Instructional Capacity Building in Postsecondary Education: Lessons from the Developing World

Sheila M. Coressel and John M. Dirkx

Rapid social and economic growth within developing countries has focused attention on the quality of student learning within their institutions of higher education and the need to more effectively prepare students for real-world demands. This paper uses Vietnam as a case in point to illustrate the limitations of existing approaches to building instructional capacity within higher and adult education and offers a set of guiding principles to create systems of professional development that are sustainable, integrated, and comprehensive.

Introduction

In a recent study of a community college teaching improvement project in the American Midwest, an experienced teacher was asked why he chose to leave his position at a rather elite private college to teach at a community college. “At my former college,” he replied, “you could put a book and a dog in front of them and the students would still learn. Here the students need me.” In the vast majority of higher and adult education contexts, the quality of teaching is considered a key factor in student learning outcomes. Considerable emphasis is now being placed within these contexts on the use of professional development or instructional capacity building to improve the quality of teaching and, therefore, enhance student learning (Gillespe & Robertson, 2010; Quigley, 2006; Saroyan & Frenay, 2010). Nowhere is this more evident than in developing countries, whose governments see reform of postsecondary education as critical to addressing their growing economic and social needs.

Because of the breadth and depth of the need, developing countries offer an opportunity to learn more about the nature of capacity building needed in higher and adult education to bring about systematic change in teaching practices. Using Vietnam as a case study, we argue that such efforts must go beyond the “one-shot” approach characteristic of standardized and centralized approaches to professional development, such as conferences and workshops, and strive to create approaches that are sustained, continuous, and integrated.

Student Learning and the Need for Instructional Capacity Building

The idea of using professional development to improve the quality of teaching in higher and adult education is predicated on the notion that the quality of student learning is related to the quality of instruction students are receiving. Like the community college teacher quoted earlier, there is a clear sense that what the teacher does in the classroom matters to students and what and how they learn. This relationship has increasingly become a focus of attention in postsecondary education because of increasing concern for what students are learning and what employers are expecting of them as graduates. In an analysis of higher education and adult learning within the United States, Kett (1994) reveals how our conceptions of what counts as “useful knowledge” have changed over time. Our society has increasingly framed higher education as, in part, preparation for work. Young people are strongly encouraged to stay in school and pursue postsecondary education and adult workers laid off from jobs that no longer exist are advised to return to school for further training. Conceptualizing student learning within
a workforce framework focuses not only on what students are learning but also how they learn. The latter is clearly reflected in the so-called “paradigm shift” in higher education from teaching to learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This shift reflects more emphasis on instructional methods that actively engage students in the learning process, stressing the importance not only of the knowledge they are acquiring but also their ability to understand and apply what they are learning (Mabrouk, 2007; NRC, 2000).

In summary, the growing insistence that what students learn in higher and adult education should have relevance to the world of work and an evolving understanding of how students learn have raised questions about the nature and quality of teaching in postsecondary settings. Instructional improvement projects seek to bring about forms of teaching in which students are taught what is more relevant to economic and social needs of society, and are taught in ways that help them understand and more effectively apply what they are learning to real-world settings.

Nowhere is this focus more apparent than in developing countries and Vietnam is a case in point. Many higher education institutions in Vietnam are graduating students who, in the words of a Vietnamese colleague, “know a lot but can’t do anything” (personal communication, Advisory Committee member, July, 2006). In 1986, the Vietnamese government enacted a socioeconomic policy change which led to the opening of a free market economy. Since then, the country has experienced rapid economic expansion, creating demand for skilled and educated workers. This development eventually led to the reformation of the higher education curriculum (Fry, 2009) and other policies that aim at enhancing the quality of student learning. Government documents clearly indicate that education and training are the number one priority in national policy. A report by the Vietnam Education Foundation describes a number of issues with regard to teaching and learning in undergraduate education and training, including ineffective teaching methods and lack of attention to developing students’ professional skills, such as teamwork, oral and written communication, problem-solving, and life-long learning (VEF, 2007). Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2011) has also stressed the need for learners to be more actively engaged in the learning process and for teaching to be more learning centered. Currently, too many higher education lecturers in too many institutions spend far too much time delivering and transmitting information to students and far too little time helping students understand and apply this information within their respective disciplines. Policy-makers and educators within the country clearly recognize this situation and have called for capacity building that helps lecturers shift to a more learning-centered approach to teaching.

The idea of improving student learning by enhancing the quality of instruction they receive reflects a central premise of faculty development in Western countries and represents the core argument of the paradigm shift in higher education (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Learning outcomes associated with this paradigm shift are consistent with what students need to actively participate in civil society as well as be productive members of the workforce (Bok, 2006). Facilitating this shift from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered and learning-centered approach also characterizes instructional capacity building efforts in developing countries like Vietnam (Sloper & Lê, 1995), which seeks to help lecturers in higher education acquire the knowledge and skills required to foster student learning outcomes more closely aligned with the economic and social needs of Vietnam.

Current Approaches to Instructional Capacity Building in Vietnam

Building instructional capacity in Vietnam represents a country-wide effort at all levels of postsecondary education, from vocational schools and centers to community colleges to regional
and national universities. The focus of this effort is on the teaching practices of lecturers, a designation that is used to refer to a large majority of the teaching staff in higher education. Most of these lecturers do not possess advanced degrees and in many institutions they are often quite young and inexperienced both in their disciplines and in teaching. Bright, promising students who are graduating are often recruited by their universities to become lecturers. A student who graduates in May, for example, in physics may very well join the lecture staff of that university in August.

There is little question that educators and policy-makers in Vietnam recognize the need to change how lecturers teach. In a recent visit to over 20 institutions and agencies of higher education across the country, most of the representatives with whom we talked clearly demonstrated an awareness of the need to foster more active and learning-centered approaches among their staff. Many institutions of higher education also reflect some level of commitment to professional development.

The dominant approaches we observed that were being used to build capacity included (1) study for advanced degree abroad or within country, (2) professional conferences in country and internationally, and (3) regional or local workshops on teaching and learning, often designed and facilitated by international experts. Vietnam is currently encouraging members of their lecture staff in higher education to pursue doctoral degrees. One of MOET’s directives is the goal of having 20,000 lecturers with doctoral degrees before 2020; 10,000 of which are from international institutions of higher education. The large majority of those being sent abroad are already lecturers within higher education and study abroad is seen as a form of professional development that fosters subject matter and research expertise and, therefore, enhances the quality of teaching. In turn, lecturers will be able to use this expanded knowledge and research skills when they return to Vietnam.

Unfortunately, we know relatively little about the effectiveness of these programs in contributing to the development of teaching knowledge and skills. Given the highly specialized and focused nature of many doctoral programs in western research universities, it seems unlikely that these lecturers will devote much energy or time to studying how to more effectively teach within their disciplines. Development of subject matter knowledge and scholarly expertise may contribute to improved teaching among these lecturers, but it is unlikely that they will develop significant knowledge and skill in effective pedagogical practices relevant to their disciplines.

Lecturers are also encouraged to attend national and international professional conferences within their respective disciplines. These experiences providing opportunities to develop relationships and networks with colleagues within their respective disciplines. Such relationships help them stay current in their fields. However, we also know relatively little about how this approach may contribute to the improvement of teaching. It seems reasonable to surmise, however, that the primary focus of such experiences reflects an emphasis on subject matter knowledge and research expertise, with little or no specific attention to pedagogical practices within the discipline.

A third approach to building instructional capacity that is evident in Vietnam is the use of the workshop. In contrast to the previously mentioned approaches, workshops often target specific instructional techniques or strategies and usually involve 30 – 70 lecturers from a variety of regional universities, community colleges, or vocational centers in experiences that may last from two to five days. International experts are invited to design and facilitate workshops that focus on specific instructional areas, such as writing syllabi and lesson plans, using active learning strategies, facilitating inquiry-based learning, or using collaborative learning methods.
In these workshops, lecturers are invited to practice what they are learning through the use of simulations or other experiential learning approaches. In contrast to study for advanced degrees or attending professional conferences, workshops provide participants with the opportunity to study and learn more about specific pedagogical methods and skills. In workshops, participants are able to meet and talk with lecturers from other institutions and other disciplines.

Although the workshop approach focuses on specific instructional techniques, skills, or practices, there is often little follow-up after the workshop. We know from limited studies of professional development activities that, without some kind of support or follow-up for participants, it is not likely that participants will be able to implement or sustain significant changes in their professional practices (Zepeda, 2008). If the participants return to practice contexts that remain structurally unchanged, the excitement evoked during the workshop quickly evaporates and new ideas and practices learned are set aside.

In summary, standardized approaches to professional development, such as participating in professional conferences and focused workshops on teaching and learning, are characterized by a centralized approach and are used to effectively disseminate information and skills to larger groups of teachers. But these approaches do not help teachers learn to effectively transfer or apply what they are learning in the conference or workshop to their practices. The excitement of learning new methods quickly wanes and little of what the teachers learned in the workshops or conferences is ever fully implemented in their individual classrooms. As a result, little systematic change in teaching practice occurs.

The challenge of capacity building at a national level is daunting. In the West we struggle with this effort at the institutional level (Dirkx & Connor, 2006). Based on prior work and our current experiences in Vietnam, we can identify several characteristics that are needed to institutionalize and bring to scale innovations designed to improve instructional practice among our teachers in higher and adult education in developing countries like Vietnam and in the West.

**Key Characteristics of a Systematic Approach to Instructional Capacity Building**

Based on our experiences in Vietnam and what we can learn from existing scholarship (Gillespie, et. al., 2010; Saroyan & Frenay, 2010; Zepeda, 2008), it is possible to tentatively identify several attributes that characterize systematic approaches to instructional capacity building. First, we need to move away from a medical model for prescribing treatments to improve teaching practice and more towards an orientation to professional development as a form of lifelong learning deeply embedded within the practice of teaching. The medical model operates with a deficit or pathology perspective seeking to diagnose what is wrong with current practices and prescribing specific interventions to address these issues. This orientation leads to the design and implementation of “one-shot” treatments, such as targeted workshops, that often prove to be isolated and independent of one another. Rather, instructional capacity building as a form of professional development should be regarded as ongoing and continuous, a process through which lecturers learn through the study of and reflection on their own practices. Such an approach does not displace the use of standardized, centralized approaches to dissemination information about “best practices” in teaching. In a learning approach, however, lecturers identify question or issues within their practices and seek out those information sessions that reflect their particular needs and design their own change plans or interventions, assessing within their own practices the effectiveness of the designed intervention.

Second, the professional development of lecturers should be conceptualized within the context of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This idea reflects the growing awareness of
the social nature of learning and how meaning is inherently bound up with relations among lecturers or staff (NRC, 2000; Wenger, 1998), and the importance of peer support and feedback in the process of instructional improvement. Interdisciplinary learning communities (Cox & Richlin, 2004) can be formed from participating institutions within which lecturers collaboratively participate in the study of particular problems or issues related to their teaching practice, such as the use of inquiry-based methods or active learning strategies.

Third, individuals and learning communities should be assisted by instructional coaches. While considerable work has focused on the use of coaches in primary and secondary education (Zepeda, 2008); the idea is less well known in higher education. The purpose of coaching is to “improve the instructional practices of teachers in order to increase student learning” (Oliver, 2007, quoted in Zepeda, 2008, p. 163). They are essentially peers who have developed expertise in observing teaching and providing teachers with their thought processes and performances within the classroom. They develop close relationships with the practitioners with whom they work and come to know the strengths and concerns of those with whom they work. Instructional coaches provide another means for lecturers to receive information on their efforts to improve their teaching.

In addition to a focus on creating safe and supportive environments for lecturers to reflect on and experiment with their teaching practices, institutional policies and structures also need to be aligned with and a part of instructional capacity-building efforts. Mid-level and upper level managers in Vietnamese higher education need to reinforce the importance of continuous improvement of one’s teaching and to provide the support lecturers need to build capacity. Leaders need to create collaborate structures within their institutions that focus on teaching and learning (Zepeda, 2008). Structural changes may be needed to provide needed resources and support for the individual lecturers and their learning communities.

Finally, to be effective instructional capacity building needs organizational champions (Thompson, 2009) individual leaders within an institution, a school or college, a department, or a program that are deeply committed to the process of instructional capacity building and the improvement of student learning. While there are various ways to conceptualize the role of champions in a capacity building process, they are essentially change agents who address problems through innovation. They focus heavily on the socio-emotional dimensions of the change process and seek to create environments that are safe and that nurture change.

Conclusion

Rapid social and economic growth within developing countries have focused attention on what and how students in higher education within these countries are learning and the need to build instructional capacity among the teaching staff charged with their learning. In this paper, we have used Vietnam as a case in point to illustrate how this relationship is manifest at a national level and the limitations of existing methods that are intended to build capacity within higher and adult education. Based on our ongoing work in Vietnam, we suggest several principles around which a systematic approach to capacity building should be developed. These principles will help create processes for instructional improvement that are sustainable, ongoing and continuous, integrate the various components of professional development, and address all aspects of the teaching process. Our work here can provide a helpful framework for both the development and study of instructional capacity building not only developing countries like Vietnam but in developed countries of the West as well.
References


Sheila M. Coressel is a doctoral student and graduate assistant in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education at Michigan State University (coressel@msu.edu). John M. Dirkx is Professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education at Michigan State University (dirkx@msu.edu).

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