Educational Developers Caucus Grant – Fall 2016 Proposal

Title: Using Professional Learning Communities to improve the teaching of introductory courses: How Centres for Teaching and Learning can support faculty in collective capacity building

Contact Information:

**Principal Investigator:**
Robyne Hanley-Dafoe (EDC member)  
Educational Developer, Centre for Teaching and Learning  
Instructor: School of Education and Department of Psychology  
Trent University  
robynehanley@trentu.ca 1.705.748.1011 Ex. 7240

**Co-Investigators:**
Dr. Cathy Bruce  
Dean of Education & Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning  
Trent University  
cathybruce@trentu.ca 1.705.748.1011 Ex. 5000

**Project Mini-Description:**
To investigate the use of a professional learning community to improve course design for large introductory courses. Purposes of the study: evaluate the benefits, challenges and effectiveness of implementing a PLC focussed on course design and investigate faculty’s experiences and teaching efficacy based on their participation in the PLC.

**Full Project Description:**

**Introduction**
Centres for Teaching and Learning provincially and nationally are continually adapting to the ever growing scope of services offered to their respective institutions (EDC Website). Educational Developers can play a critical role in supporting system improvements through collective capacity building initiatives (Dawson, Britnell & Hitchcock, 2009; Harris, 2011). For the purpose of this project, we are interested in investigating how PLCs can be facilitated through a Centre for Teaching and Learning to support course design renewals. We want to explore the effectiveness of using a professional learning community (Trent First Year Caucus) to facilitate collaborative discussions and peer learning as a venue for initiating organizational change. We intend to measure faculty’s experiences and teaching efficacy from participating in one round of PLC.

**Rationale**
For the past two years, the CTL has been working on an inter-disciplinary collaborative study: 1st Year Academic Experience Project. This project is led by our Educational Developer and the design was developed in consultation with faculty and members of the Retention Committee. The goal of the project was to conduct a ‘360 degree’ scan of the first year learning experience from three perspectives (instructors, staff supports and students) as well as to conduct a syllabus environmental scan in order to better understand the complexities and varied perspectives of the experiences of first year students. The final report carried a series of recommendations, including developing PLCs to address some of the challenges with 1st year course designs, particularly how faculty can include a variety of pedagogical
approaches in conjunction with innovative assessment and evaluation practices. For the purpose of this study, we want to investigate if a CTL formed and facilitated PLC is an effective venue for building capacity within our teaching professionals to address these recommendations as we believe this will be helpful to other Centres and Educational Developers.

**Professional Learning Communities (PLC)**
Over the past two decades, the educational literature has devoted significant attention to the topic of professional learning communities (PLCs) and how they can be successfully incorporated into faculty development. The underlying philosophy of PLCs is anchored to the belief of improving student learning by improving teaching practice (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2007). The literature provides convincing evidence of the benefits of PLCs such as improving the teaching culture of an organization (Vescio, 2007), increased student achievement (Lomos et al. 2011), reduced teacher isolation, increase in peer learning, increased knowledge of effective teaching strategies, and greater job satisfaction (Annenberg Ins., 2004). Cox (2012) recommended that PLCs need to be specifically structured, yearlong academic communities of practice with shared goals of building a teaching community, engaging in scholarly (evidenced-based) teaching practices, and the development of SoTL. There is less research on the effectiveness of using PLCs as a mechanism of fostering organizational change with faculty for a specific variable such as course design. This study will help address this question.
Project Plan/Timeline

- Trent Ethics Review Board approval – December 2016
- Trent First Year Caucus (FYC) re-established – January 2017
- CTL actively recruits faculty from each decanal unit
- Three 2-hour meetings will be hosted by the CTL over the Winter 2017 term
  - Facilitated meetings will explore the benefits and challenges of teaching large introductory classes
    - Emphasis on course design (pedagogy, assessment, evaluation)
    - FYC sets learning outcomes, directions for growth and learning goals
    - Ed Developer & CTL will provide resources and support
    - Pre-Meeting #1
      - teacher efficacy questionnaires
    - Post-Meeting #3
      - teacher efficacy questionnaires & interviews with faculty
- Summer 2017 Teaching Renewal Workshop
  - CTL, in collaboration with the FYC members, organizes a (free) one day Teaching Renewal Workshop and Community Knowledge Forum for both Trent and Fleming College faculty
- Educational Developer will present findings at EDC and STHLE conferences 2018

Method

A multi-method case study design will be used to investigate the effectiveness of using the professional learning community framework for course design improvements. The case study design will include narrative interviews, teacher efficacy questionnaires, and discourse analysis (Gall et al., 2010).

Fit for Trent and connection to EDC Living Plan Priorities (2016)

Trent has held a reputation for personalized learning, teaching excellence and community engagement. This character is still present, however the university has grown in size over 50 years with approximately 8000 students. Faculty continue to be invested in the student experience and make meaningful connections to their students however note that it is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve the outcomes of first year courses. We believe that Trent faculty and our CTL are not alone in their observations. We believe that faculty and CTLs across the university and college sectors may be in similar situations of wanting to address course design renewal. Being able to investigate if professional learning communities are an effective avenue for supporting faculty development with this specific goal, will support both our provincial and national colleagues. We hope to provide evidence if this is a sound approach to organizational change that can be rooted in Centres for Teaching and Learning.

We believe that this project embodies the EDC grant mandate in the following ways:

1) Provides fundamental faculty and course development opportunities
2) We will be working collaboratively with members of different academic units, curriculum planning groups, and organizational change leaders who are part of the First Year Caucus
3) We will be supporting, enhancing and advocating for quality teaching practices by engaging in rich discussions, reflective practices, and peer-to-peer feedback and learning support.
4) Provide the opportunity for faculty to build capacity within their own teaching practice and foster relationships with the Centre for Teaching and Learning and beyond
5) Provide the Educational Developers Caucus and community a protocol guide for CTL facilitated PLC framework developed by Trent.
Outcomes/ Deliverables

1) CTL will build its capacity to support inter-disciplinary faculty development initiatives through Professional Learning Communities and share this with EDC.
2) CTL and the ED will contribute to the SoTL through co-authoring of a peer reviewed publication
3) Raise the profile of the CTL & ED within and beyond our institution
4) Co-authoring of EDC and STLHE presentation proposals for 2018 conferences
Budget
We are proposing an EDC grant to partially subsidize the expenses involved conducting our study and Community Knowledge Forum.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salary: Graduate Student – Educational Developer Associate (EDA) 85 hours at $20 per hour – selective literature review, data collection, transcription, planning support to Summer event (Trent Funding model) + 4% + benefits</td>
<td>1,700.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer Teaching Renewal Workshop &amp; Community Knowledge Forum Refreshments and meal Promotional materials and resources for attendees</td>
<td>850.00 250.00</td>
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<td>In kind contributions from Trent:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Educational Developer .5 day per week for 10 weeks</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>• All Summer Teaching Renewal design costs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• All printing costs</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total amount requested from EDC Grant Program</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,900.00</strong></td>
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Agreements

[x ] I/We agree to provide the EDC community, who funds this grant, with access to resulting information and resources for which the copyright remains with the author(s).

[x ] I/We acknowledge that I/we will submit an interim report and a final deliverable (as described below)
References


