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Shifting our educational development practice: Responding to change

Patti Dyjur¹

*Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, University of Calgary
434 Collegiate Blvd NW
Calgary, AB, Canada*

Kim A. Grant²

*Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, University of Calgary
434 Collegiate Blvd NW
Calgary, AB, Canada*

Abstract

Today's students face rapid technological advances, a changing workplace, and future challenges that are difficult to anticipate. Preparing future-ready graduates compels instructors to demonstrate flexibility, and by extension, educational developers are challenged to reconceptualise their philosophical approaches and practices as well. In this paper we highlight several changes to our educational development practice, including working on a broader scale, using the online environment, expanding our range of topics, micro-credentialing of professional learning opportunities, and moving toward capacity-building.

1 Introduction

Although the field of educational development is still relatively new and evolving, we tend to rely on a few established practices such as workshops and consultations. These methods will continue to have a place in educational development practice. Increasingly, however, we are using a broader range of practices, topics, and approaches designed to foster excellence and shift the culture of teaching and learning in our institutions. We are moving from providing expert advice to individuals toward working collaboratively within and across groups in ways that build capacity (Dawson et al., 2010; Taylor & Colet, 2010). Thus, groups of faculty are able to incorporate their disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning while we, as educational developers, also learn from them in a reciprocal relationship (Gibbs, 2013).

2 Shifts in practice

In this paper, we outline some current shifts in our educational development practice. (1) Rather than focusing exclusively on individual instructors, we are expanding our reach by working at the department, faculty and institutional levels. (2) We are using learning technologies to offer more blended and online workshops, sessions and consultations. (3) We are responding to evolving topics and emerging trends. (4) We are supporting micro-credentialing initiatives that document learning. Finally, (5) we are participating in a shared leadership approach that involves many members of the campus community.

¹ pdyjur@ucalgary.ca

² grantka@ucalgary.ca

2.1 Expanding our reach

While our previous educational development practice emphasised working with individuals (micro-level), we now work more with departments and faculties (meso-level) as well as across the whole institution (macro-level) (Williams et al., 2013; Roxa et al., 2011). While we still do one-on-one consultations on occasion, increasingly we are involved in committees, group consultations and project work.

For example, we are expanding our reach by consulting on curriculum review and development projects which typically occur at the faculty or department level and involve most faculty members. We also sit on teaching and learning committees, supporting faculty-initiated activities to advance teaching and learning. In addition, we are involved in various institutional-level committees, such as our student engagement committee, mental health and well-being committee, and our institutional program approval process.

Working at the department or faculty level can be incredibly challenging. We may be perceived as disciplinary outsiders or misunderstood to be representatives of senior administration. Because unfamiliar activities such as curriculum review can make people feel vulnerable and threatened, some groups are less than enthusiastic about engaging in the process. However, by working through the challenges, we are able to participate in transformational group conversations that can be hard to achieve when working with individuals. By expanding our reach, we are also expanding our impact on teaching and learning culture.

2.2 Increased blended and online offerings

Prior to COVID-19, we were increasing the number of blended and online workshops and consultations in our unit. This process was greatly accelerated by the pandemic, which highlighted the importance of being responsive to the needs of the academic community. Focusing with colleagues across our teaching and learning institute on the goal of supporting instructors as they abruptly put their courses online, we created a huge number of resources in a very short amount of time.

Currently all our courses, workshops, and consultations are conducted online through our institution's learning technologies, and we expect that to continue for the foreseeable future. In this time, we are creating web-based resources and continue to offer synchronous sessions, recording some of them, as well as asynchronous courses and learning modules (see <https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/> for examples).

While the transition to online professional learning development offerings was much more rushed than we would have wanted, we have already noticed a few benefits from the shift. For example, we are no longer restricted by physical location. People who could not travel to campus can participate in online sessions, and those in different time zones can access recordings and electronic materials. By using the same learning technologies (i.e., D2L™, Zoom™, etc.) that our instructors use with students, these online sessions also help them to become more comfortable with the technology and its possibilities.

2.3 Evolving topics

As educational developers, we will probably always be involved in work relating to foundational topics such as student assessment, course design, and engaging students in the classroom. However, along with increased committee work, we also find ourselves at the fore of conversations around timely and emerging topics. For example, we are involved in supporting teaching and learning aspects of institutional priorities such as incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing; ensuring equity, diversity and inclusion; and enhancing mental health and well-being in higher education. Other evolving topics include working with teaching assistants and

incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into course design. Working on new topics allows us to grow and expand as educational developers: we are able to delve into as well as add to research literature on these topics (i.e., see Nelson et al., 2019). Learning new things is energizing, and keeps us motivated in our work while benefitting the campus community by addressing institutional priorities.

2.4 *Micro-credentialing initiatives*

Short workshops for professional learning on a specific topic relating to teaching and learning continue to be a central part of our practice. However, in the past five years we have launched a number of micro-credentialed programs that provide structure and recognition of participant learning. These micro-credentials, or digital badges, acknowledge learners' accomplishments as they create a personal learning pathway (Devedzic & Jovanovic, 2015; Gamrat et al., 2014) through a particular aspect of teaching and learning development.

For example, we offer several micro-credential options for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. We have a Certificate in University Teaching and Learning comprised of a number of digital badges, so participants are able to identify their preferred topics and the pace that suits their schedule (Nowell et al., 2020). We have a similar certificate program for academic staff and offer stand-alone micro-credentials in topics such as course design, teaching online, and research skills.

These programs allow us to build capacity in teaching and learning in new ways as participants engage in a number of workshops, not just a single one. Because these programs draw participants from a wide range of disciplines and positions, we have opportunities to facilitate conversations that cross traditional academic boundaries. In the same way that we as educational developers learn by participating on faculty committees, the participants learn from each other as they share teaching and learning theories and practices from their disciplinary perspectives.

2.5 *Shared leadership approach*

A final example of how our practice is shifting is the move toward a shared leadership approach that builds capacity across campus to further teaching and learning excellence. Rather than seeing ourselves and our institute as the primary providers of teaching and learning development opportunities, we work with others to plan and offer initiatives for small and large groups who may not engage with centrally organized activities. For example, in the past we offered teaching observations in which an educational developer would observe an instructor's teaching, write up a report, and then have a debrief with the instructor. We no longer do individual teaching observations, but we help faculty and graduate students organize teaching squares that allow them to observe one another and reflect on their own practice. We also have guest speakers and panellists at workshops, and co-facilitate curriculum workshops with instructors.

One of the benefits we have seen in shifting to a shared leadership approach is that people start to view teaching and learning as something that everybody takes responsibility for rather than limiting it to a central unit. This approach also builds educational leadership more broadly across campus and allows educational developers and instructors to learn with and from one another.

3 *Conclusions*

The workplace is changing rapidly and higher education institutions must be ready to meet future challenges. If we are to prepare future-ready graduates, it is critical that educational

developers expand their practice to provide professional learning development that builds teaching and learning capacity and leadership across higher education. In this paper, we have outlined some of the ways in which we are shifting our practice to work with instructors and graduate students to meet this challenge.

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