

Focusing on the Mission: Teaching and Learning

An Essay on the Reflective Inquiry Experience at Laney College

I. Introduction to the Laney College SPECC Initiative

The Laney College grant proposal to the Carnegie Foundation SPECC initiative was ambitious. With a focus on pedagogy to strengthen student success in the basic skills, the Laney College Basic Skills Learning Collaborative proposed a multi-pronged approach to professional development which included faculty inquiry groups, classroom-based research, and ongoing and continuous professional development workshops. Ultimately, the heart of the project lay with faculty and their interdisciplinary cohort groups whom we hoped would work collaboratively on pedagogical projects of common concern. We designed our faculty inquiry groups (our term is Reflective Inquiry or RI) in order to have supportive cohort groups that would continue over time and be a “safe place” for faculty to discuss classroom issues. We hoped that our project would help teachers “fine tune” their pedagogy, provide faculty with a better understanding of discreet aspects of learning as well as provide faculty with new descriptive and interpretative skills to describe classroom dynamics. At the same time, we charged the faculty to work on curricular change and develop tutorial support for students in basic skills. This proposed plan of action was bold, infusing the faculty with the expectation of learning more about teaching and improving instructional outcomes for basic skills students. Despite bureaucratic protocols and staffing constraints at the college and district, the SPECC grant offered the faculty the freedom to generate new ideas and innovate programs. As one of our guest speakers, Brian Stanley¹ once advised faculty stymied by budgetary and administrative constraints, “*Just do it! Do the best you [as teachers] can for students.*”

For the first year (2005-2006), we brought together ESL, English, math and Project Bridge as the interdisciplinary cohort. We provided funds so that each faculty member’s basic skills class in our project had a tutor, and we studied the effects of these tutors in the classrooms. In the second year (2006-2007), we added two instructors from Vocational Education (Machine Technology and Environmental Control Technology) to our interdisciplinary cohort. In order to deepen our inquiry, we recommended that faculty from each department work as a team to develop new curriculum, observe each other’s classrooms, and meet weekly to discuss their work and projects. We formed tutor support groups and helped to nurture the tutoring class and encourage the tutoring programs here on campus.

II. Basic Skills Learning Collaborative Accomplishments

We have managed during the three-year period from 2005 to 2008 to bring together an interdisciplinary group of faculty teaching basic skills students to talk about their pedagogy, their students, the college, student support services, and ways to make things better at Laney. Former RI participants continue to count on and talk to each other when there is a question about classroom issues in a particular discipline. Recently, a former RI participant (2005-06) talked about the positive effects of the RI experience on her teaching today. She reported, “*I feel reflective inquiry is necessary. When there’s a problem in my class, I realize these problems are*

¹ Brian Stanley, Ph.D. is the Director of the San Francisco Peer Resources program and formerly with California Tomorrow as Senior Associate for Public Education, Advocacy, and Alliance Building for the Community College Access and Equity Initiative.

bigger than me and more important than I realized before. I am more confident in addressing these issues, doing it more aggressively and discussing them with fellow RI teachers." The notion that we feel less isolated as instructors within our departments is pivotal.

The impact of reflective inquiry on programmatic change has been significant. The vocational education instructors have created their own assessments for use in their classrooms. They have modified their teaching techniques, fully cognizant of reading and language issues students might be struggling within the classroom. Vocational Education instructor, Louis Quindlen revealed he had never asked himself whether his students have sufficient reading, writing and communication skills to allow them to be successful in his program and in the machinist trade. He later claimed that by *"asking that particular question through the reflective inquiry process initiated a series of actions that has profoundly changed the Machine Technology program... and has to be considered the most important accomplishment."* In another example, the ESL participants created a new combined intermediate level ESL reading and writing course. This course directly grew out of two years of discussions with grantees, and the continuing research of RI participant Lynda Nichol in ascertaining the issue of how ESL classes fit together in the program. These are just a few examples of the departmental work initiated by the RI faculty.

Faculty reflected also on issues of "resistance" in their classrooms and how to best deal with those issues when they arose. The concept of resistance was new for some of our faculty; we briefly examined why this might be the case. A deeper look at the social, historical, and political reasons for resistance to education was introduced by RI participant David Mullen². Laney College students and faculty may consider further exploration of this issue in the future. We saw that resistance often manifests itself in behavior issues that can disrupt a class and demoralize faculty. Understanding of student resistance transformed faculty attitudes towards difficult students and became an important facet of tutor training.

As part of our engagement in developing a tutor-training program, BSLC organized the biweekly support sessions for the tutors who were assisting in RI instructors' classes. During these sessions, tutors invited particular faculty to address questions and issues relevant to their classroom. In addition, this past year, two sequentially linked tutor-training courses were developed and will be put into place. In fact, the Faculty Senate has approved a resolution requiring all Laney tutors complete formal training through these special courses.³ Finally, BSLC members have actively supported the creation of a new full-time tutor coordinator position. As a result tutoring service entities across the campus will be organized, overseen and supervised by a single faculty coordinator. These initial plans will create the foundation for a centralized tutoring center.

During our last SPECC year (2007-2008), one natural outcome of the RI was the establishment of interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Communities (TLC). From the seeds of TLC's grow new curriculum and new partnerships. We have an ESL class in Woodworking and ESL instruction in Environmental Control Technology. The Community Voices English class grew

² David Mullen's *More Than a Notion* workshop addresses ways to engage African American students in the learning process. He chairs the Project Bridge Program at Laney College.

³ The Laney College Faculty Senate Agenda item, April 15, 2008. Resolution put forth by Lisa Cook and Suzan Tiemroth-Zavala of the Instructional Support Committee.

out of and is supported by a TLC composed of ESL, English, and theater instructors. This class is currently involved in having students collect oral histories of Oakland residents regarding education and literacy; they will put on a college-wide performance on May 20, 2008 reading their collected stories. The Math TLC consists of instructors in Math and ESL, a learning disabilities specialist, and a tutor who has taken courses in teaching adults. This TLC is exploring effective study skills techniques to implement in the math classroom while our learning disabilities specialist, who also teaches math, is revisiting mathematical concepts that she will use in her instruction. The group is also working with ESL to create better instruction to ESL students in math classes through vocabulary work. A further extension of this inquiry group is integrating word problems into ESL reading classes.

For the purpose of sharing BSLC efforts with the wider community, we planned several forums. In early 2007, we arranged for two college-wide retreats providing an opportunity for our faculty and student services personnel to better acquaint themselves with basic skills issues and offer some solutions. In fall 2007, we organized a regional conference, under the sponsorship of Carnegie, highlighting the importance of reflective inquiry in pedagogy. Fellow Peralta district colleagues together with those from more than fourteen sister campuses throughout Northern California attended "*Transforming the Classroom Through Faculty Inquiry*" on November 9th, 2007 at Laney College. Sharing of innovative pedagogy continued under our monthly Teaching and Learning Series with guest speakers from SPECC campuses and from within the talented faculty ranks at Laney.

III. What We Have Learned

We deepened our understanding of the vital importance of professional development. Clearly, successful professional development is project driven, teacher-initiated, collaborative, continuous, and includes release time for faculty taking leadership roles. We recognize the differences among the terms widely used to characterize this activity, such as "training" (on using a new software, for example); "meetings" (that are necessary to make sure we are all on the same page at the college) and *professional development*. The latter activity is distinguished from the others because we see that it not only invigorates one's teaching, but deepens our professional knowledge, strength and commitment to our students. We learned that working bureaucratically at the PCCD consumes time and energy, which is why we are advocates for release time for teachers serving in leadership roles. We also advocate paid stipends for faculty, especially part-timers, who participate in rigorous professional development activities as we have suggested above.

We learned that the reflective inquiry process offered faculty a chance to be recognized for their intellectual endeavors and to be involved in research in their classrooms. It offered them the experience of working through classroom problems within their groups as well as giving them time to think through issues. In terms of our experience in organizing RI groups, we realized that ten faculty members participating in inquiry was too large a number. We also realized that a two-hour time slot was the minimum necessary for this kind of work. We asked our faculty not only to reflect, but also to investigate their classrooms, to look for empirical evidence of student learning, and to better understand the immediate and long-term effects of their pedagogy. It must be acknowledged that the traditionally expert community college classroom teachers were not prepared to perform classroom research. In order for a culture of inquiry to be realized on the

campus, we suggest that consultants or the institutional research team at PCCD and Laney provide ongoing support and training to mentor instructors in data gathering and data interpretation. Perhaps the college can set up a course connected with the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education that would provide faculty with course credit to participate in research endeavors that would have lasting effects for teaching and learning at Laney. Professional development not only should be ongoing and continuous but provide various incentives for faculty to engage in the process. Taking credit courses that would help instructors increase their pay scale rating would be one example.

We learned that the most significant barrier to strengthening student success at Laney College is the gap between instructional faculty and student services. Although we held two very successful retreats with a variety of faculty and support services individuals, including counselors, it has been impossible to continue these very important dialogues. The instability in staffing student services during our SPECC grant made it difficult to address the issues we observed regarding how students receive guidance at the college.

Finally, as faculty coordinators we have learned the importance of leadership in guiding and facilitating faculty initiatives. We realize that despite joint governance efforts, which in some cases tends to prolong or place needless barriers to progress, there must be direct administrative leadership.⁴ We learned that in order to sustain leadership within the faculty ranks, it takes commitment, eloquence, and courage to convince faculty to create innovative pedagogy, sustain collegial communication, and engage district and college administrators on policy issues. The bold action plans proposed three years ago were based on our understanding of areas of weaknesses within our system that needed to be addressed and the expectations of creating an inquiry culture. What is critical is that the college administration in concert with the faculty maintain the college's mission of teaching and learning ensuring ways to sustain and reward the hard earned efforts of faculty to increase student success. Indeed, through this extraordinary journey faculty have gained greater insight into, and respect for what they can achieve when they are given the release time to do this important work.

IV. Sustainability of SPECC Efforts and the Work of BSLC

One of the focus areas of this grant was to create a place for purposeful dialogue on teaching and learning in the basic skills with and among faculty from diverse disciplines. Ongoing communication continues in the form of a) vocational education faculty visiting ESL classrooms; b) TLC's working across disciplines; c) English and ESL faculty jointly managing and staffing the new James Oliver Writing Lab. In order to sustain the growth that has occurred, we suggested a Basic Skills Program. This program could be housed under an already existing dean's position. This administrator would lead many of the efforts that we have started. In addition, we note that this would be one of the "effective practices" cited in the report by the RP

⁴ RI faculty recommendations cited the need to create a dean of basic skills. Administrative duties would include one who is informed of the issues and state mandates, able to navigate the bureaucracy, understands the importance of maintaining a culture of inquiry, readily utilizes and know the importance of data, and provides support for teachers in their efforts to teach basic skills classes. " *Summary Reports & Recommendations to the Laney College Community* by Reflective Inquiry Faculty Participants II, BSLC. Fall 2005 – Spring 2007.

Group on basic skills⁵. As this would require no additional staffing we see this change as occurring during the spring 2008 semester.

The efforts of RI faculty are available in two substantive and widely circulated documents summing up their inquiry group experiences and offering recommendations to the wider college community.⁶ It has been broadly disseminated and read by faculty, administrators, grant writers, researchers, and those interested in developing basic skills programs.

Ongoing Professional Development

Continued professional development is critical in sustaining our efforts. The promotion of deliberate, on-going, sustained, intelligent, collaborative professional development must also be met with faculty incentives such as release time, stipends, and/or academic credit. In sustaining this work, a dedicated group of ESL faculty have been meeting monthly to participate in Reflective Inquiry. We now know that it is necessary to set aside funds to provide a stipend for faculty who facilitate these meetings as well as a smaller incentive for teachers who actively participate in the reflective inquiry process. Furthermore, professional development sustainability must entail continuous and regular offerings of workshops that focus on basic skills issues that link theory to practice, provide insight into adult learning and cognition, and demonstrate successful teaching models as seen in the SPECC Teaching and Learning Series workshops set up by our group. Finally, incentives should be given through stipends or release time depending on the amount of work required for faculty in Teaching and Learning Communities (TLC) who collaborate across disciplines to produce instructional and programmatic changes for basic skills students.

To sustain the intellectual curiosity that inquiry engenders, our nascent professional development library for faculty must continue to grow. Presently, there is a small collection devoted exclusively to instruction, student learning, and classroom research including a video collection of our recent conference presentations and guest speakers. We urge the administration to set up a dedicated section of the library for the purpose of fostering faculty community around professional development.

As a result of the Reading Apprenticeship training, we continue to present workshops to the wider college community during professional development days. We address the bigger issues of the impact of reading on our students and how students' ability impacts their success in college. So far, nine faculty from ESL, English, vocational education have been trained by the West Ed⁷.

⁵ Effective Practice A.3.2 from *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges*. The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges. "Based upon the institutional structure, a dedicated administrator /or lead faculty is clearly identified and accorded responsibility for college-wide coordination of basic skills program(s)."

⁶ *Summary Reports and Recommendations to the Laney College Community* by RI participants 2005-2006 (Orange Book) and RI participants 2006-2007 (Green Book). BSLC SPECC Project. Laney College, Oakland, California

⁷ Professional training in improving teaching effectiveness in reading comprehension at the community colleges. Leadership Institutes in Reading Apprenticeship (LIRA) are offered at the Strategic Literacy Initiative at WestEd. Oakland, California.

Pathways to Understanding

Cross-level, discipline-specific convenings are invaluable in increasing understanding of the lifetime educational experiences of our students. We need to talk about why forty to sixty percent of local high schools need basic skills math and/or literacy instruction and what we can do to remedy this critical failure in the education of our students. We should advocate an annual meeting to connect K-12 and community college teachers. Another meeting should be planned to connect community college with university instructors at UC and CSU. An annual colloquium on basic skills math issues should be convened for community college faculty working in the discipline.

A Change in Paradigm – A Focus on Teaching and Learning

As a result of discussions with our Vice President, Dr. Elnora Webb, we have become aware that the initial planning for a teaching and learning center is underway. We believe this kind of institutional commitment is essential to constructing a new paradigm for Laney College. We envision a place dedicated to instructional support services for students, where faculty is able to engage in supportive and collaborative professional development as modeled over the three years of the Carnegie SPECC Grant, where centralized tutoring can be provided to students, and where all learning resources, student and technology services are coordinated to support and enhance student success.

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