

Needs assessment and beyond in the setup of centers for teaching and learning excellence: An-Najah University center as a case study

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Abstract

An-Najah University recently established a center for excellence in learning and teaching (CELT) in collaboration with Northwestern University. The main goal of the center is to support the university's transition to a more learner-centered, technology-assisted environment. This paper focuses on the CELT Teaching Fellows Program, a program to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching. It also reports on key challenges which the center encountered when it began to engage with the university and its response to those challenges which included: i) developing a participation strategy, ii) creating multi-specialist teaching fellow teams, and iii) responding to macro-intervention requests.

Keywords: Centers of Excellence; needs assessment; capacity building; micro-interventions; macro-interventions

1. Introduction

In 2010, An-Najah University in Palestine established a center for excellence in learning and teaching (CELT) in collaboration with partners from Northwestern University in the United States. Chartered in 1971, An-Najah is a highly ranked Palestinian university located in the city of Nablus. The university has grown to include almost 1600 staff and 600 professors. It offers undergraduate instruction in the fields of Medicine, Engineering, Humanities, Social Sciences and the Natural Sciences, and teaches over 20,000 students, about 19,000 of whom are undergraduates and 1,100 of whom are masters' students.

The main purpose of CELT is to support the university's goal to improve students' learning through more learner-centered and technology-assisted approaches to teaching. Recent research has found that teachers in higher education take three contrasting approaches to teaching students (Prosser M. & Trigwell K. 1999; Light G., Cox R. & Calkins S 2009). In the first approach, teachers view teaching as being about the 'transmission' of the content of their course: the focus is on the quality of the content and the quality of the delivery of the content. Teachers taking the second approach expand teaching to include a focus on the learner, specifically the students' acquisition of course content. In the third approach, teachers regard teaching as also helping students develop and construct a deeper understanding of the core concepts of the core content. Research indicates that teachers who approach teaching in the learner and learning centered ways achieve better learning outcomes than teachers only focused on teaching-centered approaches (Kember, D. & Gow, L. 1994; Prosser & Trigwell 1999).

In accordance with best practice, in the Spring of 2010 CELT conducted a needs assessment with faculty and administrators about the kinds of activities and programs the center could provide to assist the university in its efforts to move towards a learner-centered culture of teaching and learning (Gray T. & Shadle S. 2009).

Faculty across all the main academic fields were surveyed and 30 professors were interviewed in detail. As a result of the needs assessment five main areas the center could provide training were identified: new methods of assessment, active learning methods, critical thinking, problem-based-learning; and enhancing learning new technologies.

This paper reports on the program to build leadership capacity to address these learning and teaching needs. It focuses on the CELT Teaching Fellows Program and provides an evaluation of the impact of that program. It also reports on key issues which the center encountered when it began to engage with the university and the roles the CELT teaching fellows play. These include: i) participation strategy, ii) creating multi-specialist teaching fellow teams, and iii) the requests for macro-interventions.

2. The CELT Teaching Fellows Program: Building Leadership Capacity

The main goal of the CELT Teaching Fellows Program is to develop a group of teaching fellows with the knowledge and skills to help faculty across all the university's academic areas improve the learning environments in the courses they teach. The program is led by CELT directors and a team of six master teaching fellows at An-Najah who collaborated with a team of five faculty learning and teaching specialists from the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University. The first part of the program consisted of three phases.

Phase I took place during June and July of 2011. It consisted of teams of 2-3 faculty from both CELT and the Searle Center working together through email and skype meetings to create a series of 6 learning and teaching modules focused on the key themes identified in the needs assessment. These modules were designed to help to the master teaching fellows develop workshops in learning and teaching that they were giving for 30-40 new faculty at the end of summer; and to prepare 10 additional teaching fellows with the skills to conduct workshops, observations, discussions with faculty in the university.

Phase II occurred at An-Najah University during the last two weeks of July 2011. In this phase, the international teams met together to finalize the modules and present them over a two week period. These workshops were led by the CELT master teaching fellows in partnership with Searle faculty. This model for the workshop development was chosen because it a) built on existing strengths of the master teaching fellows, b) allowed for sharing of resources and ideas between faculty from the two centers and c) provided CELT master teaching fellows with the opportunity to facilitate workshops for their own faculty at An-Najah University whilst collaborating with experienced learning and teaching specialists. Workshop topics and the duration of each workshop are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Workshop Modules

Workshop	Duration
Course Design	2 days
Assessment	2 days
Active learning and Critical Thinking	2 days
Problem-based-learning	½ day
Action Research	½ day
e-Learning	1 day

The teaching fellows who attended the July workshops were drawn from a variety of disciplines including economics, engineering, medicine, science, arts and information technology. The workshops appeared to be very well received. Each workshop was evaluated formatively by the participants using a formative evaluation survey that was also developed collaboratively by An-Najah and Northwestern team members. Participants were asked to indicate their extent of agreement with a series of statements. Results for the 6 workshops combined are presented in table 2 below (based on data from 45 survey responses. Approximately 70-80% of respondents agreed that that a) the workshop materials and activities facilitated learning b) the core teaching fellows displayed effective facilitations skills and c) the workshop participants found the workshops useful for developing their own skills as workshop facilitators and for designing their own workshops.

Phase III was conducted at Northwestern University in October 2011. This phase involved a visit of the CELT master teaching fellows to the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University.

Aims of this phase were to a) immerse master teaching fellows in the activities of the Searle Center so that they could learn about the range of faculty development activities in a US university b) provide the opportunity for the master teaching fellows to learn how a well established US teaching center is structured and managed c) enable master teaching fellows to observe innovative courses at Northwestern d) continue to develop relationships between the CORE trainers and Searle Center staff.

Table 2. Results of the formative evaluation of the July workshops

Type and	Item	Not at all	Somewhat	Mostly	Fully
Materials activities	A. The learning objectives for the workshop were clear.	5%	19%	47%	29%
	B. The learning objectives for the workshop were met.	4%	19%	56%	21%
	C. The workshop used a variety of methods and activities.	0%	16%	51%	33%
	D. The activities facilitated my learning about (the topic).	2%	18%	59%	20%
	E. The workshop materials are relevant to my needs as a workshop facilitator.	0%	27%	48%	25%
	F. There was sufficient time for discussion.	14%	16%	34%	36%
	G. There was sufficient time for activities.	11%	14%	39%	36%
Trainer Skills	H. The trainer has expertise in the workshop topic.	0%	11%	67%	22
	I. The trainer was able to involve all participants in activities.	0%	11%	60%	29%
	J. The trainer provided useful feedback during activities.	2%	20%	49%	29%
	K. The trainer communicated concepts clearly.	4%	9%	60%	27%
Participant Skills	L. I enjoyed the workshop.	0%	11%	58%	31%
	M. The workshop inspired me to design my own workshop.	2%	9%	65%	24%
	N. The workshop gave me knowledge to be a facilitator.	3%	9%	71%	17%
	O. The workshop gave me opportunity to practice my skills as a facilitator.	3%	14%	66%	17%
	P. The workshop prepared me for work as a consultant.	6%	9%	63%	23%
	Q. I am satisfied with my own contribution to the workshop.	3%	9%	51%	37%

During their visit, the master teaching fellows met with Searle Center staff, discussed the history and growth of the center, discussed the organizational structure and funding of the center, observed a faculty workshop facilitated by the Center, co-facilitated a round-table session on teaching diverse learners, observed a variety of both traditional and non-traditional classes (engineering design and communication class, classes utilizing personal response system technology), met with Searle Center partners (Academic and Research Technologies; Writing Center), discussed electronic and distance learning initiatives at Northwestern and met with the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education to discuss the role and impact of the Searle Center within the University. The Fellows also participated in sessions and papers at the conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.¹

Having established a model for building leadership in learning and teaching and developed the materials for five core modules, the CELT team was ready to implement its first training modules for university faculty. At this point, a number of issues related to participation of the faculty in these modules and other CELT training and consultation activities needed to be addressed. In addition to learning and teaching skills, the needs assessment also revealed institutional concerns about a lack of motivation, high teaching loads, and a lack of expertise with the older faculty. The response to these issues informed the strategy CELT developed to engage the university.

3. Beyond Needs Assessment: Engaging the University

3.1 CELT participation Strategy

The first issue concerned which faculty CELT would engage and how they would be identified. There were two ways to proceed. On the one hand, the workshops could be announced and interested candidates could register their names, or alternatively, deans could be asked to nominate participants from among their teaching staff.

¹ The ISSOTL conference took place in Milwaukee, USA, from October 20-23, 2011

The problem with the first approach is the potentially low registration rates due to busy schedules and the lack of motivation to participate in professional development activities. In such a case, there was a high likelihood that only a few candidates would participate and that they may come from only one or two faculties. The impact for the center would be low and word-of-mouth publicity for building a good reputation at an early stage in the life of the center would suffer. Seeking nomination through the deans, on the other hand, might guarantee higher numbers of participants, but at the risk of having faculty who do not wish to participate and do not consider their participation important for their career development. This too would hurt the center's reputation as it might be perceived as a punitive entity within the institution which would significantly jeopardize its work to improve teaching and learning environments.

CELT developed an alternative selection strategy which left more room for voluntary participation of faculty, but involved college administration in the selection of potential participants. In the fall of 2011 deans were asked to provide nominations specifically targeted at spring course teachers from across all disciplines. It was felt that this would be a motivating factor since the outcome of the nominations would result in a multi-disciplinary group from across the university. Deans were also asked to invite participants from the different departments within their colleges, a strategy which would guarantee voluntary faculty registration.

For the first workshop on redesign of the special topics and seminar courses, this strategy worked extremely well. Ultimately, 17 participants from 13 different colleges participated voluntarily in the workshop, all with positive expectations for a high level exchange of experiences with colleagues. The CELT master teaching fellows provided conceptual frameworks and models of learning and teaching and focused on encouraging the faculty participants from across disciplines to share their experiences in teaching and assessing the same course. The following were set as the workshops' main objectives. The participants will be able to:

1. Describe learner-centered teaching strategies and compare them with the teacher –centered strategies.
2. Revise the Intended Learning Outcomes for their special topics course.
3. Revise the different teaching and assessment methods so they are aligned with the new course outcomes.
4. Create and present a new course design that is constructively aligned and is ready for implementation in the spring semester.
5. Share, exchange and reflect on their experiences with other participants.

The post-workshop evaluation results showed relatively high levels of satisfaction among participants. There were no cases of drop out and no complaints were received from participants about feeling required by their deans to attend the workshop.

3.2 Establishing Multi-Specialist Learning and Teaching Teams

When the teaching fellows were originally identified, they were selected from across different disciplines, to ensure a multi-disciplinary team but also to provide a liaison between CELT and the different colleges of medicine, engineering, science, economics, arts, and education. They were also asked to focus during their training and collaboration with the Searle Center on two general modules from the learning and teaching modules mentioned in Table 1 above. The original idea was to offer five different modules; however, when the teams began planning CELT workshops, it became evident that due to the specialized nature of the workshops it was necessary to integrate modules and to create multi-specialist teams for each workshop.

The actual teams that facilitated the workshops were made up of specialists in at least three different modules. The more general module specialists participated in all workshops since assessment and course design practices provide the base for any course restructuring initiatives. For example, a workshop was planned on integrating critical thinking and problem based learning into the research methods course design, a course taught in most programs across all disciplines. Specialist team members were brought together in active learning, problem-based, and technology assisted learning to facilitate the workshop. In this particular case, a team of five facilitators was involved in the implementation of the workshop schedule which consisted of the following:

Table 3: Using a Multi-Specialist teaching Fellows in Workshop Design & Facilitation

Duration	Session content	Teaching Fellows
Day 1	1. Creative thinking and problem based learning: Overview, frameworks and key concepts	Three Specialists in: ➤ Course design ➤ Critical Thinking ➤ Problem-Based Learning
	2. Teaching strategies and tools to encourage critical Thinking.	
	3. Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs): Overview, frameworks & learning centered approaches.	
	4. Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs): Redesign for research-methods & critical thinking skills.	
	5. Developing outlines for facilitating research skills: Critical Thinking and problem-based models.	
Day 2	1. Assessing critical thinking tasks: tools for research methods courses.	Two Specialists in: ➤ Assessment ➤ E-learning
	2. Assessment: Frameworks, rubrics, models & practices for redesign.	
	3. E-Learning: options and practices in research training	

For such an intervention aimed at improving performance in courses offered under the same title in many academic programs, CELT set up a team of fellows from among the available six modules. The participants shared their teaching and assessment practices and modified their course plans accordingly. Among the most significant policy change recommendations that came out of the workshop was a call for the college administrators to adopt less conventional standardized assessment procedures.

3.3 Need-based macro-intervention requests

The third issue which CELT encountered concerned requests from senior university administration for CELT to engage in learning and teaching interventions at the macro level. Unlike micro level interventions restructuring a course, for example, macro-level interventions concerned learning and teaching initiatives at the institutional level. Only a few months into the life of the center, the vice president's office sent a request for an intervention concerning the university internship program. The office of the vice president reported many points of weakness in the program related to the organization, coordination, and assessment of graduating student work. To address the weaknesses, the university decided to set up a small unit to coordinate the program for the whole institution. The vice president requested that the CELT intervene to help with creating the program vision, structure, ILOS, and procedural and assessment issues in coordination with the unit director.

Such macro-level types of interventions were not taken into consideration during the initial needs assessment and the capacity building phases of the CELT. The team that was formed to address this intervention request consisted of CELT director, course design specialist, assessment specialist, in addition to the unit director. The CELT director's role was to review similar programs run by same tier institutions, to customize the program to fit Palestine market situations, and to initiate new needs assessment schemes intended to collect input from internship program supervisors, graduating seniors, and hosting organizations. The key task for the course design and the assessment specialists was to review with the unit director current program ILOS and assessment and procedural methods with the realization that they were now working at macro-program level and not at the micro level of a single course. The capacity built during the training phases at the CELT set up stage was developed further when the master teaching fellows engaged with tasks basically intended to improve the internship program outcome and performance.

4. Conclusions

The CELT Teaching Fellows program has proved to be successful in building leadership capacity in learning and teaching at An-Najah University. The center has facilitated the development of expertise in six critical areas of educational capacity which the university has identified as important in their goal to shift towards a more student and learning centered environment. In this effort CELT has employed this leadership expertise to design and implement key programs and activities to support university instructors in working towards this goal.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the program and the teaching fellows have allowed the center to address challenges which had not been anticipated. The success and strength of a program does not consist simply of the ability it has to address the needs it has been established to address. It is ultimately judged on the flexibility it has for addressing needs and challenges which were not originally anticipated or expected. Barnett (2000) refers to these kinds of challenges - uncertainty, unpredictability, contestability - as increasingly characterizing the condition of contemporary higher education. He refers to the condition as “supercomplexity”. The ability to cope with and manage learning and teaching under such conditions is a key ingredient of the program’s future sustainability and ultimately of the sustainability of CELT.

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