

The Faculty Learning Circle: Created to Support the QEP, Now Integrated as Permanent Fixture

From Carpentry to Economics, The Faculty Learning Circle Provides Meaningful Professional Development, Creates Excellent Networking Opportunities, and Supports Innovation in Teaching and Learning Strategies at West Kentucky Community and Technical College

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What do cosmetology, radiography, biology, theatre, and mathematics students all have in common? Textbooks. Textbooks filled with an often overwhelming amount of highly technical information, unfamiliar vocabulary, challenging textual structures, and a wide variety of writing styles. Nearly every class taught by West Kentucky Community and Technical College has a textbook and an expectation that students will be able to read, comprehend, and retain the information contained between the covers of those books. However, statistics from a variety of studies indicate that over half of all college students are not prepared for the reading assignments that they will encounter in college. This lack of preparation leaves both faculty and students feeling frustrated and often contributes to either poor performance on the students' parts, spoon feeding on the faculty members' parts, or a withdrawal or failing grade.

Reading is the foundation for success across the curriculum. For this reason, in 2006, West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC) in Paducah, Kentucky, began to implement "Focus on Reading", a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) designed to enhance the college's culture of literacy by focusing on meaningful professional development, enhanced reading opportunities for the campus and community, and a higher quality reading environment that offers both an improved physical reading environment on campus and more engaging reading resources for the campus and community.

In the 2011-2012 academic year, WKCTC will be entering its fifth year of the implementation of the "Focus on Reading" plan. Therefore, discussions in the 2010-2011 year began regarding which aspects of the QEP had the greatest impact and, thus, would begin to be permanently integrated into the practices and activities at WKCTC. Without a doubt, the Faculty Learning Circle (FLC) was at the top of the list of aspects of the QEP that have simply become "who we are."

The FLC is a group of both full-time and adjunct faculty (along with some staff members such as Adult Education staff and Academic Support staff) who are chosen or who volunteer themselves each

year to receive intensive training in teaching and learning strategies related to reading in the content areas. These faculty members, typically 14--17 in number, represent diverse disciplines from across the campus and are from every academic division in place at WKCTC from the Division of Nursing to the Division of Business and Computer Related Technologies. For example, the upcoming FLC will have faculty members ranging from chemical operator to anatomy and physiology to developmental reading to culinary arts.

Over the years members of the FLC have remarked that the professional development they received has had a more profound impact on them as educators than any other workshop or activity they have taken part in at WKCTC. One part-time instructor noted, "It gave me the confidence and the knowledge to try new things, and it made me feel more invested in the college because I was part of something that was important to our students." Another faculty member stated, "I am so much more conscious of how I approach each reading assignment that I require of my students, and this attention has improved my students' performance and confidence dramatically."

One lesson FLC members learn early on in their training is that many of our students are extremely intimidated by our textbooks and our reading assignments. Furthermore, nearly all of our students have had no formal training in reading in the content areas. For most of them, the last "reading" class they had was in middle school at the very latest. Many are fairly comfortable and proficient with reading fiction; however, fiction is typically not encountered outside of a literature class. Therefore, faculty, who are so comfortable with their disciplines and were mostly likely strong students, need to learn to put themselves in their students' place. The best way we have found to allow our faculty to see a new class through the eyes of a student is to engage in a "textbook exchange." At our very first FLC training, all faculty members bring one textbook from a class they are currently teaching, and then they pass the book to another faculty member outside of that discipline, and that faculty member is assigned some sort of task. Needless to say, after looking at the physical therapy assistant textbook or the dental hygiene textbook, members of the humanities faculty had a whole new understanding of and respect for what those students encounter in those enormous and heavy texts.

After that first training workshop, which is usually a full day or day and a half intensive session taught by an outside professional in the discipline of college literacy, the FLC then has monthly tasks such as formative assessments (completed by students and faculty) of various strategies done in class, reading assessments (for quantitative data collection and comparison to non-FLC courses), and monthly meetings with the entire group. It is at these meetings where FLC members share their successes, exchange ideas, discuss activities that didn't work well and try to troubleshoot, and also get to know

people from all across the campus whom they might not otherwise ever know by name. These meetings also play host to a new teaching demonstration, allowing an FLC member to teach his or her peers a new strategy to try in class. Additionally, FLC members are briefed on upcoming QEP activities and serve as "ambassadors" for the QEP in their various academic divisions. They become visible advocates for the WKCTC culture of literacy and continue to support the efforts of the QEP long after their year of service is over.

The impact of the FLC over the years has been overwhelming, both for students and for faculty. For example, data collected by a study done on campus indicated in 2007 that approximately 3% of WKCTC students, on average, were familiar with certain reading strategies. By 2010, that number had climbed to 50%. One Health Physics student stated, "I really wish I had been taught these strategies earlier on in my academic career. College classes would have been a lot more meaningful and a lot less stressful." A nursing student exclaimed, "I am finally able to understand my reading assignments on my own and don't have to rely on my teacher to tell me what I read when I come to class after an assignment."

In the 2011-2012 school year, the Faculty Learning Circle will evolve, and by the end of that year, nearly 90 faculty members will have been through the program. How is the program changing? It will now become a permanent part of the WKCTC New Faculty Orientation/First-Year Experience, which is a year-long, mandatory program for all new full-time faculty. This award-winning orientation program will now include the traditional intensive reading strategy workshop and monthly meetings. Not only will this new tradition help immerse new faculty in the college's culture of literacy, but it will also equip them with the understanding of the importance of providing our students with a strong, solid foundation in reading in the content areas. These new faculty members can walk into their classrooms confident in their ability to use and teach innovative, effective reading strategies that will only enhance their students' enthusiasm and overall success when it comes to reading and the overall academic experience.

The objective of a Quality Enhancement Plan is to enact meaningful and lasting change at an institution, and most importantly, it should also directly impact student learning. When assessing which aspects of the WKCTC QEP, "Focus on Reading," have reached those goals, it is the Faculty Learning Circle that has had the most profound effect, in both a qualitative and quantitative sense. Looking toward the future, the FLC is most certainly here to stay at WKCTC and will serve as a lasting method of continuing the culture of literacy, in which our institution now takes a great deal of pride.

