

Using Learning Circles to Support Faculty Professional Development

Introduction

Learning Circles at Utah State University (USU) were developed to encourage collaboration and learning among faculty with a teaching appointment. These small groups, consisting of 4 to 8 members, meet regularly (4 to 6 times during a semester) to discuss research and books and to share ideas related to the implementation of new teaching strategies and improvement of teaching skills. Studies have shown that faculty involved in learning groups for two or more years reported feeling less loneliness, more emotional safety, and a stronger sense of belongingness in the workplace (Himelein and Anderson, 2020). Collay et al. (1998) suggest that instructors form Learning Circles based on six conditions that promote healthy communities: building a community with other learners, using personal experience to construct knowledge, supporting reflection, documenting reflections on personal experiences, assessing instructor expectations, and improving the culture in the classroom. Here, we describe the creation of our long-term Learning Circle and explore how it has contributed to professional development and enhanced our teaching experience and job satisfaction.

Procedure

Our Learning Circle was initially organized by instructional designers in the Empowering Teaching Excellence Program at Utah State University. The members of this group initially came together for a six-week period to discuss the book "Hitting Pause: 65 Lecture Breaks to Refresh and Reinforce Learning," by Gail Taylor Rice. Our Learning Circle was composed of seven USU instructors from various disciplines within the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences and the College of Education and Human Services. Participants had diverse position titles and ranks (e.g., extension associate professor, assistant professor, professional practice associate professor, lecturer, and graduate teaching assistant), teaching roles, and teaching assignments in terms of class sizes and delivery formats. Two instructional designers at our institution initiated the first meeting and suggested the book for review and teaching improvement. Since that time in 2018, our Learning Circle has continued to meet on a regular basis. Meeting frequency has evolved based on availability but has averaged once per month throughout the academic calendar.

To form a Learning Circle, faculty should first join or organize a group of instructors committed to improving their teaching pedagogy. This group may be assembled within a specific unit, department, college or across the institution. Determine dates, times, and frequency of

Learning Circle meetings (i.e., every 3 to 4 weeks), what will be discussed (e.g., book, articles, a presentation, innovative ideas, feedback, etc.), and how group members will divide their work. For example, one or two group members could be assigned to lead the discussion at each meeting, or one group member could function as the facilitator for every meeting. Encourage participation and inclusion of more reserved or less-experienced members.

Ideally, it would be best to not only reflect and discuss pedagogical strategy, but also determine how specific ideas and approaches may be implemented by group members. Formulate a plan to measure the impacts or outcomes of those approaches. For example, our group relies upon providing direct or indirect peer evaluations, instructional feedback, publishing scholarly works, or presenting at teaching conferences.

Results

One year after beginning our Learning Circle, we reflected on our experience together. Here is a sample of some of our comments: 1) "Participation in this Learning Circle was one of the best professional development experiences of my career, not to mention by far the most enjoyable." 2) "This Learning Circle allowed me to connect with and be inspired by colleagues I may otherwise have not crossed paths with." 3) "Our Learning Circle provided me a safe environment to share my successes and failures as an instructor. It has been a source of inspiration for me when I make changes to my courses." 4) "Being part of this learning circle has been a game-changer. It's given me new ideas and energy, encouraged me to try new things, and helped me become a more intentional teacher. But more than that, I now have a new 'tribe'—a community of friends that I can count on, collaborate with, and go to when I need help, encouragement, advice, or added perspective."

Overall, our experience as members of a Learning Circle has been very positive and our meetings continue to this day (three years later). As a group, we have presented at multiple teaching conferences on an institutional, regional, and national level. In those presentations we have discussed the value of Learning Circles and the concepts and teaching methods we implemented because of the books and literature we have read and reviewed. We have also developed a formal Peer Evaluation Form based upon principles we have learned and desire to incorporate in our courses more fully. The form has also been helpful for showcasing our performance impacts and informing changes to our instruction and assessment each semester.

Our Learning Circle was the first one at our institution and has been used as a model for other Learning Circles. Since 2018, 36 Learning Circles have been formed at USU with more than 290 total participants. This method of learning and collaboration has proved to not only be effective in improving teaching skills, but also effective in building connections and community among faculty.

Advice to Others

Learning Circles can promote a culture of teaching excellence, exploration, inclusion, and collaboration. They may also be a way to increase job satisfaction and improve connections among faculty.

References

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