

HAVE YOU JOINED A CIRCLE?

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A teaching circle, or group of faculty meeting regularly to discuss teaching, is an excellent opportunity for faculty development. As a member of two circles, I have learned a valuable lesson, "We work with teachers." There is so much to learn from our colleagues. For example, are you three-hole-punching all of your handouts, so your students will keep up with them? How about copying your syllabi on colored paper?

Most teaching circles consist of no more than 15 faculty members, who meet for 1 or 2 hours in a round-table discussion. These meetings include the general sharing of personal experiences, but can also incorporate classroom visits, demonstrations, guest speakers, book clubs, conference reports and student guests. From my experience, the personalities of the members tend to determine the dynamics of the group. Innovative teachers often prefer to visit classes and share demonstrations, while traditional scholars appreciate topical discussions.

I was privileged to participate in a faculty development program designed by Georgia Southern's first Board of Regents Distinguished Professor of Teaching and Learning, John Daily. He had three groups of ten faculty members meet weekly for two quarters to discuss a variety of topics. We used Wilbert McKeachie's *Teaching Tips* as a guide. During the second quarter Daily realized that there is a name for what we were doing...a teaching circle. We had discovered a valuable resource that university faculty around the country were already utilizing. Attendance at the meetings was high, and the discussions always filled the allotted time. My group enjoyed the discussions so much that we continue to meet quarterly.

During the following summer, the chemistry department at Georgia Southern University was going through a major revision in the way we were to be evaluated. As we discussed the evaluation of teaching, we realized that none of the methods we suggested encouraged faculty development. For example, student evaluations, peer evaluations and teaching portfolios require faculty members to boast about successes, while ignoring failures. We admitted that we should learn from each others achievements, as well as mistakes.

Using what I learned from John Daily's program, I established a teaching circle within my department. The meetings are held weekly, and we have been loosely following Daily's outline and McKeachie's text. We have learned that informal meetings are a great forum to share ideas, complaints and strategies.

The content of the discussions is set at the beginning of each quarter, although some meetings move to more pressing issues. The first year of topics included the following: the syllabus, expectations of our students, professional culture, how students learn, the lecture, managing class discussion, teach-

ing activities, in-class writing, technology in the classroom, the laboratory, term projects, designing and administering tests, assessing student work, counseling, evaluation of instruction, the classroom, academic dishonesty, values and undergraduate research.

Circles within a department and those across a campus have certain advantages and disadvantages. While some topics are irrelevant and there is never enough time to share everything, interdisciplinary circles offer more about departmental cultures and teaching failures. Members learn more about teaching, in general. With a professional hierarchy always present within a department, members in intradisciplinary circles are less likely to admit mistakes. Also, departmental activities can disrupt the meetings. On the other hand, departmental circles can include discussions on area specific topics and are easier to schedule. In general, members receive more practical advice.

What have we learned? Here are a few ideas that were shared in my circles:

- It's time to add the statement, "Computer failure is not a legitimate excuse for late papers," to our syllabi.
- Our students' SAT scores aren't nearly as high as we think.
- Departmental cultures vary widely by dress codes, grading policies and teaching techniques.
- The size of the class and material covered determine the appropriate type of lecture. Most lectures require at least one two-minute pause for students to catch up and reflect.
- Perhaps the faculty member shouldn't be doing all of the talking in class.
- Guest lectures and Jeopardy-type reviews are excellent examples of teaching activities which revive student interest.
- To encourage our students to write in any discipline, we might require study journals or student poster presentations of new topics.
- From laser pointers to digital cameras to web-based lectures, one important rule should be remembered when dealing with technology: Always have a back-up! We should plan for failures, because they can happen at any time.
- Unannounced exams are a way to have perfect attendance and well-prepared students, but would our students ever forgive us?
- When it comes to personal problems of our students, the best response is to refer the students to the school's counseling center. We should avoid giving advice, if at all possible.
- Many of us spend too little time assessing student work.

Exams are certainly important enough to spend an entire hour discussing the correct answers. So, have you joined a circle? If not, please try one. And if you don't have a circle to join, consider starting one. You will be surprised at how much you can learn from your colleagues. *