



DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY AT BANK STREET

Building Intellectual Community
while Responding to Accreditation

BENEFITS

February 2018

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With few exceptions, the focal inquiry group members identified benefits for their practice and the institution from participating in the inquiry group. One faculty member commented after the first two meetings, “It [the inquiry group] definitely helped me think more about my teaching,” and another explained after the same interval, “I’m finding myself within the last two weeks kind of saying, this inquiry’s impacting my practice, or at least my reflection around it.” These positive assessments increased as the inquiry group met over several months, and in the final interview, some faculty who had been reluctant or confused about the purpose early on were more convinced of its value. One faculty member, who, in the first interview, expressed difficulty tracking the group’s work because of multiple commitments, identified significant benefits in the final interview for the study. “The structure [of the inquiry] forced me to stop thinking about modeling as I know it and forced me to listen to fellow faculty who I respect. So it was good for me, because I can get locked into my own definitions.”

Increased collegial interaction and camaraderie. Nearly all of the faculty members spoke in interviews and reports about the joys of working with one another through the inquiry process. While the institution is relatively collaborative and collegial for a higher education environment, many organizational barriers to sharing practice and building relationships persist. One faculty member’s comment represents what was a widely-held view, “There’s something about being in a room with people [whom] I deeply respect. They have years and years of experience with students, and they almost always model themselves something I haven’t thought about, or ask me a question that helps me go deeper.”

Cross-programmatic sharing. Faculty members particularly appreciated the opportunity to work with their peers from other programs, or with whom they didn’t have regular interaction. In the final report, members of one inquiry group stated that the inquiry process had “allowed us to get to know each other better and to know each other’s work better.” And yet, another report explained, “The process of our work was impactful for the opportunity for the group to develop professional empathy for one another’s work. We were able to talk across and within one another’s work.” Another group reflected in their final report, “The fact that we represented quite a mix of disciplines allowed for a kind of reflection that is very different from what many of us are used to,” and “We all gained a lot from the mix of programs represented in our group.” This type of cross-program sharing felt like a luxury amidst the sometimes insular, day-to-day work within a discrete educator preparation program.

Access to peer feedback. Over the span of the academic year, the focal inquiry group members shared aspects of their practice with their colleagues. These included oral retellings of their work with students, artifacts from practice such as assignments and course evaluations, and examples of student work. In one example, when one faculty member shared a template she gave students for taking low-inference notes while observing a child, she said that she was trying to figure out why the template worked for some students and not others. After reviewing the notes of a student who used the template, the group discussed how the student might be interpreting the directions and how some of the template might be reframed to become clearer about the purpose. One group member suggested, “I’m wondering if the word ‘required’ is what confuses them. Maybe the title has to be

different than ‘The required elements of session notes.’” This exchange, in which a senior faculty member offered advice, was representative of the type of conversations that unfolded in the group. Often, faculty members would offer their expertise, judgment or suggestions to another group member with the apparent purpose of helping to hone the other’s practice. Almost all faculty reported this as a useful aspect of the inquiry group. The faculty member who shared her template, for instance, saw the benefit as “seeing the effect of what you have implemented and how people [are] perceiving it and whether your intentionality or purpose comes across.”

Opportunities for self-reflection. Along with receiving useful feedback from peers, the members of the focal inquiry group relished the self-reflection that occurred as a result of participating in the group. A frequent sentiment expressed in interviews was succinctly captured in one straightforward comment, “I think it was useful for me... It pushed me to think about my own practice.” Again and again, faculty members not only asserted that participating in the group was an opportunity to receive feedback, but also that participating in the group engendered a self-reflective disposition that was spurred by listening to others. One person shared how this dynamic worked for her. She explained, “[When] my colleague shared about her group’s process with the protocol, ...I felt [it] was really enriching for me. It made me think about my practice and stuff I tried prior but hadn’t done this year.”

Increased appreciation for the use of evidence. A subtler, but critical, benefit of the inquiry process was an increasing awareness and appreciation for the use of evidence to guide decision-making at the instructional, programmatic and institutional levels. Within the inquiry group a few members sought to use evidence to ground their conversations even when it was difficult for cultural

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and historical reasons within the institution. At an early meeting of the focal inquiry group, one member encouraged another to consider what evidence she might use to judge the effectiveness of a classroom activity: “Is there evidence?” she asked. Later in the conversation, when faculty were discussing aspects of assignments they thought were effective, the member again stated, “I’m pushing for evidence.” Taking this remark to heart, another stated, “I do appreciate the nudge to make the implicit more explicit.”

As faculty members carefully defined what constituted evidence within the inquiry group, the chair of the group, along with the chairs from all of the groups, participated in a parallel process to develop their own capacity to define and analyze evidence. This group, the Assessment Task Force, was chaired by the dean who led the group chairs through a rigorous process of Descriptive Inquiry, in which members shared pieces of evidence from their own groups. The dean insisted that members separate value judgments and questions about artifacts of practice they shared with the group, and modeled doing so herself at every meeting. For example, in one session, she counseled, “If you are going to notice, that is one layer. What wonderings come out of this? I think it is really important that as workers with evidence, we understand the difference between these two things...Another layer is how we interpret them. I think we are bound to do those things together, I think it is helpful as chairs if we know the difference.”

In describing their work with their faculty inquiry groups, using evidence of their students’ learning became a more pressing issue for the chairs as facilitators. For example, at an Assessment Task Force meeting midway through the year, one chair described how the group

she was leading bristled at the notion of structure, which made it difficult to develop a systematic process for viewing evidence. She told the Assessment Task Force that it was “helpful to use accreditation” as a reason for a protocol, but that “structure got their [her group members’] backs up a bit.” She pushed forward, though, taking careful notes to instill a sense of structure and coherence between meetings, and asking people to stick to the evidence. She reported taking deliberate steps to make time for faculty members to “give a little context” before looking at the evidence, so their need for informal conversation rather than strict structure could be met. This approach showed how this chair and her group engaged in parallel learning about the role of evidence – the group learned how to create a comfortable and rigorous process for looking at evidence and the chair learned how to accommodate the culture of the organization while helping it meet its learning goals as well as demands from external accreditors.



The Learning Agenda

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