

Title: Communities of teaching practice in the workplace: How are they perceived by faculty?

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Abstract

This study was aimed at investigating the impact of a faculty development program on teachers' educational workplace environment. 23 Teachers participated in a focus group discussion. From the focus groups three main themes were identified: increase in educational networking, increase in insight in own functioning as a teacher due to coaching and increase in awareness about organisational aspects influencing teaching practices. Implications for further strengthening communities of teaching practices at the workplace by the design of faculty development programs are discussed.

Introduction

From research on faculty development an overall satisfaction with programs is reported. Participants experience FD programs as relevant and useful. Also positive changes in teachers' attitudes and knowledge are reported as a result of FD programs. Changes in the way teachers collaborate at the workplace are to a lesser extent the focus of studies on faculty development (Steinert et al., 2006). O'Sullivan and Irby (2011) argue that research on professional development of teachers on a group level is needed. They presented a new framework in which teachers who follow FD programs and collaborate are identified as a workplace community. Key components as coaching, relationships and networks are associated with concrete processes which take place in the work environment of teachers (Eraut, 2007). In this study the framework from O'Sullivan and Irby (2011) was used to investigate the impact of a FD program on the workplace community.

The main research question was: What is the impact of a faculty development program on teachers' educational workplace environment?

Three sub-questions were formulated:

1. What are changes in participation in formal and informal educational networks?
2. What is the role of formal and informal coaching?
3. What are enabling and inhibiting factors in the department and the organisation?

Method

Setting

The FD program involves a University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) program within the faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences at Maastricht University, the Netherlands. All staff members within this setting are well introduced from the onset in problem based learning which is the educational approach within this school.. The UTQ is a FD program for staff members who are responsible for various educational tasks: delivery, developmental and assessment tasks. Since the introduction in 2008, already more than 100 teachers successfully passed this program.

Characteristics of FD program

The UTQ is a longitudinal program of 5 monthly training sessions which last each one day, combined with workplace learning, portfolio learning and self-study. Guidance is provided by a faculty development trainer and a coach at the workplace. Assessment of the participant's development takes place by means of a portfolio and an interview about this portfolio by two assessors.

Subjects

Respondents were 23 teachers (10 women, 13 men) from the faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences of Maastricht University, randomly sampled from the total group of 102 teachers who attended and successfully finished UTQ. They have a clinical, biomedical or a social sciences background. Their years of experience in teaching ranges from 2 to 20; 8 of the teachers have 5 years or less experience.

Instrument

A qualitative research method was used, namely the focus group methodology. Four focus group sessions of two hours each have been conducted to discuss the relevant themes, facilitated by a moderator and an observer. The format was semi-structured, starting from leading questions.

Analysis

The sessions were taped and afterwards the content was summarised by a research assistant. The summaries were analysed thematically by 2 researchers separately (MLS and WH), and discussed afterwards to identify the key themes.

All the participants filled in an informed consent form and were informed about the use of the tapes and the confidentiality of the data. The summaries were sent to all the participants for their agreement.

Findings

From all four focus groups three main themes came up: 1. Increased participation in educational networking, 2. The positive effect of coaching and 3. More awareness of organisational policies .

Increase in educational networking

Nearly all interviewees reported an increase in educational networking; i.e. they reported to consult more often colleagues about their teaching activities; among colleagues whom they had met during the FD program but also other colleagues involved in teaching. However, this was mainly on an *informal* basis. The contacts between UTQ members are more intense even after the trajectory has finished, and difficulties in communicating with non-UTQ colleagues become more apparent. This is due to a shared educational framework within the UTQ.

Effect of coaching

Discussing educational questions with a coach leads to a higher level of insight and functioning. The coach has stimulated reflection and provided feedback. An increase of awareness of the power of feedback in the learning process is often reported in the focus groups. They gave and asked more and qualitative better feedback to colleagues as well as to students. Some UTQ members serve as a coach for others within their department.

Awareness of organisational policies

In the focus groups several enabling and hindering conditions were discussed. An improvement in the educational culture within the faculty was reported in favour of educational careers. Though, there were differences among departments; i.e. some chairs of departments more often consulted staff members because of their teaching expertise; some

chairs did not show much interest in education. Most participants reported a positive effect on their awareness of the educational policies and the complexity of the educational organisation. Moreover, the role of the educational department became clearer and it was easier to address the department for advice.

Discussion

The results from the focus group discussions indicate a positive impact of the FD programme on the teaching workplace environment. Teachers intensify their communication with colleagues and even more with those who passed the FD program. They ask and give feedback more easily and more frequently on teaching. This fits the viewpoints of O'Sullivan and Irby (2011) who state that the participants of a faculty development program communicate more intensely and enter a new community of teachers who share a passion for education. Coaching and networking seem to function as an enabling strategy in community formation. Furthermore faculty became more aware of the educational organisation and culture. All these effects provoke a more positive atmosphere towards education and indicate a community of teaching practice. Although, there are significant differences between departments due to differences in attitudes from the chairs.

Limitations of the study

The limits from this study have to be kept in mind. This study is conducted within one specific faculty, well-known for its innovative student centred learning approach. It is not clear if the results are generalizable to other faculties with more traditional teaching contexts. All the subjects in this study had finished the FD program only recently. It is not clear from this study what the long-term effects are. Although this study indicates that coaching plays an important role, much more research is needed to explore why and how FD programs can enhance community building by teachers at the workplace.

Practical implications

Educational networking can be promoted by follow up meetings after FD program, e.g. by means of a supervision or reflection meeting. Furthermore, appointing coaches at the workplace seems to enhance building a community of teachers

References

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