Encouraging Teachers' and Students' Innovation with the Support of Teacher Learning Communities

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The purpose of this paper is to share knowledge generated through the implementation of "Teaching Innovation Teams" as a strategy for teachers' professional development and innovation at the University of Alcala (Spain). We analyse the contributions of this strategy to the facilitation of curriculum innovation in higher education and reflect on some of the achievements and results of the activities carried out by these teams, identifying the dilemmas and difficulties that teachers experienced and that hinder the development of curriculum innovations. Finally, we outline some educational contributions of Teaching Innovation Teams understood as a collaborative and formative strategy to facilitate educational change.

Key words: Collaborative learning, Higher education, Professional development, Teacher learning communities, Training teachers

Introduction

For a decade, Spanish universities have been involved in a process of change and adaptation to the European Higher Education Area. This process has provided an opportunity for review and reflection, from the purposes and functions of the university as an institution to the ways of teaching and learning.

"Innovation" made its official entry into universities and appeared in a variety of fields: *institutional*, specific vice-chancellorships and offices were, for example, created to address this task; *educational*, a multitude of courses, seminars and conferences were given with the sole theme of teaching innovation; *didactic*, learning strategies began

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to be implemented and debates were held on the updating of teaching methodologies; *evaluative*, new indicators of educational innovation were incorporated in order to assess teachers; and *financial*, various calls were organised to finance teaching innovation projects.

With so much interest and dissemination surrounding educational innovation at universities it is logical that various questions would arise: What do people think innovation is? What has actually been innovated? How and with what strategies? What results have been obtained and what has been the impact on educational practices? Of course, answering these questions would require a thorough investigation and that is not the purpose of this paper. What we want to show is an alternative way to understand the processes of curriculum innovation from its most profound framework, i.e., from a cultural change in the university community, a change in mentality that leads to a transformation in teaching practices.

To this end, we present the experience that we conducted at the University of Alcala (UAH) in order to foster the implementation of curriculum innovation processes in university classrooms. In this paper, we will describe and analyse the strategy that the University Teacher Training Office uses to train teachers in order to create a teaching innovation culture. This culture is also upheld by the creation of learning communities in order to support not only the professional development of our teachers but also the improvement of teaching-learning processes. We have called this strategy "Teaching Innovation Teams". These teams have become an opportunity for teachers to come together and plan, design and assess curriculum innovations on their own practices.

Innovation and learning communities for professional development

The theoretical framework that supports our work is based on two fundamental pillars: teaching innovation and professional development through learning communities.

With regard to the first, teaching innovation, we have used the meaning of innovation built from the model of practice and enquiry as stance, supported by Cochran, Smith and Lytle (2003); Hargreaves (2000); Randi and Corno (2000); Könings et al. (2007); Goodnough et al. (2009) and other prior studies gathered in Margalef and Álvarez (2005); Margalef, Canabal and Iborra (2006); and Margalef and Pareja (2008).

Based on these, we understand that innovation:

- Means an idea perceived as new by someone, and in turn includes the acceptance of this novelty.
- Involves a change that seeks to improve an educational practice.
- Is a deliberate and planned effort aimed at the qualitative improvement of educational processes.
- Entails learning for those who become actively involved in the innovation process.
- Is related to financial, social and ideological interests that influence the entire innovation process.
- Is an intermittent process that signifies first-person involvement, i.e., it is begun individually but in collaborative relationship with others who are part of the trainee community in order to carry out a transformation from within.
- Questions the beliefs and conceptions related to teaching and learning.
- Is a process that takes time and requires bringing together knowledge, action, risk and responsibility.

As stated by Kushner (2002, p. 198), "innovations are acts of meaning, but there is no reason to imagine that the meanings are stable across individual lives". For this reason, we understand that these meanings must be built and rebuilt with the help of other professionals who comprise a teachers community. We tend to think of innovations in a proactive manner always leading to a transformative action, but this means understanding innovation only from the perspective of the person who proposes it and not of the individuals "touched" by the programme, regardless of whether they are professors or students. For many of these people, innovations are things that usually occur unexpectedly. For this author, these people need a process in which experience and ideas, dissatisfaction and ways of thinking, failures and learning, comprise a foundation. Experience is a test and preparation for entering into a process of change. From there is where we need to round off the perspective of innovation with that of professional development, understood as an area of the experiential learning of the participants themselves.

Könings, Brand and Merriënboer (2006, p. 995), state the following conditions that are necessary in order for innovation to be effective in practice:

- An innovative educational design should offer teachers a great deal of guidance on how to implement it in practice, as our results indicate that teachers otherwise tend to implement the innovation in accordance with their own approaches to teaching, which are not always in line with the intended design.
- Therefore, a second practical implication is that cooperation between educational designers and teachers should be promoted and become common practice. Because teachers experience problems in the feasibility of the design, they themselves adapt the design to a practical form. These feasibility problems provide important feedback for designers and a starting point for cooperating with teachers more closely in order to develop a more workable design.
- The principles of participatory design can give practical guidance for this cooperation. With more intensive cooperation between designers and teachers the scope of the innovative design can be enhanced, as it makes it easier for teachers to teach according to the design rather than according to their own approaches to teaching.

In this regard, we are aware that the institutional context that is favourable for innovation in universities does not include ordering or controlling; we know that the subjects participating in the innovation processes must become involved. For this reason, it is important to clearly know the reasons for the changes and their meaning; in other words, the *why* of innovation. Facilitating curriculum innovation processes in which the students play the lead role in their learning is not a question of decrees or external regulations; designing and developing environments of independent and heteronomous learning and of critical and reflective learning requires the creation of appropriate situations that provide students with an opportunity to develop these types of learning (Brockbank & McGill, 2002). Teachers need to rebuild their practices in order to design these learning situations.

One way to contribute to the rebuilding of customary teaching practices is to provide training and support to teachers so that, based on processes for building individual and collective knowledge, they can transform their teaching. Hannan and Silver (2005) document various studies, the results of which have shown that university

teachers commit to innovation despite knowing that it entails more work and dedication. Although they do not do so to gain a promotion they do appreciate receiving institutional support and incentives. Therefore, the Training Programme Proposal, through its goals, structure and characteristics, is a way of bringing this incentive, recognition and support for innovation to light.

The second pillar of our theoretical framework is the professional development of teachers through learning communities. Our understanding of a community of learning and enquiry is in line with the definition provided by Christie et al. (2008, p. 264): "a group of people who work together with a shared purpose which entails some collaborative attempt to explore issues or answer questions and hence potentially create new knowledge or understanding in a given domain for anyone seeking to establish a collaborative community of enquiry in the context of educational research".

For Dooner et al. (2008, p. 565), we must take one step further, as they state that "a learning community is a group that act on an ongoing basis to develop their knowledge of a common interest or passion by sharing individual resources and by engaging in critical dialogue. Thus, if members' relationships are built on trust, the forthright nature of the group's practice can generate honest interactions, challenging questions, and constructive feedback, all of which are essential for intellectual growth to occur".

Taking all of the above into account in order to propose Teaching Innovation Teams, we have relied on the research and contributions of action research and the research conducted by the teachers themselves as a way of ensuring a change in the traditional *habitus* and the search for a *reflective habitus* that leads to innovation from "within" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2003; Lieberman, 2003; Ponte, 2002).

This is not a simple task. Training and support are required in order to be able to carry out a reflection on practice that involves an exercise of self-reflection (Gruskha, McLeold & Reynolds, 2005).

With the processes of innovation through learning communities, a contribution is made to the development of abilities for reflection on the professional task. Teachers are aware of their initial situation, of what they do, why they do it and what they can do and improve. As indicated by Harrison, Lawson and Wortley (2005), it has to do with the teachers understanding not what they can change in others but what they can change in themselves.

Thus we have chosen some of the principles that support a reflective practice in order to guide our formative actions, as contributed by Kraft (2002):

- Understanding the actual practice and the different variables involved that are linked with an impact on teaching-learning processes.
- Internal change, from within and with the actual involvement of teachers.
- Taking into account beliefs.
- Making beliefs and conceptions explicit.
- A critical view of the "use of power".

As suggested by McLaughlin and Talbert (2006), the development of Teacher Learning Communities involves *collaborative work* or a project that fosters the *collaboration* of a group of teachers who share a mission or commitment to improving their teaching practices. This project usually arises from an interest in changing their practices. The development of Teacher Learning Communities depends on:

- How the collaborative work of the teachers within the community is designed, guided and accompanied.
- The extent to which a context is created that allows the teachers to *learn from their own practice*.

It also signifies the *ability of the group to create and use knowledge and tools* in order to improve their teaching practices.

In the Teaching Innovation Teams, as we describe below, we have gone from individual self-reflection processes to a shared reflection through dialogue, observation and feedback, from the most contemplative reflection to action and a commitment to improving and transforming practices. The intention is to create a context that allows teachers to learn their practice and improve it through the development of innovations.

Teaching innovation teams as a professional development strategy

The University Teacher Training Office of the University of Alcala has incorporated the creation of Teaching Innovation Teams as a formative action that supports teaching innovation. These groups are comprised of at least three teachers from our University with the goal

of implementing innovative experiences in their teaching practices. Although our University has been carrying out some activities within the framework of calls for innovation projects, priority is given to providing teaching activities with more drive, systematisation and continuity. It is important to consolidate the activities and lines of work, to go beyond the scope of isolated or sporadic actions and give greater recognition to teachers involved in improving their teaching practice.

The creation of Teaching Innovation Teams is aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- Encouraging teachers to actively participate in stable teams that implement actions related to innovation and the updating of educational methodologies
- Contributing to the creation of a collaborative culture of continuous training for teachers' professional development
- Creating an actual impact on the teaching practice at UAH and contributing to an improvement in teaching quality
- Providing spaces and channels for reflection, for questioning and rethinking practices and proposing new ones based on theoretical and practical knowledge
- Granting greater recognition, outreach and dissemination to educational innovation actions as well as to the teachers involved.

At this time, 29 groups are officially registered, comprised of 220 teachers who belong to different teaching categories (from assistants to professors) and a wide variety of disciplines. The groups have different characteristics, needs and courses of action. There are groups of teachers with the same degrees, for example, physiotherapy, law or English language and culture, while other groups are comprised of teachers with different degrees but who belong to the same faculty, as in the case of history, humanities and philosophy. There are also interdisciplinary groups in which the teachers belong to different departments, faculties and even campuses. I think that it is from these groups that we can learn the most, with a view to making progress with proposals of cross-cutting skills and content, as well as to introducing common credits to various branches of knowledge or within the same branch, in such a way that they promote greater integration and a more interdisciplinary approach.

Each group is assigned a *facilitator for the teachers' learning processes*. The facilitator's functions are related to detecting formative

needs, monitoring and supporting the group's activities, and encouraging and contributing to professional development through the knowledge generated within each group and its dissemination in order to contribute to public knowledge (Brockbanck & McGill, 2002; Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

The group and the facilitator jointly draw up a work plan for the support and monitoring provided, as well as for the enquiry into and learning of the innovative practice itself. The goal is to go beyond experiential knowledge with a view to creating spaces of reflection that make it possible to review and question cases, enquire into the reasons for what is being done, critically review the didactic strategies being carried out and discover the theories and models that lie behind their practices. Through this collaborative work, the teachers can debate, disagree, enquire and explore different ways of doing things, while making comparisons with other individuals who research the same topics in order to generate didactic knowledge (Margalef, Canabal & Iborra, 2006).

We agree with Christie et al. (2008) that the factors for creating a learning community that fosters innovation must be based on:

1. Dialogue and participation: a community depends on its members' opportunities to engage in dialogue and other modes of participation.
2. Relationships: participation in a community is sustained through the quality of its relationships.
3. Perspectives and assumptions underpin the relationships of a community and may offer insights into the dynamics and operation of the community.
4. Structure and context: how a community operates is governed by its structure and context, including the extent to which its structure is imposed or constrained either internally or externally.
5. Climate: as a community develops, a climate for its operation also emerges, involving aspects such as tone, environment, and potential conflict.
6. Purpose: the purpose of an enquiry will influence this climate and there may be a need to accommodate or harmonise a multiplicity of purposes arising from the complex interrelationships, perspectives, and assumptions involved.
7. Control: a key issue for all communities is control, in relation to who has access to the community, to resources, constraints, and power within it.

All of the above are determining factors for the success of the Teaching Innovation Teams as agents of innovation in university teaching.

The power of the processes as learning tools

With a view to investigating the processes carried out by the Teaching Innovation Teams as mediators of the transformation and improvement of teaching, the TET (Train, Enquire, Transform) Research Group has spent two years conducting research that makes it possible for us to generate knowledge on these processes.

The research questions have focused on the following:

- What stages or phases do the Innovation Groups go through?
- What factors favour the Group's involvement in the innovation process in university teaching?
- What is the facilitator's role? What strategies are used to encourage reflection by the Group and foster their development?
- What are the relationships established amongst the Group members and between the Group and the facilitator?

A Case Study: the innovation process

Given the Groups' diversity, we have conducted a case study comprised of six Teaching Innovation Teams in order to further analyse the factors and limitations of the learning communities for professional development and innovation.

Four of the six groups are comprised of teachers from the same knowledge area: two from health sciences, one from social sciences and one from engineering. The two interdisciplinary groups are comprised of teachers from different branches of knowledge.

The facilitators of these groups acted as external researchers or critical friends, in accordance with the action research model. The following tools were used to gather information: participant observation, journals to which we had access, in-depth interviews with the coordinators of the Innovation Groups, discussion groups, and facilitator seminars that were a basis for the triangulation of data and theoretical triangulation.

Content analysis was carried out to analyse and interpret the data, while further study of the various dimensions was undertaken on two different levels: vertical and horizontal. The horizontal analysis

was carried out within each dimension and category of analysis, based on each Innovation Group selected in the Case Study in order to not lose any information. In the vertical analysis, the data from all of the cases was triangulated and the material was identified as a whole for the presentation of the results in an integrated manner.

The categorisation procedure was a two-fold process: *inductive* ('bottom-up'), creating new emerging categories that arose from the 'text' in order to be part of the category system, and *deductive* ('top-down'), in the sense of using previously created categories, especially based on the categories used in the interviews. The categories created through the inductive process facilitated the understanding, clarification, comparison and verification of the categories created prior to the commencement of analysis. Furthermore, they facilitated a greater understanding of the analysed phenomenon.

We are currently finalising the analysis phase and data interpretation, but we have some preliminary results that are shared in this paper.

Stages or phases that the Innovation Groups go through

From the beginning, the Groups have formed according to various expectations and motivations. There is a common denominator that leads us to conclude that the teachers who have participated in the innovation groups are all interested in implementing innovations in their classrooms or in the planning of their curriculum. As indicated by Könings et al. (2007, p. 986), a teacher's willingness to learn is a crucial factor for implementing educational innovations.

Nevertheless, we have noted diversity in the rates of development of each group, as well as of the members who comprise the groups. We were able to verify that there are two different types of behaviour that affect, in an uneven manner, certain issues related to the implementation of innovations. Of the types or models indicated by Van Ekelen and cited by Könings et al. (2007, p. 986), we have identified two in our groups. There are "teachers who wonder how to learn and want to improve their teaching practices but do not know how to accomplish this. They are mostly critical of their own role". But we have also found that there is a group of teachers, perhaps the minority, "who are eager to learn, want to improve their performance and undertake action in order to learn. They are alert to classroom process, have an open mind for others and are critical towards their own role".

This manner of acting and its diversity in the responses is detected in the content of the proposed innovations, in the relationships that are established with colleagues and students, in opening up to new processes and in the attitude towards reflection on and criticism of their own practice.

To analyse this process and the differences in each group we took the development stages indicated by McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) and summarised them in the following table in order to understand the evolution of our groups.

Table 1. Developmental levels of enquiry-based reform

Novice	Intermediate	Advanced
- Constructing a teacher community - Developing systems to manage reform work - Creating a focused effort to guide school reform efforts - Discovering the value of data and how to use it - Experimenting with enquiry and creating procedures	- Developing a norm of questioning - Beginning to develope a shared language - Broadening teachers' leadership roles in reform - Clarifying vision; developing work plans to enact vision. - Managing data so that it can be used in better ways - Focusing on teaching and learning	- Becoming a learning community focused on improved practice and shared accountability - Establishing ownership of reform work among most of the faculty - Establishing coherence - Managing external pressures - Connecting whole-school, subunit, and classroom enquiry focus and practice.

Source: McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006, p. 36

There are groups that we can identify in each of these stages. It is important to consider that there is no correlation between how long the groups have existed or when they were formed and their level of maturity. We have identified various determining factors that allow the groups to progress from one level to another. These are related to the characteristics indicated by the authors.

Due to limited space, we have only cited three excerpts from the notes taken on the three innovation groups that belong to these levels:

- Example of Innovation Group D, Novice Level

  "It is still not very clear to this group what their task is. They are more focused on creating finished products, but have not yet been able to focus on the teaching and learning in their own practices.

Nonetheless, they are satisfied because they are creating a climate of collaboration, because they share an interest in improving their practices. They are still very focused on organisational tasks and on seeking greater clarity and coherence with regard to a common objective." (Journal from Facilitator B)

- Example of Innovation Group H, Intermediate Level
  "*They have found a common theme around which to work in a shared practice. They themselves are carrying out experiential learning as they design an interdisciplinary seminar in which they put their own manner of understanding teaching and learning into play. As facilitator, I have been able to go beyond the task-related organisational functions. We have gone from strong dependence to greater independence, especially through the peer coaching work that some of the members are carrying out.*" (Journal from Facilitator L)
- Example of Innovation Group F, Advanced Level
  "*This is a highly motivated group. It has a very rich prior history of experience and collaborative work. They have been working together for a very long time. One factor is that they are building a shared conception of learning. Despite their individual differences, they know exactly what the reasons for their innovation are. Another important factor is that they have actively participated in the Teacher Training Programme. Also, as facilitator, I have developed various formative strategies for integrating theory and practice: readings, debates, seminars with experts in subjects that are of interest, discussion groups.*" (Journal from Facilitator A)

Based on the interpretation of the data, some of the more noteworthy factors that help the Innovation Groups progress from one maturity level to another are:

- **Cohesion:** the groups that appear to be more closely-knit are those in which the members had prior relationships with one another, relationships that were established before they came together as groups, such as collaborative work previously carried out as innovation projects. Another dimension that contributes to greater cohesion is related to the ways in which teaching and learning are perceived. When there are similarities in ideologies or in the ways in which to

address teaching practice the groups advance more quickly through the developmental levels. The level of commitment to implementing transformations in their classes contributes to the group as whole becoming stronger as a learning community.

- **Interaction between the group members** strengthens the sense of belonging and the climate of trust. As a result, they can focus on the processes to transform their practices. "Practice must be a point of departure for developing a profession with confidence and pride and providing a common basis for change and development". (Postholm, 2008, p. 1727). This is also highlighted as a basic factor in the studies conducted by Zwart et al. (2008).
- The **leadership of some of the group members**, generally the coordinator or the head person who has configured the groups.
- The **clarity and degree of achieving the group's purposes and objectives** with regard to innovation. When the groups know exactly what their proposed objectives are and share their immediate problems they gradually bring focus to their innovation proposals, using reflection on their own practice and integrating the principles and procedures of action. In this way, they progress more quickly towards the advanced maturity stage, as indicated by McLaughlin and Talbert (2006).
- The **transition from intentions and plans to the specific action** of doing and **achieving their goals**. The Innovation Groups at the Novice Level stay at a level of more technical knowledge. In other words, they remain in the phase of planning and of how to do more rather than focusing on the 'why' and 'for what' and, to a lesser extent, on the impact achieved in their own practice. As demonstrated by Ponte et al 2004, teachers approach knowledge based on what they want to do (and rarely on what they want to achieve - effects). Nevertheless, they first reflect based on the desired action rather than what is currently being done. This means that the teachers develop knowledge primarily at the technical level and not so much at the ideological or empirical level. Therefore, assistance must be given to the group members to help them to make these transitions in a planned and

continuous manner, so that they can progress to their next developmental level.

- We have also found that **active participation in prior formative activities**, such as teaching innovation seminars, initial training programmes, innovation projects organised by the University Teacher Training Office, has made it possible to develop positive attitudes towards reflective practice, a greater willingness to continue learning and enquiring into the teaching practice and a certain sensitivity required in order to accept constructive criticism.
- **Institutional support and recognition from co-workers** and other colleagues is a factor that plays an important role. For example, the feeling that one is part of a recognised formative activity that includes advising and institutional recognition promotes the incorporation of many teachers who would otherwise have reservations about these processes. This is related to the tradition of some departments or faculties and the pressures for dedication and assessment of other types of activities such as research, rather than to teaching.
- The **support of the facilitator** as a promoter of reflective processes. It is important that the teachers be aware of their more tacit theories, bring them to light and rebuild them based on theories. This is difficult to achieve without the support of an external person with the ability to do so. That is why the following section is dedicated to them.

Role of the facilitators

As previously explained, each Innovation Group has been assigned a facilitator. The function of this individual, who belongs to the University Teacher Training Team, is to create a learning context for the Innovation Groups. In practice, we have noted that the facilitators act in accordance with the action principles detailed below:

- They carry out monitoring, support and continuity: significant changes and cultural changes take time and need monitoring, support and theories. Continuity is fundamental in innovation projects or groups that have a significant impact on practice itself and guarantee a change in the *habitus* of university teachers.
- They generate interest, awaken concerns and help with self-motivation.

- They suggest a resolution of the problems that concern the groups. It is first necessary to identify these problems and enquire into them, but it is also necessary to generate concern about other types of questions that perhaps have not been posed.
- They provide a space for sharing their learning, achievements and results with other groups, not only for the exchange of experiences but also for the formative activities specifically designed for groups with common needs.

Facilitators cannot make a linear transfer from theory to practice through training or give formulas for the "ought-to-be", let alone act as experts. The facilitator must foster understanding about the problems and their possible alternatives through their own involvement and reflection. This is expressed by facilitator M in her journal:

> *"I think that the facilitator's role as a creator of learning contexts is essential during the first moments of the Group's development. It is the spark that ignites the flame, the first steps, the first questions that help awaken the curiosity to begin setting out challenges. Likewise, I feel that this role is also crucial at the end of the process. From my point of view, if there is no final reflection that helps us to continue progressing, to keep the process going, to turn that final reflection into an intermediate reflection of something bigger, the process of learning, of innovation, of improvement, will come to a standstill. It would be strange, at least if we have set out to make changes, if we have entered processes of self-evaluation, of self-reflection, of self-enquiry and questioning."*

Ponte et al. (2002, p. 419) highlights five characteristics of the facilitation process:

- *Cyclic*, making teachers constantly look back (What have I done?) and forward (How can I progress from here?)
- *Explicit*, clarifying what the teachers were doing and expressing it in action research terms
- *Negotiated*, convincing the teachers, based on arguments, of the best way to proceed in the given circumstances
- *Forceful*, continuously talking with the teachers about the actual carrying out of certain activities, as well as discussing these activities with colleagues in a systematic and purposeful manner

- *Critical*, asking the teachers about what they are doing and why.

In the case of the facilitators of the six Innovation Groups presented here, we have noted that not all of them can have these characteristics due to the maturity levels of the groups. For those groups that are still at the novice level, and even the intermediate level, the facilitator performs functions more related to group coordination and organisation. As stated by McLaughlin and Talbert (2006), functions are carried out that have more to do with task organisation: identifying the issues that the group will be working on, encouraging the sharing of knowledge and advising on the planning of actions. This is noted in the following excerpt by facilitator L:

> *"The Group is still very dependent. They need me to be present at the meetings and they ask me about their action plan. I feel that they are still not independent and my functions at the moment are limited to ensuring a certain continuity and to making sure the members meet and set out their problems."*

Nonetheless, the role of the facilitator in Groups that are at an advanced level changes and becomes more focused on tasks related to creating learning contexts. In this case, they fall in line with those indicated by the aforementioned authors as contexts:

- Focused on knowledge: on problems and practices that make it possible to deepen their conceptual knowledge and skills in a content domain.
- Focused on the community: involving the members of the community in collaborative work that is based on the knowledge of each person and on the building of new understandings and practices.
- Oriented towards improving their teaching practices.
- Putting various strategies and tools into practice.

This is how one of the facilitators describes his role in a group of advanced maturity:

> *"They asked me what had attracted my attention, as a facilitator, with regard to the process followed, focusing on "Why have they done or said that?" But I also added another level: Why didn't I*

pay attention to…? I try to reflect with them on these questions and on what we learn collaboratively about these processes." (Excerpt from the Journal of Facilitator A)

Achievements and results thus far

The results of this formative experience show us that we cannot immediately list tangible and spectacular results, since we cannot alter the processes in a short period of time or through the implementation of certain innovative practices. However, it is with the quality of the processes that we guarantee the best results. In this regard, we can highlight certain achievements:

- An increase in the number of groups registered during the last year.
- The group reports show greater activity and interaction, which has immediate consequences in the implementation of innovations with a significant impact on practice.
- We have progressed, in some cases, from planning and discussion to the implementation of processes with an analysis of achievements and difficulties.
- The incorporation of new members, once they see that the groups' activities work and that they have greater success in the students' learning.
- The strengthening of the sense of belonging to the institution and the satisfaction of having real support and backing.
- Demand for training in dimensions of the teaching-learning process, which previously was not perceived as necessary.
- The support for curriculum planning of cross-cutting and interdisciplinary modules.
- Sustainability and greater autonomy of the facilitator in the group's activities.

Dilemmas and difficulties

A common dilemma is that teachers have the desire to innovate and improve their practices but are faced with insecurity brought about by the implementation of new processes, either because they have no training or they lack prior experience or a hands-on reference. In many cases, they need to see that others can do it before they try it themselves. Therein lies the importance of collaboration for these

types of innovation processes. We have seen that many teachers not only require understanding and time, but also need to experiment on their own, to take risks, to test things out and to reach a certain level of "cognitive disruption" or dissatisfaction with their regular ways of thinking and doing. This requires a loss of control and security with regard to their regular routines in order to be able to build a new "habitus". It is a process that requires a great deal of effort when done in an individual manner, on one's own. That is why collaborative work and institutional support is so important.

Another dilemma is related to the ability to reflect on one's own practice. The more the group members get involved in shared dialogue processes and discussing conceptions, concerns and proposals, the better they are able to accept criticism and work on the continuous improvement of their processes. However, often true reflection is not undertaken, since one tends to stand by new habits or guidelines in which new securities are found. This results in the replacement of certain practices with others, but not always accompanied by changes in conceptions.

From the individual level, it is clear that investing in the facilitator is crucial, but distributed leadership or "peer coaches" must also be strengthened. This contributes to greater development and independence in the Innovation Groups.

We are aware of the need to expand the cases and carry out theoretical sampling, because the experience of incorporating the in-depth analysis of other Innovation Groups enriches and strengthens certain data that will make it possible for us to generate knowledge on the impact of innovation on university classrooms through learning communities.

The fact that it is not just a fad or simple rhetoric must be taken into account. As indicated by Donner et al. (2008, p. 574), "a deeper understanding of what life is like in professional learning communities will challenge professional dialogue beyond the simple rhetoric to encompass more of the harsher realities of group work. This understanding will help educators who wish to become members of professional learning communities to respond more effectively to the challenges associated with collaborative work and to ultimately become more skilled at combining collegial support with the critical dialogue that is necessary for meaningful professional growth".

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