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ATS Educational Models grant report, March 1, 2019

**Project title:** Teaching in changing contexts

**Abstract:**

At any given time, a St. Andrew's College faculty member may be teaching a semester course in a classroom and a semester course online and preparing to teach a one-week intensive course, while looking ahead to preparing a non-credit lay education course. Students in one basic degree course may be from different degree programs or specialties; some may have prior theological education and others have none. Some students are native English speakers, while others have only just gained proficiency. This situation is markedly different from even five years ago. This project aims to foster discussion about new opportunities and challenges in this situation, to help faculty learn and apply teaching strategies, and to develop practices for assessing and supporting faculty teaching. The format of the project aims to model practices for an on-going college-supported faculty development program.

Because approval of the grant and receipt of the funds did not happen until summer 2017, the project did not get underway until late October 2017. The project was completed in January 2019.

**Primary goals and their attainment:** (Slightly adapted from the application's goals)

1. Discussion and reflection on changing contexts (demographics, degree programs, program delivery) and how these contexts affect teaching
2. Learn about research into a variety of teaching and learning strategies and processes
3. Develop formats for on-going faculty development

All three goals were met. At two full-day retreats, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the project, faculty had both broad and deep discussions about changing contexts and the impact on teaching. A peer-led series of lunch-and-learns saw research on a number of topics being presented to the faculty as a whole, which means that all faculty will be reasonably conversant with the issues if and when they come up in the future.

The model of peer-led learning was successful in engaging the attention of most faculty. However, we also recognized that we didn't tackle one topic because we thought it would require more expertise than a faculty member plus student researcher could develop in a few weeks. As well, we concluded that a monthly event might be too often for an on-going program of faculty development, and suggested that a once-a-semester event might be more practicable going forward.

Because we decided to invite the Principal (who is the sole full-time faculty) at our partner school College of Emmanuel & St. Chad in the project, we also developed a model that could be used in the future for all three schools in our consortium (Saskatoon Theological Union), leading to increased trust and cross-school engagement.

### **Crucial issues and questions:**

Between 2005 and 2016, enrolment in the MDiv program dropped from 83% to 16% of the student headcount at St. Andrew's, and enrolment in the MTS program rose to 35% of the student headcount, mostly in the specializations of spiritual care and acculturation to Canadian ministry. Over that time, teaching changed from being mostly semester-length classroom courses to being a combination of semester-length classroom, semester-length online, intensive/modular classroom, and modular online courses. The student body shifted from being mostly native English speakers to a mix of native and non-native speakers; at the same time, the number of students in basic degree programs with prior theological education (often in another country) rose. It is now common to see semester courses where the native English speakers are in the minority. Fall 2016 saw the first intake of students into a combined undergraduate-MDiv program, and thus added students with little or no post-secondary education into the mix. The college has also embarked on a continuing/lay education program.

Along with the rapid change towards heterogeneous learning environments, we have seen a rapid change in teaching format. Faculty members are often only teaching one or two traditional semester courses in a classroom per year, while also teaching a semester-long online course, preparing to teach a one-week intensive course during the semester break, and preparing material for a weekend lay education course. What it is to teach at St. Andrew's College has shifted so dramatically and so quickly that we are no longer sure what good teaching is, or how to assess and support faculty in developing their teaching.

Since the emerging formats and environments are different from what most faculty experienced themselves as students and are different from what faculty who have been here for more than five or six years have experienced as teachers, the most crucial question is: how can faculty adapt to changing contexts? The faculty in most cases have led the college in these new directions, or have developed programs in response to perceived needs in the community. However, it is one thing to see and respond, and another to be properly prepared. How can the faculty be better prepared to teach in changing institutional contexts? The increased demands of adapting to new teaching modalities needs to be balanced with faculty responsibilities and commitments as scholars. This is important for what faculty bring to the classroom, and for the leadership faculty provide within the institution and its constituencies.

### **Opportunities and challenges:**

We had the opportunity to work with an expert from the University of Saskatchewan's Teaching and Learning centre, due to our affiliation with the university. She helped us more clearly define what we wanted to achieve over the course of our learning together. She

prodded us to think bigger for our project, and it was due to her that we included a student researcher in the grant proposal and the project. It was also particularly valuable that we met with her both at the early stage and at the conclusion of the project. She facilitated a discussion in response to the ATS Faculty Development forum from June 2018.

Having a student research assistant has relieved individual faculty of some of the work of peer-leadership, and has provided a learning opportunity for a student. Most of the faculty have not worked with a research assistant before, and have been pleased with how the work was both beneficial to the project and beneficial to the development of the student. Supporting theological scholarship through providing mentoring and professional development to an advanced student has been an unforeseen benefit.

Another opportunity arose when we decided to include the aforementioned faculty member/Principal from our partner school. It broadened the project's perspective to include an ecumenical component, and allowed our colleague to have structured time and opportunities to think about teaching in a collegial setting. He remarked how much he appreciated the invitation to participate and how it could be a model for future work in our consortium.

The biggest challenge has been finding regular times to meet as a faculty. Inevitably there has been at least one member missing from every lunch-and-learn, and the only event that included all participants was the final retreat day in January 2019. The other challenge has been thinking through the ongoing leadership for a sustainable faculty development program. Even having an event two or three times a year means someone has to be given the responsibility for organizing it; peer-led events require faculty willing and able to take on responsibility for a topic, while bringing in an outside expert also requires time and energy on the part of the organizer. St. Andrew's College does not have a position of Academic Dean, so ongoing leadership for the program would have to be assigned with other administrative tasks.

### **Benefits for St. Andrew's and for other schools:**

We learned about:

1. Differences between lay and professional education, and unique requirements for lay education, especially with respect to "life-long learning"
2. Whether and how diverse delivery formats of the same course have an effect on meeting course goals
3. Problem-based learning
4. Peer-mentoring effectiveness
5. Identifying threshold concepts for students in the study of theology
6. Developing (e-)portfolios for students

Topics that we identified as needing to be addressed in future faculty development:

7. How to orient students to (theological) education

8. Diversity in student body, including language, culture, race/ethnicity, age differences, differences in preparation – this will require an outside expert who might be able to address only one aspect of diversity
9. Formation: of students and possibly also of faculty

Because these were topics generated out of our own collective sense of what we needed to explore based on our school's mission and changing contexts, most faculty saw immediate applicability from at least one topic in their own teaching or in the work of the faculty as a whole. Undertaking this project in the way we did reminded us that the most meaningful learning comes out of self-assessed needs and interests.

Because of our small size and the large sparsely-populated geography that we serve, many learning opportunities will have a mix of degree program students, clergy seeking continuing education, and non-program students. We have learned that there is not much scholarship about what "continuing education" is in a theological education context: while to us there's a distinction between people of faith coming together to learn about their faith, and clergy looking to keep their skills and knowledge current, that distinction is not made in the literature. Thus there are no easy answers to the question of how lay and professional education differ and how to serve the different audiences in the same course or learning opportunity.

We have learned that delivery format does not have to have an effect on the meeting of course goals, but that non-traditional delivery requires work from faculty to creatively rethink the work (assignments, course activities) needed to meet course goals. We have learned that Problem-Based Learning has become a standard format in health-sciences education and business education over the last thirty to forty years, and that it is more effective at enabling students to retain and apply skills and knowledge. Teaching in diverse formats and reconfiguring courses to be Problem-Based requires a large investment of faculty time.

Problem-Based Learning, in particular, has potential for broad application in theological education, even though there is very little scholarship from theological educators on the topic. Individual course modules, whole courses, and even whole degrees could be oriented around the solving of carefully-constructed problems.

The research on peer-mentoring practices and effectiveness allowed us to see that while there can be formal mentoring programs, a lot of mentoring that already goes on can be nudged along with some simple encouragement from individual faculty members. Since we don't have the resources to implement a formal program, this was helpful to discover.

Threshold concepts was a new model for us when our consultant introduced it to us. Exploring this topic allowed us to think critically about the process of learning: both how we ourselves learn and have learned, and how our students learn. Learning that there is a certain point that a person must reach before they can learn more knowledge or skills helped us think about how we can assist students to reach that point.

(E-)portfolios turned out to be an interesting idea but potentially a lot of work both for us and for students. We learned that the most important part of the portfolio process is having students reflect on each part of it. If this isn't already built into the curriculum, it would be adding more work to what we already demand of students. But we started thinking about how the reflection we already require of students might be leveraged, both for students being able to articulate their learning and for faculty in assessing the curriculum's effectiveness.

We thought that having some funds available to purchase library materials would enable us to build a better collection of teaching-and-learning resources, but very little of that money was spent. Faculty were frequently reminded that they could recommend books (or other materials) for purchase, but it simply didn't happen. Faculty and the student researcher did seem to find enough materials through our access to the University of Saskatchewan Libraries' ebooks and databases as well as what is openly available online.

### **Recommended practices:**

1. Faculty-designed professional development programs are preferred over imposed programs: what do the faculty themselves have the desire to learn?
2. We don't need to reinvent the wheel: many issues we have tackled have already been well-researched and best practices have been developed by scholars in other areas of higher education.
3. Building community through faculty development requires intentionality and usually food.
4. Making use of library resources already available, especially if the school is in a consortium with access to resources on teaching and learning.

### **Implications for redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation:**

Although theological education is its own unique form of education, there are many things to be learned from professional education in other fields, and from the broader field of scholarship of teaching and learning. Best practices in higher education more generally might be held up in the educational and degree program standards.

### **Sustaining the learning:**

This will be the most difficult part of the project. As mentioned above, responsibility for following through and maintaining a culture of faculty development has not been assigned. One thing that may help make the learning sustainable is continuing to have a student research assistant. There is a small fund (less than C\$1000) available each year for collective faculty development that might be tapped into.

Additional questions for the final report:

**Resources from beyond the institution:**

1. Our teaching-and-learning consultant, Sheryl Mills. She was effective at bringing her knowledge of the field to us, and for giving us tools to assess our own learning and desire to learn more. She also made us read (skim) all the interim reports from May 2018!
2. University of Saskatchewan Libraries. This is a major research-intensive university with a college of education and a library system that had more than enough resources for us.

Appendix: Bibliography generated from the peer-learning lunches

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