

# The Study of the Current Condition for Implementing Faculty Professional Learning Community in Higher Education in Taiwan

## Summary

### Introduction

The three main duties of university teachers are teaching, research and service. Professors need to produce knowledge and give service to society, and this is where university teachers are different from teachers at other levels of education. Because professors are required to assume different kinds of duties, they are always juggling multiple tasks (Commonwealth, 2012; Du, 2002; Dunkin, 1994; Green, 2008; Parker, 2008; Vardi & Quin, 2011; Wei & Cheng, 2006). This situation has become more and more severe when the higher education began to promote improvement exercise in recent years (Chen, 2001; Du, 2002; Song & Chang, 2008). Universities try to help teachers by offering professional development strategies. Professors are a group of people who have professional knowledge and work independently. Besides teaching, they spend lots of time doing research to explore the uncharted territories and to produce knowledge. The type of strategy and the way to carry it out are two important issues for higher education professional development.

Nowadays, most universities in Taiwan invite outstanding speakers to give academic talk or to share their life experience as the major activities for professional improvement. Some universities require teachers to attend those activities up to a certain number of hours. Consequently, they fulfill the hour requirements, but they show no interest in the activities, which do not really help improve their teaching ability and increase effectiveness. The activities have a weak connection to the needs of teachers, and cause teachers to refuse to learn (Beavers, 2009). Even if they try to learn, their achievement

is shallow and short-lived (Gregson & Sturko, 2007). Professors are adult learners who have accepted professional training. Their learning needs are highly practical and what they learn should be immediately useful to their work. The professional development strategy offered to adult learners should respect their experience and profession, combine their work needs, offer flexibility and choice, and motivate them to learn (Huang, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Lai, 1996).

In addition to academic talks and experience sharing, we should try to find out other professional development strategies suitable for professors. According to my research in 2011 (Chen, 2011), the Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) is one of the most popular professional development strategies in higher education in Taiwan, only next to academic talks. It is important to try to find out whether this type of professional development is a practicable professional development strategy for professors. Researches about FLCs is abundant internationally (Cesarini & Chao, 2005; Glowacki-Dufka & Brown, 2007; Hershberger, Richlin, & Essington, 2004; Sirum, Madigan, & Kliensky, 2009) but they seldom explore the utilization of professional development in Taiwan's academia. With this the research background, the purpose of this study is to explore the current condition for implementing FLCs in higher education in Taiwan and to investigate how universities carry out this strategy, but also the effectiveness for running this strategy and the challenge of universities to push this strategy.

## Method

The study adopted document analysis and interview as research methods. Document analysis was used to explore the current condition for implementing FLCs in higher education in Taiwan. The study searched the websites of 118 universities and downloaded their documents that contain the rules and methods of how to carry out FLCs. If the websites did not provide sufficient information, the study contacted the universities by phone and email to collect the information needed. After all the information of 118 universities was completely collected, the content of documents was categorized and analyzed. Interview was used to collect the experiences in carrying out FLCs. The study interviewed four directors of the teacher

development center of universities and five leaders of faculty professional development communities. The interview content included the way to carry out the community method, the effectiveness and challenges for promoting this strategy, the gain of the community members, and the challenges faced in the process of carrying out the community method.

## Results

The results showed that some universities started to use FLCs as one professional development strategy in 2005 and by 2012, there were seventy-nine universities (67%) carrying out this professional development strategy. The purpose for implementing the faculty learning community method is to offer teachers communication opportunities and increase their teaching interest and professional knowledge. The main members of community are teachers, and a community usually includes three to fifteen members. Universities will regulate the minimum number of community members to maintain the quality and function of communication. About 87% of universities which carry out professional learning community offered funding for community projects. Most of their funding resources came from MOE projects. These funds were mostly used for assistants' salary and fees for meetings. The universities set many rules to the use of education funds and the process to apply for reimbursement is complicated. This situation makes the community professional development method hard to match the needs of teachers. There are multiple types and themes of faculty professional learning communities in Taiwan. The method for carrying out the community strategy can be adjusted to teachers' needs and the schools' objectives. The FLCs can encourage teachers to have professional discussion and promote teachers' professional knowledge. If universities want to popularize this strategy, they need to handle the awkward situation that teachers' workloads are too heavy to join community activities. Furthermore, the effectiveness of compulsory communities is not as good as communities that teachers join voluntarily. The key element for creating and using a successful community is to try to match the needs of teachers and to create a friendly learning community where all members get along with each other, and enjoy the experiences.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The FLCs is one of the main professional development strategies in higher education in Taiwan. The experience of universities and faculties that implemented this strategy showed that the FLCs method can indeed offer the opportunity for teacher interaction and encourage teachers to join professional discussion. But in most universities, the funding comes from the short-term MOE projects and is only temporary. If we want to make this strategy a long-standing, universities should fund communities on a basis of stable funding policy from the school's own funding in addition to the funding coming from temporary projects. Moreover, the key to the success of the community is matching the needs of teachers and helping teachers feel comfortable when using this strategy to improve their profession. The university regulations concerning the use of education funding and the administrative processing are not user-friendly to the teachers and they even increase teachers' workloads. If we can increase the flexibility and decrease the inconvenience for carrying out the community method, the effectiveness of faculty learning community would increase. Furthermore, the effectiveness of faculty learning community depends not only on the support of university management but also on teachers' enthusiasm and involvement. Teachers should seize the opportunity to join the community, help their universities realize their professional development needs, and make good use of this resource to improve their profession.

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