

GUEST EDITORIAL

TEACHING & LEARNING A VIEW FROM THE IVORY TOWER

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As an optometric educator, I sometimes find myself immersed in the literature of teaching and learning. Often an event acts to trigger this immersion. I recently attended a State University of New York, State College of Optometry (SUNY) Faculty Development Conference, where I learned about Faculty Learning Communities (FLC). I am still exploring and learning about FLCs, but it did occur to me that a FLC is very similar to an OEP study group.

A FLC is a group of faculty engaging in an active, collaborative program dedicated to enhancing teaching and learning through a series of discussions and activities. Evidence shows that FLCs increase faculty interest in teaching and learning. Additionally, they can provide safety and support for faculty to investigate, attempt, assess, and adopt new (to them) methods.¹ It is an opportunity for faculty to engage in learning through conversation; a place for scholarly exploration, innovation and change.

A FLC may be either topic-based or cohort-based. A topic-based learning community addresses a special teaching and learning need, issue or opportunity. In other words, all of its activities are focused on one particular theme. A topic-based FLC typically has a timeline. It may be in existence for a predetermined length of time (such as 6-12 months) or it may end when the teaching opportunity or issue of concern has been satisfactorily explored and addressed. The cohort-based FLC is not as structured. For example many colleges have FLCs for new faculty, for faculty and librarians or for faculty members from one particular discipline. In each instance there is the opportunity for these groups to interact in ways that they determine.

Membership in a FLC is voluntary and it requires time and energy. All members

must commit to meet once a month and complete assignments between meetings. There is great emphasis on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Members may be expected to focus on a particular course that they teach and redesign the content and/or the teaching strategies. The FLC usually has a predetermined outcome as well, such as a scholarly paper and/or a less formal but equally important report and/or presentation to the faculty. A facilitator guides the entire process and keeps the FLC moving toward its goals. A FLC is NOT a course or workshop. There is no predefined curriculum or set of assignments. Although there is an endpoint, the members of the FLC determine the path (or paths) to arrive there.

Community is an essential component of the FLC. All members have the common goal of improving their teaching skills and must be open to insights and constructive criticism from other members of the community. Trust and confidence in members of the FLC allows them to talk freely about their successes and failures without fear of evaluation. Members of the FLC often engage in conversation between meetings, sometimes face-to-face and sometimes using chat groups and email. The FLC can break down barriers between departments, disciplines and academic ranks.

Colleges and universities that have these programs usually have many different FLCs in place. Although there is often a predetermined length of time for the FLC, some will review their plans annually and elect to stay in operation for longer periods of time. New FLCs may be initiated with new topics or cohorts stimulating their implementation. It is a dynamic and evolving process that is consistently being assessed and adjusted. Most colleges and universities dedicate personnel and other resources to the development, implemen-

tation, facilitation and assessment of FLC programs.

Although they are not as numerous as in previous years, the study groups that were developed by the Optometric Extension Program (OEP) were essentially like FLCs. Originally, these groups were topic based. The participants read and then discussed the monthly OEP papers from the current curriculum. This provided the topic. With the evolution of the OEP education program, the study groups have become more cohort based; thus, a group of behavioral optometrists gather once a month to discuss a variety of topics. Although a study group has a more open enrollment, very often the same core group comes to the meetings. The study group also values the trust and confidence of the community. Exploration, innovation and change are nurtured and encouraged. A number of study groups have flourished and have been meeting and studying for several years. Some have waxed and waned but maintain enough momentum to stay in existence. Others have gotten started but then disbanded for assorted reasons.

The biggest difference between the two types of communities is structure. The FLC will discuss and agree on a goal or goals to be achieved over a finite period of time. Members commit to active participation with readings and other assignments. Members may have individual goals and projects as well. Although the FLC must be flexible to allow exploration and creativity, the facilitator must maintain a common direction and monitor progress toward predefined outcomes. The FLC has the support of the college or university as well, which imposes a timeframe and measures of accountability.

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Would optometric study groups benefit from assuming some of the characteristics of a FLC? Should study groups become more topic-based, perhaps reviewing topics and goals annually? Should the members suggest relevant readings to be discussed at meetings? Perhaps study groups can have goals that include a poster presentation or the publication of a series of case reports with a common theme. Study groups would benefit from some support and oversight from OEP and other sources. Perhaps technology should be explored as a way to enhance communication on many levels—between members of a study group, between study groups, and between study groups and the umbrella organization. In other words, would study groups benefit from more structure, or is structure antithetical to the whole concept of a study group?

One of the first lessons I learned as an optometric educator is that curriculum as well as teaching methodologies must be dynamic and evolving. A curriculum that never changes will die a slow death; a teacher who lectures for hours will soon be standing in front of lifeless students. Every institution and organization with an educational mission must constantly rethink and re-engineer its programs. OEP is no exception. Study groups have been part of OEP's educational program for longer than I can remember. Perhaps it is time to rethink, re-engineer and thereby rekindle study groups.

Reference

- 1 Cox MD. Faculty learning communities: Change agents for transforming institutions into learning organizations. *To Improve the Academy* 2000; 19:69-93.