using these CATS consistently each week allowed the faculty members to monitor student learning and immediately correct or address any misconceptions. By preparing CATS before the class began, faculty were able to focus more on student learning and interaction, rather than the continual creation of new materials. By openly sharing student feedback with one another, faculty were able to refine and improve CATS quickly to enhance the student experience.

Technology Tools

There are vast options for technology tools that can make a positive impact in a traditional or online classroom. The faculty in this example wanted to integrate more technological aspects to their course and began by examining each individual's strengths and weaknesses in this area. Learning a new technology tool can be daunting at first, but like anything, practice makes perfect. In this particular case, faculty decided to add Loom videos, the Remind app, FlipGrid, Padlet, as well

as the addition of specific YouTube videos. The tasks were then divided based on knowledge and level of comfort.

Research by Saeed, Yang, and Sinnappan (2009) shows that students are open to using emerging technology tools, and that they can adapt to them regardless of specific preferred learning style. In the online course this faculty team teaches, using these technology tools allowed students to explore their learning styles and gain information in new ways. The use of FlipGrid allowed students to participate by using videos to discuss course concepts. The faculty in this case created a community FlipGrid that was used in each faculty member's course. A community FlipGrid allows students in different course sections to engage with students enrolled in other sections of the same course to hear additional perspectives and viewpoints. Using Remind in the course allowed students to receive text message reminders about important class events and assignments. Padlet was used to house shared classroom policies, assignment tips and resources, as well as lecture highlight videos and chapter PowerPoint slides for students to review at any time during the course.

For instructors working individually, using all of these tools can be an overwhelming task to learn and master, but by working together, using each faculty member's strengths, and distributing the work, adding emerging technology into a class is much more manageable. Students are willing to incorporate new technology into their routines in the classroom and are also willing to try new communication channels, so taking the time to develop technology-based content is a wise decision (Saeed et al., 2009).

Research

The faculty in this example committed to rallying and participating in the eight-week Think program to appease leadership, expecting that likely the eight weeks would be completed, and that would be that. What happened over those eight weeks is what stands out in particular among the collaborative efforts of this team.

With full support of the faculty chair, the team committed to bi-weekly research meetings off site both in person and also using Zoom technology. As time went on, the group realized what was being learned had to be shared with others. The team was enjoying the discovery process of conducting SoTL research. At the end of the day, data tells a story and would ultimately help them to better understand how to help their students learn.

Recent research supports the experiences of these faculty with regard to the value of collaboration when conducting SoTL research (Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010; Marquis, Healey, & Vine, 2016; Rehrey, Siering, & Hostetter, 2014). As of this publication, the faculty in this example have combined and individually published a total of eight manuscripts, presented at seven conferences, and have a total of four writing projects in progress. What began as four individual faculty doing the same or similar work individually became a conscious effort to collaborate and share best practices with each other and other faculty. The effort did not stop there but grew to include faculty from different disciplines and colleges and concluded with a plethora of research and scholarship projects.

REASONS

Reason One: Finding Time to Add Value to Self, Students, and Discipline

As stated above, collaboration may seem impossible to squeeze into an already tight schedule, but in reality a small investment in time up front can provide dividends of extra time in the future. The old adage that one cannot see the forest for the trees comes into play here. Oftentimes the day-to-day tasks bog us down that we cannot see the bigger picture that collaboration provides value to faculty, students, and to the teaching discipline. Anyone who has been in business or in a personal relationship likely knows that the best ideas and learning come from hearing differing perspectives born from divergent life experiences. Musits et al. (2020) surveyed individuals involved in interdepartmental collaboration and discovered an interesting byproduct. New conversations started between faculty in different departments and disciplines, and together they learned when an interdepartmental collaborative approach begins, the stage is set for knowledge and perspective sharing for everyone. The evidence is clear that collaboration is a win-win proposition; the problem is to create the investment of time up front.

Reason Two: Where to Start and Leadership Support

Faculty members juggle multiple and sometimes-competing priorities, which can make it difficult to begin something new. As an example, one may come to campus with the idea that they are going to have a couple of hours of quiet time to conduct research and start a new project. After arriving to the office, three students are waiting, the dean calls with a last-minute crisis that must be addressed, and a colleague unexpectedly needs help. As a result, everything that was planned originally goes out the window. This inevitably causes frustration and leads to the problem of where to start.

A lack of leadership support can exasperate this problem. Despite potential challenges, proper support from administration is necessary to provide the time, space, and resources necessary to encourage and support faculty collaborative efforts. Dewey claimed, "The risks of going at teaching alone as individuals far outweigh the benefits of working collaboratively to improve the practice of teaching" (as cited in Frank, 2017, para. 26). In an effort to avoid such risks, it would behoove administration to afford faculty proper time and backing needed for collaborative projects. Clark and Wilson (2017) noted a particular barrier to university collaboration may be the reluctance of leadership to allocate funding and resources on an ongoing basis beyond initial setup as a potential solution. With this in mind, faculty seeking to collaborate can adopt a preemptive strategic plan in order to identify potential roadblocks and develop solutions to address administrative concerns.

EVALUATION

Is the reason collaboration does not occur really because of a lack of time? As stated above, faculty members juggle multiple priorities every day and oftentimes find themselves confronted with unplanned crises that can upend a well-planned schedule. Is that really the problem, or are their other barriers in the way? One challenge faculty members who want to collaborate need to overcome is changing their relationship from being independent colleagues to becoming a team. Working together toward a common goal does not magically occur, but rather a newly formed team must work through several stages. Bruce Tuckman developed a roadmap that describes the five stages that groups must work through to become effective teams (Ungvarsky, 2020). Tuckman's Team Stages, Systems Theory, and Shon's Reflection in Action are three theoretical frameworks that may be used to explain and evaluate these reasons for the problem.

Tuckman's Team Stages

Tuckman's research in this area can shed light on the process and help group members understand and manage issues when they arise. Forming, is a tentative stage in which individuals get to know one another and is generally a smooth period, while the Storming stage can become rockier as group leaders emerge, and conflict and/or power struggles may present themselves (Ungvarsky, 2020). While conflict and collaboration may seem at odds, it is vital to view this as a common developmental process to prevent individuals from becoming discouraged. Fortunately, as Murray (2018) explains, in the Norming stage, trust is built as team members work toward a common goal, ultimately leading to the Performing stage. This trust and cooperative spirit are the essence of effective collaboration and allow members a means to forward progress. Allison and Ramirez (2016) noted in their self-study, "Moving into the Performing stage, we were able to be more reflective, using our individual and shared experiences to align practice with ideals" (p. 12).

Tuckman's five stages of teams are also evident in collaborative endeavors between faculty in different institutions; oftentimes, cross-institution collaboration can lead to a cultural clash of sorts due to differences in structures and practices (Clark & Wilson, 2017). Setting standards through norming activities, however, can lead to an agreed upon format that participants can work jointly within. Further, encouraging innovative teaching strategies can be a means by which those from different universities may be better equipped to handle inconsistencies.

Systems Theory

Being equipped to handle inconsistencies aligns with the organizational behavior, Systems Theory. Systems Theory posits that organizations are open systems comprised of subsystems (Griffin, Phillips, & Gully, 2020). The system-subsystem relationship is rooted in interaction

and interdependence between the "system" and "subsystems," and it is impacted by both the internal and external environment.

Systems Theory explains the transformative process of conversion of inputs into outputs through the interactions in the subsystems responding to the environment (Griffin et al., 2020). Ability and willingness to respond to environment is key to effective organizations. The ability of the college leadership and faculty chair to listen to the environment, the needs of the university, and the academic community demonstrates this systems approach. Simply put, universities exist to transform college students into college graduates. Faculty focus is on delivery of content that prepares students for their future profession, guiding students to be and become who they were created to be.

As stated above, institutions of higher education have a hierarchical top-down authority structure. Leadership must direct or at least support any major changes to the mission or priorities of the college. According to Kim and Senge (1994), the systems-thinking perspective illuminates that learning occurs through experience, which explains why many organizations often fail to learn. Bureaucratic organizations like the university configuration are slow to react to dynamic environmental changes, and leaders may lack creative answers to ongoing challenges. To address this, leadership should support the collaboration efforts of faculty whereby allowing the participants the opportunity to share their individual experiences and perspectives to discover vibrant solutions.

One way to promote collaboration would be for leadership to model the behavior. According to Kim and Senge (1994), many leaders say they believe in collaborative decision making but repeatedly make decisions individually. University leadership should break down the bureaucratic hierarchy by increasing local decision making and focus on becoming better learners. Leaders should speak to, and more importantly, hear from all levels of the organizational structure, including administration, faculty, and students when searching for answers to the complex problems that institutions of higher learning face. University leadership can provide support for collaborative efforts by providing faculty professional training and tools, bypassing the hierarchal leadership model, and relying on the shared experiences of faculty to transform the university into a learning organization. Learning organizations are described by Senge (as cited in Luhn, 2016) as a place where people continuously utilize their capabilities, new ways of thinking are supported, and people learn to learn together.

Schon's Reflection in Action

Donald Schon's (1984) Reflection in Action, also provides explanation opportunity to evaluate the chosen reasons. Schon (1984) speaks to what he refers to as a "crisis of confidence" in professions both through mis-used autonomy as well as through failures in professional action, and the diminishing confidence of professionals in their own professional knowledge. Schon (1984) explains reflection as two parts: (1) during the actual event, then (2) following the event. He explains these as "Reflection in Action" and "Reflection on Action" (1991).

Schon's (1984; 1991) Reflection in Action shows the vital need for reflection in the professions, helping professionals to glean skills in improvisation to guide creativity and problem solving in the workplace. The faculty in this example identified opportunities for collaboration that allowed for greater efficiencies, team dynamics, and synergies that ultimately benefit students. Collaborative efforts using both Reflection in Action and Reflection of Action can add significant value to faculty, to students, and to the discipline.

As Dewey emphasized, the merging of ordinary experiences with experimental inquiry lead reflection, shared knowledge, and practical solutions able to be shared with all (as cited in Vo & Kelemen, 2017). Once the faculty team has worked through the five stages of team development, then the opportunities for effective collaboration focused on pragmatic solutions to day-to-day problems becomes available. These shared solutions result in timesaving activities. Opportunities to improve the student experience should be emphasized as well as research efforts to add to the scholarly work.

DECISION

Two specific reasons were presented as possible factors contributing to the unexpected nature of this collaboration. First, finding time to add value to self, students, and discipline and

second, the ability to identify where to start and garner leadership support. Each of these potential reasons explain the uncertainty faced by these faculty when it comes to collaborative efforts; however, as we look back, it is clear that the most reasonable explanation of hinderance was where to start and leadership support.

Aside from the value to self, students, and discipline, the more pressing reason why some faculty choose not to collaborate is rooted in the uncertainty of where to start and how to garner support from leadership. The faculty in this example felt challenged by their college dean and faculty chair to look beyond themselves, their egos, and personal interests; and focus on the outcome: student success. Unknown to the faculty were the benefits gleaned through the collaboration, which involved working through the team stages using thoughtful reflection during and after the process through the lens of organizational systems.

A Simple Start: Shared Resources

The faculty started simply by creating shared resources. This allowed the faculty to tap into the knowledge and expertise of each individual to create content greater than what could be accomplished alone. Each faculty member brought to the collaborative effort expertise in different areas related to course content, pedagogy, and technology acumen. Each were seasoned and successful faculty, and individually quite successful. What they found was that while one was strong in one area, someone else was in another—a true example of the adage, "The sum is greater than its parts."

Creating Together

From building on individual strengths through content creation, the team transitioned to a collaborative "divide and conquer" approach. All four faculty were initially hesitant to engage in the use of Web 2.0 in the classroom. The idea of web-enabled resources seemed ubiquitous at the start. However, the team identified among the available Web platforms Padlet, Kahoot, FlipGrid, and Remind to be resources that they could individually become "experts" in, and then together develop custom content for the course. The faculty each took a platform, learned how to use it, and then collaborated together on content for each.

Ready to Engage

As the team began to function as high performing through collaboration on course content and development and integration of Web2.0, the expectation of leadership to further engage through scholarship arrived at the perfect time. Looking back, the faculty in this example see how starting small through collaborating on a bank of course content posts eventually led to the addition of technology integration followed by a challenge to step up and add to the body of knowledge through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Presented with the challenge by their leaders to work within the eb and flow of service and scholarship, the faculty identified an opportunity to evaluate recent changes in their course using statistical analysis. What once had been an individual teaching effort had become recognized as better when approached together. The expertise and enthusiasm of each faculty member added to the success. Each faculty member had different strengths related to process, synthesis, pedagogy, and scholarship; uniting together through scholarship led to a fruitful experience.

CONCLUSION

Although faculty may find themselves with limited time to collaborate, university leadership can encourage faculty to interact and get involved. One way to accomplish this is to have faculty who teach in the same content area participate in the development of curriculum and policies. Once faculty members are engaged, there is a possibility that collaboration will follow. One recommendation for administrators to consider is to offer training opportunities focused on group dynamics and understanding group norms. This may alleviate potential hesitation due to concerns over conflict during collaborative efforts. The mere act of engaging in joint training alone can set the foundation for future collaborative projects. "Engaged employees have high levels of energy and are enthusiastically and actively involved in their work" (as cited in Eldor & Shoshani, 2017).

Using various types of technology can create new learning experiences and outcomes for students. While faculty are collaborating on course content and innovative ideas, leadership can encourage faculty to integrate technology.

An obstacle, however, may be faculty hesitation due to lack of technology skills. To overcome this roadblock, administrators should be cognizant that some faculty may need further education in technology options. Therefore, professional development in this area is recommended.

Another benefit in support of faculty collaboration is employee satisfaction and commitment to the university. A study by Mabasa and Ngirande (2015) tied employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment with perceived organizational support. Faculty wishing to pursue collaborative projects are more likely to do so when they perceive that the administration supports their efforts.

Schieffer (2016) discovered that successful ongoing collaborative efforts require support from leadership; however, to build that support faculty may need to take initiative and lead by example. The old adage of "If it isn't broken, why fix it?" can be the enemy of successful collaboration. As faculty, be the first to ask for ideas from others. It may be easier to start in one's own "silo;" however, do not stop there. Seek input from faculty in other subspecialty silos as well. Keep an open mind and be persistent. Remember, collaboration does not naturally occur, but rather it is like a muscle that can atrophy if not exercised regularly. Like a muscle, with more use, the stronger it becomes. As the strength and success of collaborative efforts is realized, support from leadership and peers is likely to increase.

Research shows that faculty value collaboration (Hammond, Coplan, & Mandernach, 2018; Hubball et al., 2010; Marquis et al., 2016; Musits et al., 2020; Osbeck, 2020; Rehrey et al., 2014). The faculty in this example benefited from the opportunity to collaborate on course content. What began as content specific collaboration grew into the unexpected: collaboration on research. Support from administration was key throughout this collaborative experience, allowing them to unite in purpose and collaborate as one. An important lesson was learned…we're better together!

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