LEARNING TO TEACH : EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF NEW TEACHERS IN THE CEGEP NETWORK

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BACKGROUND

This presentation provided an overview of elements from our three-year, PAREA-funded research project, *Factors Promoting the Effective Integration and Professional Development of New Teachers by Academic Departments*. The project was developed in response to the high volume of cegep teachers taking their retirement. The network is losing a rich resource of experienced teachers. To fill the gap left by retirees, CEGEPs have been hiring large numbers of new, often inexperienced teachers.

We set out to research how departments can best accommodate the renewal of teaching personnel. We worked with three departments[1], each selected on the basis on having a substantial number of new teachers. A member of each of the three departments served as a facilitator, ensuring a link between us and their department.

1.   METHODOLOGY

We opted for qualitative research, namely action research, because it allowed us to take into account the realities new teachers face and helped ensure the development of practical ideas that could be applied to the situation. Action research consists of a cycle that permits theory to emerge from research and action. (See figure)
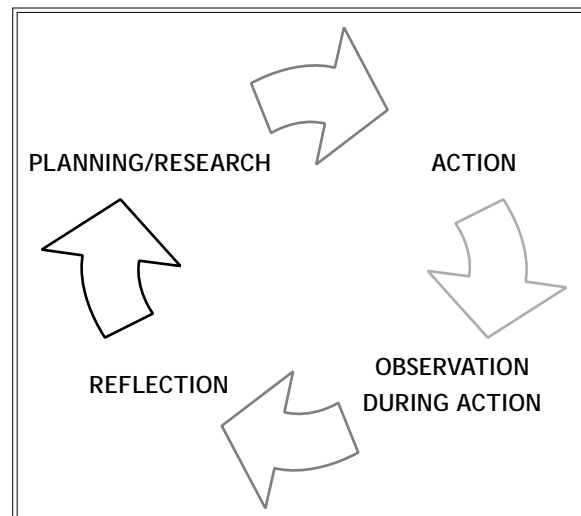
Source : ZUBER-SKERRITT, 1995 ; DOLBEC & CLEMENT, 2000.

2.   NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Guided by this methodology, we conducted a needs assessment, which provided our data. It consisted of an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. New and experienced members of our three departments were asked to complete the questionnaire on their respective departments' integration activities and services. In total, 21 experienced and 23 new teachers responded to the questionnaire.

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1. Henceforth referred to as departments A, B and C.

Only new teachers[2] were asked to participate in the interviews. Twenty-two new teachers volunteered to be interviewed. Most had entered Vanier College *via* its Continuing Education department (summer or evening courses). Few of our interviewees had formal academic training in Education: five had taken one or two courses on teaching and only two out of all 22 teachers had an Education diploma.

3.   WORKING THE DATA

The interviews provided a wealth of information. We began by identifying three overarching rubrics within which all elements of a teacher's career are contained: pedagogical, administrative and social. Then, in order to transform the interview transcripts into data, we employed grounded theory as our method. Also a type of qualitative research, it worked well with action research as both allow research to dictate theory and not *vice versa*. The process consisted of reading the interview transcripts, diligently taking notes and coding the information. Then, we cross-referenced the interviews and categories and themes emerged. This was done until the data was exhausted and saturation reached. Each category fell under one of the three rubrics.

3.1   Pedagogical Rubric

The categories to emerge under this rubric deal with the challenges new teachers face in their role as educators. When asked in the on-line questionnaire to what extent they had experienced pedagogical challenges, 55% responded "very much," 30% responded "somewhat" and only 15% said "not very much." The following categories are thus crucial to the successful renewal of teaching personnel.

1.   Course preparation

This category included both planning a course before it begins and class-by-class preparations. Certain first-time teachers experienced a double challenge in that, for one, they lacked experience and had difficulty planning a 15-week course. Secondly, some were unsure of their targeted audience, of the kinds of students they were planning for, making it difficult to gauge the rate at which the course could progress. The following are quotes from our interviews on the subject of course preparation.

> *"It was a course that I'd never done before. So of course that adds challenges because you don't know what works, what doesn't work. What do the students know coming in, what do the students not know coming in? So that posed some problems."*

> *"[On my first course outline] I was ambiguous about my late work policy, so I ended up being pretty lenient about late work coming in. But next time I'll be very clear about it."*

As this last quote demonstrates, some overcame course preparation challenges through trial and error. In general, challenges in course preparation usually meant new teachers had to amend their course structure once or more throughout the semester.

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2. Defined as having 0 - 5 years of experience at Vanier.

2.   Pedagogical resources

Having little or no experience to rely on, new teachers need pedagogical resources to help guide them. The main themes to emerge in this category dealt with getting support from, and using as a resource, fellow department members, departmental documents and college-wide workshops for teachers.

Some of the challenges in this category pertained to not knowing which resources were needed or where to go for them, and workshops either not being offered on pertinent subjects, or being offered too late (*i.e.*: after a problem had been solved).

One of the key findings in this category was the value of teacher lounges. They were popular venues for obtaining pedagogical resources; ideal place to get immediate, *ad-hoc*, needs-based advice.

3.   Personal time management

Many new teachers were overwhelmed by the amount of time and effort they had to put into course and lesson planning, as well as marking assignments and exams. There weren't any quick-fix solutions; it was simply a matter of taking the time to complete tasks and remaining optimistic that somewhere along the line it would ease up; eventually, new teachers become veteran teachers and work that was previously time-consuming becomes second nature.

4.   Level of students

The themes in this category attest to the rather unpleasant surprise many of our interviewees got when they began to notice that their students' abilities did not always match their (the teachers') expectations. For the most part, teachers with previous university experience had anticipated that cegep students would be on par with university students. They were thus stunned to realize that the level was considerably lower than expected.

Another challenge was having to teach to varying levels of ability. Teachers had to juggle the difficult task of ensuring that lower-level students understand the material, all-the-while engaging the higher-level students. Many of our interviewees had to regularly alter lessons and materials to accommodate students. This exacerbated time management issues.

Quotes from interviews:

> "I was disheartened by the poor communication skills, the weak study skills, the non-existent test-taking skills; it's like you have to assume they know nothing, totally tabula rasa, and work from there. You have to tell them how to take notes, how to organize their notes, you have to show them how to take a test. […] So I'm giving them more step-by-step coaching now."

> "The one thing that concerned me most and still does is figuring out what the students know when they come here, because I'm not from Quebec and so I don't know what exactly they cover in high school, and it seems very difficult to find out that sort of information."

5.   **Student motivation**

As much as some new teachers had overestimated the level of their students, many were taken off guard by what they perceived to be a lack of motivation on the students' behalf. Some questioned whether their lack of ability as a teacher hampered students' initiative. The main theme in this category was that trying to increase students' interest in and commitment to their studies is a major challenge. Finding lasting solutions that would stick was not easy since a lot goes on in the life of a student from class to class. Thus, to carry the motivational momentum through the semester, teachers we interviewed worked on a class-by-class basis.

6.   **Classroom management**

This was the category our interviewees most struggled with. A common thread running throughout our research was new teachers being disillusioned by the anticipation of university-like students. This category was no exception. Expecting that students were choosing to partake in a college education, they had not foreseen that so many students would misbehave, and to such an extent. Needless to say, they were unpleasantly surprised.

Themes associated with classroom management ranged from dealing with students lying to get out of class to severe discipline problems, like students writing threats on a teacher's office door. Interestingly, an ironic point to emerge from this category highlighted that new teachers, who are presumably less skilled at and experienced in successfully controlling their classes, tend to end up with the most unruly classes. This is due to the fact that they are assigned the last sections to be added on, which tend to attract less academically inclined students.

The majority of the teachers we interviewed admitted to having difficulty with classroom management issues. To cope with these problems, new teachers realized that it was necessary to create a set of classroom rules, be very clear about them and stick to them. This tended to be helpful, as was the practice of immediately calling students on inappropriate behaviour. As one interviewee put it:

"I didn't realize that discipline was going to be an important part of my role in the classroom. That was a real shock to me. I had to realize that what I say goes. That was probably the number one thing that needed to be tackled for the classroom to be as strong as it could be."

There was, however, one glaring exception in this category: new cegep teachers who had previously taught at the high school level never did not have difficulties with behaviour. They had all dealt with far worse discipline problems and found cegep students comparatively easy to manage.

7.   **Evaluation and grading**

Many new teachers enter cegep with little to no experience in translating demonstrated student ability and knowledge into a mark. The aforementioned lack of awareness of the level of students and, above all, being uncertain of how to set up a course only aggravated the evaluation process. New teachers sought guidance from colleagues on such matters as the number and types of assignments, how much percentage to allot different tasks,

what constitutes a 90% *versus* a 70% and 50%, as well as when to hold exams and/or set due dates. Some new teachers championed standardized grading among different sections of a course, stating it would make them feel more secure and confident in their marking. In lieu of standardized grading, others preferred that detailed information on grading grids be disseminated to new teachers.

3.2   Administrative Rubric

Colleges are bureaucratic institutions and administration plays a significant role in teachers' careers. At a time when new teachers may prefer to focus primarily on the pedagogical aspects of their job, they can find themselves faced with administrative challenges. In our on-line questionnaire, new teachers reported that the extent to which they faced administrative challenges were: a great deal (5%), very much (15%), somewhat (45%), not very much (30%) and not at all (5%). Our seven categories represent the areas where new teachers faced the greatest administrative obstacles.

1.   **On-campus resources and services**

    This category explored basic information regarding familiarity with the college, addressing such themes as receiving a campus tour and being made aware of services available for both teachers and students. Teachers who hadn't received a tour of the school when hired were unaware of the type and/or location of available resources. They had to invest extra time in discovering the campus.

2.   **Acquiring accurate, timely information**

    The main challenges new teachers faced here were not receiving information (or receiving it too late) and having to accumulate information from various sources, often resulting in conflicting ideas. The themes associated with this category were divided into two types of information: college-wide and department-specific.

3.   **Bookstore**

    The staff of the *Bookstore* at Vanier was praised by new teachers for being friendly and helpful. Difficulties associated with the Bookstore pertained to understanding policies and procedures, namely the correct process for ordering books.

4.   **Differing procedures and policies in place between daytime teaching and Continuing Education teaching**

    This category involved new teachers who taught in both the daytime and evening/summer streams. As we saw earlier, more than half of the teachers in our sample entered Vanier via Continuing Education. One of the main themes in this category was confusion as a result of teaching in two different streams. This included having to learn and abide by two sets of rules and procedures.

5.   **Human Resources**

    This category dealt with new teachers' various experiences with Human Resources. While it was home to several minor themes, there was one prominent theme: C.I. calculation.

In terms of the extent to which this posed a challenge to our interviewees, C.I. was second only to classroom management.

Interview after interview, new teachers explained the sheer confusion they had experienced trying to figure out what C.I. is, its impact on salary and seniority, and how it is calculated. Here are two examples of the many C.I.-related quotes:

"After two years, I figured out C.I. and how to go on the computer and calculate my own. So the C.I. thing now finally makes sense to me."

"I didn't know how to calculate my workload. I had no idea. I was wondering about this for a long time. I actually got it from another teacher. It was just a simple formula, but I really had to chase after this information. These sorts of things need more attention."

Considering the importance of C.I. and its consequences, new teachers should not have to wait two years to understand it, nor should they be left to figure it out on their own.

6. Computer systems

Although the use of computer systems is not mandatory, it is becoming increasingly common. They are valuable pedagogical tools and can contribute greatly to students' knowledge and help teachers save time. However, teachers must first learn how computer systems work, which tended to present challenges.

For some the challenge lay in finding the time to learn a computer system. Of course, this does not refer to acquiring a basic, functioning knowledge of the system, but knowing it well enough to incorporate it in one's teaching and grading. Other teachers self-identified as having weak technology skills and questioned their ability to successfully integrate technology into their curriculum.

7. Logistics

This final category dealt with the administrative planning of a course. While comparatively minor in terms of the number of challenges it posed, and the number of new teachers affected, the consequences of these challenges can still have a significant impact.

The first of its two themes encompassed booking computer labs to hold classes in. This is generally done at the start of the semester, which, referring to the course preparation category, is not an easy task for someone lacking course-planning experience. The second theme was scheduling final exams. Challenges here were either not knowing one had to separately book final exams on one's own and/or being unfamiliar with final exam scheduling procedures.

3.3 Social Rubric

It needs to be noted that this rubric was, by far, the least challenging for our participants. Indeed, survey results show that only 25% of respondents "somewhat" experienced social challenges. Nonetheless, the three categories under this rubric merit attention as teaching is by nature a very social profession; socializing with colleagues is one of the key factors to new teacher survival.

1. **Isolation**

   The main theme to emerge dealt with problems resulting from not having an office near other department members, particularly at a time when one can most benefit from having friendly colleagues close by to answer questions. The other theme dealt with the isolation of teaching during the summer or evenings, when most colleagues are absent. Isolation ties to other categories insofar as being removed from colleagues, physically or otherwise, generally results in less outreach and thus the dissemination of less information.

2. **Perceived lack of collegiality**

   The vast majority of our participants found their department to be very friendly and welcoming; in a few instances, however, some did not feel quite as welcome. This category's three main themes were lack of outreach and/or transmission of information, lack of cohesiveness among department members, and a sense of tension between new and senior teachers.

3. **Lack of time to socialize**

   This category explored how new teachers sometimes face difficulty in finding time to attend departmental/social activities. While this category was not widespread among new teachers, it was very much noteworthy, particularly considering both how busy new teachers are and the fact that all of our participants agreed on the value of socializing with colleagues.

4. **IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTION**

Given our limited timeframe and resources, we could not address every challenge expressed in the interviews. Rather, the facilitators prioritized the issues in their respective departments to develop and implement action to respond to the most significant issues. What follows is a brief overview of activities and materials that stemmed from our research.

1. Classroom management workshop

   This was offered jointly by all three facilitators and open to all teachers in the three departments, regardless of experience. The workshop was animated by the manager of Student Services, whose dossier includes dealing with unruly students and offering teachers support in such matters. It offered teachers a space in which to discuss the problems they've encountered and tools for effectively dealing with disruptive students.

2. C.I. calculation workshop:

   Offered jointly by facilitators A and B[3], the session was videotaped for department C as well as future teachers in all three departments. The workshop was in a computer lab; the animator introduced participants to an online calculation form and guided them through it as they inputted their own information.

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3. C's participation started one semester later.

3. Department-specific guidebook for new teachers

Facilitators A and B each developed their own guidebook, containing both pedagogical and administrative information.

4. Mentoring directory

Facilitators A and C each compiled a list of teachers who had volunteered to be mentors. They made the list available to new teachers should they choose to have a mentor.

5. Action implemented by and for department A

New teacher luncheon:
- Informal gathering for new teachers to meet other department members and discuss concerns, ask questions.

Departmental book fair:
- Teachers gave away unwanted books for others to pick up.
- The fair provided a platform for pedagogical discussions among colleagues.

End-of-semester party:
- Social gathering at a department member's house.

Facilitator mentored two newly-hired teachers:
- Offered pedagogical and administrative guidance to two teachers who were hired during department A's action phase.

6. Action implemented by and for department B

Computer system tutorial:
- Detailed, step-by-step guide to learning the system most commonly used in this department; instructions and suggestions for using it in-class.

7. Action implemented by and for department C

Mini-conference and orientation session for new teachers:
- Two integration sessions: one more pedagogical in nature, the other administrative.

Pedagogical guide:
- Guide to teaching one of the levels of the department's introductory courses.

Wine and Cheese:
- Social gathering for new teachers to meet and mingle with one another, as well as fellow department members and the faculty dean.

New teacher initiatives implemented by department C's assistant coordinator throughout the course of the project:
- Office hours for new teachers.
- Monthly workshops:
  - Two pedagogical workshops: grading and plagiarism; one administrative: C.I. and seniority matters.
- "Winter teaching concerns" meeting:
  - A get-together for new teachers not getting sections in the winter semester. The purpose was to reassure them that they would likely be teaching again in the summer or fall and that they were, regardless, still very much part of C's team.
- Revision of departmental model course outlines.
- Booklet on ministerial and departmental policies.

5.   RECOMMENDATIONS

We propose recommendations to departments for the five main areas new teachers experience difficulty.

1.   Classroom management

It would be useful to inform teachers when they are hired that they could potentially encounter classroom management issues. This could be done in a way that does not alarm new teachers, but rather makes them aware. This information could include the coordinates of the manager of Student Services.

2.   C.I. calculation

Department coordinators could advise newly hired teachers to meet with someone from Human Resources as soon as possible to learn about C.I. is and how to calculate it. This could take the form of an announcement at the first departmental meeting of the semester, or an email to all newly hired teachers.

3.   Course preparation / level of students / evaluation

These three pedagogical categories are joined together on the basis that they are all founded on a lack of pre-existing knowledge regarding the cegep curriculum. Incoming teachers should be made aware of the level and type of curriculum most conducive to learning at the cegep level. This could occur as early as during the job interview; it would not only give potential teachers guidance for their future courses, but allow them to get an accurate view of the realities of the job.

4.   Lack of orientation

Ideally, every new teacher should receive an orientation to the college; it should be one of the first steps of integration. Generally, we found that coordinators did in fact offer an orientation session. The problem had to do with when it was offered, which tended to be for the start of the fall semester. This left out two groups of teachers: those hired for the summer semester and those hired at the last minute. For the former, the orientation was too late; for the latter, too early. A useful suggestion would be to offer an orientation after all new teachers have been hired, every semester new teachers are hired. It could take place in the first or second week of the semester: this would still be early enough to offer useful information and not too late so as to cause new teachers to feel like they have been left to fend for themselves.

5.   Continuing Education

The majority of new teachers we interviewed entered Vanier *via* Continuing Education, to teach either summer or evening courses. The issues these teachers dealt with were primarily the isolation of teaching when most teachers (particularly experienced ones) are not, confusion over policies and procedures, and not having an office.

Perhaps the best strategy for a smooth integration is for all new Continuing Education teachers to receive an orientation and to ensure that there is ongoing, healthy communication between Continuing Education and academic departments. This would help guarantee that newly hired teachers receive all pertinent information and feel part of a cohesive team.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This project found that a middle-ground must be established between new teachers not receiving enough information (or not receiving it in a timely manner) and new teachers being bombarded with too much information at once. While one needs a certain amount of information to begin teaching, the integration and professional development of new teachers in the cegep network is a lengthy process. One does not immediately start out an expert teacher; there are procedures to be learned, methods to be established and skills to be developed.

All three of the departments we worked with took great pride in providing new teachers with a positive working atmosphere and making them feel integral to the department, which was one of the qualities new teachers most preferred. Indeed, amid the numerous results of this research project, the most prominent to emerge was that, above all information and knowledge, a supportive, nurturing and dependable department is the most crucial factor to new teacher integration. When a teacher enters an accommodating environment, all the information needed to feel secure in her/his career is just a phone call, email or knock on the door away.