
**Shifting Professional Identities:**
**Reflections on a Faculty Learning Community Experience**

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The authors, members of a faculty learning community at Kent State University, explore the professional impact that the learning community process had on them two years after the experience. As its members approached the tenure and promotion process, they collaborated to identify the impact, if any, that the learning community experience has had on their classroom practices, professional development within the university, and other scholarly endeavors. Most importantly, the group identified a lasting shift in their thinking about teaching and learning that reflected a move from an instructional to a learning perspective. Other related themes in this project are also identified.

A paradigm shift is taking hold in American higher education. In its briefest form, the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to provide instruction. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm:
A college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything. It is both needed and wanted. (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 12)

Ever since Barr and Tagg’s (1995) groundbreaking article, “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education,” was published, colleges and universities across the country have been discussing the shift from an instructional to a learning paradigm. Rather than focusing on how our individual actions as teachers create meaning for our students (the process we use), the learning paradigm asks us to consider how the entire experience and/or structure of the institution encourages learning (the purpose we are seeking) (Tagg, 2003). In many ways, this shift in thinking asks us to move away from an individual understanding of our place in a student’s education to a more collaborative perspective on the process of teaching and learning. Put differently, it demonstrates an appreciation of the relationship between the parts (the individual teachers and learners) and the whole (the institution) that is missing in the instructional paradigm.

The development of a more holistic, collaborative frame of reference can proceed in a variety of ways. One of the most effective methods is through learning communities. Drawing from the notion of “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998), Tagg (2003) notes that “the reason practice in a community of peers is an excellent context for learning and motivation is that it is preeminently through such context that we construct and revise meaning” (p. 12). The interactive and collaborative process that occurs within learning communities creates a space for “deeper” learning. It also provides the individual with experiences that help facilitate the paradigmatic shift in thinking that is required for the learning paradigm to take hold. Scholars have addressed the important role that faculty learning communities play in faculty socialization (Austin, 1992; Cox, 1995, 1997; Richlin & Essington, 2004), the development of teachers as scholars (Cox, 2003; Hubball & Albon, 2007; Richlin & Cox, 2004), instituting professional collaboration (Cox, 1999; Taylor, 1997), and other important aspects of faculty development. As Cox (2001) has argued, learning communities can become agents of change that alter university culture.

The following reflections add to this discussion by illustrating the ways in which experiences associated with faculty learning community participation can encourage a lasting shift in thinking toward a perspective that is supportive of the learning paradigm.
The Teaching Scholars Program at Kent State University

One particular type of learning community is a cohort-based group whose members build a community around the common theme of teaching and learning. These types of learning communities began forming in colleges and universities around the country in the mid-1980s and were composed of early career tenure-track faculty members from a variety of disciplines (http://muohio.edu/celt/flcs). Kent State University began its Teaching Scholars Learning Community (TSLC) in 2000; thus far, eight cohorts of scholars have completed the process. Each fall, a community of early-career faculty begin a year-long process of analyzing their teaching and learning, with the overriding goal of enhancing both student learning and their own teaching and learning skills. Members are selected by a committee of faculty and previous TSLC participants; selection criteria include applicants’ goals, needs, and project ideas, as well as the talents and skills they can bring to the group. Optimally, between 9 and 12 members are selected each academic year. Each TSLC is led by a senior faculty facilitator who has knowledge, experience, and expertise in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Throughout the year, members investigate different strategies for enhancing teaching and learning and determine whether to incorporate new methods into their own pedagogical practice. To support these efforts, TSLC members are offered a reduction of one course per year in their teaching loads and financial support to attend and present at two professional conferences that focus on college teaching.

Once accepted into the TSLC, members are expected to select and work with a faculty mentor and a student associate, both of whom serve in a mentorship capacity. Together, they develop a theme, or identify aspects of teaching and learning, on which to focus throughout the year. In each case, the goal is to reflect critically on the member’s teaching and learning in a supportive, collaborative environment.

Another component of each TSLC member’s experience is the formulation and development of a project that he or she works on throughout the year. These individualized projects typically focus on a specific course, but they may also address the cultivation of particular skills related to teaching and learning (for instance, those necessitated by advances in technology). At the end of the year, members summarize the results of their projects in a final report, give presentations at pedagogy conferences, and share their insights with the broader academic community through conference presentations, scholarly publications, or both.

A further, and vitally important, expectation for members of Kent State’s TSLC is participation in bi-weekly meetings. The meetings are intended to
provide a forum in which members can hold critical conversations about teaching and learning, collaboratively and cooperatively solve problems or address issues that arise in the classroom, and explore the theoretical underpinnings of pedagogical practice. At the outset, the group identifies a theme upon which they will focus throughout the year. Over the past eight years, themes have included student engagement, the social construction of teaching, the role of autobiographies in teaching, and enhancing communication with students.

Our group focused on becoming more self-reflective as a means for enhancing our pedagogical practice and remaining open to change and lifelong learning. Throughout the year, each bi-weekly meeting addressed a different topic related to the theme; this was usually coupled with discussion of a reading selected to frame the conversation or with presentations by faculty guests from across the university. Members engaged in lively discussions, often challenging each others’ assumptions. In the end, the goal was to create a culture of reflection that has teaching and learning at the core of its value system.

Our cohort worked well together from the outset, something which was recognized early on by our facilitator and others in the Faculty Professional Development Center (FPDC). The year was not without its challenges, however. Members were unclear about the FPDC’s expectations for the individual projects and about the goals of the bi-weekly meetings. For instance, some expected that the facilitator would present the group with a pre-planned slate of topics for discussion, rather than the group developing this agenda itself; this resulted in some initial confusion and frustration. We also faced the difficulty of working across a multi-campus system, requiring several participants to drive great distances to attend our meetings and leading to somewhat irregular attendance. While many members found their projects to be quite valuable, others felt that they could have gone much further with their inquiry than they ultimately did. For the most part, partnerships with faculty and student advisors provided constructive teaching feedback; for a few, however, these partnerships failed to materialize at all.

Despite the diversity of experiences with the various aspects of the TSLC program, we all agreed that the sum was greater than the parts. In other words, it was not the discrete projects and tasks that we valued most, but the community that developed as a result of our extended discussions, time together, and shared experiences. The group provided a safe space to discuss teaching and learning where it was valued and taken seriously and where we did not feel the usual pre-tenure vulnerability. As a result, we were able to develop new understandings of, discourse around, and
orientations toward teaching and learning.

**Our Process**

Our group participated in the TSLC during the 2005-06 academic year. All members felt that, on the whole, the experience was an extremely positive one, and we were grateful for the variety of professional development opportunities it afforded us. As described above, we attended bi-weekly meetings, developed individual projects, worked with faculty mentors and student associates, and collaborated on two different conference presentations. Many of the members also engaged in a peer review process, conducting classroom visits and providing each other with constructive feedback. Overall, the variety of activities served to enhance the professional development of each of the members, while creating an environment of collegiality among participants.

As with many university collaborations, after the final scheduled meeting, the group as a whole did not continue with other collaborative projects or formal discussions. Although our professional friendships did not diminish, other responsibilities took priority over continued collaboration within the group. As members approached the tenure and promotion process and began preparing their files, however, most of us realized independently that our experience with the TSLC provided both an overarching framework and the guiding themes for our “personal narrative” letter, an important component of our files. While we have no direct evidence of how these experiences were valued by the committees who evaluated our files, we became interested in exploring collectively how the learning community had contributed to our growth as professors within the university.

In an effort to address this question, we thought it would be valuable to assess the impact of this experience, now two years removed, on our professional development. Seven of the original nine members agreed to be a part of this project. In an effort to facilitate our inquiry and collaboration, one of the members created an online collaborative text through Google Documents. This open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix A) was adapted from the Ohio Learning Network Learning Communities Initiative and Miami University’s evaluation forms (Hubball, Clark, & Beach, 2004; Miami University, n.d.) and served as a means for framing our collaborative assessment. After writing a narrative response to each of the questions, community members independently analyzed the entries to identify themes that captured important aspects of our experiences and our changes in thinking. Throughout the process, participants found
that some of the original questions did not allow them to identify the nuanced and subtle changes to their teaching that occurred as a result of the learning community experience. Thus, we modified the questionnaire as needed by adding new prompts that would capture all of the relevant changes in our practice.

To ensure the credibility of our findings, we solicited the assistance of a peer debriefer, a faculty member who was not involved with our learning community or any others, to read our postings and provide feedback on the themes we identified. Peer debriefing is the “... process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Through this process, we were able to collaboratively analyze and assess each other’s entries and insights into the perceived impact of the learning community experience on our professional development.

We believe that this process of inquiry and collaboration represents a novel approach to collaborative authorship and has resulted in a document that is not solely a qualitative study, a self-report of impact study, or a collection of intertwined personal narratives. Rather, drawing on each of these modalities, we have endeavored to construct an essay whose structure mirrors the nature of our inquiry itself. What began as an attempt on our parts to clarify in our own minds the impact of our participation in the TSLC on our personal and professional lives soon expanded beyond this framework. We realized, as we commented on each other’s responses to the prompts in our online questionnaire, that we were continuing the process of reflection on our teaching that we had begun while we were members of the learning community. Rather than operating as detached observers, collecting and analyzing data from a purely theoretical perspective, we were engaging in the very process of growth that was the object of our study. On the other hand, we were not recording our impressions solely to keep a personal record of our growth as teachers or to produce an autobiographical account of our experiences on the tenure track. While we certainly found the process rewarding on a personal level, we also recognized that the knowledge gained from our collective reflections could help to produce a new model of what could be accomplished in a faculty learning community.

Our formal goals for this article are, thus, twofold: First, we would like to illustrate the potential that involvement in learning communities has for changing faculty members’ orientation toward teaching and learning, in the hope that others will endeavor to create such change in their own pedagogical practice. We believe that adoption of the learning paradigm
leads to more effective teaching and learning, and that our own process of growth as instructors provides a vivid example of this. Second, we seek to provide a source of inspiration for junior faculty who are attempting to become more reflective about their teaching, particularly those who feel that their department or university is unsupportive of their goals. Beyond this, however, we hope to create a text that will actively engage readers in the process of collective inquiry, prompting them to respond in their own way to our reflections, much as we ourselves have done in our preparations for this article. In summary, then, this article represents not so much a closed, finite piece of scholarly research as it does one part of an ongoing process of growth in which we hope our readers will become involved.

**Emergent Themes**

In our process of reflection and dialogue, five general themes emerged that characterized the individual and collective shifts in our teaching: (1) experiencing teaching as a process, not a product; (2) developing the courage to know ourselves and teach differently; (3) viewing teaching as a scholarly activity; (4) empowering students to learn; and (5) valuing the collaborative process. In what follows, we discuss these themes to illuminate the shifts in thinking that occurred in the context of our learning community’s work together and to provide for our readers a variety of rubrics within which they can begin, or continue, their own process of inquiry and growth.

**Teaching as a Process, Not a Product**

One of the things I thought was interesting and noticed was that by talking about us, our teaching, our struggles, our concerns, we ended up thinking not about “us” [but] thinking about learning, which is totally all about “them.”

—a learning community colleague

The broader shift from the instructional paradigm to the learning paradigm in higher education discussed above (Barr & Tagg, 1995) parallels the shifts that many of us experienced on the individual level as a result of our participation in the learning community. One way that this was expressed in our inquiry was as a movement from thinking about our teaching as a product—something we developed and delivered—to thinking about it as a process, either in the practice itself or in the student learning taking place in our classrooms.
While focusing on our own practice, some community members found that assessing our teaching “performances” as “good” or “bad” prompted emotional reactions that consumed much of their energy. However, while reading Brookfield’s *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995) and talking about our experiences and reflections, several of us began to recognize that our focus was shifting away from our performance and toward our students’ learning. For example, one colleague, referring to her use of teaching logs (Brookfield, 1995), wrote on the collaborative document that a theme I found in the analysis of the teaching logs was what I began to refer to as my own self-absorption—the sense that so many of the things that made me anxious and distressed were related to my “performance” in front of my students. This focus on my own performance sapped energy that could have been spent thinking about my students’ learning.

During our inquiry process, this colleague wrote that, as a result of participating in the learning community, she “recognized that striving for some sort of perfection in teaching is elusive. Instead, being a reflective practitioner with your eye on student understanding/learning means teaching is always a work-in-progress. And that is okay.” Another colleague summarized this shift as being one from teaching as a performance, a duty, a job, a “terminal” activity with goals that are either achieved or not achieved each semester, to teaching as an ever-changing process, one guided on the deepest level not by the desire to achieve this or that teaching objective in this or that class (although this is important), but by the desire for growth in many areas of our personal and professional lives, by self-reflection, and by a deepening commitment to helping others engage in the process of self-discovery that we call “learning.”

For some of us in the learning community, this shift from product to process was manifested in the ways in which we viewed the student activity in our classrooms. We began to understand our students’ experiences as part of an ongoing learning process rather than more technically, in terms of “input” (our teaching) and “output” (their resultant learning). One colleague expressed this change as follows:

Before my involvement with the TSLC, class sessions were often planned with the thought process of what I need to tell them, what material I need to cover, how much time I have, etc. Now I still think about the material and the concepts that I want students to understand. However, I approach the planning of
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the class session differently. Before planning an activity, I find myself asking, “What is its purpose?” Will it merely fill time, or will it give students the best opportunity to learn the material and, in some cases, produce those “Aha!” moments that we look for in our students’ eyes? Sometimes the answer is through an experiential exercise, where students learn by doing. In other cases it might be a problem-based learning exercise. . . . As a result I don't see myself as merely a deliverer of information. Instead, I see my role more as a facilitator and a vital resource component of students’ learning.

Even now, two years after the end of our formal involvement with the learning community, our shift from viewing teaching as a product to viewing it as a process has endured, impacting the ways in which we see ourselves, our role as professors, and, especially, our students. This shift has resulted in an orientation toward teaching that emphasizes inquiry and reflection over time and the understanding that both we and our students are always in a state of becoming.

The Courage to Know Ourselves and to Teach Differently

Parker Palmer’s now-classic text, The Courage to Teach (1998), challenges educators to consider how the “. . . convolutions of [one’s] inner life” (p. 2) affect classroom encounters. One of the themes that emerged in the process of inquiry we have described above was that the safe and reflective space created by the learning community allowed for deep exploration of our inner lives, which, in turn, has influenced our teaching practices.

Several of the participants noted that the learning community process allowed them to observe that they were not alone in their feelings, concerns, and fears regarding the life of a professor. For example, we discovered that our fears of the unknown aspects of the tenure and promotion process (for instance, how many publications would be required, how much committee work would be enough without making excessive demands on our time, what our departments’ expectations for quality teaching were), were common across disciplines, colleges, and departments. Sharing these concerns allowed us to gain comfort and wisdom from each other as we developed strategies to encourage our own professional development. One colleague described the impact of the learning community experience as an overall shift in her outlook as a professional. She wrote that

a lot of my change has been change in my perspective . . .

knowing how others think about their teaching, recognizing
the process, not the performance aspect, understanding and working with my own strengths and weaknesses, giving up on the ideal of perfection in teaching, and relaxing because I know I’m not alone in my obsessiveness over teaching.

Realizing that others shared the obsessive desire to teach better, this participant was able to work through the fear and become more relaxed and focused on the learning process rather than on developing into a “perfect” teacher. Another colleague added that “after participating in the Teaching Scholars and sharing with you all my feelings of being on an emotional roller coaster in regards to how students responded to me . . . I just don’t seem to be as sensitive.” As the group shared its fears, concerns and worries, we were able to develop a more holistic understanding of ourselves, one which had a positive impact on our teaching.

Palmer (1998) notes that if identity and integrity are more fundamental to good teaching than technique—and if we want to grow as teachers—we must do something alien to academic culture: We must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract. (p. 12)

To us, Palmer’s words ring true. As we began to discover ourselves in deeper and more significant ways, we became truly free to create conditions for learning. One participant clarified this perspective when she added that

[within a non-threatening, non-competitive environment, we discussed our craft of teaching. No one was jockeying for position as they might be within the same discipline or college. This is a point that cannot be more important to our development as faculty. It is not an experience that you get on a day to day basis as you hustle from class to class. Rarely do you find those colleagues who are engaged in thinking about teaching at the same time you might be or in the same context.

For several of us, the exploration and discussion of our “inner lives” resulted in the discovery of feelings of self-recrimination that were hampering our performance as teachers. We realized that, when faced with disgruntled students, excessive demands from our departments or colleges, or a lack of understanding on the part of colleagues regarding our pedagogical goals, we had often assumed that these behaviors were a response to character flaws within us. Over the years, this had resulted in our eventually coming to believe that our teaching was defective in
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ways that no amount of reflection, practice, or methodological innovation could address. As a result, we came to regard our time in the classroom as little more than a forum in which our imperfections were showcased for an audience of students who were eager to take advantage of them. This attitude, in turn, led to resentment of our students, procrastination over important tasks, and a general lack of enthusiasm for and engagement with our role as educators. In some cases, this unhappiness caused students to stop investing their time and effort in our classes, negatively affecting their learning and providing us with apparent confirmation of our inadequacy as educators.

Although there are many possible explanations for the type of insecurity and self-criticism we experienced, Palmer (1998) traces their origin to a “culture of fear” within the modern university structure. He argues that “[a]s a teacher, I am at my worst when fear takes the lead in me, whether that means teaching in fear of my students or manipulating their fears of me. Our relations as faculty colleagues are often diminished by fear; fear is nearly universal in the relations of faculty and administration.” (p. 36).

All of this changed as a result of the learning community experience, however. Once we were able to regard ourselves and our teaching practice with compassion, and to accept our imperfections and fears as a natural part of this or any other human endeavor, we began to treat our students with greater compassion as well. This enhanced our ability to grow as both teachers and learners, initiating a cycle of positive reinforcement within our professional lives. The environment that was cultivated within the TSLC allowed us to begin to address and diffuse this fear. As one participant put it, the learning community provided “a different sort of collegiality” that “helped me put teaching into context through dialogue with others. It helped me find comfort and the realization that I was not alone.”

Palmer (1998) strongly advocates this type of transformation, believing it could help effect the kind of change to institutional structures that many instructors desire, but feel powerless to bring about. He states that “[i]f we were to turn some of our externalized reformist energies toward exorcising the inner demons of fear, we would take a vital step toward the renewal of teaching and learning” (p. 37). On an individual level, several of the members of our learning community began to see such renewal in their professional lives as a result of the various reflective practices they adopted. One member, who had utilized a teacher learning audit to examine areas of her pedagogical practice about which she felt emotionally conflicted, stated that
the freedom from guilt and self-recrimination vastly improved my performance in the classroom. Having a context in which I could see myself as a devoted instructor who truly cares about becoming better, rather than a failure in the classroom . . . made me approach the classroom with the conviction that I truly was attempting to improve student learning. . . .

Once we were able to start treating ourselves with respect, this shift in perspective naturally carried over to our interaction with our students. Learning community members found themselves discovering a variety of ways to make their classes more student-centered and interactive, and the increased trust and respect they showed their students often led to an enhanced classroom experience for teacher and learners alike. (See the section “Empowering Students Toward Learning” below for more details on some of these innovations).

In the end, developing the courage to explore our fears and to become more compassionate teachers had positive effects both within and outside the classroom. As Palmer (1998) puts it, “[g]ood teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young, and hospitality is always an act that benefits the host even more than the guest” (p. 50). Our experiences lend support to this view, insofar as the freedom from doubt and self-recrimination that arose through our participation in the learning community was a greater reward than we could have imagined we would gain from engaging in this process.

Viewing Teaching as a Scholarly Activity

Teaching, when defined as scholarship, both educates and entices future scholars (Boyer, 1990). Participation in the TSLC at Kent State has facilitated our exploration of this domain and, for many of us, has broadened the meaning of scholarship beyond disciplinary research to include the full scope of academic inquiry. Through our formal training, we had learned what was meant by the first three types of academic scholarship Boyer discusses in his Scholarship Reconsidered (1990): the Scholarships of Discovery, Integration, and Application. Yet many of us had failed to understand or appreciate Boyer’s fourth type of scholarship, the Scholarship of Teaching. Our discussions in our bi-weekly meetings echoed our struggles as tenure-track faculty to find not only adequate definitions, but also a balance within the triad of research, service, and teaching. Boyer (1990) identifies the paradox that lies at the root of these struggles: “The work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by others. Yet today, teaching is often viewed as a routine function, tacked
on, something almost anyone can do” (p. 23).

For some of the learning community members, their department or college’s primary emphasis on the Scholarships of Discovery, Integration, and Application underscored Boyer’s point. The impact that this learning community, one dedicated to studying the scholarship of teaching, has had on our view of teaching as a scholarly activity was pointed out by one participant, who wrote,

I have come to see that presenting at pedagogy conferences, writing scholarly articles on teaching, etc., is just as valid a form of research as publishing “in my field.” Pedagogical research is devalued by some of my colleagues, so it was refreshing to meet others who found it to be a fruitful avenue of scholarly inquiry.

The quality of one’s scholarly work depends fundamentally on the depth and breadth of the scholar’s understanding of the subject matter (Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997). As described above, our exploration throughout the year was designed to provide a multifaceted look at teaching through the assortment of activities described above. As one colleague noted,

[a]fter participating in the learning community I do approach teaching as an ongoing “discovery” area of research. The sheer volume of reading and investigation I did during the learning community and as a result of the learning community is testimony that participation sparked my interest into the investigation of teaching.

Richlin (2001) draws a distinction between the Scholarship of Teaching and scholarly teaching. She asserts that the Scholarship of Teaching begins with scholarly teaching, which is subsequently documented and investigated, and which eventually forms the subject matter of scholarly publications and presentations. As a learning community, our journey together has followed a path similar to that described by Richlin. Before we could fully grasp what the Scholarship of Teaching was, we first had to become good learners ourselves. The group presentations we made, in which we reflected on our experiences, and, indeed the preparation of this article itself have taken us closer to this goal. Whether we as individuals would have traveled this path alone is unclear; what is evident, however, is the impact that the learning community has made on our pursuit of excellence in the Scholarship of Teaching. As one participant stated, “the learning community was a validation of embracing teaching as scholarship.”
Revisiting the work of our learning community two years later has allowed us to investigate the extent to which we have promoted teaching as a scholarly activity in our own departments and professional contexts. Interestingly, many of us have become advocates for the kind of professional development we experienced in the learning community. Frequently, this advocacy is manifested in our encouraging colleagues, especially those new to our institution, to join the TSLC. In fact, some of us even routinely share our experiences with the learning community—as well as related work that emphasizes teaching as a scholarly activity—with candidates for new faculty positions. Others share their work, and the understanding they have gained as a result of it, with experienced faculty colleagues, in order to promote change and an appreciation of the learning paradigm. In sum, our experience in the learning community not only helped us to view teaching as a scholarly activity, but also to contribute to broader efforts to promote and advocate for this view within our institution. This recalls Cox’s (2001) suggestion that learning communities can become agents of change that work to shift a university culture.

**Empowering Students to Learn**

According to Wang (2006), “[w]hen the learner feels a sense of empowerment, the learning is the most profound” (p. 315). For example, in a traditional classroom, students are given assignments together with the instructor’s grading criteria and the designated due dates. Giving students a choice of assignments empowers them, insofar as it prompts them to voluntarily assess their own strengths and interests; they thus come to perceive an assignment as a learning opportunity and not a chore (Knight, 2008). Along with this freedom of choice, empowerment learning gives students ownership of their own learning process (Wang, 2006). As students ask and answer their own “How come?” and “Why?” questions by determining which forms of representation and what kinds of reference material best support their original ideas or arguments, they embark on a journey of self-discovery. As one TSLC participant commented, with respect to a class she was teaching,

> Throughout the course, playful appropriation of ideas and themes was strongly encouraged to the extent that my authority as professor and as the legitimated source of knowledge was, at times, subverted. My experimentation with this teaching strategy offered unexpected opportunities to capitalize on my students’ impromptu performances that indirectly expanded my own capacity for imagination and improvisation.
In addition, such “empowerment learning” environments create opportunities for students to solve real-world problems, and that is where learning occurs (Wang, 2006). When learners have to constantly negotiate between intangible, abstract ideas in their minds and concrete material and form in the real world, the truth of Dewey’s (1938) claim that education is not merely preparation for life becomes clear. One Teaching Scholar expressed this shift toward empowerment learning in her own practice as follows:

I began to emphasize collaborative learning among students so that they understand everyone in the class is somehow responsible for one another’s growth and professional development. Through extended group work . . . and electronic peer guided evaluation/checklists in preparation for their final research paper, students began to cherish each other’s input and contribution. Thus, they also became more appreciative of diversity around them.

In a learning community, everyone participates equally, and all members bring valuable perspectives and experience to the learning process (Wang, 2006). Likewise, in the classroom, promoting collaboration and emphasizing group effort can help develop a sense of self, and of responsibility and maturity, among students. Our reflections revealed that, as a result of our involvement with the TSLC, several of us were striving to create a more collaborative and empowering classroom environment. For example:

I would like to create a safe and supportive environment to enhance my students’ learning. After joining the learning community, I helped my students to see that our class can be a learning community that encourages everyone to share ideas and make comments in the class, because everyone has strengths and we can learn from each other. I have seen my students, including the shy and quiet ones, gradually answer questions and share information in the class.

Another way to empower students’ learning is through student self-assessment, which helps alleviate worries about whether the final paper or class project will be graded in accordance with the rubric prescribed by the instructor and the inevitable stress involved with completing the work by the submission deadline. According to Obenchain and Abernathy (2003), “Self-assessment gives students an opportunity to identify personal strengths and weaknesses” (p. 60). As such, students move one step closer to self-directed learning as a result of their own knowledge-construction
process and journey; in order to foster these developments, many of us now incorporate student self-assessment into our courses. For example:

... in my preschool curriculum course, students are required to develop an activity plan for preschoolers. After they implement the activity, they need to complete a self-assessment assignment, which includes how they think the activity went and what are the things they would like to change, modify, or extend for the future, with supportive reasons.

When students as a class were given the opportunity to reach consensus on their major assignment rubrics and to negotiate mutually agreed-upon due dates for assignments, they were more committed to the assigned work. The commitment also forced them to make choices in their personal life, which were manifested as more effective time management and a greater sense of personal responsibility. . .

When their students reported positive changes in self-perception and attitudes as well as improved learning habits, these colleagues became motivated to continue their new practices and to share their successes with others in the learning community. This eventually led some participants to reconsider pedagogical priorities that they had initially considered to be beyond question. One participant described this change as follows:

I compromised my idealistic expectation of asking students to transfer knowledge and skills they acquired from other courses for application in this class. Instead, I encouraged them to reconsider their college learning experience after displaying/teaching what they know to the children. . . . I further emphasized meaningful engagement to encourage full potential for lifelong learning. . . .

As noted above, this learning community experience shifted many of our attitudes regarding power relationships in the classroom. We no longer viewed our role as that of dispensers of knowledge, but as co-collaborators, with our students, in the learning process. This collaborative spirit carried over into other areas of professional involvement as well.

**Valuing Collaborative Knowledge**

According to Hildruth and Kimble (2004), “Knowledge building can be construed as an essential component of innovation in communities of practice” (qtd. in Cassidy, 2008, p. 228). During our time in the learning community, much information and knowledge was created and shared.
As discussed above, the learning community enabled its members to create a “learning space” where members could air, share, and expand upon their knowledge. Palmer (1998) describes this learning and teaching space as one that allows for “emergent collective wisdom” (p. 76). He further details the desired qualities of a created learning space in terms of six paradoxical tensions that should be built into it. Primary among these is the requirement that participants believe that creating a space for developing collective wisdom is transformative in itself; in our case, it became an arena in which members could challenge and be challenged in a supportive and constructive manner. In essence, our learning community space became much like the classrooms Palmer insists need to be created—namely, those that facilitate teaching and learning. In such environments, “not only do students learn about a subject, but they also learn to speak their own thoughts about that subject and to listen for an emergent collective wisdom that may influence their ideas and beliefs” (p. 76).

As noted previously, in one of our bi-weekly meetings one learning community member shared her personal insecurities about teaching and the frustration caused by responding emotionally to students in the classroom. Immediately following this admission, another participant affirmed this comment by stating that “You are brave, you say what’s on your mind, and I am glad you said it since I feel the same. . . .” Supportive group dialogue on the original comment continued at later meetings. Subsequently, members felt more comfortable airing suggestions and presenting their viewpoints on a wide range of issues for group consumption and discussion. Much of this collective knowledge was created because the learning space facilitated dialogue. According to Cassidy (2008), “[d]ialogue requires access to physical (or virtual) and mental space. It is also desirable that there is a disposition to become involved and to participate in the dialogue in the first instance” (p. 221).

The dialogue and inquiry shared in our learning community has led members to influence decision-making regarding our teaching lives in many other “spaces” as well. As described above, these contexts include our interactions with colleagues in our home departments, job candidates, administrators, and students. The learning community has compelled many of us to create a space to dialogue about our teaching and our experiences in the learning community. Through our reflection on the learning community experience, it has become readily apparent that our participation in the collective creation and transference of knowledge has impacted many facets of our teaching life. This collaborative knowledge-building and sharing has extended well beyond the learning community’s
members, insofar as we continue to share the knowledge we have gained and to emphasize the value of creating collaborative knowledge.

As Cassidy (2008) states, even though learning community group members come together to form a community with a common purpose, each will also bring with them a unique background and a range of “tribes” to which they belong (for example, the faculty in their home departments), beyond the shared context that has brought them together. In our case, this meant that each of us pursued a different route toward our shared goal of adopting a pedagogical approach that is supportive of the learning paradigm. In a similar vein, Palmer (1998) emphasizes that the first paradox of a collaborative learning and teaching space is that “[t]he space should be bounded and open” (p. 74). He elaborates by stating that “[i]f boundaries remind us that our journey has a destination, openness reminds us that there are many ways to reach that end” (p. 75). As our reflections have illustrated, through our involvement in the learning community we have had the opportunity to explore and generate collaborative knowledge; this environment has both guided us with its structure and created openness for individuals to investigate and pursue quality teaching, both individually and as a member of a group. Our learning space has supported the authentic voice of individuals and facilitated the growth and sharing of collaborative knowledge.

Conclusions

This article has documented the meaningful and lasting professional impact of a learning community experience. Each member of Kent State University’s 2005-06 Teaching Scholars Learning Community took something positive from the experience that, two years later, continues to influence our scholarly identities. This growth has led to changes in our teaching practices, our attitude toward collaboration, and our overall sense of the life of a professor. However, the most important change has been the shift in our thinking away from the instructional and toward the learning paradigm.

Our reflections on teaching provide evidence of this shift. As we noted, many of us became more concerned about what students were learning than what we did as individual instructors. We concentrated more on the construction of learning environments than on teaching techniques as means for improving our classrooms. Additionally, we became more reflective about ourselves as learners and teaching scholars as we searched to find meaning in our professional journeys.

This journey is a difficult and stressful one for many faculty members.
Part of the difficulty is due to the professional isolation that is inadvertently encouraged in many institutions. As faculty members, our days are filled with teaching, research, and advising responsibilities that do not necessarily lend themselves to collaboration across disciplines or, in some cases, even within departments. This level of isolation can magnify the stress of tenure and promotion as the individual struggles with insecurities and worries. In our case, we found that the learning community experience provided each of us with insight that allowed us to develop in productive ways and to break free from this stifling professional isolation.

First, the learning community process allowed us to see ourselves as part of something larger. We learned that others shared our insecurities and concerns about teaching, research, and other political realities of faculty life. Second, due to the level of trust and camaraderie that we developed, we were able to explore, in a deeper and more meaningful manner, questions regarding our own professional development. Through peer review of teaching, collaborative conference presentations, and the sharing of teaching techniques, we became comfortable with honest feedback and critique, which served to improve our professional efforts. Third, each of us became more committed, in unique ways, to personal and professional reflection on learning and teaching. Our learning community experience helped us to implement “new” ideas within departmental structures, encouraged us to suggest learning community participation to interested peers, and provided us with a mindset and a set of strategies to improve our educational practice. In a small way, this shift in our professional identities is making the university a better place: a place that is more committed to learning than to the traditional framework represented by the instructional paradigm.

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Reflections on an FLC Experience

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Appendix A
Teaching Scholars Group #6
Learning Community Professional Reflection

Part I
In the first series of questions please consider, now that you are two years removed from this learning community, how you would evaluate the impact of this process on your development as a faculty member. When possible, use critical incidents, vignettes and/or anecdotal evidence of the changes, if any, that you have seen in your professional development. Use the following questions as your guide to this response:

(a) Describe how your teaching and your perception of yourself as a teacher have changed (if they have) as a result of your involvement in this faculty learning community.

(b) What are some of the specific ways you have investigated and tried teaching differently as a result of participating in this FLC? Please be as specific as possible: for example, describe changes in your syllabus, strategies, processes, curriculum, format, style, assessment, etc. Did you measure any change in student learning?

(c) Describe how and in what ways you have seen and/or assessed a change in student learning due to your participation in this learning community.

(d) Describe how and in what ways your perception of yourself as a faculty member within your department, college/school and/or university has changed as a result of your involvement in this faculty learning community.

(e) Can you provide any documentation (stories, incidents, vignettes) of the changes in how you interact with colleagues/staff/administration as a result of this learning community experience?

(f) Describe how and in what ways your perception and understanding of reappointment/tenure/promotion has changed as a result of this learning community process.

(g) Can you provide documented examples (changes in your file, evaluations, etc.) that represent how colleagues have recognized any of these professional changes?

(h) Describe how and in what ways your attitude about your other scholarly activities has been affected by participation in this learning community.
Reflections on an FLC Experience

Part II

In this second series of questions, prompts are provided to guide/inspire your reflection on the perceived impact of the Teaching Scholars Program on your professional development. If you feel you have already responded to these issues in Part I, feel free to skip the prompt.

How has your Faculty Learning Community participation affected:

- Your technical skill as a teacher?
- Your overall effectiveness as a teacher?
- Your interest in the teaching process?
- Your research and scholarly interest with respect to your discipline?
- Your view of teaching as an intellectual pursuit?
- Your understanding of and interest in the Scholarship of Teaching?
- Your awareness of ways to integrate your teaching and research experiences?
- Your comfort as a member of the University community?
- Your understanding of the role of a faculty member at our University?
- Your view of teaching, learning, and other aspects of higher education beyond the perspective of your discipline?

If not covered by the above questions, what have you valued most about your participation in this Faculty Learning Community?

Part III

What aspect(s) of this faculty learning community could be changed to make it more valuable for future participants? Do you have any suggestions for modification (additions, deletions, substitutions, restructuring, etc.) of the content or form of the Teaching Scholars Program?