

Purpose, Task, and Criteria

A quick-start guide to your FLC

Purpose

The Purpose of Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) are to give small groups of faculty (typically 8-10) the opportunity to engage in sustained, meaningful conversations about teaching and learning with supportive colleagues from across campus. These can be across departments or within a single department.

Research shows that faculty who engage in FLCs have more confidence in their teaching, a better understanding of how their students learn, and are more willing to try new pedagogical approaches in their classrooms. Participation in FLCs has also been shown to increase scholarly activity and feelings of belonging at their institution, as well as increase feelings of connectedness between students and faculty.

Task

Each Meauxmentum Scholar (MS) will:

- Choose a context or contexts on which to focus. These contexts include:
 - The Classroom: utilizing James Lang's *Small Teaching*, we will focus on how to make small but powerful changes in the classroom to enhance student learning.
 - Assignment level: A focus on Winkelmas' *Transparency in Teaching & Learning (TILT)*, this entails transforming assignments to make Purpose, Task, and Criteria transparent for students
 - Extending the classroom: A focus on learning that happens outside the classroom, using AAC&U's Eight Key Elements of High-Impact Practices (HIPs)
- Recruit 8-10 members to make up an FLC.
- Schedule regular meetings (about once every three weeks) where participants explore areas of interest (through readings, invited experts, etc.) which lead to changes inside or outside the classroom. These can be face-to-face, hybrid, or online.
- Foster community through support, regular communication, positive interactions, and (when possible) food.

By the end of spring semester, each MS and FLC participant should be able to point to a change or innovation they have made in their classroom or on their syllabus to an assignment, activity, or course material as a result of their participation in the FLC.

Each FLC will submit a collated critical reflection at the end of spring semester that includes:

- A brief description of the original assignment, activity, or course material.
- The purpose of the assignment, activity, or course material.
- A description of the change or innovation you have made to the assignment, activity, or course material.
- What you hoped to accomplish with this change or innovation (i.e. your goal).

- Did this change or innovation meet your expectations?
- What was the outcome for your students?
- What will you do differently next time?
- What effect did your participation in this FLC have on your teaching?

Criteria

An MS will be considered successful if they 1) organized and conducted regular meetings with their FLC participants, fostering a feeling of community amongst their members; 2) facilitated and supported their participants in making a change in their classrooms; 3) submitted their own critical reflection as detailed in the “task” section, and 4) compiled critical reflections from their FLC participants as detailed in the “task” section.

Examples of Critical Reflections from previous programs:

Example 1.

CLS: Tony Pearson, Gordon State College

FLC Topic: Inclusive Pedagogies

Using the article, “Features of an Inclusive Syllabus” (<http://www.slu.edu/blogs/ctl/2017/01/18/features-of-an-inclusive-syllabus/>), as my guide, I have focused on revising my theatre appreciation syllabus this semester looking to the Fall. Theatre appreciation was the ideal course for kicking this off, as it tends to include a broader and more diverse swath of the student population at Gordon than my major courses in the theatre program.

Where I’ve really been able to dig in right away is with shaping the language of the syllabus to be more of an invitation than a legalistic contract. Over the years, as we have to include more and more policy statements, my syllabus has grown to a nine-page monstrosity. It has become a place where I try to cover all of the bases for everything that could possibly go wrong, so that when a student has an issue or misses a thing, I can say “It was in the syllabus”, point to the section and be covered. But that doesn’t really bring them into the course, does it? Nor does it really guarantee that they will even read it. The goal is that it will be a useful tool that will also get them excited about the course. So, with that in mind, I have made the following adjustments:

Revised language where possible to be less legalistic, and more about showing why it is important for success in the course. My syllabus opens with a statement about a required performance that the theatre produces. In the past it has said:

Required Performances: Gordon theatre performances are free for Gordon Students with a student ID and take place in the Fine Arts Auditorium. Make arrangements NOW. If you cannot make one of the performances, you must DROP THE COURSE!!

But now, in an attempt to highlight why it matters (while still holding firm on the importance of seeing the live play), I've changed the language to this:

Required Performance: Gordon theatre performances are free for Gordon Students with a student ID and take place in the Fine Arts Auditorium.

NOTE: Attending a live performance this semester is not only essential to the experience of developing appreciation, a major writing assignment is connected to watching the play. If you are unable to attend any of the dates below, please see me immediately to determine if this course is a good fit for you

The former was certainly not a great way to welcome new students to my course. Hopefully, the new statement will establish a less harsh tone, but still make clear the necessity of seeing the live performance. There are places throughout the syllabus that, while not as severe as this one, probably don't do much to encourage students to succeed in the course.

I have re-worked my assignment descriptions to not only talk about what they involve, but also what I hope for the students to get out of each assessment. This is to shift the language more towards the students seeing them as learning opportunities rather than hurdles to jump.

Finally, I have looked through the syllabus to find places where I can shorten things—to edit out the parts that are unnecessary or unclear. I have made use of hyperlinks where possible, to send students to a website for a policy statement or assignment description where possible. One of the largest issues I see consistently from term to term is that students don't read the syllabus and it often hurts them academically in my course. In the end, I want my students to look at the syllabus, feel welcome in the course, but also know exactly what will be expected of them if they want to succeed.

I look forward to continuing my study of inclusive pedagogy next year. I plan to present (along with my colleagues from the CLC at Gordon) something about Inclusive pedagogy at our CETL-sponsored Teaching Matters conference next year and possibly something also at our beginning of the year Student Success Summit next year. I hope to read at least one more book on the subject and continue looking through the resources made available to us in the PowerPoint from the workshop at beginning of the year.

This FLC has challenged me to think about something that is incredibly important in my teaching, and to stretch in places where I thought I was pretty good already. It's also been nice to study together with colleagues from outside of my discipline. But I believe in the power of this idea to be transformative at our college, and I hope to help our group take this large scale.

Example 2.

Name: Matt Milnes, FLC Participant (with CLS Brooke Conaway), Georgia College

FLC Topic: Small Teaching

1. In the first iteration of non-majors biology that I taught at Georgia College (BIOL 1100), I relied upon examples from our textbook to make connections between key concepts in the course and real world applications of this knowledge.
 2. The purpose of the assigned activity was to provide a framework in which the students would find and reflect upon real world applications or examples of ongoing research that incorporated key concepts learned in class.
 3. For each of the four units of the course, my students were expected to find an article published in the New York Times within the last year that incorporated a key concept presented in that unit. For example, our first unit covered evolutionary theory, and the students had to find an article demonstrating a recent advance or proposed hypothesis related to our understanding of human evolution. Once an article had been chosen, the student had to submit two paragraphs based on their understanding and reflection upon the article. The first paragraph was a summary of the article in the student's own words, demonstrating her/his factual understanding of the article. In the second paragraph, the student had to address a number of prompts meant to encourage reflection upon the impact of the subject and findings of the article.
 4. There were two major goals of the assignment. First, I wanted to provide an opportunity for the students to find relevancy in the course content by familiarizing themselves with examples of their own choosing. Second, I wanted the students to practice critical reflection on the process, findings, and impacts of scientific research.
 5. This change did meet my expectations in that students were more willing to engage with, and reflect upon, examples of scientific research of their own choosing rather than examples chosen for them.
 6. Unfortunately, I did not employ a mechanism for assessment of learning outcomes specifically associated with this assignment, and I did not receive any comments in the course review addressing this assignment. Based on comments included in the written assignments, it does appear that some of the students identified connections between scientific endeavors and their own interests or topics that they are passionate about.
 7. Based on the articles that the students chose and the comments that they included in their reflections, I gained insight into the topics and examples that my students found most interesting. Next time that I employ a similar assignment, I will set the due dates for the assignments earlier within each course unit. This will provide me with an opportunity to determine what the most popular sub-topics are within each unit and cover those in greater detail at the appropriate time in the semester.
 8. Participating in an FLC and hearing about my peers' successes, failures and current strategies for improving student engagement is motivating. The Small Teaching concept is particularly appealing in that wholesale revision of a significant number of my classes is not a practical option for me at this point in time. Overall, I think that my future students and I will benefit from the ideas that I picked up as a result of my participation.
-

Example 3.

Name: Carol Ann Ham, FLC Participant (with CLS Mark Thomas), Albany State University*

FLC Topic: Mindset

I did several activities in my Psychology 1101 class related to addressing mindset. I had the students draw the brain with their dominant hand and then label it with their non-dominant hand. I then had them write one word on a Post It Note to describe the experience and then displayed all the words. Several students wrote “weird,” “hard,” and “frustrating.” However, a few students wrote words like “challenging” and “fun.” We discussed the words and how two people could go into the same new experience with different mindsets and that ultimately, we control our own mindset.

That activity became the foundation for class. I would ask my students to check their mindset periodically. I had them complete weekly worksheets where they explained what they had learned, asked questions, and share how they were feeling about the class. I had an assignment where they contracted with me for a length of time to go without their cellphones and identify classical and operant conditioning in relationship with their phones. I was surprised how many wrote in their reflection papers, “I almost gave up after [amount of time] but I had told Dr. Ham I would go [amount of time] so I had to stick with it.” We discussed in class how they felt compelled to complete the assignment because of that contract and that it was something they could apply to other aspects of school and their personal life.

My goals were to have them become consciously aware how their mindset played a role in their classes and their personal lives. That things that seemed difficult, like using the non-dominant hand, became easier with time especially when approached as something new and different and not daunting and frustrating. They were in charge of their mindset.

The outcome was better than I had hoped for. On my final exam I asked them to explain two things they had learned in class. They had fifteen weeks of material to choose from and of the 57 who took the final, twenty mentioned something related to mindset or their own motivation. I had not anticipated that but was quite happy to see their responses. It reinforced the need to keep mindset as part of the course.

In the future I believe I will continue with what I did this semester and possibly introduce contracting even earlier. I can contract with the students regarding what they are willing to do in class, not just on one assignment, to reinforce the importance their approach has on how they perform in their classes.

I believe my participation in FLC has reminded me that I set the milieu for the class and that my own mindset plays a role in that. If I approach the class with a positive mindset and model that behavior for the students, it will foster that in my students. I can find myself focusing on checking of boxes in my duties as a professor, which is counterproductive when trying to establish an excitement for learning and instill a belief in students that they can accomplish their goals if they set their mind to it.

*Carol Ann Ham is now at Valdosta State University