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Building Community: Professional Development through Teacher Discussion Groups

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Universities are gathering places for specialists ranging across a wide array of subjects and disciplines, free to explore their own academic pursuits. One of the costs of this independence though can be isolation from the community in which we work. Although many university professors do engage in research collaborations these often take them outside of their discipline or even beyond the university, exacerbating their separation from the university community. Moreover, collaboration rarely extends to teaching and faculty are often left to explore teaching dilemmas and to improve their teaching alone. Workshops and individual assistance through OI DT can help but can often leave participants wanting more. One solution to this problem is the building of community through teaching discussion groups. This edition of FOCUS presents the experiences of two Teaching Discussion Groups at Dalhousie University: the Discourse and Dat Course Group for new faculty and their mentors and the Math/Stats Education Study Group. Both of these groups meet face-to-face on a regular basis and provide examples of the benefits of starting or joining such groups.

University teachers increasingly use small group work in seminar classes and even in large lecture classes to facilitate learning. Many teachers have been convinced that students talking with other students, as well as with teachers, creates a comfortable and productive learning environment. Ironically, the "individualistic culture of academic life" (El-Khawas, p. 41) results in many university teachers struggling alone to learn how to teach, at best soliciting teaching advice through informal hallway chats with colleagues, confiding in a close friend, or attending the odd teaching workshop (Selwyn, p. 756, and Shaw, p. 29). These methods are useful and appropriate in many situations, yet, "... to learn about, reflect upon, and practice good teaching requires a community of scholars with whom to swap stories, talk teaching, and collaborate if real change is to take place" (Nyquist, p. 91).

Teachers' discussion groups or learning circles provide a structure for the development

of such a community. These groups can be productive in a number of ways:

- Discussion groups provide a consistency, including regular meeting times and recurrent participants, that creates a comfortable and supportive environment in which to discuss issues of direct and immediate importance to instructors' classroom experiences and teaching values. Successful groups provide cohesion and continuity that could last over the course of years.
- Ideas for discussion come from within the group rather than from the outside or top-down, allowing for "learner-directed agendas" (Pelos & Stakiw, p. 27).
- Many professionals often avoid talking about problems in practice. Teaching discussion groups can provide a safe environment to allow teachers to consider ways to improve their teaching and in the process improve their professional practice
- Groups can promote professional

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development of both new and more senior faculty, by encouraging discussion about different teaching methods between faculty members of varying experience levels (Shaw, Belcastro & Thiessen, p. 29).

- Gatherings like these provide the opportunity to "reflect on the multiple cultures, multiple voices and multiple realities" of teaching (Polirstok et al, p. 4)
- Members may decide to append more structured activities onto the group meetings, such as peer observation and review of classroom teaching (Weimer, p. 111, Shaw, p. 31) They may also assist one another in developing teaching portfolios (Wiltz, p. 3).
- Some groups may even evolve into teaching research groups engaged in the study of educational theory and practice (O'Donnell-Allen)

Teaching discussion groups need not be a mammoth undertaking in planning, organization, or preparation. They can simply be a forum where teachers come together to share ideas and challenges, learn from one another, and in the process build a teaching and learning community. OIDI would be happy to assist anyone who wants to start such a group.

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Discourse and Dat Course

Kevin Hewitt, Department of Physics

In 1999, the Office of Instructional Development and Technology (OIDT) established a New Faculty Teaching Mentorship Program in which new faculty members choose a mentor from amongst high calibre, senior faculty. I participated in the program as a new faculty member beginning in October of 2001 as a means to add to my teaching toolkit. In an introductory meeting the teaching mentors and mentees discussed teaching scenarios in small groups (e.g., *A new faculty member, with only TA experience in small class situations, is informed that her first teaching assignment will be an introductory section with approximately 175 students*). The participants then gathered together in the larger group to discuss their responses. During these times I found all participants contributed some very meaningful pedagogical approaches and strategies to the issue. It occurred to us that, while the one-on-one pairing was important, the diversity of opinion in the room also provided more information than could be provided by one mentor. The Discourse and Dat Course sessions were born of this need. It was decided that we would gather on a monthly basis to discuss a topic of interest and share our experiences and expertise

The Discourse and Dat Course sessions were structured around the interests of the mentees and mentors. A topic for each session was suggested by a mentoring pair. Those new faculty and mentors interested in the topic then gathered and were introduced to the

teaching tool or question. The topics ranged from the use of instructional technology such as Microsoft PowerPoint™ to understanding the advantages and seeing examples of active, rather than passive, learning. The relationship between teacher and student was covered in a discussion on the Role and Responsibility of the Teacher inside and outside the classroom. Another topic, Women in Academia, arose spontaneously during one session where only women were present.

I have been able to add a great deal to my teaching toolkit as a result of these sessions. One of the mentees presented a model for interim evaluation to understand a class's needs before the end of the semester. The same associate discussed a one-minute drill, which he uses to determine what the students had most difficulty with, and whether they grasped the most important points during the lecture. Questions that the students did not have time to ask, or were too shy to ask, during class were scribbled down onto the paper provided to them two minutes before the end of class. I have incorporated both these tools into my class, and have found them to be very beneficial.

The Discourse and Dat Course sessions were also used to test ideas about teaching in a supportive and knowledgeable environment. Having used PowerPoint™ presentations as a lecture tool, I wanted to understand the pedagogical implications of its use – its advantages and disadvantages. Consequently, I suggested this topic for consideration. By the end of the session it confirmed my thinking that, while it is an excellent means of presenting images and diagrams, the derivation of equations should not be presented using that technology. These ideas were gained through a thoughtful and revealing discussion that was based in the experience of all gathered during the Discourse and Dat Course sessions.

In a university where funding is driven by departmental enrolment, good teachers are one of the most important resources in a department — attracting students and thereby increasing the department's ability to deliver a world class program. The New Faculty Mentoring Program offered by OIDI is an important part of the development of teaching at Dalhousie. More specifically, the Discourse and Dat Course sessions create a forum for the exchange of ideas, providing new faculty with methods of enhancing their teaching practice. By bringing the experiences of senior and junior faculty together, Dalhousie enhances its ability to attract, train, and retain students and to support faculty teaching development.

An Education Study Group

Richard Hoshino, Department of Mathematics

In December of 2001, I attended the Canadian Mathematical Society's winter meeting in Toronto. At this conference, I participated in a special session on mathematics education, coordinated by Pat Rogers (Windsor) and Walter Whiteley (York). During this session, one of the speakers encouraged all of us to start a study group within our own departments, to discuss and share teaching ideas. In addition, such a study group would provide a forum for celebrating teaching and recognizing its importance. Inspired by the conference, I asked my colleagues in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics if we could start a study group at Dalhousie. The response was tremendous, and many faculty members and graduate students were interested in participating.

Since January of 2002, the Dalhousie Math and Stats Education Study Group has met once every two weeks. The meetings last for one hour, and usually consist of a 15-minute presentation followed by a 45-minute open-ended discussion. We have approximately ten people per meeting, although this number has been as high as twenty. We have discussed a wide variety of topics in mathematics education, including effective use of technology in the classroom, active learning, alternative assessment techniques, non-traditional teaching practices, dealing with large classes, problems-based learning, and gender issues. In addition to the meetings,

Teachers' Discussion Groups at Dalhousie

- **Discourse & Dat Course - OIDI**
Meets monthly on the first Thursday.
Contact OIDI@dal.ca
- **Films on Fridays - OIDI**
View and discuss videos on teaching & learning. Meets monthly on the second Friday. Contact OIDI@dal.ca
- **Math/Stats Education Study Group**
Contact Hoshino@mcs.dal.ca
- **Club Ped - Language Teachers' Discussion Group**
Monthly group meets to discuss a publication and its implications for their own teaching. Contact Patricia.DeMeo@dal.ca

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participants are regularly given journal articles on mathematics pedagogy, which they are encouraged to read prior to study group meetings. Several members of the study group have presented at local, provincial, and national conferences, including the Canadian Mathematics Education Study Group, the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and the Dalhousie Conference on University Teaching and Learning. Handouts from these conference presentations have been duplicated for the study group participants.

Mathematics research is often very collaborative, as is research in other disciplines. However, teaching is often non-collaborative. Faculty members are rarely found discussing teaching ideas over lunch, or debating pedagogy during a coffee break. Too often, we teach as we have been taught, and are not aware of other models and practices in undergraduate education. The majority of new instructors (especially graduate students) are inadequately prepared to teach a class of fifty students, and there is no support network in place for them. Our study group attempts to correct these problems by providing a safe, cooperative forum where teaching issues can be discussed. Our diversity enriches our thought-provoking discussions: we have faculty members with over thirty years teaching experience and graduate students with no formal experience. Regardless of our background, all contributions are equally valued and respected.

Our study group is informal, with no set agenda or plan. We seek to provide a forum where we can explore and debate our views on teaching, as well as share resources and practices. We seek to build a community where teaching excellence is celebrated, and thus, our

discussions are not specific to mathematics or statistics. The study group has attracted colleagues from other departments, such as computer science, history, physics, biology, and the Office of Instructional Development and Technology. We have welcomed and valued their contributions, and learned from their experiences. We also have participants from other universities, namely Saint Mary's, Mount Saint Vincent, and Acadia. They have added a new perspective to our discussions, and we hope that the study group is working to improve undergraduate mathematics education in Nova Scotia.

The feedback from the study group has been extremely positive. Personally, I have gained so much from the study group meetings. I have learned many innovative ideas from colleagues with far more experience, and have used their methods in my own teaching practices. I have learned (i.e., stolen) many other resources from conferences I have attended, and have had the privilege of sharing them with colleagues who have benefited from them. Other study group members have enjoyed similar experiences.

Due to the success of the Math/Stats Education Study Group, we encourage faculty members and graduate students from all departments to form their own study groups. We hope that these groups will help maintain and improve the high standard of education at Dalhousie University.

If you are interested in being a part of our study group, or would like access to the handouts that are shared in our meetings, would you please contact Richard Hoshino at hoshino@mscs.dal.ca. You can visit the group's website at <http://www.mscs.dal.ca/~hoshino/studygroup.html>

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