



DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY AT BANK STREET

Building Intellectual Community
while Responding to Accreditation

CHALLENGES

February 2018

CHALLENGES IMPLEMENTING THE INQUIRY PROCESS

Higher education faculty essentially work within two institutions: the college or university by which they are employed and the larger academic and professional community in which their area of scholarship and/or professional practice is situated. This often creates a conflict for faculty who must balance the needs of the employing organization and the desire for rewards that come from academic and professional prestige outside of the organization. Additionally, faculty are hired for their expertise in discrete areas of study and/or professional practice but have wide latitude in what and how they teach. For these reasons, faculty members often have little occasion to work in coherent ways with others outside their narrow areas of specialization or the programs they offer students.

At Bank Street College, faculty are more likely than those in many other higher education environments to coalesce around shared practices and ideas. The College's long history of a shared educational philosophy and approach brings them together in ways that might not be typical of teacher preparation faculty in less value-driven contexts. However, faculty autonomy, "siloes" of expertise, and competing incentive structures outside of the organization were present and affected the regularity and depth of their work with one another. The inquiry group provided a rare opportunity to come together with colleagues, and some faculty reported it was a struggle to understand their colleagues' perspectives. While the faculty expressed near universal appreciation for the inquiry process, they encountered difficulty in crossing longstanding disciplinary and organizational boundaries.

The challenges that confronted the faculty and the dean as they embarked on this process together were, to a large degree, learning challenges. Individual faculty, groups of faculty, and chairs of faculty groups had to learn to describe, analyze, and make arguments based on evidence and support their colleagues to do so by examining documentation of their practice, their colleagues' practice, and students' learning. Despite frequent discussion of low-inference observation and notetaking as a fundamental component of the programs they led, faculty were often uncomfortable using the same techniques to examine documentation of their colleagues' practice. Faculty often struggled with simply describing artifacts of practice and regularly asked one another for more context.

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Exchanges in the focal inquiry group meetings typically included long discussions of background information about the evidence faculty were examining. Sometimes such exchanges occurred in the Assessment Task Force group meetings as well. Inquiring at length about the context surrounding the evidence meant that groups spent much less time especially in the earlier meetings directly examining evidence than they might have. In the Assessment Task Force meetings, however, the dean took a strong

role in redirecting the group to evidence, and the group responded by acquiring a shared appreciation of the discipline of looking at the data before them. In the focal inquiry group, it took longer (after the facilitator had practiced in the Assessment Task Force several times) for the group to practice a disciplined approach to looking at documentation in a low-inference way.

LEARNING CHALLENGES

The learning challenges the faculty, the Assessment Task Force, and the dean experienced throughout the process were multifaceted. Faculty were learning the practice of describing data and struggling to differentiate between evidence and data. They were also learning about how to employ evidence in assessing their students' learning and their own teaching. Assessment Task Force members were learning how to support their colleagues to do rigorous inquiry across the Graduate School, and the dean herself was learning how to support the School to take an inquiry stance to their practice.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Implementing the Descriptive Inquiry process across a complex organization was accompanied by perhaps unsurprising logistical challenges. These came in the form of scheduling conflicts for faculty participants, lack of time within meetings and across the year to go deeply into the ideas that were surfaced, and disorganization as the faculty inquiry group began its work, but this abated significantly over time. Given the time between meetings, the various programs the faculty participants represented, and some absences of the facilitators and group members, it was hard for the group to gain momentum during the first few meetings despite the clear interest in modeling as a topic of inquiry. The group then, had several organizational challenges to solve right off the bat: creating systems and structures to chronicle their work as it progressed, creating norms for communication within the group and between meetings, and accounting for differences in content expertise across the members.

For a group that did not meet regularly outside the faculty inquiry process, getting organized took a large share of the group's energy for the first three meetings.

This finding was triangulated by the final reports submitted by several other inquiry groups, some of which contained details about the challenges for faculty to organize themselves given the multiple demands on their time and communication issues, particularly in the beginning of the inquiry process. Overall, groups reported beginning to systematically look at evidence several months into the school year; most were underway by February or March.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES

The strong philosophical stance that undergirds faculty work at Bank Street was both an asset and a challenge for implementing this process. Repeatedly, faculty members referred to the "Bank Street way" as shorthand for the shared values and practices that united them. This enabled faculty to participate in the inquiry process with keen interest because they were deeply committed to socially constructed learning experiences and sharing practice. However, it also led to a perceptible difficulty in analyzing one another's practice and a resistance to structures and norms that would likely have facilitated their learning the discipline of Descriptive Inquiry sooner. For example, faculty rarely challenged one another's assumptions about their practice publicly.

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In fact, comments that confirmed the approach that faculty used in their classrooms and then shared with the group were omnipresent in the faculty inquiry group sessions and, to some extent, in the Assessment Task Force meetings. These comments further reified rather than challenged, the group's assumptions about their practice.

Interviews with faculty indicated that most felt the value of participating in the group came not from challenging assumptions that underpinned their own or their colleagues' work, but rather learning what others were doing and perhaps modifying their own practice as a result. This was particularly evident in the case of junior faculty who appreciated the opportunity to learn from senior faculty.

In addition to the reluctance of faculty to question one another's work and expose themselves to potential critique, faculty also resisted disciplining themselves to do the careful work of Descriptive Inquiry. Because the faculty placed a premium on relational learning, individuals, and context, it was sometimes difficult for them to see the value in refraining from intuiting meaning and giving fulsome explanations of the context. It was also difficult for them to engage in a collective discipline because each person's experience was highly valued. Even gentle objections to implementing a structured process for reviewing evidence easily dissuaded the entire group from sticking with it.

Because the work to build intellectual community and coherence across the institution was fraught with learning, structural and cultural challenges, a key element of implementation was time and practice.



The Learning Agenda

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