Faculty Learning Community in Maritime Teaching

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Abstract

This paper shares the issues of planning and implementing the establishment of a faculty learning community for maritime (business) administration and marine transportation faculty. A faculty learning community provides a forum for the faculty to reflect on and discuss improving the teaching portion of their scholarly role. Furthermore, the community allows a sharing of ideas and experiences in a more formal way than is generally experienced in maritime departments and academies.

The paper provides an evaluation of the accomplishments and failures of the community after two years of meetings. The focus here is placed on the unique issues experienced in teaching students for a professional life in the maritime industry. Topics discussed by the maritime faculty learning community include the appropriate way to use case method teaching; the “which and when” of using simulations; the benefits and risks of faculty peer review programs particularly as they relate to professionally trained (licensed) faculty; evoking a classroom response by students with emphasis on the adult learning issues unique to undergraduates who already have sea experience; the proper use of assessment in the classroom and the revision of curriculum.

Since the implementation of the faculty learning community, we find a change in the attitudes of faculty participating in the community. Further we find an increase in campus respect toward the faculty participating. Faculty have observed an increase of trust in fellow colleagues, an increase in participation in
the community by additional faculty and an increase in acceptance of the unique role of professional faculty by the campus. We also observe that the community has provided a forum to discuss better integrating the curriculum goals across classes and sections of the same class.

Key words: Faculty learning community; faculty development

Introduction

Faculty in maritime education must not only maintain skills in theoretical aspects of maritime related disciplines but also in the practical, professional and vocational practice of the industry. This often leaves little time for the study of pedagogy. Often, best practices in teaching are not fully explored in the classroom; and new approaches in technique and skill or presentation are not attempted. Yet all maritime faculty wish to be better teachers. Therefore, opportunities which fit the special needs of maritime faculty must be provided to assist faculty in refining their teaching skills. These opportunities must be embedded into the rigorous schedules of academy life.

Further, with the trend in emphasis on the measurement of improved student learning, faculty must better understand the learning process. One way to better understand learning is to actively and continually experience the process. This experience can be accomplished through the establishment and participation in a faculty learning community. A learning community embedded within a maritime academy or academic department can help faculty who have daily interaction abroad ship or in the classroom to formalize and focus the sharing of similar experiences and problems in getting students to learn. It can also help new faculty in assimilating into the organizational culture of a maritime academy
through the sharing of experiences, and transition those new faculty into the specialized teaching needs of maritime education.

**What is the Faculty Learning Community?**

A faculty learning community is a venue for faculty to reflect on the teaching portion of their scholarly role and share ideas with colleagues (Center for Teaching Excellence, 2006). Using a collaborative approach, participants explore and broaden their understanding of learning and then apply this knowledge as they investigate alternative approaches to teaching (Center for Teaching Excellence, 2005). Further, “faculty learning communities create connections for isolated teachers, establish networks for those pursuing pedagogical issues, meet early-career faculty expectations for the community, foster multidisciplinary curricula, and begin to bring community to higher education” (Cox, 2004). Angelo (1999) notes that learning communities are carefully designed groupings of faculty intensively and collaboratively organized toward shared, significant learning goals – often by focusing on themes that cut across several traditional themes.

In other words, a faculty learning community provides an opportunity to explore learning from multiple perspectives (Layne, et. al, 2002). Faculty learning communities provide what one-day workshops and training sessions cannot. Most college teacher have at least an intuitive understanding of student learning (Bain, 2004) so faculty can help each other with the improving of student learning-based teaching. Further, sustained interaction (Layne, et. al, 2002) among the faculty members leads to trust and connection and the willingness to share good and bad war stories to enhance the intuition that the faculty member already has with confirmation of appropriate pedagogy.
Goals and Planning for the Development of the Community

The primary motivator and focus of most faculty learning communities is the scholarship of teaching and learning (Richlin and Cox, 2004). This was the case for the Texas A & M University at Galveston (A & M) maritime faculty who wished to expand their repertoire of teaching strategies. Additionally, one of the impetuses of the development of this community was compliance with the proposed Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) candidacy accreditation requirement that faculty engage in development activities and scholarly and professional activities including the scholarship of teaching (ACBSP, 2004). Many faculty members engage in traditional research and professional content development. However, there is a general lack of development of teaching skills. Further, the A & M maritime faculty envisioned that the learning community would be a friendlier forum for adjunct faculty to engage in these activities.

Support for the faculty efforts at A & M was very good. On the campus, the Assistant Vice President for Academic Services, Dr. Donna Lang, encouraged the formation of the community. Further, Texas A & M University developed a university-wide program on faculty learning communities. Dr. Prudence Merton, Director of the Texas A & M University Center for Teaching Excellence, visited the maritime departments and explained the various resources available. As a result of faculty discussions with the Teaching Center, the maritime faculty decided to set an agenda for the learning community and create a schedule of meetings based upon the membership’s particular and peculiar schedules.
Evolution and Implementation of the Community

The Marine Transportation (MART) and Maritime Administration (MARA) departments at Texas A & M University at Galveston share the same department chairman and, as such, the departments share faculty meetings on many issues. At our initial faculty meeting of the 2005-2006 academic year, the possibility of starting a faculty learning community was discussed. The authors of this paper described the community as an opportunity for faculty to reflect on the teaching portion of their scholarly role and share ideas with colleagues. We also discussed the need for compliance with the “scholarship of teaching” under ACBSP, and the Standards for Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) accreditation, and how this community could assist us with that compliance. It was determined by the faculty, as a whole, that as a natural extension of this joint faculty relationship, the learning community would include both department faculty. Further the community would initially be limited to these departments on the campus so as to allow us to focus on the particular needs of maritime education. It was decided, however, that the Assistant Vice President for Academic Services would be invited to the community’s meetings in order to continue to encourage administration support.

Scheduling was difficult due to the number of adjunct faculty and evening classes offered in our programs. E-mail responses were solicited from all faculty members as to the best meeting time. It was determined that the time of the meetings would alternate between lunch and earlier evening one day a month. The time of the meetings was initially limited to one hour per meeting to encourage attendance.

At the initial meeting, volunteers were solicited to serve as leaders for meetings scheduled during the academic year. The leader could choose from the faculty
A list of suggested topics, yet to be determined at this first meeting, or determine his/her own topic. The initial meeting also set the agenda discussed below.

An e-mail was sent by the meeting’s leader to the entire maritime and marine transportation faculty a week prior to each meeting. The email noted the topic and attached any handouts or readings. RSVP’s were requested and generally were received. The authors of this paper served as overall coordinators of the learning community to ensure that each meeting time had a leader and topic.

After several months, it was determined that attendance was best in the late afternoon or early evening due to faculty scheduling conflicts. Therefore, late afternoon on the third Thursday of the month evolved as the permanent meeting time. Also, faculty who are not able to attend meetings requested the materials provided in the meetings and asked particular leaders for clarification about the meeting session via e-mail.

**Agenda of the Community**

The members of the faculty determined the agenda of the new learning community. The members wanted topics that were grounded in theory but practical in maritime classroom application. Prior to the first meeting, an e-mail was sent to all faculty members to solicit suggested topics for the community. Many suggestions were made. However, there was one consistent suggestion. The consistent suggestion was to have one topic per meeting. The leader who volunteered for a particular meeting could decide which, if any, readings were appropriate. Further, the faculty suggested that the anticipated best result for a meeting would be when the leader prepared a presentation and/or handouts that the faculty could discuss without prior preparation.
The initial topics suggested by the faculty members included active learning techniques, classroom management issues, educational grants, case teaching methods, learning objectives – measurement and embedding objectives into daily class activities, distance learning techniques, millennial generation expectations in learning, learning styles and techniques to adjust to each in the classroom, feedback – when, from whom, and how often, and teaching using groups. These topics were of particular interest to our maritime faculty as most teaching focuses on experiential student learning. Techniques and methods that emphasize this type of learning were considered a priority for the community so the initial list was revised by further faculty discussion to include pitfalls experienced using simulations and evoking a classroom response by students with emphasis on adult learning issues unique to undergraduates who already have sea experience.

Further assistance on setting an agenda was sought from the Center for Teaching Excellence at Texas A & M University as mentioned above. The Center has a regular program of faculty learning communities in College Station and offered the model to the maritime learning community along with a reading list (Clark, 2005). After review of the information from the Center, the faculty decided to be less formal in the approach to the community and focus on building collegiality and addressing the specific needs of our maritime students. However, the Center did encourage the community to consider discussing the proper use of assessment in the classroom and the benefits and risks of faculty peer review programs particularly as they relate to professionally trained faculty. These two topics were and are a priority for the entire university. The faculty felt that the community would best tackle these two topics of assessment and peer review after it was established and collegiality was established.
The faculty also felt that assistance with technology in teaching was needed. The faculty learning community asked the Computer Information Systems faculty support staff member, Jennifer Willingham, to train the maritime faculty in the use of the university’s web-based blackboard, WebCT, and the specific advantages for its use in maritime studies. Due to the flexibility needs of professionally trained and adjunct faculty, WebCT can provide additional flexibility and scheduling freedom for students and faculty.

Curriculum revision and development has been one of the most significant items discussed in the faculty learning community. There were three motivations for the revisions and development: our hope of ACBSP accreditation, the Texas legislative requirement for 120 hour limit on all bachelors degrees awarded by Texas state universities, and the United States Coast Guard/Maritime Administration (USCG/MARAD) audit under STCW.

**Membership in the Community**

Membership in the learning community has increased over time. Most of the full-time faculty members have participated in at least one activity of the community. Further, we have seen a variety of new members participate as time continued. Professionally trained faculties are as well represented in the learning community activities as traditionally trained faculty. However, the community continues to suffer from poor attendance by adjunct faculty. Comments from the adjunct faculty members as to why they do not participate include time constraints and a lack of incentive to participate, i.e., no additional compensation. Furthermore, it is not evident that these nonparticipating faculty members are using other means for developing and improving their teaching skills.
Accomplishments and Failures

The case study approach was discussed in one of the first meetings since real life situation experience is critical for maritime students. Issues of selecting the right cases, integrating the cases appropriately into the required course content and evaluating student performance on the casework were debated. Further, the faculty agreed to use more cases in their classes to help students with broader skills such as critical thinking, reasoning and writing. Cases are extensively used in the maritime curriculum in more advanced courses, however, the faculty noted in the community discussion that short, less complex cases could be and are used in sophomore level courses.

During the community discussion regarding evoking student response in the classroom, the faculty addressed the difference between the student’s expectation for the classroom and the faculty’s expectation. Faculty generally wanted to “tell the students” their various wisdoms whereas students wanted to “get a good grade.” The community determined that it is doing work together that is important, particularly as we train students for maritime logistics and transportation. Faculty determined through discussion that collaborative assignment similar to the activities of the faculty learning community foster faculty and students working together to learn. Further, the faculty determined that teaching outside the classroom for maritime students is as important as the classroom. Activities such as the Propeller Club (a student industry organization) and assisting with job placement, as well as advising, helped students become comfortable in the classrooms of faculty who engage in such outside activities.

In discussing the use of web-based business simulations, the faculty explored the strategies to use more simulations in maritime courses outside the already training simulation courses. Several business simulations were discussed, and
the faculty looked at products that try to integrate the shore side of the industry with the transportation side. Further, the customers of the maritime industry have changed, and demand continues to increase due to globalization. The learning community wanted to look at inexpensive ways to provide students real life experiences on these changing conditions.

The faculty decided to integrate a capstone strategy simulation in a separate course that gives the students various scenarios of changing demand conditions integrating all functions of an organization. This decision was made for two reasons. First, simulations give consistent feedback across the student population and are relatively easy to implement. Second, a strategy-based simulation can better focus on the evolving pooling phenomena observed in the blue water part of the industry through faculty research.

The second year of the community began with the community sponsoring WebCT training by the Computer Information Systems faculty support staff for all maritime faculty members in the first general faculty meeting. This tool was shown to provide freedom for faculty and allow students additional help outside the classroom. It was shown to be of particular use to the adjunct faculty.

Another major issue addressed by the community was the implementation of a peer review program for the MART-MARA faculty. The faculty members discussed the benefits, design and implementation of a program within the departments. Two major issues emerged. The first issue dealt with the methods of evaluation. The second issue addressed incentives for faculty to participate in a peer review program. Generally, the faculty agreed that a collaborative peer review program which is developmental not judgmental would be in keeping with the new spirit of learning to improve our teaching that began with the implementation of the faculty learning community. Further, faculty decided that
the mutual trust that faculty members had for each other with grew through the learning community activities would serve as an incentive to participate in a peer review program in which faculty members directly observe each other in the classroom. Success in the classroom would be measured by criteria consistent with student learning outcomes.

The curriculum was revised over the course of four learning community meetings in the second year. At this point in the life of the community, faculty members were more comfortable with each other and with sharing what actually happens in their classrooms. Much of the revision benefited from discussions on what is actually being taught in the class and the students’ positive and negative reactions to the material and process. Professionally and traditionally trained faculty members discussed their biases toward material they felt important to students. As a result, the curriculum was revised to allow student to choose two different tracks and/or more electives. The first track included more traditional economic and financial theory courses whereas the second track emphasized maritime operations and logistics. Therefore, the students now have a choice to enter the maritime industry through the financial side as well as the operational side. Further, discussions continue with the community as to what emphasis will be placed on brown- verses blue-water operations. Finally, since the community provided a forum for faculty to discuss what content is actually delivered in various classes, both departments now review curriculum revisions with an eye to better integrating the curriculum goals across all classes and all sections of the same class.

The biggest accomplishment of the maritime faculty learning community is the change in faculty attitude through participation. The changed attitudes are toward teaching and toward each other. The faculty has reported an increase of trust in fellow colleagues. There has been a better building of the social network
across the professionally and traditionally trained faculty as well. This is manifested through an increase in reaching across disciplines and departments for help in the classroom and other roles. For example, the marine transportation faculty asked for assistance from the maritime administration faculty during the last STCW accreditation audit. The maritime administration faculty seeks help from the marine transportation faculty in working with the Cadets’ unusual schedules and difficult work demands.

Most notably, however, the campus now views the learning community effort as a serious commitment by the professionally trained maritime faculty to improve their craft and participate in activities outside the immediate classroom. For example, there has been a change on the campus to include more professionally trained faculty in committee assignments and leadership roles of committees such as the curriculum committee, which in the past tended to be reserved for traditionally trained faculty. One of the professionally trained faculty remarked, “we are not viewed as much as the blue collar faculty” (A. Roth, personal communication, September 20, 2006).

**Future Directions**

The maritime faculty learning community continues to discuss the implementation of the peer review process, which, as a result of the collegial bonds formed in the learning community, appears to be more widely accepted by the maritime faculty. Further, future emphasis in the community will be placed on issues of adult learners as the department expands into graduate programs and more veterans appear on the A & M campus.

The community would like to bring an element of assessment to the faculty learning community. Assessment embedded in the learning community can determine whether teaching and, more importantly, student learning is improving.
Within the learning community, faculty will continue to answer questions they have formulated in response to issues in their own teaching experience (Angelo and Cross, 1993).

The faculty learning community has proved to be a good resource for faculty to learn how to improve their teaching. It has assisted the faculty with overcoming their preconceptions on how to improve their teaching. The community discussed expanding the community to include other departments on our campus. Texas A & M University at Galveston is primarily a teaching institution with a healthy research record, and the learning community has enhanced an appreciation in the faculty participants for the skills related to the many dimensions of teaching. What began as an initiative for the accreditation process has become a place where there is recognition of what it is central to the role as faculty on the A & M campus.

References


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