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Marie-Louise Schreurs, Wilma Huveneers & Diana Dolmans

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# Communities of teaching practice in the workplace: Evaluation of a faculty development programme

MARIE-LOUISE SCHREURS, WILMA HUVENEERS & DIANA DOLMANS

Maastricht University, The Netherlands

## Abstract

**Background**: The focus of faculty development (FD) has recently shifted from individual and formal learning to formal and informal learning by a team of teachers in the workplace where the teaching is actually effected. This study aimed to evaluate the impact of a faculty development programme on teachers' educational workplace environment.

**Methods**: We invited 23 teachers, who had successfully completed a University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) programme, to evaluate the faculty development programme and participate in focus group discussions. This UTQ programme spanned one year and covered 185 hours of formal and informal learning and training activities and formal coaching.

**Results**: After having obtained their UTQ, teachers reported that coaching enhances reflection and feedback, to participate more frequently in educational networks, which enhances consultation among teachers, increased awareness of organizational educational policies and more confidence in fulfilling educational tasks and activities.

**Conclusion**: The evaluation of the UTQ programme demonstrated to enhance the development of a community of teachers at the workplace who share a passion for education and provide each other with support and feedback, which triggered a change in culture enhancing improvement of education. However, this did not hold for all teachers. Inhibiting factors hold sway, such as a prevailing commitment to research over education in some departments and a lack of interest in education by some department chairs.

## Introduction

In the medical education realm, the concepts of staff development and faculty development (FD) are used interchangeably. For the sake of consistency, we cleave to the concept of faculty development throughout this article. Faculty development involves the coherent sum of activities targeted at strengthening and extending the knowledge, skills and conceptions of teachers in a way that will change their way of thinking and their actual educational behaviour (Fenstermacher & Berliner 1985). It is not confined to formal workshops, but can also include informal learning experiences, such as cooperation and exchange of ideas by teachers (Fullan 1990; Steinert 2010), as they both aim for a change in teaching practice to improve student learning and safeguard the quality of teaching and learning in universities (Devlin 2006).

Recently, the focus of faculty development has shifted from an individual level to a group level. Steinert (2010), for instance, discerned a movement away from individual experiences to group learning by a team of teachers. O'Sullivan and Irby (2011) also laid a greater emphasis on FD at group level. They distinguished between two communities of practice: one created between participants in FD programmes, the other being a community of teaching practice in the workplace

> ### Practice points
>
> - Appoint a coach to stimulate reflection and provide feedback.
> - Promote participation in informal and formal educational networking.
> - Enhance awareness of educational policies.
> - Provide insight in the complexity of the educational organization.
> - Assign challenging educational tasks to apply newly acquired competencies.

(classroom or clinic) where the teaching is actually effected. The first community is typically shaped by the participants, programme, content, facilitator and context in which the programme is executed and in which the faculty teach. Characteristics of the second community, on the other hand, are the relationships and networks of association in that environment, the organization and culture of the setting, the teaching tasks and activities and the mentoring available to the members of that academic and/or clinical community of teaching practice. Yet, what holds true for any community of practice is that participation and learning hinge on

*Correspondence*: Marie-Louise Schreurs, Department of Family Medicine, Maastricht University, PO Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands. Tel: +31 (0)43 3882805; E-mail: m.schreurs@maastrichtuniversity.nl
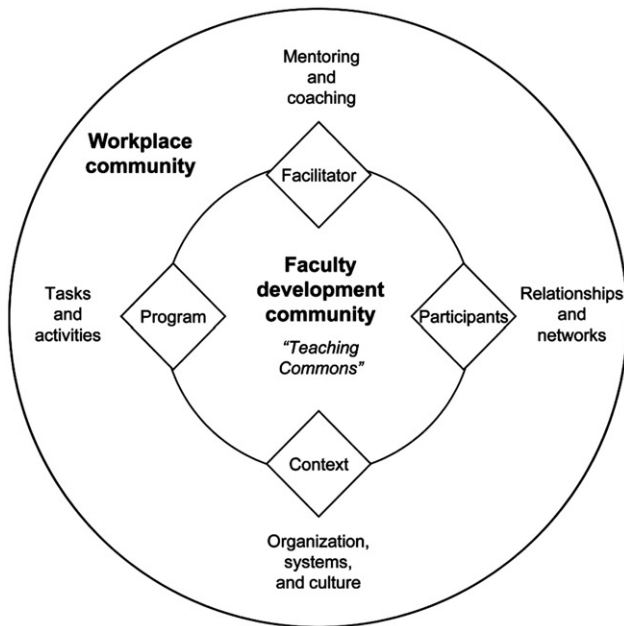
**Figure 1.** The framework of O'Sullivan and Irby. Reprinted with permission from O'Sullivan and Irby (2011) Copyright 2011 by the Association of American Medical Colleges.

social factors. By creating an inviting environment, providing guidance and encouraging personal engagement, relationships within the community can enhance participation. Also, work structure, time pressure, workload and work flow all affect participation. O'Sullivan and Irby (2011) introduced a framework in which teachers who receive FD training and collaborate are identified as a workplace community. The framework is composed of the key dimensions: "mentoring and coaching", "relationships and networks", "organization, systems and culture" and "tasks and activities" (Figure 1), which will each be spotlighted in the following paragraphs.

## Mentoring and coaching in the workplace

According to Eraut (2007), support and feedback by a mentor or coach are critically important for workplace learning which will be enhanced by increasing opportunities for consulting with and working alongside colleagues. Mentoring should be considered as an explicit approach in FD, for mentors can provide guidance, direction, support or expertise to faculty members in a variety of settings. They can also help teachers understand the organizational culture in which they work and introduce them to invaluable professional networks (Walker et al. 2002).

Doppenberg (2012) found in her study that coaching and collegial visitation take place in a specific collaborative setting which differs from that of other collaborative team activities.

To raise involvement of clinical teachers', Steinert et al. (2010) suggested a buddy system of mentoring colleagues to get junior faculty members "hooked".

## Relationships and networks in the workplace

Doppenberg (2012) provided an overview of categories of teacher-learning activities in collaboration with colleagues.

For each activity listed, she investigated the frequency of its occurrence within different collaborative settings. Exchanging, listening and evaluating emerged as the activities most frequently reported.

Steinert et al. (2010) by extension argued that FD enables personal and professional growth and that faculty might be more likely to participate whether they appreciated this and considered it relevant to their needs. Other intrinsic motivations could be their appreciation of teaching and self-improvement, coupled with the opportunity to network.

In a similar vein, Lave and Wenger (1991) stressed the importance of relationships and networks to the success of a community of practice, and they deemed importance of both the relationships forged between community members and participation in external networks.

Participation in educational networks can occur in an informal way by exchanging and consulting colleagues about educational issues or more formal by collaborating in a working group or taking part in a professional meeting or educational conference.

## Organization, systems and culture in the workplace

Teunissen (2014) argued that learning from practice enables people to learn how to perform, think, and interact in ways that work for their specific context. At the same time, however, the highly contextual nature of learning from practice makes it a challenging educational environment.

From a different angle, Eraut (2007) asserted the importance of the managerial role, which is to develop a culture of mutual support and learning. Managers should share this role with experienced workers and this implies some form of distributed leadership. In this capacity, they have a major influence on workplace learning and culture that extends far beyond their job descriptions. Handelzalts (2009) indeed mentioned that active involvement by school managers can bolster teachers' commitment to educational innovation. Beside the managerial role, also the learning climate of the organization is an essential variable (van Rijdt et al. 2013). Lave and Wenger (1991), for instance, argued that a community requires a shared repertoire of common resources, including language, stories and practice. What is desirable, moreover, is a "shared and negotiated system of socially and culturally meaningful structures" resulting from recurrent patterns of activities (Teunissen 2014). By this, Teunissen referred to stable structures in the workplace environment that are resistant to change.

## Tasks and activities in the workplace

Doppenberg (2012) posited that collaboration in teams can foster teaching learning, for instance by giving teachers the shared responsibility for an educational task, or by implementing a new educational approach. Lave and Wenger (1991) also stress the importance of the shared activity of newcomers at the workplace in the learning process. Fuller and Unwin (2003) describe the process from peripheral to mainstream participation in an organization. Working alongside and interacting with experienced colleagues leads to learning by

engagement into the practices of the community. Handelzalts (2009) hailed the benefit of collaboration in his study into the way teachers collaborate in teams for the purpose of designing a new curriculum; it results in teachers combining their knowledge and creating new knowledge to fulfil their task in an appropriate way. Hence, team activities play a powerful role in professional learning by teachers, above essential attributes, such as motivation, commitment and willpower to nurture a collaborative culture.

## Focus of the study

From research on faculty development, it results that participants are generally satisfied with FD programmes that they deem relevant and useful (Steinert et al. 2006). FD programmes were also reported to bring about positive changes in teachers' attitudes and knowledge. What studies on faculty development have largely neglected to investigate, however, are changes in the way teachers collaborate in the workplace (Steinert et al. 2006). O'Sullivan and Irby (2011) also stressed the need for research into the impact of an FD programme on teachers' educational workplace environment. How do teachers cooperate in the workplace during and after participation in a longitudinal FD programme? Does a FD programme make a difference? In this evaluation study, we investigate the impact of an FD programme on the various dimensions of the workplace community framework identified by O'Sullivan and Irby (2011).

## Research question

The main research question is as follows: how do coaching, networking, organization and activities in the workplace facilitate or impair teaching practice after the completion of a faculty development programme from the participants' perceptions?

# Methods

## Setting

The FD programme under scrutiny in this study concerns a University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) programme offered by the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) at Maastricht University, the Netherlands. It is directed at staff members who are responsible for various educational tasks, such as delivery, developmental and assessment tasks. From the onset, all the programme's staff members have been well introduced to problem-based learning, which is the educational approach of this university. Since its introduction in 2008, already more than 100 teachers from various departments have successfully completed this UTQ programme.

## Intervention

As previously mentioned, the FD programme under scrutiny in this study concerns a so-called UTQ course, which forms part of the opportunities for faculty development offered by the FHML at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. The programme is intended for teachers and for faculty members who want to improve their educational skills and expertise.

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The full UTQ programme spans a period of one year and involves 185 hours of study, including formal and informal learning and training activities (like workshops, sessions with experts and exchange of experiences during teaching practices, portfolio learning, workplace learning and coaching). In the workplace, course participants are assisted by a formally appointed coach who acts as a facilitator and provides supervision on the job. The coaches, who had been trained in coaching skills, conduct reflection and feedback meetings with the trainees depending on their needs, but meet at least two times per year. The purpose of the introduction of formally appointed coaches was to stimulate application of newly learned competencies in daily practices. Throughout the course, participants compile a portfolio in which they demonstrate their progress in teaching competencies, which is discussed individually with their coach and forms the basis of their final assessment (Schreurs & de Grave 2010).

The development of UTQ competencies depends on participants' present competencies, learning objectives and their learning in authentic settings in educational practice. Over a period spanning five months, participants partake in five compulsory training days, during which they discuss competencies (developing of teaching, teaching delivery, assessment and testing, self-reflection and cooperation) – for which they do a literature reading in advance-, they share knowledge and experiences, practice teaching roles and reflect on their competencies. In between sessions, participants can apply and test their newly acquired knowledge in their work environment. This perfectly fits the notion of a community of teaching practice as defined by O'Sullivan and Irby (2011): the community in the workplace where the teaching is actually affected, which forms an indispensable part of the UTQ course.

## Subjects

Respondents were 23 teachers (10 women, 13 men) from the Maastricht University FHML, selected by purpose sampling (Stalmeijer et al. 2014) from a total of 102 teachers who attended and successfully completed the UTQ programme. Participants from three clusters of departments with clinical, biomedical or social sciences backgrounds were proportionally represented in the sample. The number of 24 subjects was determined a priori. Saturation was expected to take place after four focus groups. We recruited the subjects by telephone and informed them about the study in a standardized way by reading a set text.

One subject selected did not join the focus group session. Their prior experience of teaching ranged from two to 20 years, with eight of the teachers having five or fewer years of experience.

## Instrument

For this evaluation study, we used the focus group method. According to Morgan (1998), focus groups of six to eight participants are useful for evaluation research to explore topics that are poorly understood. The group discussions create a process of sharing and comparing among the participants and they explore the contexts in which they operate for us as

researchers. We convened four focus group sessions of two hours each with six participants, which were facilitated by a moderator and assistant moderator, to discuss and explore the relevant themes. Both were skilled in group dynamics and the subject matter under discussion and had a background in educational psychology. The role and responsibilities of the moderator and assistant moderator were consistently divided across all focus groups (Stalmeijer et al. 2014).

The format was semistructured and departed from four questions about coaching, networks, organization and activities in the workplace that guided the discussion; the questions were derived from the framework of O'Sullivan and Irby (2011) (Appendix). We discussed the questions in the research team and we pilot tested them in the first focus group with the participants. The moderator systematically went through the questions and gave time to the participants to collect and express their thoughts. Participant verification took place by summarizing the main results from each question, before moving on to the next. After the session the moderators took time to debrief, compare field notes and discuss first impressions and highlights. These steps in systematic focus group interviews were described by Krueger (1998).

### Analysis

The sessions were taped and summarized by a research assistant. All participants were informed about the use of the tapes and the confidentiality of the data and were explicitly asked for agreement of the procedure. Two researchers (Marie-Louise Schreurs & Wilma Huveneers) independently analysed the summaries. To trustfully conduct the process of analysis, we started to analyse the first focus group, by reading the transcript carefully and coding relevant quotes to identify key themes independently. We compared the results, resolved discrepancies by discussion and fine-tuned our strategy for further analysis of all four groups. Afterwards, we had a comparison discussion and selected the relevant quotes in our research team to verify the results.

The process of analysis has been carried out systematically following the steps identified by Krueger (1998). Corrective feedback was obtained from participants, for example, the summaries were sent to all participants for approval to ensure that our results were valid and members from the research team by critically discussing the findings as recommended by Stalmeijer et al. (2014).

## Results

By means of the focus group discussions, we have sought to answer the following research question: How do coaching, networking, organization and activities in the workplace facilitate or impair teaching practice after completion of a faculty development programme? The results from these discussions will be grouped according to guiding theme, which were the following four:

(1) The positive effect of coaching on reflection and feedback.
(2) Increased participation in educational networks.

(3) More awareness of organizational policies.
(4) More confidence in fulfilling educational tasks and activities.

### Coaching enhances reflection and feedback

The thematic analysis revealed that the opportunity to discuss educational questions with a coach led to elevated levels of insight and improved performance. As the coach stimulated reflection and provided feedback, teachers reflected more on own teaching practices and planned alternative strategies, and, consequently, experimented actively with new teaching behaviour. What the participants often mentioned was that they gained a better appreciation of the value of feedback in the learning process. Teachers gave and solicited more and qualitatively better feedback to/from both colleagues and students. Some UTQ members also served as a coach for others within their department: colleagues who were not UTQ-qualified called on them for advice on educational questions.

> I more often solicit feedback from both colleagues and students
> A coach has the same UTQ framework, which facilitates communication for the UTQ participant
> More and critical feedback provides scope for rapid improvement
> Discussing the UTQ portfolio with the coach helps me to reflect and to achieve a higher level

### Increased participation in educational networking enhances consultation among teachers

Nearly, all participants reported an increase in educational networking; that is, they indicated that they consulted colleagues about their teaching activities more frequently. In doing so, they not only called upon colleagues with whom they had participated in the UTQ course, but also on other colleagues involved in teaching. However, this mainly happened on an informal basis. Participants also perceived an intensification of contacts with UTQ members, even after the trajectory had ended, while difficulties in communicating with non-UTQ colleagues became more apparent. This could be ascribed to the fact that former UTQ-course participants shared a common educational framework. In some departments, UTQ members served as a role model of qualified teachers and inspired others to participate in the UTQ programme as well. Some UTQ members even had plans to specialize in education and to take the master's in health professions education offered by the FHML.

> The most powerful mechanism of the UTQ programme is the sharing of experiences.
> Working with UTQ fellows boosts creativity.

> *I am now more inclined to contact UTQ peers and ask for their advice.*
> *A UTQ member infected other staff members with the educational virus*

## Increased awareness of organizational educational policies

In the focus groups, several favourable and inhibiting conditions were discussed. What came to the fore was that participants experienced an improved educational culture within the faculty in favour of educational careers. However, this did not particularly hold for all departments: while some department chairs consulted participants more often for their teaching expertise, other chairs did not show much interest in education. At the same time, most participants reported that they had become more aware of educational policies and the complexity of the educational organization. Moreover, they gained a clearer view of the role of the educational department and more readily turned to the department for advice. The fact that the UTQ course obliged participants to fulfil more educational roles and to opt for an educational career also triggered a change in organizational culture. Hence, it is with reason that the faculty board in a way regards the UTQ programme as a breeding ground for future educational leaders within the faculty. The faculty board is among others, responsible for appointments of qualified programme directors. As regards barriers encountered, participants pointed out that their departments were little receptive to new educational insights. Because of such indifference, a few participants feared that they would slide back into old behaviours. These participants in particular resorted to follow-up activities or programmes to hold on to their newly acquired behaviour.

> *The policy is changing in favour of educational tasks.*
> *I became more aware of the complex educational organization at the macro level.*
> *The department's culture, either positive or negative, is crucial for the effectiveness of the UTQ course.*
> *As a junior teacher it is difficult to argue with department members from the Old Guard.*

## More confidence in fulfilling educational tasks and activities

The focus groups also addressed several motivational aspects of teacher learning in the workplace. Participants reported more awareness and analytical ability with respect to the educational tasks and activities. Their educational behaviour during delivery of education and planning of educational activities had changed positively, for example in terms of reduced uncertainty. Moreover, collaboration within teams had intensified, as participants for instance more easily solicited feedback or assistance from colleagues about educational tasks and activities. Likewise, participants noted an increase in team responsibilities; some planning groups immediately incorporated the newly acquired educational

knowledge into the redesign process of a programme or into an educational approach. Hence, FD facilitates personal and professional growth. In fact, colleagues in the workplace who had not taken the UTQ programme recognized the knowledge of those who had.

> *Newly acquired competencies are deployed for curriculum innovation.*
> *The UTQ is required for educational tasks with more responsibility, for example, for programme directors and for block coordinators.*
> *The UTQ course makes you realize that education is a field of expertise, not something you can just do in between.*
> *In the department, UTQ course participants act as key persons and role models for teaching.*

## Discussion and conclusion

The results from the focus-group discussions reveal that the FD programme had a positive impact on the teaching workplace environment: it involved teachers in more intense communication with colleagues and even more with those who had also partaken in the FD programme. Feedback on teaching was also solicited and given more easily and more frequently. This ties in nicely with O'Sullivan and Irby's (2011) contention that participants in a FD programme communicate more intensely and enter a new community of teachers who share a passion for education. Through the whole, coaching and networking seemed to function as a catalyst for community formation. Coaching appeared to raise awareness of informal and tacit learning and help to operationalize it. By the same token, faculty became more aware of the educational organization and culture. The sum of these effects invoked an atmosphere that was more favourable to education and gave birth to a community of teaching practice. At the same time, however, significant differences existed between departments due to diverging attitudes adopted by the chairs. Hence, an important hurdle has yet to be taken, a concern that has been deftly voiced by Teunissen (2014) who posited that "healthcare workplaces are relatively stable environments that tend to resist change; not necessarily because of individual resistance but because of a practice's longstanding tradition of having similar groups of people involved in similar tasks with similar goals". It is therefore suggested that further research be conducted that seeks to answer the following question: What proportion of certified UTQ staff should a department ideally employ so as to redress the balance of attention between education and research that has hitherto favoured the latter? We also recommend that departments hold faculty accountable for education, in line with procedures that are already in place for research. This can also mark an important agent for cultural change in departments where traditional practices still hold sway. Such endeavours, however, should take into account the fact that there are communities that do not share a common goal; some colleagues, or even entire departments, inhibit the execution of educational tasks and activities, because they attach lesser a value to education than they do,

for example, to research. This is in line with the work of Cuban (1999) who investigated the historical development of curriculum change in universities and the role of strong research value propositions in the resistance to curriculum reform. Participants indeed reported several instances of colleagues being sceptical about faculty development; they focused too much on career and research, and paid little respect to educational tasks and activities.

This study has demonstrated that a formal longitudinal UTQ programme with an integral workplace learning component can be a very attractive vehicle for change, not only with respect to teachers' individual competences, but also in the way teachers cooperate, network and fulfil tasks within the organization. Moreover, the evaluation of this UTQ programme proved to have community building for a side effect. The impact FD has on teaching practice in the workplace differs between departments according to the number of teachers that participated in an FD programme. Follow-up FD activities should address these shortcomings.

## Limitations of the study

It should be borne in mind that this study is not without limitations. First of all, this study does report on teachers' self-perceptions and was conducted within one specific faculty that is well-known for its innovative student-centred approach to learning. It is not clear if the perceptions of the teachers do indeed have a positive effect on teaching practice when observed by other stakeholders and if the results are generalizable to other faculties with more traditional teaching contexts. Second, all the subjects in this study had finished the FD programme only recently. Hence, no inferences can be drawn from this study about the programme's long-term effects. Although we found that coaching plays an important role, much more research is needed to explore why and how coaching within FD programmes can enhance community building by teachers in the workplace.

## Practical implications

Educational networking can be promoted by organizing follow-up meetings, such as supervision or reflection meetings, after completion of the FD programme. Furthermore, it seems that teachers can be encouraged to build a community if coaches are appointed in the workplace.

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### Glossary terms

Faculty development, community of practice, workplace learning, networking, cultural aspects
**Communities of practice:** A model of situational learning, based on collaboration among peers, where individuals work to a common purpose, defined by knowledge rather than task
Wenger E. Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity. New York: Cambridge University Press; 1998.

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## Notes on contributors

MARIE-LOUISE SCHREURS, PhD, is the Quality Coordinator of the Family Medicine Specialty Training Programme within the Department of Family Medicine, with expertise in faculty development. She coordinated the University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) programme for years.

WILMA HUVENEERS, MSc, takes a keen interest in faculty and educational development. She developed, coordinated and is trainer in the University Teaching Qualification (UTQ) programme.

DIANA DOLMANS, PhD, is a professor at the School of Health Professions Education (SHE) with expertise in the area of innovative learning environments and faculty development.

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## Appendix

Questions that guided the focus group discussions.

The goal of the focus group discussions was to investigate the impact of a faculty development programme on teachers' educational workplace environment.

Guiding questions were as follows:

(1) How did formal and informal coaching affect teaching practice after completion of the UTQ programme?

(2) In what ways did your participation in formal and informal educational networks change?

(3) Which factors facilitated and inhibited teaching practice in the department and the organization?

(4) How did the UTQ programme affect your tasks and activities in the workplace?