Volume XXXII, Number 6

NISOD INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

COLLABORATION: BRIDGING THE DISCIPLINE DIVIDE

Our faculty are well-versed in the attributes of collegiality: we meet as required to offer reasonable perspectives and rational ideas. When we disagree, we are respectful, polite; and more often than not, we avoid challenges or confrontations—especially the kind that might call into question an individual's academic principles or pedagogical practices. Collegiality greases the wheels of education. The bumps in the road, sudden detours, and unexpected stops are far more manageable in a collegial atmosphere of benign, courteous tolerance. But collegiality, for all its tradition and virtue, should not be confused with collaboration.

Here's why: while collaboration inherently involves collegiality, collegiality does not necessarily invite collaboration. Tulsa Community College West Campus faculty made this discovery by accident. After an unusually disappointing semester, faculty gathered to bemoan the fact that regardless the discipline, our students were consistently unprepared, irresponsible, and unable to think—in any substantive way. For all our anguish, there was nothing new in those collegial discussions, nor was there anything new in our oft-repeated desire for our students to read and think in a way that made sense within and across our disciplines, and beyond.

In that meeting, ours was the convivial collegiality of shared misery and mutual despair, shared with faculty from biology, chemistry, English, psychology, mathematics, physical science, humanities, developmental studies, history, Native American studies, business, and information technology. But we wanted more than collegiality: we wanted to change something. So when talk centered on critical thinking across the disciplines, we knew we had something. Critical thinking lies at the core of education. It was what we wanted *from* and *for* our students.

In theory, it all made sense: beyond memorization and comprehension, thinking was at the heart of learning, an intellectual activity shared across the disciplines. We reasoned that if we could create a pattern for the thinking process, we could use the pattern in all of our classes. Students would see connections between disciplines and become better thinkers by repeating the pattern on a regular basis.

The decision to use language as the framework for the pattern of thinking was easy. Bloom's categories of thinking have been around since the 1950's, and the new terminologies in vogue describe, with little variance, the same categories. We reasoned that if we were using the same language, the same set of terms across the curriculum, students would benefit from the repetition and from a cross-discipline approach. Yet, faculty needed to agree on what constitutes critical thinking. Reaching this pedagogical consensus required more than collegial respect.

We had to be willing to reach agreement on the definition of words like *knowing*, *synthesizing*, and *evaluating*. Our goal meant staying at the table when we disagreed, focusing less on academic autonomy and more on academic coherence. Our process was messy, repetitive, sometimes discordant, and always intense. Our group dwindled, especially after one meeting when cross-discipline faculty spent more than two hours defining the word "meaning." However, we refused to give up.

Over the next year, faculty discussions about how to teach critical thinking gave birth to a powerful, collaborative process. We learned to trust each other, to trust the process of dissent and argument; we learned more about teaching and thinking than we ever thought possible. What began as a faculty gripe session about student performance resulted in a powerful metacognitive process for our own professional growth.

There is no question that cross-discipline collaboration requires a shift in perspective. Faculty have to agree that, in some circumstances, coherence has more value than autonomy. Students can benefit as much, if not more, from broad cross-discipline goals than from narrow discipline-specific goals. And, in the case of the West Campus Critical Thinking Initiative (CTI—we gave ourselves a name), we further agreed that critical thinking could be assessed in terms of course-specific goals and every-day applications.

The Bridge

We knew that thinking was at the core of all of our disciplines. If students could think in any one discipline, they could think in all disciplines. This was not a new idea, but it was from this foundation that faculty built a structure of cross-discipline collaboration.

Our conversations about critical thinking began with Bloom's Taxonomy and struggled to define the act of thinking—not as a discipline component, but as an intellectual activity used to process information. Our interest was in the components inherent in analysis, application, evaluation, and synthesis. We had to think about thinking as a framing apparatus that could be taken apart. The framework of common terms and definitions would connect the disciplines.

The CTI group found that collaboration, not collegiality, was essential to the process of addressing student needs. Although we did not start out with collaboration in mind, it happened. And after four years, we are convinced that cross-discipline collaboration, focused on critical thinking, has the power to transform education! It certainly transformed our teaching. This transformation has meant that lesson plans, in-class activities, quizzes, and exams are created with awareness of the various levels of thinking involved and the specific sequence of intellectual steps that students must take to finish the task or answer the question. This enables faculty from various disciplines to pinpoint exactly where students experience difficulty in thinking and to work collaboratively on exercises and strategies to encourage and strengthen that step.

Building the Bridge (Cross-Discipline Collaborative Process)

We discovered the characteristics that formed the foundation of the collaborative process:

Objective: Identify a learning outcome or student skill that is shared in multiple disciplines. The identified element should carry significant weight for all participating faculty and be independent of any collaborative effort among the various disciplines.

Motivation: Begin with an urgent desire to confront and change the status quo. Most faculty work in an environment that demands increasing commitments of time and energy. These competing demands require a resolute faculty community. The collaborative process must carry its own intrinsic value.

Participation: Encourage participation. The process requires autonomous enthusiasm and dedication, and stems from trust, respect, and a desire to work within a community. These qualities cannot be mandated or coerced by outside forces.

Foundation: Develop a model, or framework, for the collaboration—time-consuming, yet extremely valuable. In large measure, it is determined by the desired skill/outcome, the collaborative faculty focus. A shared foundation is essential to coherence and should be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of teaching styles and discipline content.

Group dynamics: Concentrate on the collaborative process, actively cultivating the talents, skills, and expertise of each participant to build trust and coherence. Group dynamics change. Patient, attentive, respectful listening is key. This, of course, is collegiality. Beyond this is the tough reality of recognizing disagreement and difference while staying at the table to reach consensus.

Assessment: Evaluate student outcomes together, and refine the teaching/learning model as necessary. Once teaching moves beyond rote memorization or comprehension, assessment shifts to the more challenging arena of qualitative measures. Designing assessment tools requires faculty to examine how we measure learning outcomes. The insights gleaned in this step focus teaching strategies away from static lecture to more cooperative, active learning environments.

Conclusions

Setting the framework is only the beginning; the commitment and work continue. We still meet three or four times a semester, and we offer training for other faculty. Our students' chatter is laced with critical thinking terminology, and our collaborative process is focused on learning—ours and our students. Our research is promising, but inconclusive. What we can say unequivocally is that the collaborative CTI work of the last four years has resulted in an affirming bond among the faculty in various disciplines. We want our students to think and carry that intellectual activity beyond the classroom—ultimately, the point of education.

Members of the Critical Thinking Initiative:
Rosemary S. Carlson, Lyndel P. Colglazier, RoxAnn Davenport, Susan Kamphaus, Lori Mayberry, Terry McDevitt, Jacalyn Swicegood, Diane Trimble, Patty Smith, and Steven Woods

For further information, contact Lyndel P. Colglazier at Tulsa Community College, 7505 W. 41st., Tulsa, OK 74107. Email: pcolglaz@tulsacc.edu

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
February 26, 2010, Vol. XXXII, No. 6

Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, 1 University Station, D5600, Austin, Texas 78712-0378, (512) 471-7545, Email: abstracts@nisod.org