

HELPING TEACHERS HELP STUDENTS: FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Steve Hunsaker, Lynda Hawkes, Ryan Nielson—Faculty Development Committee

Editor's note: On 14 July 2009, Steve, Lynda, and Ryan discussed with John Thomas their work on the Faculty Development Committee.

John: Tell us about the genesis of the Faculty Development Committee and how each of you became involved.

Steve: Let me give a short history of the committee. In April or May of 2007, Max Checketts called me and described what they wanted to happen and asked if I would chair the new Faculty Development Committee. The initial assignment was to assist Phil Packer in the rollout of the Learning Model. I had served on the Learning Model Committee and was eager to see it succeed. Phil had some members already in mind, but we consulted together and then he invited the original committee members to participate. I believe Lynda made known to him her interest in participating, and she joined the committee in the fall of 2007. Devan Barker joined us not long after that, and Ryan Nielson, James Helfrich, and Eric d'Evegne came on board in the fall semester of 2008. Our initial charge, as I said before, was to sponsor the Learning Model rollout.

John: What prompted you to volunteer, Lynda?

Lynda: Previously I had been a department chair and so busy with those things that I hadn't paid as much attention to the Learning Model. But when my administrative duties ended I thought that, being from teacher education, I should know some of this and have something to share. I had had lots of training in cooperative learning and other relevant issues, so I thought I should contribute. I asked Phil Packer to put my expertise to work where he could, and this is where he put me.

John: If the goal in 2007 was to educate and train people about the Learning Model, has the goal changed at all, or is that still your basic purpose?

- Steve: Ryan helped shape our development by an idea he expressed in an email about the difference between the “why” and the “how.”
- Ryan: I’m not sure I even remember that precisely. The basic premise seemed to be that we needed to make a transition in how things are done in teaching and learning. I heard colleagues saying they would be interested in seeing how it works. A colleague observed that if he didn’t agree with the premise of a brown bag session, he wouldn’t come. So I wanted to see what ideas we would develop to make the Learning Model function in different places and different settings.
- Steve: Since it was brand new at the time, initially we were really hitting hard on what the Learning Model is, why we should know about it, what it might involve in our classrooms. As a result of Ryan’s comment we have shifted into more of a “how to do different things” mode.
- Lynda: We’ve gone from theory to application. It took a long time for Learning Model language to be hammered out. So that was the theoretical component. We thought of our role as taking its language and helping to identify the application in the classroom through different content areas. What does this look like in math? What does this look like in English? So that’s where we turned our focus.
- John: What are the major ways that your committee is trying to advance practice?
- Steve: Our role has shifted because what would have been our initial role of supporting and encouraging development in use of the Learning Model has been largely taken up by the Academic Office, Brian Schmidt’s group in particular. We are still involved with that, but he has a much more prominent role than we do at this point. We have a menu of projects that we talk about in each meeting. We have our brown bags, which I think have been reasonably edifying to those who attend. The high attendance suggests that people feel rewarded when they come. We have sponsored learning communities. We’ve encouraged peer observation. It’s something we have called “open doors,” trying to get people to get out to visit one another’s classrooms. Then there’s our fall faculty conference.

John: Lynda, you've been part of a learning community. Tell us about that.

Lynda: Stan Kivett was our leader, and there were about twelve of us in that first learning community. The idea was that the first group of participants would be trained to lead future learning communities. So after a semester in that community, I facilitated another. One person said, "I'm going to focus on *Prepare*." My community focused on *Teach One Another*. Faculty voluntarily signed up for the learning community that interested them. At our initial meeting we decided to meet twice a month and observe each other's classes twice a month. So we did an observation each week, and the next week we had a meeting and talked about what we thought, how we could adapt a practice to our content area. We didn't limit observations to members of our community but reached across campus. I watched a chemistry lesson in a room with fixed seating, and I saw some great things happening. I took those ideas back to enrich my classroom.

John: If the subject was *Teach One Another*, were there a couple of over-arching questions you wanted to investigate as a group?

Lynda: We decided as a group what to do in our observations. We did not want a formal observation. We decided that first we would meet with the colleague and ask for one thing we should look for. And then my goal as an observer was to find what I could take from my colleague's classroom to make me a better teacher. It was very friendly, very open, not intimidating, and very enriching.

For instance, one teacher asked me to sit in the back of an auditorium-style classroom, where the last four rows weren't participating, and give some ideas to get them involved. While his other students were sharing with each other, the last four rows were texting and otherwise unengaged. So we talked about it afterward.

John: With regard to "open doors," Steve has said it's not quite what you hope it will be yet. Why not?

Steve: Well, we are convinced as a group that the things that Lynda has just described are of tremendous value. We are sure that if they were practiced more widely on campus we would all be lifted. But we've been torn between different ways of

making it work. Should it be an administrative thing where your department chair says, “Do this and report back?” Or should it be the kind of thing that grows naturally out of a few enthusiastic colleagues who say, “I was really enriched by this, and maybe you should give it a try?” We haven’t settled on a model.

John: What about the possibilities for those involved in Foundations teaching groups? Steve has been in an active group. To what extent is Foundations complementing what you do as a mechanism of faculty development?

Steve: “Complementary” is the exact word. We know we can’t meet everyone’s needs, and we can’t match everyone’s personalities. There are things we are doing well and the Foundations groups are doing some similar things. Faculty development is a huge task, and there isn’t any sense that we are competing with Foundations. I’m having a wonderful experience in a Foundations teaching group, and that does involve some peer observation. I hope that some of the opportunities that the Faculty Development Committee sponsors will be useful for faculty in Foundations, and so on.

Ryan: I’ve played a peripheral role on one Foundations course committee where I’ve visited a couple of classrooms to get an idea of how they were handling different things and to get acquainted with the concepts. One of the most enriching parts of the experience is interdisciplinary curriculum development. I see what a biologist really thinks rather than what a physicist thinks after reading a biologist’s point of view. And that sort of thing has been enriching and very helpful. But we’re still in sort of a triage mode—just getting something into the classroom. We still need to spend time to best incorporate principles from the Learning Model.

John: Eight years ago President Bednar said that every faculty member ought to have an intense interest in both a discipline and the scholarship of teaching and learning—in what students should learn and how best to help them. So as you figure out what you want students learning, how do you discover how they are learning—or not learning?

Ryan: We just try something and see what happens. We start by identifying what have been best practices with the ideas, then try those practices, and look at the consequences, their performance on exams. I also make it a point to visit with

students individually. I ask students, “What did we do today that worked? How did this feel?” I ask that of students after classes and when they stop by my office.

John: Let’s talk more about the work of your committee, starting with a definition of what “faculty development” means to you.

Lynda: It means developing the faculty. One of the challenges of working year round is to continue to grow in my content area. I don’t know how many books in my field I have read since my dissertation. But I need to be current in my content area, especially if it is forever changing. Meanwhile, the learners in your classroom are also forever changing. If we maintain that the way we taught last semester and the semester before and ten years ago is going to be successful with these students, we are naive, for they are very different learners. Faculty development requires me to stay current in my content area and continue to explore how to teach learners who may even be different than they were when the Learning Model rolled out. Technology overloads them with information, and when we give them so much new information and they don’t know where to put it and they don’t get immediate feedback, it’s frustrating for them.

Steve: Here’s a more limited definition for our committee. I would say that our role in faculty development is simply supporting faculty growth. I don’t know that we as a committee can do much for growth in the discipline, but we can support growth as good teachers, and that’s what we are trying to do.

Ryan: For me, faculty development means an opportunity to grow and to take new ideas and see how they play out and try and adapt them to my own personality and style and to my students. Lynda mentioned the challenge of students being different, and I wonder if they are as different as I am different in how I view them. I am going to have to think about that. I came from a tradition where teachers were barely weaning themselves away from an approach that might be described as, “Throw them all into the deep end, and the ones who haven’t drowned are going to be our majors.” Now we actually try to bridge gaps and connect links. If we reasonably address the needs of the weakest student in a particular concept, we make it a safe place for all students to work out insecurities and learn. Over the years I keep finding students who completely

surprise me. I'm looking for all kinds of tools for how to approach my students. What we are trying to accomplish is to give faculty opportunities to get experience with some helpful tools.

Steve: It's really interesting because we're talking about faculty development in kind of a generic way. But I think as this effort matures, we'll eventually see the need to do faculty development in disciplines. There's something called pedagogical content knowledge, which is all about how people learn physics, how they learn Spanish, or how they learn to be teachers. So as we mature and as we get our feet under us, we will start seeing that there are specific learning and teaching issues in the sciences that will need to be explored and researched and investigated, and that there is an entirely different set of questions that will apply in the humanities. We're not there yet, but I think that the day will come when we'll need to turn to the disciplines.

John: Let's say you do a nice job of understanding how an eighteen-year-old thinks about physics for Science Foundations, for example. Where do you archive or share the results of your inquiry into that question? And what forum would allow you to share what you've learned about learning with teachers of language and teacher education and humanities and business?

Ryan: I'm a little spoiled, because in some significant and fundamental ways the difficulties that are associated with physics have been fairly clearly mapped out over a period of probably about forty years and documented. And once the bottlenecks to learning—the difficulties that are common to most students—have been pretty clearly mapped out, experts have laid out strategies to help students learn those basic concepts. We try to apply these insights in Foundations courses. But the idea that faculty are meeting students today who were raised to learn and think differently from previous generations is a wild card. We may have to start from scratch on some things as a result.

John: So if Steve wanted to know the five most important obstacles to learning physics, how would you get that information, and what role would Ryan play?

Steve: I think I would do a couple of things that I have done with Ryan. I attended one of his classes to watch discovery learning,

inquiry learning. I read an article by a major figure in physics education, Lillian McDermott, and it was very enlightening. I didn't necessarily change my practice very much, but I was really inspired by the way this discipline has investigated itself so rigorously and extensively over all these years. So I would visit practitioners, I would read, and I would ask questions.

John: Lynda's specialty is how people learn, although you may focus on earlier developmental phases more than 18-24-year-olds. What have you learned from talking with people in other disciplines?

Lynda: I teach reading in the content area for all secondary education majors. There are eighteen secondary education majors, and somewhere they have to take this reading class. I have visited classrooms, sat down with those teachers, methods teachers, in those disciplines and asked them very specific questions about what their students learn in these classes and how they learn it. Then I need to tell my students, "If you become a physics teacher you will take a very different approach with reading than an English teacher would." For music teachers a text means sheet music. I have to investigate that because when you say I study the learner, I study a reader who has seven periods a day in a high school, where each teacher has a different subject that has to be approached a different way. There are times when I am sure that Ryan does nothing but lecture, and he should because there are life-and-death experiences that could happen in that lab with an experiment, and we don't want anyone's safety at issue. And so when people say the learning model just means not to lecture, that's not true. In the hard sciences I want my students and my child lectured to. I want them to know certain information before you allow them into a lab to experiment. Reciprocal teaching is where I have learned something, and when I understand it well, then I teach someone else. Some teachers get muddled about this as they try to apply the Learning Model. If teachers just turn over the content to the students when the students don't know the content, they are swapping ignorance.

John: So there is a time and a place for lecturing in our classrooms?

Lynda: There's a time and a place for it. Delivery is very different across disciplines, and I think we need to ease up on the non-lecture idea. Lecture has its uses, and I lecture. When I

teach reading I'm not going to allow my students to go teach a young child to learn to read unless they know what they are doing first. You can do more harm than good if you don't have your content.

John: You all have children who are coming to school here or who will come here. What does faculty development mean when you think about what your children are going to experience here? What kind of faculty do you want your children to encounter? I assume you want the faculty to know their stuff, to know their learners and the difficulties they encounter. What does faculty development mean from the point of view of a parent?

Lynda: My son is a married student and visits us regularly on Sundays. He's frustrated that the Learning Model is not universal. Every teacher does it differently, and he explains what every teacher does, and I look at him and I think, "Oh man, are we reading the same words and instructions?" He's frustrated, but I say to him what I've always said to my kids: "I don't care where you work, where you end up in life—you have got to learn to learn from different people. And maybe that teacher does not fit your learning style. Well guess what, neither will your bishop or your stake president or your next boss. But as a learner we need to learn to adjust." As a teacher, I learn to adjust to my learners. But they also need to learn to adjust to me. I had a student say this morning in a class, when I have a classroom it's going to be quiet, because this class drives me crazy. And I said, I am so sorry you feel uncomfortable here, but this is the way I choose to teach, and I am not apologizing for the discussion that always happens in my class. As a mother I want my child to be learning; I want my child to be stretched. I want my child to be challenged. I also want teachers who care enough that when my child is struggling he can go to them and they can say, "Well, what's the best approach I can take with you, such as a one-on-one consultation or a tutoring opportunity where you might learn better?"

Steve: I have a daughter starting here in the fall, and I am starting to think about these things. I am feeling old. I guess one way to put it would be that I hope she will go into classrooms that will be very different from one another but with core principles that remain the same. I hope she will be able to learn how to learn, that she will have powerful learning

experiences because the different instructors whose classes she takes will magnify their unique gifts within a common framework. So if she takes physics from Ryan, it's going to have Ryan's imprint on it, but it will be recognizably a BYU-Idaho experience, and that would be true everywhere: powerful learning experiences through developing unique gifts.

Ryan: I think it is important for teachers to teach to their strengths. As a student I was always frustrated how often things were simply repeated or simply stated and I was supposed to understand it. I've come to learn that some of the hardest ideas we deal with are very easily repeated back to the instructor, even on a test, like a catechism. *Understanding* is different—a higher standard than we imagine. I've got a daughter here now and I would be looking for experiences where she is allowed to make the fundamental learning, to learn the core principles in deep and profound ways. That's what I am hoping for because if she understands those deeply, she can guide and direct a whole lot else that she is exposed to; it will structurally get her somewhere.

John: Based upon what you are hoping for, what does faculty development need to look like? What kind of faculty development is most likely to generate those kinds of learning experiences for your children?

Lynda: I think faculty development is about knowing the learner and nurturing the learner.

Because if you understand my child who is in your class, you know that he's frustrated, that he's thinking of dropping your class. A developed faculty asks why. And I think that's unique at BYU-Idaho. We send emails to students when they miss two classes in a row and say, "What's the matter?" And the student will talk to me and say, "I didn't know you cared." We do care.

Steve: I hope I can express that one of the guiding ideas we have had as we have organized different events is that we are not trying to come in to provide an official answer to pedagogical questions, but rather to gather colleagues who are tremendously wise and insightful and to get a conversation going. Our conversations are so much richer than they would be if it were just the chair of the Faculty Development Committee giving answers. That would be a disaster. It's so rewarding when we

come and learn from that kaleidoscope of approaches and ideas on things.

John: Last spring in *Perspective*, Fenton Broadhead wrote about the need for faculty to make a professional development plan. The idea seemed to be that not only would new faculty have a plan for developing but so would every faculty member. So if your colleagues said, “You are on the Faculty Development Committee—help me plan,” what advice would you give to them?

Lynda: I think it is goal setting, much the same as for a couple or a family. Where do we want to be in five years? Where do we want to be in ten years? Where do we want to end up? That involves setting short-range goals and long-range goals based on where you want to end up. It could be degrees that they want to earn, additional education they want to receive, but also how to deal with advisees. I would love to have a plan for my 180 advisees to help them each semester.

John: That sounds like short-term survival.

Lynda: I think we are so much into survival mode that this learning community was a life saver. Otherwise I wouldn't get out of my building.

Steve: And that's one of the greatest blessings of being involved with this committee because I am getting out of my building and I'm getting out of my department. Getting to know Ryan and Lynda is representative of the way I have developed friendships with people across campus, and it is a wonderful thing.

Lynda: But how many are missing that? One of my learning community members said it was the best part of her week because we had colleagues from all over campus, we met together, and those people solved so many of her problems. So she was really disappointed that we stopped and wants to know when we are going to start again.

Steve: I will second that. We had the same response when we finished our *Ponder/Prove* learning community.

Lynda: We are just getting started here. But it is more demanding for the leader, who needs to arrange the time, organize it, and make sure everybody stays up-to-date.

- Ryan: I've seen the power of the brown bags. I can spend thirty minutes or less in preparation with those and be benefited.
- Steve: We try to offer a menu of faculty development projects to meet people at different levels, and maybe for some people the brown bag is enough—just come and participate for an hour and off you go. That may change some things, but there's no follow up; we're not going to track that in any way. The learning communities are more involved and provide much greater payoff. We are trying to do similar things with the conference and "open doors." We are trying to meet people at a variety of levels, and I hope that is working. One sign of success is that we're seeing different people participate in different things. It is not the same group of eager beavers who are doing everything.
- John: I think it is safe to say that we are always thinking about faculty development as a means to an end where the end is the preparation of students. But what role can students play in faculty development? For example, have you seen cases where faculty-student collaboration produces a disciplinary pay off and a pedagogical payoff for both parties?
- Ryan: A student has been part of pioneering the state-mandated online endorsement which is done without credit. I don't know all the particulars, but he's been involved with Brian Pyper's Physics Education research group, and he's developed a few surveys for us. On another level this business of interviewing students in some organized way, if we could involve students, I am sure they could help design something to help track student responses about where they face challenges.
- John: Are there other ways in which students inform what you do as a faculty development committee or participate in it?
- Lynda: We had a panel discussion of students at a brown bag to describe what was working and not working in the application of the Learning Model. It was eye-opening for faculty, I thought. We had freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. So we had a broad range, including one who had been here through the transition, and he had lots to say. Not all of it was positive, but it was really good for us to hear.
- John: We say that we evaluate things we do in terms of how they benefit and bless our students. And if somebody wanted to do a faculty development project and wasn't exactly able

to articulate how it would benefit and bless students, what would you respond?

Ryan: I would be tempted to ask, how does it benefit you? If it develops excitement and interest in your students and how they perform in class, if it develops your capacity as a teacher, it may not necessarily require one-to-one mapping a specific outcome that benefits students. I hope it could still get reasonable consideration.

Steve: Last semester Dave Magleby and I made some visits to former students who are teaching in Madison County schools, the thought being that no surgeon just works on your insides and then sends you off and never checks up again. It's like the post-procedure visit. "Are you really okay? You looked okay on the table. How are you doing now?" That was an interesting idea, and I would like to do more of it to really get to know what we are producing. How strong a graduate are we consistently producing? I agree with what Ryan said about the general effect—that if the instructor is built up in some way, there will be an effect. But I would like to be able to see it. I would like to see that our efforts in faculty development are more than just busywork. I think we are edifying, but I don't know that it is getting down to the students.

Ryan: I think it is nice to have a spectrum of those possibilities available. I think it is appropriate to require one-to-one mapping for some things. Other things may have value for keeping us alive, keeping us invigorated.

John: In his 2001 talk to faculty, President Bednar also argued that our scholarship should involve and engage and benefit our students. What would that look like? When you hear about a scholarly community, a faculty community who are engaged in scholarship that involves and engages and benefits students, what does that look like in your mind?

Ryan: I have occasionally told the students that we're trying an experiment in class and I want to hear how it is working. I want to know which works and which doesn't. I found that's a lot more successful experience than just trying the experiment. If students know they are part of an experiment, then they feel they have an influence on the outcome. It's not just my experiment; it is theirs too.

I think students learn a great deal by thinking about what works or doesn't. There is some power to that. When a learner has a wrong idea, I or he needs to respectfully map out why this idea, which is held by an honest and talented student whom I love, does not agree with nature, and how we must think about the world to get the right answer.

Lynda: Student-teachers go to Las Vegas, and when I visited, the principals would pull me aside and say, "We cannot figure out what it is about your students but they are so different. And it's not just their dress; it's not just that they don't smoke and drink." I would just say to them, "They know who they are, and they know what they represent, and most of all they know where they are going." "But how do your kids know how to coach soccer?" "Well, she did that in the activities program." So people are recognizing something very different but very professional, but they can't put their finger on it, and it is that our students carry the Spirit with them. They teach with the Spirit, and their lesson plan is designed and influenced by the Spirit.

Now my hope is that, when we go visit those young teachers in five years, they don't look and sound like every other teacher. If we don't have that prolonged effect, that's really a sad dilemma.

Steve: We have a Spanish 490R class, a special topics class. Two of the three times I taught that class, I have focused on pedagogical topics. We took on the project of redesigning one of my classes using the Teaching for Understanding approach from the Project Zero group at Harvard. That was a great experience. It was a tiny class, just two students. But the three of us worked together. We reworked the class and presented our product to the other Spanish faculty to make sure they understood what we were doing and to ensure that there was some level of approval from my colleagues. It was a great experience. I have had a steady stream of email from those two students thanking me for that experience. One of them is teaching now, and she continues to ask about our project, and she's very committed to the Teaching for Understanding approach.

Just this past winter I had another opportunity like that, and this time we took concept mapping as our topic and the class really jumped on it. We had a larger group, but still just six

or so students. They really got involved. We took students from other Spanish classes and had them do an early semester and late semester concept map of their understanding of an important grammatical question. We found some interesting results, and my students were really enthused about doing a deep dive into the theory of what concept mapping is all about. Students were very involved in that process in both cases in ways that produced a successful class but more importantly in ways that will produce more successful teachers.

John: As we conclude, what are your main hopes for the faculty conference in September [2009]?

Steve: We hope people come. It was members of the committee who proposed the idea, not the academic administration. A member of the committee proposed the idea and a subcommittee worked on details.

Lynda: It was totally faculty-driven. Administrators never gave us direction on what to do. And the outpouring of support was overwhelming.

Ryan: I'm not part of the design team for the conference, but I've got some specific things I am looking for. I'm looking for a couple of zingers and a couple of ideas where I say, "Good grief, I could do that." I would define a zinger as something that is exciting and scholarly, and we need to know that those kinds of things are happening on campus. But we also need to see the little bits and pieces that contribute to make an educational whole. And sometimes it's just a moment or two, a simple ten-minute idea that will be as productive and as transferable to other classes as a powerful study someone has accomplished.

Steve: That reminds me that a few days ago here in the hallway of the Smith Building I saw a colleague. His office is nearby, but I had never spoken with him before. He had sent in a proposal for the conference and I stopped to thank him for sending it in. He responded with thanks for an article I had sent to him on his presentation topic. He said that he was scared about the idea of presenting at the conference. He said, "I'm not an educator; I come from industry." He's scared and he feels unprepared, but he has something to share and he's doing it. That is exactly what we are looking for. He is acting in faith.

- Lynda: I am participating because I went to a wonderful conference. But do any of you know or care? We don't ever share. I just can't wait to tell some of the things that I learned that have changed my teaching, and this is an opportunity for those who have received some new learning to come back and share it with us. My own department doesn't even know I went.
- John: Do you have a sense of where you would like the faculty conference to be in two years or three or ten?
- Ryan: I would like to see it still be accessible for someone to try out this exact sort of thing: to share something they've learned and that they are excited about with the understanding that it isn't finished, it isn't polished. So it would be open to presentations that are professional but not necessarily publishable. And colleagues are sharing.
- Steve: We've had some suggestions on how things might be different in the future. One suggestion was that we share books that have been read recently, kind of an open forum—"I read this, and this is what I learned." It wouldn't have to be pedagogy; maybe it's on the Athenian Empire or something, and we could just learn about what you've been learning. Another suggestion would be kind of like Education Week. For instance, Randy Kempton comes in and teaches the group about singing by preparing them to sing a number for the concluding meeting of the conference. Or I teach some Spanish thing, but we all teach in our discipline during the conference, showing how we teach and what we teach.
- John: Any last words on why the Faculty Development Committee matters?
- Ryan: I notice that what we've been doing in the brown bags illustrates the basic premise of the Spori Summit: Any group of a dozen people interested in teaching constitute at least as much expertise as an outside expert. We want to provide a vehicle for that sharing.
- Steve: I would reaffirm that our goal is to draw on the goodness and wisdom and insight of the faculty. In a lot of ways I think that we are succeeding and blessing the teaching faculty of BYU-Idaho. ☺