

Chapter 4

Engaging in SoTL Through Faculty Learning Communities: Implementing “Small Teaching Practices” to Improve Graduate Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

In the spirit of the scope of this book, this chapter highlights the potential impact collaborative faculty work can have on course design and pedagogy for online graduate students. The chapter describes the development and implementation of a faculty learning community (FLC) engaged in discussions centered on “small teaching practices” and the knowledge gleaned from the collaborative experience that will inform our practice. Emphasizing collaborative faculty engagement, our Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project has sought to strengthen our online graduate students’ learning experiences and support their learning needs.

INTRODUCTION

As Shulman (2011) offered,

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SOTL is an area of scholarship that does not solve problems once and for all. The challenges of teaching and learning are persistent. They mutate and grow as new disciplines are invented, new challenges of practice emerge and new generations of both students and faculty come to inhabit and define our classrooms and institutions. (p. 6)

As professors who teach an online graduate program, we could not agree more with Shulman's (2011) words. We have firsthand experience with a multiplicity of challenges brought to the educational arena, and our graduate online program is no exception. Due to an ever-increasing online student enrollment fueled by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in March 2020, we are continually faced with the issue of student readiness, student retention, and student success. At the same time, we recognize that high quality online programs are reliant on instructors who understand effective course design and instruction that facilitates positive student performance outcomes (Rapanta et al., 2021). This in turn means that we must be adequately prepared for the virtual learning environment.

To improve our courses and the experiences of our graduate students in the online higher education program, we determined that a formalized collaboration among our program faculty could serve to strengthen our practice and address concerns with student performance. As a result, we created a faculty learning community (FLC), designed to examine theory and the literature, to expand our practice more thoroughly, and as Shulman (1998) endorsed, to share the experiences of our collaboration with the scholarship community. Therefore, it follows that we conceptualize the scholarship of teaching and learning as a channel between theory and praxis. More specifically, we endorse the premise that the scholarship of teaching and learning is about improving our pedagogical content knowledge in the courses we teach to improve student learning via evidence-based approaches (Shulman, 1986, 1987).

BACKGROUND

In preparation and to begin our project, we planned three phases. The goal for the first phase was: 1) to engage in the study of best practices for online graduate courses and 2) to share through collaborative discussion and reflection our insights from reading "small teaching practices" coined by James Lang (Darby & Lang, 2019; Lang, 2016) related to improving the teaching and learning experience. Thus, the first phase chronicled and highlighted our discussions of the readings and the knowledge gained through collaboration. Through shared discussions, we discovered

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