

Student Engagement through Faculty Engagement: Faculty Learning Communities as Professional Development

REEVES SHULSTAD

As a graduate student at The Florida State University (FSU), I served as one of Douglass Seaton's research and teaching assistants, and under his supervision, I received invaluable instruction and guidance in music history pedagogy. Douglass was very methodical in his instruction, asking his assistants to observe his music literature and music history courses before instructing classes of our own. Douglass was generous with his time and resources, sharing his teaching philosophy, his course and lesson plans, and his approach to assessment. We had access to his teaching files and library to help with class preparation. Regular discussions about pedagogy eventually included other teaching assistants, and I became a mentor to others who came after me. Douglass is committed to the art of teaching and has a passion for sharing and expanding his knowledge about the process. The dynamic he established with me and other teaching assistants was that of a community dedicated to finding compelling ways to convey musical style and history to students.

The meaningful collaboration I experienced at FSU created an appreciation for professional development with long-lasting impact, and I have recently benefitted from returning to that high level of collaboration with my colleagues in a Faculty Learning Community (FLC). FLCs are long-term, sustainable groups investigating pedagogy in higher education. This article reveals the way in which such a community facilitated my research on student engagement in introductory music courses with large enrollments. Through my ongoing involvement with this group, I redesigned a course in order to strengthen

Research for this article was supported by Appalachian State University's Faculty Development Office and the Hayes School of Music. Portions of this paper have been presented at the 2012 National College Music Society meeting, the 2013 Mid-Atlantic Regional College Music Society meeting, and the 2013 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning conference. I would like to thank Kate Brinko and William Pelto for their support and Tracy Smith, Jennifer Snodgrass, and Jennifer L. Hund for their guidance and feedback on this project.

Journal of Music History Pedagogy, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 273–81. ISSN 2155-1099X (online)

© 2014, *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*, licensed under CC BY 3.0

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)

students' understanding of course goals and developed tools that help me track student engagement throughout the semester.

Faculty Learning Communities

In his 1993 article “Teaching as Community Property: Putting an End to Pedagogical Solitude,” Lee Shulman, Professor of Education at Stanford University and past president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, contrasts faculty experiences in their disciplines (where they typically have long-term connections with people and publications) with their experiences with pedagogy (where faculty often grapple with issues and problems in closed classrooms).¹ Shulman advocates for discussions and research of pedagogy to become community property—a value shared by all faculty that deserves the attention of all involved. Creating an FLC focused on pedagogy provides one solution to combat “pedagogical solitude,” and to maximize the FLC’s utility, members must be willing to honestly discuss challenges they have faced in the classroom. In her book *Learning Community: Finding Common Ground in Difference*, Patricia Calderwood states, “Because community is such a fragile state, the ways that group members heed its vulnerabilities and fragilities offer the opportunity to develop the habits and practices that protect and deepen the social relations of community. This is counterintuitive to the notion that community within a group is strong because commonalities indicate strength and resilience.”²

Milton Cox, the Associate Director of the Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching, and University Assessment at Miami University, Ohio as well as the founder of the Lily Conferences on College Teaching, began developing learning communities over thirty years ago and has published extensively on ways to establish a variety of FLCs.³ The benefits of being part of a learning community are manifold and come largely from the long-term relationships members develop with one another as well as the resulting meaningful

1. Lee S. Shulman, “Teaching as Community Property: Putting an End to Pedagogical Solitude,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 25, no. 6 (November/December, 1993): 6.

2. Patricia Calderwood, *Learning Community: Finding Common Ground in Difference* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2000), 3.

3. A special issue of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* entitled *Building Faculty Learning Communities* provides a blueprint for creating and assessing FLCs and how to they can be effective over the long term. Two articles from this collection are Laurie Richlin and Milton Cox, “Developing Scholarly Teaching: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning through Faculty Learning Communities,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 97 (Spring 2004): 127–35 and Muriel Blaisdell and Milton Cox, “Midcareer and Senior Faculty Learning Communities: Learning throughout Faculty Careers,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 97 (Spring 2004): 137–48. Other resources include the Faculty Development website of the University of Miami, Ohio, <http://www.units.muohio.edu/flc/>.

pedagogical discussions, which may be nearly non-existent at some institutions. Different types of FLCs function in various ways. A community can respond to a group-identified issue or can proactively address new pedagogies. These communities can be either discipline-specific or trans-disciplinary.

A Model Learning Community at Appalachian State

In 2011, Appalachian State University's Faculty Development office piloted a program referred to as the Scholarly Teaching Academy. The call specified that applicants should already be successful in the classroom and ready to work on self-identified pedagogical issues through a faculty learning community facilitated by a professor in the College of Education.⁴ While intended for more seasoned faculty with a track record of successful teaching, it was open to faculty at all levels and in all departments. The application for a place in the Academy required applicants to describe the self-identified project and provide a curriculum vitae and letters of recommendation from the Dean and colleagues. If accepted, participants agreed to two-year commitments working with this group.

After completing a comparative analysis of each of the accepted members applications, the facilitator chose pedagogies to discuss in monthly meetings based on group needs. These included threshold concepts, Paideia seminars, incubator presentations, and presence pedagogy.⁵ Along with our discussions of these different pedagogies, each member of the group worked on an individual project, putting together a plan of goals, research, and action.

4. "Faculty and Academic Development: Scholarly Teaching Academy," <http://hubbard.appstate.edu/scholarly-teaching-academy>.

5. Glynis Cousin, "An Introduction to Threshold Concepts," *Planet 17* (December 2006): 4–5. Cousin discusses avoidance of stuffing curriculum so that students have room to grasp threshold concepts. This article reinforced my belief that more is not better and providing space along with various assessment opportunities for students to grapple with the course content allows for the material covered to have more staying power.

Paideia Active Learning, <http://www.paideia.org>. Paideia Seminar is a collaborative, intellectual dialogue organized by open-ended questions about a text. A facilitator poses open-ended questions about a text and then takes notes on the discussion. The facilitator does not interject into the discussion unless facilitation is needed. The facilitator reports back to the group at the end of the discussion.

Incubator presentations provides a opportunity for a colleague to present a pedagogical issue, listen to the group discuss the issue, and then respond to the discussion.

Stephen Bronack, et. al., "Presence Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning in a 3D Virtual Immersive World," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 20, no. 1 (2008): 59–69, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ895226.pdf>. Presence pedagogy is a concept developed by IT faculty at ASU regarding Virtual Learning Communities. Students become involved in a 3D virtual world and they can remain in that world as long as they are participating in the learning and creating of knowledge.

Student Engagement: Course Goals and the Student Engagement Interview Protocol

My project for the academy was student engagement in general education courses with large enrollments. Every semester, I teach Introduction to World Music, a course with an enrollment of seventy-five students and a mix of music majors and non-music majors who take the course as a General Education requirement. We meet in a dimly-lit recital hall, which creates distance between the instructor and the students and also limits the ways students can interact with each other. The limitations of this classroom, the diversity of student backgrounds, and the number of students rendered the pedagogical approaches I had developed in smaller, more malleable classrooms ineffective. In smaller classes, I had developed a de-centered classroom, allowing for more student involvement and less lecturing.⁶ In classes with large enrollments and spatial limitations, I could not effectively evaluate student comprehension through class discussion because students were more reluctant to speak in a large room and were not in a position to make eye contact with other students. Small group discussions could not be created spontaneously, as I had successfully done in the past with smaller classes.⁷ I had been teaching for a long time with no trouble developing a rapport with students, so it was an odd experience to feel so disconnected.

As part of the work with the Scholarly Teaching Academy, each participant developed a Teaching Excellence Plan. During our monthly meetings, members of the Academy shared their progress on their plans and received feedback from the group. Feedback included suggestions on organization, solidifying outcomes and goals, and creating bibliographies. The facilitator scheduled individual time with each member to discuss their plans in more detail. A condensed version of my teaching excellence plan to create a more dynamic classroom environment that will inspire learning in courses with large enrollment is shown in **Table 1**. The rest of the plan included identifying potential resources, a plan for evaluating the project, and a list of proposed deliverables.

6. Several articles were helpful to me in this process, including Pamela Starr, "Teaching in the Centrifugal Classroom," in *Teaching Music History*, ed. Mary Natvig (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 169–80 and Pamela L. Caughie and Richard Pearce, "Resisting 'The Dominance of the Professor': Gendered Teaching, Gendered Subjects," in *Feminist Pedagogy: Looking Back to Move Forward*, ed. Robbin D. Crabtree, David Alan Sapp, Adela C. Licona (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 27–39.

7. Jennifer L. Hund discusses similar issues in large sections of music appreciation in her article "Writing about Music in Large Music Appreciation Classrooms using Active Learning, Discipline Specific Skills and Peer Review," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2012), 117–18, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/41/88>.

Table 1: Teaching excellence plan.

I. Objective	Become more effective at engaging student participation in larger classes
Action	Investigate new technology that actively engages students and hone my skills on the technology I am currently using
Action	Research pedagogy on using groups in the classroom
Outcome	Use technology and small groups more effectively to enhance student learning in classes with large enrollments
II. Objective	Create assessments that will challenge and encourage students while allowing me to more effectively assess student comprehension
Action	Investigate different types of curriculum design including Backwards Design and Assessment Alignment
Action	Investigate alternative types of testing/presentations of course knowledge
Outcome	Connect class assignments to course goals and objectives more effectively Assess course outcomes more effectively by developing and improving tests, quizzes, and other assignments

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's *Understanding by Design and Schooling by Design* proved to be the most helpful resources in dealing with my second objective.⁸ Using their concept of backwards design to revamp my course, I identified the desired results for the course, determined acceptable evidence, and planned learning experiences and instruction around the first two.⁹ As a result, I made more room throughout the course to discuss one of the important over-arching goals, students' awareness and critical evaluation of their own ethnocentrism. Not only is this an important goal in and of itself, but is also closely aligned to several of the Learning Outcomes of my institution's general education program. In past semesters of teaching this course, I emphasized this goal at the beginning of the course but neglected it and then had run out of time at the end of the course to really allow for contemplation, relegating student responses to a forum that became too tedious for me to deal with due to the number of students. The re-design created more space throughout the semester to approach ethnocentrism and allowed a full class period at the end of the semester for this discussion, preceded by students writing individual

8. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2006) and *Schooling by Design: Mission, Action, and Achievement* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007).

9. Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 18.

responses that I could easily read beforehand. I found that students were able to discuss this issue more comprehensively at the end of the course and to apply the knowledge they had gained more effectively.

The other objective involved measuring student engagement during a class session. In the beginning of the course, students are engaged as I take them through the elements of music. This part of the class is very participatory: we sing, play rhythms with various percussion instruments, and study examples of popular music when learning about musical elements. The lack of engagement I experienced in previous semesters became an issue when we began delving into the music of specific cultures. Many of my class periods were too lecture-heavy and desperately needed time and space for students to interact with each other in order to reveal how much of the content they truly understood and how they would respond to various concepts.

Understanding how students respond to different class activities is an important part of the process of actively engaging them during a class session. Developing a Student Engagement Interview Protocol gave me a tool to better understand this perspective.¹⁰ After receiving feedback from faculty in the Academy along with other colleagues and students in the course, I improved the Student Engagement Interview Protocol to gather information.¹¹ My version of the protocol is shown in the Appendix.

I have used the protocol for three semesters in the same class session in the syllabus, which also includes a PowerPoint slideshow accompanied by my lecture, a short documentary film, small group discussions, and a short quiz. The responses to questions below have been the most helpful towards my own goals:

- Which aspects of the class session did you find to be the most engaging?
- What did you find to be the least engaging in the class session?

Students in all three classes ranked the documentary film highest overall as the most engaging element, and ranked the lecture as the least engaging element. The students' perceptions of the group discussions, however, were split. **Table 2** shows the percentages of the responses for the last two questions. Assembling students into groups is a challenge in the recital hall, but the data suggests that

10. The following source provided several resources and examples to help develop the interview protocol: Wanda K. Baker, Lloyd Bond, John A. Hattie, and Tracy Smith, *Certification System of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: A Construct and Consequential Validity Study* (Greensboro, NC: Center for Research and Evaluation, 2000), Appendix C. Thank you to Tracy Smith for directing me towards that source.

11. I would like to thank Tracy Smith and Jennifer L. Hund for their invaluable input on this protocol.

it is a component of the class that keeps some students engaged.¹² Part of my design for next semester will be to focus more on teaching students how to benefit from group discussions.

Table 2: Responses to student interview protocol.¹³

Which aspects of the class session did you find to be the most engaging?			
Answer	Spring 2012	Spring 2013	Fall 2013
	31 respondents	42 respondents	43 respondents
Group Discussions	32%	32%	18%
Visual Supplements	13%	76%	64%
Listening Examples	26%	0%	18%
Lecture	3%	0%	7%

What did you find to be the least engaging in the class session?			
Answer	Spring 2012	Spring 2013	Fall 2013
	31 respondents	42 respondents	43 respondents
Group Discussions	23%	30%	21%
Visual Supplements	0%	7%	0%
Lecture/Note Taking	39%	34%	24%
Nothing	16%	9%	39%

The other piece of data that has been helpful for me has been the students' perception of their engagement. The majority of the students perceive themselves to be completely or mostly engaged during the class period. I am still distant from the students in terms of space and unable to read their expressions, but I have some kind of quantitative, albeit self-reported, evidence that they are connecting to the material in class.

The re-design of the course and the interview protocol enable me to continue to track the level of engagement in this course, and the disconnection I felt has disappeared. Feedback from the students will allow me to continue to fine-tune the small group discussion portion of the class. Reinforcing overall course goals by connecting these discussions to other assessments has made the class much more cohesive.¹⁴

12. Ways to improve group discussions are included in Elizabeth Barkley's *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Chapter 9, "Tips and Strategies for Building Community," has been the most helpful.

13. Not all answers are included in this data as some were only 1% or less each time or only appeared once.

14. Other aspects of my teaching have been impacted by my involvement with the Scholarly Teaching Academy as well. I have been introduced to a variety of pedagogical ideas that I

Level of Engagement	
I was completely engaged during the entire class. I followed the lecture, understood the connection between audio/visual examples and the topics for today, and found the group discussion helpful to my understanding of the topics.	5
I was engaged during most of the class. I followed most of the lecture, understood the connection between the audio/visual examples and the topics for today, and found the group discussion helpful to my understanding of the topics.	4
I was engaged during the class. I followed most of the lecture, understood the connection between the audio/visual examples and the topics for today to some extent, and found the group discussion to be somewhat helpful to my understanding of the topics.	3
I was not completely engaged during the class. I followed some of the lecture, understood some of the connections between the audio/visual examples and topics for today, and found the group discussion to be somewhat helpful to my understanding of the topics.	2
I was not engaged during this class period.	1

1. Which aspects of the class session did you find to be the most engaging?

- Group Discussions
- Visual Supplements
- Listening Examples
- Lecture

2. What did you find to be the least engaging in the class session?

- Group Discussions
- Visual Supplements
- Lecture/Note Taking
- Nothing