GENERAL EDUCATION INQUIRY GROUPS: THE STORY OF A PEDAGOGICAL CONVERSATION

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INTRODUCTION

In September of 2007, I was asked to serve as leader of the Education Department's Inquiry Group at Hostos Community College. At the time, the General Education initiative to form inquiry groups across all academic departments was fairly new. The first goal for our department was to define "inquiry group" and to establish a precise purpose for our group. My interest in quantitative assessment seemed to lend itself to the ongoing development of our inquiry agenda. However, as this article will describe, our group evolved to a point where implementing a more qualitative approach of co-operative reflection and analysis occurred. The group also traveled through the various stages of group development, from initial to working stages.[1]

WHAT ARE INQUIRY GROUPS?

A review of the literature on the use of the inquiry method for assessment and evaluation provided evidence of success for professionals across academic disciplines who sought to reflect on and improve their pedagogical practices.[2] Marilyn Parker, Charlotte Barry, and Beth King describe the inquiry group as an "in-depth, open-ended group discussion of one to two hours' duration that explores a specific set of issues on a predefined and limited topic with five to eight participants and is convened under the guidance of a facilitator."[3] Cassandra Drennon views inquiry groups as learning communities at which practitioners collaborate on conducting systematic inquiries into practice-based problems.[4] The inquiry group discussion forum may be useful for participants in navigating the workplace and resolving everyday difficulties in a fast-paced academic environment.[5] Other benefits of inquiry groups include sus-taining educational reforms, developing critical colleagueship, and facilitating teacher learning.[6] John Bray asserts, however, that authentic participation in inquiry groups is contingent upon voluntary acceptance of an open invitation.[7] This information was helpful in creating the appropriate atmosphere for our group.

OUR PROCESS

The Education Department's Inquiry Group at Hostos began with five faculty participants. Invitations were delivered to all department faculty members informally at a department meeting and then in various email messages. Although only five faculty responded to the invitation, they were eager and enthusiastic to join in what seemed to be an interesting and engaging process. These five faculty eventually became the core of the group, present at almost all the monthly meetings, which have continued to be held in the 2008-2009 academic year, totaling over a dozen meetings so far.

The first task for the group was to define its purpose. It became immediately clear that the group was interested in assessing the levels at which students were required to use and develop critical-thinking skills in instructor-generated assignments and classroom lessons. The product of this goal was the development of a critical-thinking rubric, based on Bloom's Taxonomy, which aimed to measure the level of higher-order thinking skills required in various course assignments.[8] This rubric was used by the group members and the department at large and presented at the General Education Conference at Baruch College in May of 2008.

Although the group focused primarily on quantitative assessment, much of our regular meeting time involved discussion, collaboration, and qualitative self-assess- ment. Pedagogical strategies were often the topic of conversation, along with the joys and frustrations of daily life as a faculty member. The monthly meetings were limited to one hour in duration, and offered coffee, tea, and cookies in a relaxed, informal environment. As time progressed, more and more faculty became active in the inquiry process because the word had spread about how engaging, informative, and enjoyable the meetings were. In fact, the most recent meeting received ten participants, doubling the original five.

As the fall 2008 semester began, the Inquiry Group was again faced with de- lineating its purpose. The faculty participants unanimously suggested that the group continue on its course as an informal and ongoing conversation for assessing and im- proving pedagogical practices, perhaps by incorporating differentiated instructional methods. The rubric and quantitative analyses were still useful, but qualitative self- assessment became the group's preference because it seemed to be the most feasible form of assessment for many group members, contrary to my preference for analysis quantitative data. Furthermore, the group decided to extend the discussion about inquiry to students, to encourage their participation in our discussion. Faculty cre- ated and incorporated student feedback forms to determine whether or not particular instructional strategies were deemed effective by students across courses. Lastly, the group decided to further its mission to benefit the community. Again inspired by the higher-order thinking model of Bloom's Taxonomy, it seemed clear that students could better develop their skills by putting learning into action in real-life settings.[9] This call for community service will lead course assessment in a new direction, to determine the extent to which assignments involve application of learning.

RESULTS

The evolution of our inquiry group proved to mimic the model by Mash and Meulenberg-Buskens.[10] Their model for the inquiry group cycle involved planning for the purpose of inquiry, action or enacting the stated plan, observing experiences, and reflecting on experiences.[11] Perhaps the most crucial part of this cycle for the Education

Department was continuous reflection and discussion of experiences. The reframing of questions and analyses voiced by inquiry group participants led the way for starting new cycles, new agendas, new questions, and at the same time strengthening collabora- tion and communication across the department. Faculty members became engaged in deeper conversations about syllabi, analyzing student feedback on pedagogical practic- es, and revisiting instructional practices such as lesson planning. Interdisciplinary col- laboration also resulted from the inquiry, as the Education and Business departments' inquiry groups met to discuss mutual pedagogical questions and concerns on measur- ing students' higher-order thinking skills in oral and written assignments. Further col- laboration involved the work of faculty members from Education, Humanities, and Natural Sciences departments on pedagogy-based proposals that analyze the learning process through multimedia and technology tools, as was discussed by Joan Hughes and Ann Ooms.[12] Mash and Meulenberg-Buskens express the importance of repeating the inquiry cycle many times before arriving at conclusions[13]. The interest and willing- ness of our faculty to continue discussion and assessment will certainly allow for us to repeat this cycle of inquiry as a tool for constant reflection, evaluation, and improve- ment of practice. Faculty members in the Education Department continue to express the desire to participate in the exciting conversation of our inquiry group. The group has become just that, an ongoing discussion, a place to express pedagogical preferences, to obtain suggestions for course development, revision, and assessment, and to con- verse with colleagues about meaningful professional concerns.

CONCLUSION

It has been a wonderful experience working with colleagues both within my department and across disciplines in re-examining, revising, and ultimately improv- ing pedagogical practices. As a result of these working relationships, understanding among colleagues has become stronger and there now exists a comfortable college- wide forum for generating and exchanging ideas. The goals from month to month may seem to change, but they essentially involve what has been called a redefinition of action research in changing and perfecting instructional practices.[14] The Education Department's Inquiry Group stands committed to encouraging and supporting this ongoing conversation.

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ENDNOTES

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2. Mash, Bob, and Ineke Meulenberg-Buskens. "Holding it Lightly, the Cooperative Inquiry Group: A Method for Developing Educational Materials." Medical Education 32.12 (Dec. 2001): 1108-1114.

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4. Drennon, Cassandra. "Negotiating Power and Politics in Practitioner Inquiry Communities." New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education 95 (2002): 61-71.

5. Bray, John N. "Uniting Teacher Learning: Collaborative Inquiry for Professional Development." New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education 94 (2002): 83-91.

6. Hughes, Joan E., and Ann Ooms. "Content-Focused Technology Inquiry Groups: Preparing Urban Teachers to Integrate Technology to Transform Student Learning." Journal of Research on Technology in Education 36.4 (2004): 397- 411.

7. Bray.

8. Anderson, Lorin W. "Objectives, Evaluation, and the Improvement of Education." Studies in Educational Evaluation 31.2/3 (Jun 2005): 102-113.

9. Anderson.
10. Mash and Meulenberg-Buskens. 11. Mash and Meulenberg-Buskens. 12. Hughes and Ooms.
13. Mash and Meulenberg-Buskens. 14. Mash and Meulenberg-Buskens.