

Creating a Community of Learners Among College Faculty Through the Use of Reflective Practice

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“I have a student in my class who came with a generic list of “accommodations” that I’m supposed to provide. It seems pretty sketchy. Are there some things I ought to know in order to best meet this student’s needs?”

“The students in my large intro class fall asleep, turn in poor work, and seem disinterested in the material. I know I should be doing something other than lecturing, but how can I make the class more engaging while still covering all the material I need to?”

“I have my students do a group project at the end of the semester. Would rubrics be a way to assess each student’s contribution to that project and have them evaluate one another’s work as well?”

These questions probably sound

familiar. You might think we heard them in the faculty lounge of our high school, but we didn’t. These are the kinds of questions that seven faculty members wrestled with during their first year as members of a “Reflective Practice Group” (RP) at the University of New Hampshire, one of four New Hampshire higher education institutions that participated in a project called “Equity and Excellence in Higher Education,” that supporting faculty efforts to restructure their teaching practices to improve post-secondary outcomes for diverse students.

Today’s college students represent greater diversity than ever before: some are just out of high school, some took a few years off to work, some represent linguistic and cultural diversity, and others are making mid-life

career changes. All of our students have ‘special needs’ and we’re determined to learn how to meet them. The structured and unstructured conversations that faculty had in their RP groups was one strategy used to meet these needs for the ultimate purpose of improving student learning and performance.

A member of an RP group may want suggestions and feedback about the design of a course syllabus, a teaching strategy, course materials, the best use of technology, a design for an experiment, ideas for an end-of-course final project, or strategies to support a student with particularly challenging learning needs. She may want to look at the work that students produce and ask the question “Did they learn what I think I taught?”

Dr. Meg Peterson, a faculty member in the English Department at

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NSRF and the First Amendment Schools

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Representatives from eleven schools used NSRF practices to collaboratively think about their action plans as part of the First Amendment School Initiative, a multiyear reform effort sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the First Amendment Center. Meeting in Washington D.C., this July, administrators, teachers, parents and students were asked to work towards creating schools in which students could learn and practice the civic habits necessary to sustain a free and democratic society. Participants welcomed the opportunity to use the Tuning Protocol as a tool to facilitate cross group conversations and learning. Many praised the mini-CFG training workshop and follow-up sessions as a high point in the three day meeting.

First Amendment Schools are schools which strive to enact the following four guiding principles:

- 1 - to create laboratories of democratic freedom in which students have ample opportunity to practice democracy;
- 2 - to commit to inalienable rights and civic responsibility especially those



- rights listed in the First Amendment;
- 3 - to include all stake holders to work towards the common good in schools and communities; and
- 4 - to translate civic education into community engagement encouraging students to become active participants in public life.

Harmony School was picked as one of the first eleven schools. The other chosen sites represent a diverse cross section of America including

elementary, middle and high schools; public, independent and charter schools and rural, urban and suburban schools.

A follow-up meeting is planned for next summer so participants will have a chance to learn from each others’ experiences. In the meantime, schools will be involved in electronic conversations and there may be some cross school visitations. As their facilitator, I was impressed with their ambitious action plans. The rumor is that they want to use the Consultancy Protocol next time. ❖

For more information about this exciting new project, go to <http://webserver2.ascd.org/web/firstamendment/FLASHINTRO.cfm>.

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