

ATD Reviews

A Review of Faculty Development and Student Learning: Assessing the Connections

By William Condon, Ellen R. Iverson, Cathryn A. Manduca, Carol Rutz, and Gudrun Willett, 2016. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP. [ISBN 978-0-253-01878-6. 156 pgs, including index. \$50.00 USD (hardcover).]

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Considering the time, effort, and resources invested in professional development on campuses nationwide, it's worth considering if this investment pays off in improved teaching and learning. With their new book, *Faculty Development and Student Learning: Assessing the Connections*, William Condon, Ellen R. Iverson, Cathryn A. Manduca, Carol Rutz, and Gudrun Willett provide both college instructors and administrators with local evidence that professional development not only improves student learning, but also improves the quality of instruction over time. Noting the earnest response to Richard Haswell's (2005) call to increase the amount of "Replicable, Aggregable, and Data-Supported (RAD) Scholarship," in writing studies, this book provides a valuable model for making "data-supported" claims about the connections between professional development and student learning (201). Given the promising results of this WAC research project, this study is likely to serve as a vital framework for conducting similar research on other campuses. Grounded in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), this book also provides a public acknowledgement of the invaluable contributions of WAC researchers to the rich discussions of pedagogy, teaching practice, and professional development work central to successful undergraduate education on many campuses.

One of the many strengths of the authors' approach is that it allows instructors from a wide variety of programs and institutions to envision themselves engaging in the kinds of professional development scenarios being described. (For the purposes of this project, the authors define faculty development "as any activity that provides faculty and staff with new ideas for teaching (approaches, content, technology, and/or methodologies for assessing learning) or with tools to analyze and improve their current methods" (18).) The authors describe their research as "an extensive mixed-methods study" that takes place on two campuses, Carleton College and Washington State University. Fittingly named the "Tracer Project" because it "traces [. . .] the effects of faculty development into students' learning through course work products and, more generally, into the institutional culture that supports a teaching community," this project seeks to better understand "the relationship between faculty development, teaching practice, and student learning" (2). And, while the two participating institutions bear little resemblance to one another (one is a large state university, the other is a small liberal arts college), the local results of the Tracer

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Project are surprisingly similar—namely, that the benefits of faculty development for both faculty and students are quantifiable and that these benefits are cumulative.

While most of the research on faculty development thus far has relied on “self-reported changes in teaching, stopping short of the ways that faculty bring their new knowledge into their courses” (10), this project provides measurable evidence that faculty development actually does lead to improved instruction and improved student learning. And, although this work could take place anywhere on campus, the site of this study is close to home for instructors working in and around WAC programs: “The study targeted faculty portfolio raters on both campuses, as well as faculty who participated in WAC and/or Critical Thinking at WSU, and WAC and/or Quantitative Inquiry, Reasoning, and Knowledge (QuIRK) at Carleton College” (15). Research participants on both campuses were comprised of portfolio readers and faculty and staff who had participated in either WAC or institution-specific professional development programs; however, approaches to data collection varied on each campus. Because the initial faculty development project at WSU (the Critical Thinking Project) had expired, the focus of data collection there was “on the persistence of faculty learning” whereas data collection at Carleton was “ongoing at the time of the study” (15).

To establish a clear connection between faculty learning and student learning, the researchers crafted a model that traced the connection between faculty development and student work; this “direct path” also functioned as a theoretical framework guiding data collection and analysis. The following research questions emerged for both campuses:

- Do faculty learn as intended at the faculty development workshops?
- Do faculty translate this learning into their teaching?
- Does the improved teaching lead to improved student learning?

The authors also used ethnographic research methods to provide a more “holistic view of faculty development” and to view the data gathered as both situated and contextual in its institutional contexts (29).

With these research and theoretical frameworks in mind, researchers from both campuses interviewed instructors and reviewed their teaching artifacts to determine whether or not it was possible to see evidence of continued development in their work following their engagement in development workshops. The “persistence” of faculty development on both campuses was evident: Instructors reported still using techniques they acquired during their professional development programs and shared that these techniques were being applied to undergraduate and graduate courses. Moreover, instructors reported that their development continued to evolve; researchers noted that this sentiment bore out in the class materials they reviewed. Overall, the researchers observe that improvements in teaching on both campuses “are recognizable in assignments developed long after” the formal development ended (58).

Unexpectedly, the Tracer Project also found that even those faculty who reported that they had not participated in any formal professional development still showed evidence of having been affected by shifts in campus culture and adopted related teaching practices. At WSU, several academic programs who had not initially participated in the Critical Thinking Project created student learning outcomes for their programs after having only heard about the project. Ultimately, there is a kind of communicability to professional development that is heartening to those who labor to create professional development opportunities on their campuses.

However, the real test of faculty development is whether or not there is evidence that student learning is also improving. Prompted by the results of WSU’s Critical Thinking Project, which indicated that “when faculty learn better teaching methods, student learning also improves” (108), the researchers took a closer look at the WAC programs at both institutions. During this process of examination, researchers

discovered that instructors who have attended at least one WAC workshop demonstrated evidence of applying what they learned to their course materials and their students were rated more highly during the critical thinking rating sessions. Instructors who received direct instruction on how to develop better writing assignments were then able to better support their student writers and students were then able to produce better writing, at least in terms of the thinking exhibited in the writing. To support this claim, when it came down to selecting pieces of writing for their Sophomore Writing Portfolios (Carleton) and their Junior Writing Portfolios (WSU), both students and instructors recommended pieces of writing that were produced in classes taught by instructors who had participated in WAC workshops. In short, student work tacitly endorsed the teaching of instructors who had completed WAC training.

The Tracer Project undoubtedly provides the field with evidence that professional development has a positive effect on both teaching and learning. However, Condon et al.'s work also provides an entry point for writing scholars to join conversations about faculty development and, potentially, to craft arguments for raising the profile of the work of WAC and other writing programs. At a moment when there is increased pressure to gather evidence that what we do matters—and matters not just to the field, but to the lives of our many colleagues and stake holders as well—work of this caliber and persuasiveness is increasingly needed. Moreover, research like the Tracer Project provides scholars in WAC, WPA, and writing studies an opportunity to work at the junctures between fields in higher education. And, while this kind of research is complex and time consuming, it does provide fertile ground for critical conversations about the purpose(s) and function(s) of investing in campus cultures of teaching and learning. In an era of ever increasing accountability, institutions of higher education might do well to turn to the expertise of scholars in writing to prove that, at least in the case of professional development, what they do matters and is worth investments of time and money.

References

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