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Instructors’ Conceptualization of Course Design and What Matters in Faculty Development

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Why did we ask?
- Course reform is a signature program of many faculty-development centers (Beach et al., 2016).
- Although important to instructor work, faculty-development programs, and institutional initiatives, the matter of how instructors conceptualize course design remains poorly known.

Goal: Contribute to the research on teaching professional learning by informing faculty developers about faculty members’ perception of course design.

What was our design?
Research Design
- Phenomenography

Data Collection
- Semi-structured interviews

Data Analysis
- Phenomenographic categorization of transcripted statements

Participants
- 10 STEM faculty/teaching assistants who participated in a course re-design project
- Male and female participants
- Diverse ethnic backgrounds

What did we find?
Course design/re-design is...

Category 01
...based on what to teach; a primarily individual action to determine course content based on topical priorities and/or stated learning outcomes.

“... design a course you’ve got to come with the content of course initially in terms of the material you want students to learn; sometimes it stops there.”

Category 02
... based on how to teach; a primarily individual action to determine the strategies and tools for instruction and assessment.

“I start to think what was the best format and activities that can allow the students to accomplish those outcomes.”

Category 03
... based on individual reflection on data, experiences, and/or beliefs to adjust teaching and learning.

“It’s all about what I did last year and then just revising to make improvements.”

Category 04
... based on collaborative efforts to synchronize and improve teaching across sections and/or courses within a department.

“If you’re teaching X course and there’s five faculty that are teaching that. Then the five faculty should get together and decide what the outcomes are.”

Category 05
... based on a culture of innovating teaching and learning by collective engagement with others across disciplines and universities.

“I really think that redesigning needs to be a culture, so if you just treat it as a project and once the project’s finished, it stops. We need to work on redesigning toward a change of culture.”

Why Phenomenography?
Phenomenography asserts that individuals have different concepts of the world because any person at any time only partially experiences a phenomenon (Tight, 2016). Phenomenographic research discerns the variation among subjects of the meaning, understanding, conceptualization and awareness, or ways of experiencing an object phenomenon. Object (in this case, course design) and subject (i.e., teacher) are not separate; the subject’s experience and understanding of the object is a relationship between the two. Phenomenographic research has contributed substantively to concepts used by faculty developers:

- Deep- versus surface-learning approaches by students (e.g., Marton & Säljö, 1976)
- Teacher- versus student-focused approaches to instruction (e.g., Trigwell & Prosser, 1996)
- Varied conceptions of what it means to develop as a high-ed teacher (Åkerlind, 2007)

Significance for Faculty Development
- Faculty developers should encourage the importance of reflective iteration to continuously improve courses when working with individual faculty.
- Faculty-development catalysts should also acknowledge course design as collaborative and collective endeavors promoted within departments, across departments, and beyond institutions.
- Faculty developers can promote synergetic conceptions of course design/redesign by nurturing communities of practice; establishing faculty learning communities; instigating action research projects; and valuing SoTL.
- This study points to refining the culture of teaching and learning via course design as a continuous individual, collaborative, and collective process of improvement in departments, across disciplines, and from university to university.

References

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