Building Communities of Practice Through Faculty Mentorship Programs

Pooneh Lari, Wake Technical Community College, Raleigh, NC, USA
Denise H. Barton, Wake Technical Community College, Raleigh, NC, USA

ABSTRACT

Building an effective mentoring program for community college faculty is a complex and multifaceted task. There are multiple layers of stakeholders and levels of involvement, which at times makes navigating the mentoring relationships challenging and complicates the decision of what types of information to provide to the faculty as part of their mentorship. A strategy for developing a successful mentoring program is creating a community of practice among faculty members to provide support, create dialogue, exchange best practices, and hopefully, create a process of collective learning in a community of practice, where faculty are open to receiving guidance and willing to engage in the process as part of the mentoring program with minimal resistance to learning. This article describes the practices and processes of a newly-formed faculty mentoring program at Wake Technical Community College and the aims to add to the body of literature of community college faculty mentoring, vocational training, learning resistance, and faculty development.

KEYWORDS
Communities of Practice, Community College, Faculty Development, Faculty Mentoring, Learning Resistance, Mentoring Program, Qualitative, Social Learning Theory

INTRODUCTION

Providing adequate, necessary, and just-in-time faculty development training and mentoring is important for the professional growth of faculty members. One of the main goals of providing faculty mentoring through more seasoned faculty is for the purposes of socialization and career development of the mentee (St. Clair, 1994). Specifically, that socialization allows the mentee to become familiar with the cultural and social norms of the institution and be able to establish professional relationship with other colleagues. This mentorship influences the career development of the faculty member by enabling them to become more robust and effective instructors, establishing them as experts in their field of practice, and developing a voice and professional identity. Educational institutions, in particular, utilize reciprocal learning relationships involving trust, respect, and commitment in mentoring faculty and providing them with needed support (Foundation & Newcomer, 2016). This supportive and collaborative work environment enables individuals to learn from each other and to demonstrate their competency as faculty members in all disciplines of education.

It must be noted however, that not always is this mentorship a fluid process. As new faculty members are being instructed and mentored, some feel threatened in the sense of their lack of cognitive ability and self-efficacy (Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000) and also, that what they know and the way they have worked previously is now questionable. Atherton (1999) states that one of the major characteristics of resisted learning is its supplantive nature, which means that the person

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feels threatened that the knowledge or skills which they have already acquired will be replaced. In these cases, the faculty tend to show resistance to this new learning and mentoring. Taylor and Lounsbury (2016) note that “learning resistance often resides at the intersection of the personal and the environmental” (p. 26). Taylor (2014) defines learning resistance as “a state in which a learner is not open to learning in a specific learning situation as demonstrated through either active rejection or passive disengagement” (p. 60).

In order to better respond to the growing need of faculty to be more competent in pedagogy, technology, and possess higher levels of interpersonal skills for supporting student learning, success, and retention, Wake Technical Community College developed a 30-credit hour professional development certification program known as EPIC30 (eLearning Preparedness Initiative Across the College). Through these professional development sessions, the faculty are trained on pedagogy for teaching, use of Blackboard learning management system, universal design for learning, and accessibility. If faculty have been teaching online for several years, they have the option of becoming EPIC certified through submitting one of their courses for a blind, peer review process. Upon completing this certification program or successfully passing the peer review process, the faculty become certified online instructors. In terms of identifying mentors, curriculum deans discuss the mentoring opportunity with interested faculty and nominate qualified faculty to enter mentoring training. This training is composed of policies and procedures of the mentoring program, goal setting and time management, communication skills to build relationships, and conflict resolution skills development. Those who complete this training and are deemed fit to become mentors by their Dean enter the EPIC Mentoring Program. Using the eLearning Quality Standards rubric created by EPIC, the mentors guide the mentees who are new to teaching online to ensure they are delivering quality instruction in online courses.

This study addresses how faculty can be persuaded to accept mentoring guidance through building and participating in communities of practice to socialize, gain new knowledge, find new professional opportunities, and exchange best practices with other faculty members. Additionally, it considers how new mentors can increase their expertise and better serve mentees while development of a community of practice is taking place. Wenger’s (1998) community of practice social learning frames this study through using mentoring communities of practice as a resource for faculty growth and development. The bodies of literature supporting this study are communities of practice, faculty mentoring, and community college faculty development. This qualitative study informs the practices and processes of the newly formed faculty mentoring program at Wake Technical Community College and adds to the body of literature of community college faculty mentoring and faculty development. It particularly supports the ongoing efforts of integrating new training methods associated with vocational education at the community college level.

This study applies Cuddapah and Clayton’s (2011) Wenger’s community of practice theoretical framework to faculty development as part of a faculty mentoring program, similar to its previous application to new teacher professional development cohorts. It will also concentrate on the how faculty become effective instructors through building communities of practice through a mentoring program and how faculty mentors develop their expertise in mentoring new and less experienced faculty. It will also concentrate on the how faculty become effective instructors through building communities of practice through a mentoring program and how faculty mentors develop their expertise in mentoring new and less experienced faculty. Using Bandura’s (1997) social learning theory researchers show how new faculty learn from seasoned faculty through their role modeling of behaviors and communications within the mentoring relationship and how the mentoring program supports this process.
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