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## Increasing Teacher Effectiveness Through Faculty Learning Communities

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## Increasing Teacher Effectiveness Through Faculty Learning Communities

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*Faculty sometimes experience isolation, which can negatively influence their teaching and capacity for improvement. The authors share the benefits of participation in a faculty learning community (FLC) to mitigate teaching isolation. This study used a protocol to structure conversations around instructional problems of practice. Participants found that these structured conversations benefited their teaching and learning as well as collegiality, collaborative inquiry, and reflective practice. This study affirmed the critical importance of FLCs as a structure for increasing teaching capacity and provided insights about the roles each participating faculty member must learn for an FLC to be effective.*

A teacher's skill has significant effect on student learning, whether the teaching and learning is happening in a kindergarten or university classroom. In K-12 education, the need for ongoing professional development to improve instructional practice and student achievement has long been recognized. This development has traditionally been provided in a didactic format, where knowledge is delivered by one to another. Recently, school districts have moved toward more collaborative formats, which allow teachers to determine their own needs by identifying problems of practice.

According to Green, Hibbins, Houghton, and Ruutz (2013), "Effective learning (at work) is now known to be interactive and long-term; involves multiple opportunities for cycles of engagement and reflection, and col-

laborative participation; creates trusting relationships and ‘investigative cultures’; and pays particular attention to ‘proximity to practice’” (p. 249). These dialogic, interpersonal professional development practices have led teachers to understand their work as interdependent with other teachers and to learn from one another (Burke, Marx, & Berry, 2011).

This same shift to a more socio-cultural learning perspective has occurred in higher education, although it has been less apparent. Hadar and Brody (2010) portrayed traditional avenues of professional development at the university level as lonely endeavors, de-emphasizing interaction among participants and remaining a solitary intellectual activity. This contrasts with a faculty learning community where collaboration and inclusive membership, respectful and supportive conditions, and individual and collective learning are supported (Roth, 2014). With this in mind, in the following sections, we briefly present literature that informed our definitions of teaching effectiveness, faculty learning communities, and a critical friends approach in an FLC. We also consider the Community of Inquiry theory and model on the impact of group development within the FLC process. We then provide the importance of the use of protocols and group roles within the FLC structure to emphasize the impact on teaching effectiveness. Finally, we report the methods and results and provide a discussion and conclusion about the impact of the FLC’s and mini-FLC’s work on teaching effectiveness and about future research to be conducted.

### **Teaching Effectiveness Defined**

Teaching effectiveness in higher education has been a difficult concept to define. Skelton (2004) states effective teaching in higher education is a “contested concept” with various definitions (p. 452). McMillan (2007) stated that numerous attempts have been made to identify effective teaching characteristics using a variety of theoretical perspectives, from qualitative and quantitative approaches, from various disciplinary standpoints, and from the student point of view. Yet Johnson and Ryan, Paulsen and Trigwell found there is no universally accepted definition of effective university teaching (as cited in Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010, p. 112).

It is important to consider that teaching effectiveness can also be thought about in terms of one’s current position on a continuum or a progression. Robertson (2018) has described developmental transitions as a story of professors-as-teachers and the positions in which they reside; the transitions from one to another take time and can be difficult (Robertson, 2018). The importance of this empirically based model is that it identifies how university or college teachers could work toward

greater teaching effectiveness. The developmental model postulates three “basic perspectives” that are followed in sequence (p. 14). *Egocentrism*, or teacher-centeredness, describes a focus whereby faculty members repeat what they observed and experienced as students, and the focus is the self. Learners can be seen as an abstraction (Robertson, 2018). *Aliocentrism*, or learner centeredness, shifts the teaching focus from the dissemination to the facilitation of knowledge. Robertson refers to this as a potential “game changer,” as teachers come to see themselves as learning facilitators (Robertson, 2018). *Systemocentrism*, or teacher/learner centeredness, is the preferred perspective, because teachers attend to and reflect on their experiences with learners while also attending to the course’s ecology and its complexity (Robertson, 2018). Robertson (2018) points out that an important aspect of this developmental model is that the development of a teacher is not inevitable, and progression through the developmental stages is not a given. Teachers must engage in the process in order to integrate new practices into their teaching repertoire.

In their book, *An Evidenced-Based Guide to College and University Teaching*, Richmond, Boysen, and Gurung (2016) inform readers that the published literature characterizes approaching teaching in order to reflect on and improve one’s teaching pedagogy and practice as *scholarly teaching*. Brookfield (as cited in Richmond et al., 2016) asserts that a scholarly teacher constantly reviews and reflects on the learning experiences of students and then makes pedagogical decisions about learning experiences based on understandings illustrated in student responses. Richmond et al. (2016) point out that reflection on student learning may lead to productive changes, but “good teaching” does not have to end there. Through critically assessing one’s teaching and sharing findings with peers, we engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Gurung and Landrum (2014) define the *scholarship of teaching and learning* as “the methodologically rigorous scholarly work conducted to enhance teaching and advance learning” (as cited in Richmond et al., 2016, p. 24). Engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning is a critical aspect of faculty development as the engagement in the process will make a better teacher (Richmond et al., 2016). Faculty learning communities have the potential to provide a social setting and a powerful framework for groups of educators interested in improving teaching and learning by using all of these approaches and outcomes.

For the purpose of this study, Robertson’s developmental model of professors-as-teachers is the definition the mini-FLC used for teaching effectiveness due to its emphasis on reflective practice to improve both the teaching and the learning of the students.

## Faculty Learning Communities

FLCs have been utilized in educational settings for nearly three decades as a method for establishing collaborative relationships and providing a forum for the improvement of instruction. Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) described five essential features of an FLC:

- *Shared values and vision*—provides a framework for shared, collective, ethical decision making.
- *Collective responsibility*—helps to hold all members accountable for their share of the work and eases isolation.
- *Reflective professional inquiry*—leads to reflective conversations, examinations of current practice, conversion of tacit knowledge into shared knowledge, and the application of new ideas and information to problem solving.
- support, or assistance to feelings of interdependence.
- *Group, as well as individual, learning*—occurs through collective knowledge creation when members interact, engage in serious dialogue, and deliberate about information and ideas.

Evidence of the value of FLCs in higher education has been reported. Hadar and Brody (2010) discussed improvement of teaching through skills acquisition, breaking of personal and professional isolation, adaptation of new teaching dispositions, and development of a sense of efficacy. Roth (2014) reported on improvements in teaching effectiveness and student learning, faculty motivation, job satisfaction, and the development and maintenance of faculty relationships over time.

Participation in an FLC allows members to focus on learning through reflective practice. The addition of a critical friends group format can help participants remain focused on collaboratively addressing problems of practice (PoPs).

### A Critical Friends Approach in an FLC

Members of FLCs understand the importance of examining teaching practice as a means for enhancing teaching and advancing learning through feedback of colleagues. One source for feedback can be found in the critical friends literature. Costa and Kallick (1993) defined a critical friend as

. . . a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (p. 50)

Utilizing a critical friends approach in an FLC requires attention to trust and skilled facilitation through the use of protocols. The establishment of trust occurs when consensus regarding norms and values is reached. Shared norms and values include an understanding that the work of the group is not to evaluate, but rather to examine each other's work with an honest and thoughtful critique, including both critical and supportive observations. Value judgments are offered only when requested.

The use of critical friends in the FLC facilitation encourages members to interact with colleagues in a manner to which they may be unaccustomed: engaging in collegial work where practices are shared, asking and answering challenging questions, and participating without fear of judgement. Quate (2004) summarized how groups utilizing a critical friends approach operate. Attendance is voluntary, facilitation is effective, norms are used to guide the work, the focus is on authentic work products, and roles are rotated so that all members present work and facilitate protocols.

### **Process of Group Development**

High-performing groups are grounded in a Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (see Figure 1), which posits that individuals must engage in "purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 88). Purposeful discourse and reflection are critical elements that may lead to individual insights, collective group insights, and movement toward improved teaching and learning practices.

Many faculty learning groups stagnate in their growth, falling victim to the common pitfalls experienced by teams in educational institutions. Troen and Boles (2012) conclude that teachers are seldom trained in the nuances of high-functioning teams and, therefore, often encounter obstacles such as (a) ineffective use of common planning time, (b) reluctance to exert or assume leadership roles, (c) lack of clarity about purposes and goals, (d) ineffective team and high-performing group processes, and (e) failure to value structures for effective team functioning.

FLCs that encourage and sustain adult and student learning illustrate characteristics of progressive interactions. Perkins (2010) described these

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Figure 1  
**Community of Inquiry Model**

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Harrison, Anderson, & Archer (2000; used with permission)

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interactions as the exchange of information and ideas in ways that support astute decisions, good solutions, and forward thinking. Often, this requires that group members put learning at the center. FLCs that do so recognize that there are two learning loops. First, individual teachers can use the FLC to grow in their own pedagogy and instructional practice. Second, teachers can use FLCs to present and solve classroom PoPs that may be symptomatic of the experiences faculty and /or students are having across a department, college, or university.

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) remind us that this sort of intellectual pursuit requires participants to change their instructional practice. The desire to improve and participate in a culture of continuous growth must be accompanied by the recognition that culture influences the “drivers” of a team’s work. Lipton and Wellman (2012) described the cultural drivers of group work as follows: (a) a focus on what captures the group’s attention, (b) a commitment among the group members, (c) a commitment to invest in the meetings and time required outside of the formal meeting times, and (d) a commitment to productivity and goal attainment.

As the culture of continuous growth is sustained or overlooked for adult learning, so goes the learning environment for students. This cause-and-effect relationship is defined by characteristics that make a group culture powerful and by what should be done to enhance group culture more deeply (Lipton & Wellman, 2012). Lipton and Wellman (2012) delineate these group actions as follows:

- Maintain a clear focus.
- Embrace a spirit of inquiry.
- Put data at the center.
- Honor commitments to learners and learning.
- Cultivate relational trust.
- Assume collective responsibility.

Comparing the qualities of high-performing groups with the promising practices of FLCs and critical friends groups uncovers similarities in concept. Most critically, members should participate in an FLC with the intention to grow in their teaching practice while supporting the growth of all team members. This culture keeps the focus on results while remaining selfless and objective. Members of FLCs that operate with efficacy welcome accountability and commit to each other, to learning, and to the issues and deadlines agreed upon. Such FLCs illustrate members' willingness to be vulnerable, recognize that failure may occur, and that it is okay not to know the answer to every question.

### **Use and Refinement of Protocols**

Protocols to structure discussion and dialogue are one of the strategies to establish trust and engage in critical discourse. These protocols are defined as a series of steps that professionals take in a particular situation. For example, in the medical field, practitioners are given a set of protocols to follow for a patient's symptoms or medical condition. Protocols are widely used in K-12 settings to facilitate discussions to ensure that all voices are heard and to increase instructional effectiveness.

Often, those who facilitate a discussion will hesitate to use a protocol, believing that adults should just be able to talk through whatever topic on an agenda. However, when conversation is just allowed to happen without facilitation, some voices inevitably will not be heard, and those voices that are heard will push a set of beliefs simply because they are the "loudest."



All protocols are created with an instructional purpose in mind, that is, what is the end result the facilitator is trying to accomplish? By identifying the end goal, the protocol will take the user through a series of scaffolded steps to help the participant(s) meet the learning objective. For example, a common protocol used in facilitating professional learning communities is referred to as the "Tuning Protocol." This protocol (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013) was created to refine or "tune" a project or idea through collaborative practice and respectful dialogue. To do this, a specific problem needs to be identified by the presenter. The participants need to fully understand the problem, which can be accomplished through clarifying questions and summary. Once the participants understand the problem, they are better prepared to give feedback. This can be done a number of ways, depending on the version of the protocol. Participants can either give warm and cool feedback or utilize probing questions. The presenter listens actively without responding to the questioning or feedback until the end. At that point, the presenter should be able to identify two or three takeaways.

This example illustrates the refinement of protocols, which should be a carefully thought out process. As mentioned above, published protocols should be well crafted with specific instructional moves. If a protocol is to be revised, revision should be done only after the participants have utilized it as intended and always with the intent of meeting the participants' learning needs.

### **Roles of the Facilitator, Presenter, and Guests**

According to Platt, Tripp, Fraser, Warnock, and Curtis (2008), groups must agree upon common responsibilities, which include sharing a common understanding of high-quality learning, making a commitment to that learning, agreeing to act upon that commitment, and using data to monitor the commitment. Critical to the success of an FLC are the specific roles of participants for the professional conversation. The Tuning Protocol (McDonald et al., 2013) defines three specific roles that FLC members are assigned to format the discussion: facilitator, presenter, and guest.

The role of the facilitator is to lead the discussion. This person begins by introducing the protocol goals, guidelines, and agenda. The person serving as facilitator keeps the conversation going, and adheres to the protocol time frames and agenda.

The presenter brings to the learning community a PoP that he or she would like to share for feedback to promote improvement. The PoP could focus on a class, a student, a lesson/assessment, or work samples. The

presenter gives the group a specific focus question related to the PoP for feedback.

The rest of the group is made up of participants—the individuals who will look closely at the presented PoP to identify areas for improvement. The objective is to have the presenter leave the session with an analysis of his or her work and suggestions for practice improvement. Guests ask clarifying questions to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the presented PoP and the focus question. After the guests have a clear understanding, they analyze the work and share feedback with each other. During this discussion the presenter is silent, listening to what is being said and taking notes. Feedback is then discussed with the presenter. Positive, or warm, feedback is shared first, and then guests share concerns, disconnects, or ideas for change.

## **Methods**

The purpose and essential outcome of this FLC of this FLC was to enhance the quality of faculty teaching and student learning in our college through an approach to faculty development that integrates elements of two job-embedded, collaborative models for teacher self-study. The FLC was a year-long series of workshops and practice opportunities in which a master in facilitating student-focused conversations about instruction taught us as faculty how to become skilled facilitators so that we may collaboratively inquire into our own teaching. As a result of this experience, four members of the FLC decided to engage in a series of our own meetings that intentionally attended to the enhancement of teaching and advancement of learning. For the purpose of this FLC self-study, this group will be referred to as a “mini-FLC,” because the defining feature of an FLC is membership of six to 15 participants (Cox, 2004).

The mini-FLC included four participants, all from within the university’s Educational Leadership Program within the College of Education (COE) at a mid-sized university in the Midwest. During the winter and spring/summer semesters of the 2016-2017 academic year, our mini-FLC met regularly to conduct our meetings and collect data for this study. We decided that each participant would serve in each of the three roles of presenter, facilitator, and guest at least three times. Each time we met, we tuned and debriefed two PoPs. When in the presenter role, that member brought course artifacts to be shared in the presentation of the PoP. Each of our six meetings was videotaped.

Our data points for this study included student work, videos and transcriptions of the mini-FLC meetings, participants’ journal entries, student course evaluations and comments, and additional artifacts brought to the

table during each mini-FLC meeting time. The *tuning* process was used to arrange the data. Creswell (2018) stated that researchers should gain an understanding of the depth of the data and determine its credibility. Thus, we each reviewed and organized the data into themes. We used the eight steps typically used for the coding process, as provided by Tesch (Creswell, 2018):

1. Get a sense of the whole. Read all the transcriptions carefully. Perhaps jot down some ideas as they come to mind as you read.
2. Pick one document the most interesting one, the shortest, the one on the top of the pile. Go through it, asking yourself, "What is this about?" Do not think about the substance of the information but its underlying meaning. Write thoughts in the margin.
3. When you have completed this task for several participants, make a list of all topics. Cluster together similar topics. Form these topics into columns, perhaps arrayed as major, unique, and leftover topics.
4. Now take this list and go back to your data. Abbreviate the topics as codes and write the codes next to the appropriate segments of the text. Try this preliminary organizing scheme to see if new categories and codes emerge.
5. Find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories. Look for ways to reduce your total list of categories by grouping topics that relate to each other. Perhaps draw lines between your categories to show interrelationships.
6. Make a final decision about the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.
7. Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform a preliminary analysis.
8. If necessary, recode your existing data. (p. 196)

We used three guiding questions in looking at all data points:

- How did participation in this mini-FLC inform and impact our instruction?

- How did participation in this mini-FLC inform and impact student experiences in our classrooms as well as student learning?
- Would the use of structured conversations about teaching effectiveness improve student learning in the courses taught by the FLC group members?

These questions helped us to make sense of and code the data as we built patterns, categories, and themes from the evidence. The questions also helped maintain our focus on teaching effectiveness and student learning.

To ensure the internal validity of this study, we triangulated the data. By using multiple data sources, we ensured and verified that each of the different data sources did not have an undue influence in determining the patterns, categories, themes, and conclusions we developed.

## **Results**

Analyses of our data supported the conclusion that participation in an FLC positively affected classroom instruction as well as student learning. We found, across each form of data collected, that we could illustrate the effects of participation in the FLC on our classroom instruction.

### *Journal Entries Assessment*

In their journals, FLC participants indicated the following evidence related to influence on instruction:

Data collection of student performance informs me about student evidence of understanding.

Using assessments (summative and formative) in combination to ensure teaching strategies are actually effective with students and ‘nudging’ students to competency of course outcomes.

Engagement in the FLC resulted in confidence about possible instructional moves with students/courses.

Analyzed instructional artifacts/evidence, discussion by all FLC members allowed for new ideas and thinking around the variety of documents including common assessments, course assignments.

Discussed instructional strategies used resulting in affirmation of strategy used or new ways to think about its use and implementation. Examples include the following: student feedback, implementation activities to master course standards. . . .

FLC sessions allowed for the participants to deepen their thinking around their teaching, allowing for increased effectiveness in the classroom:

- Group processing together increases group thinking and, therefore, new ideas, considerations, and instructional moves for teaching.
- After observing myself on video (teaching), I realized I was more opinionated than I thought—more than I would like since I like to think I teach with a more constructivist approach.

While some mini-FLC members were uncertain about how participation in the FLC affected student learning, there was some initial evidence to support that student learning was positively impacted. Evidence from journal entries included the following:

The objective was for 'students to synthesize leadership research and processes into operational plans of action through inquiry-based instruction and specific instructor feedback.' Evidences of this work included student work and drafts of student work in chart paper via gallery walks.

I had more substantive, meaningful class discussions.

We have better protocols for 693 [Master's Project], which will result in more prepared and thoughtful projects.

Stronger advising—more personalization, as a department.

The student evidence and artifacts I require students to produce after 'tuning' an assessment or PoP allows for the increase in student performance due to clarity of the assessment and decisions about where to assess within the course.

During our "rounds," many of the PoPs centered on "key" assessments, or AORs.

The group feedback from 7/21 mini-FLC meeting reminded me to take the student perspective—if I were the student, what would I have to know, understand, and be able to do in order to. . . .

At our mini-FLC meetings we presented PoPs that were tied specifically to teaching and learning concerns—the causal link to student achievement.

Our mini-FLC raised the question: How is formative assessment data informing process and practice in the classroom with students?

One specific example occurred when a mini-FLC member received student comments on an evaluation form that verbal assignment descriptions were not always clear. After bringing the problem of practice to the mini-FLC, the member spent more time going over the assignments with students during the first class and added a clarifying session. We use mastery learning as the instructional model, so evidence of improved learning is not always reflected in course evaluations. However, fewer students needed additional assignment rewrites. Also, later course evaluations had fewer to no comments regarding students not understanding course requirements.

### *Video Transcripts Assessment*

After reviewing the video transcripts, four themes emerged:

- Why an FLC and/or mini-FLC
- Aha's for the presenter (improved teaching and learning to pay close attention to specific evidence)
- Protocol development and attention to process
- Developing trust and building our mini-FLC relationships (assuming roles and taking on corresponding responsibilities)

### **Why an FLC and/or Mini-FLC**

Initially, all of us agreed to be involved because we were interested in improving our teaching practices. All served as educators and administrators in K-12 systems at various points in our careers, and the study of teaching and learning was deeply personal. The experience of the mini-FLC brought increased camaraderie and enhanced collaboration because it led to improved instruction and enhanced student learning. Each experience generated deeper thinking around instruction and at least one tangible idea that could be used right away in the classroom.

### **Aha's**

The "Aha's" were identified when the presenter listened during the warm/cool feedback segment of the protocol. As facilitators and guests, we focused our attention on the evidence presented while dialogue and analysis focused on the PoP. Key to this segment of the protocol was that the presenter could not participate in the conversation; he or she only lis-

tened silently while reflecting on what was being said. This eliminated the presenter's need to defend his or her evidence, which helped the presenter receive candid feedback from colleagues. Much of the feedback received included things that we, as presenters, never had thought about prior to the mini-FLC meeting. During each meeting we were able to identify areas for improvement, thus strengthening our teaching practices. This also led to the development of a high level of trust between colleagues.

### **Protocol Development**

Protocol use and development was a critical part of the mini-FLC. We began with the Tuning Protocol, initially using it as it was published. At the end of each mini-FLC meeting, we reflected on the use of the protocol and revised it based on the experiences of the group. The revised protocol was followed at subsequent meetings. Dialoguing about the protocol process itself allowed for all of us to be heard and to develop ownership in a protocol that worked.

### **Development of Trust**

An essential component to our mini-FLC was the development of trust. We knew each other at the start of the mini-FLC because we all work in the same leadership department at the university. This naturally led to the four of us developing a mini-FLC as a smaller component of the larger FLC. Knowing each other led to an immediate sense of collegiality. However, as the mini-FLC meetings commenced, we needed to develop a new level of trust as each of us presented work to be analyzed by the group. Having candid conversations about our work was initially threatening. However, every meeting resulted in deeper individual self-development and learning focused on evidence of practice. These new learnings were an enormous benefit to us and allowed increased collegiality and trust to emerge. A deep personal and professional level of trust was cultivated as result of the mini-FLC.

#### *Example of Initial Evidence: EDL 715*

While this study did not control for all variables that could influence each mini-FLC member's teaching, initial evidence indicates that the reflection and learning that occurred in the mini-FLC had some positive impact on subsequent student learning. For example, one participating faculty member shared course evaluation feedback from students in the course EDL 715: Data-Based Decision Making and Technology. The PoPs he brought to be worked on by the mini-FLC were issues he was trying

to improve in the course while also improving the student learning experience.

Our study revealed that this faculty member's overall course evaluation rating improved after he implemented suggestions generated via the mini-FLC. Table 1 shows changes in the summative rating for the course, which represents the combined responses of students to four global summative items: course as a whole, course content, instructor contribution, and instructor effectiveness. This rating provides an overall index of the class's quality.

The mini-FLC member indicated that the final course assessments for fall 2017 were of the highest quality received to date. One student commented as follows:

The class was intellectually stimulating for three main reasons:

1. This class was aligned well with the work we want to do in our district. So, I was able to apply my learning and my work towards something that will improve the work I do in school.
2. The instructor utilized several protocols in his practice of teaching and in doing so modeled effective ways to teach or present. The protocols facilitated deep and engaging conversations. I found him to be a wonderful instructor.
3. The course was focused on improving data through improvement of the instructional core. To improve we must acknowledge that there is a problem of practice and then apply it to a project in our school.

This course evaluation comment provided further verification that his changes in instruction and assessment had an effect on the students' learning and experience in the course. Ultimately, we all agreed that our participation in the mini-FLC resulted in students possessing a deeper understanding of assignments, which, in turn, produced higher quality work.

## Discussion

We observed one unexpected outcome that was critical to the mini-FLC experience: the formation and progression of the FLC itself. Tuckman and Jensen (1977) referred to the progression of a highly functioning group via the five stages of *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, *performing*, and *adjourning*. While we began the effort as colleagues in the COE, we had not participated with one another in the FLC or mini-FLC experience before. As a result, our mini-FLC swiftly moved through the stages Tuckman and Jensen outlined. Evidence of the group's progression and formation emerged from the revised protocol that we developed to support our specific needs for facilitation and process.



Table 1  
**Summative Course Rating During FLC Experience**

<i>Course</i>	<i>Term Taught</i>	<i>Overall Summative Rating</i>
EDL 715	Fall 2016	4.4/5.0
EDL 715	Winter 2017	4.3/5.0
EDL 715	Fall 2017	4.7/5.0

More important, however, as the members of our mini-FLC reflected on the yearlong experience, our conclusions and reflective dialogue contained in the data collected most deeply reveals our efforts to improve our teaching effectiveness. Participation in the mini-FLC focused squarely on teaching effectiveness and our desire to move our practice toward “scholarly teaching” as described by Richmond et al. (2016). As a result of this focus, two additional secondary effects were observed in the FLC: improved understanding and use of protocols in the mini-FLC structure and improved teaching effectiveness for mini-FLC members.

Experience and data showed that our participation in this particular mini-FLC bred results in both teaching and learning in our higher education classrooms. After a somewhat bumpy start, we ultimately had the proper ingredients for FLC (mini-FLC) success: collegiality, collaborative inquiry, use of a protocol (and, later, a revised protocol), norms in which to ground the work, and reflective practice. Yet as members of the mini-FLC and the COE FLC, we remain aware of the possibility of the interpretation of evidence in our mini-FLC “in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations or a hypothesis in hand” (Nickerson, 1998, p. 175). Nickerson (1998) states that there can be a belief that people will engage in “unwitting case-building” without planning to interpret evidence in a biased way (p. 176). Awareness of confirmation bias, a concept that implies a “case-building” approach toward hypotheses or beliefs, is fundamental to the interpretation of evidence and possible biases that may exist among mini-FLC members. This remains an important concept to reflect on in the mini-FLC structures, because confirmation bias endures if faculty members do not recognize how it preserves existing beliefs and opinions. Nickerson (1998) states that the “perseverance of unjustified belief can cause serious problems” (p. 208). This mini-FLC self-study sought to reduce the effects of confirmation bias by using Tesch’s steps for coding data, the use of protocols in the mini-FLC meetings and the use of multiple forms of data. Despite these strategies, the mini-FLC members participating in

this self-study recognize that confirmation bias could be a factor in the interpretations and conclusions reached in this study.

Experiences on campuses around the country have shown that FLCs can provide a framework for undertaking shared inquiry that benefits both individuals and groups. But FLCs, as developed, refined, and explored by Cox and others (Cox, 2004), are not simply structural and programmatic frameworks that undergird meaningful learning and growth; they are also a special kind of professional development group grounded upon the cultivation of positive collegial, interpersonal, and collaborative relationships. Successful FLCs counter the individualism and alienation of the academy with a balancing spirit of appreciation for the collective, acceptance of others, support for all members' growth, and willingness to engage in genuine collaboration. Thus, both learning and community are essential outcomes of FLC participation (Ortquist-Ahrens & Torosyan, 2009).

### **Conclusions**

The discussions generated from using the protocol and collaborating within this FLC and mini-FLC have continued and are reverberating throughout departments in the COE. We have evidence of the FLC's effects on lesson planning and instruction, and we remain energized about the impact the mini-FLC structure can have on teaching effectiveness. Our next level of work in the FLC and mini-FLC structures is to tightly align the FLC work with improved learning outcomes for all students. As discussed in the introduction of this article, our desire to pursue scholarly teaching and, therefore, enhance teaching and advance student learning, while considering our own developmental positions as university teachers, serves to ensure that we progress not only to support our teaching effectiveness, but also to consider how course ecology impacts student learning. Teaching effectiveness, then, is improving among our FLC members, but our intentional efforts in the design of the mini-FLC will now focus more directly on its impact and correlation to student learning, which is, after all, the ultimate desired outcome.

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