"We're inventing the wheel when someone else has already tested it": A framework to support faculty collaboration towards innovative practices.

Diana Soares, Maitê Gil, Diana Mesquita

Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto, Portugal

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Innovative teaching practices in Higher Education are increasingly necessary to address the rapid changes in the way students access information and how they learn. Thus, to support faculty in implementing (and reflecting on) new teaching practices is essential. This study addressed the question: How to support collaboration among faculty members in order to foster innovative teaching practices? It aimed at developing a framework to support interdisciplinary collaboration in the implementation of innovative teaching practices. It followed a design-based research approach, involving an iterative design process, an implementation phase (52 scholars), and an evaluation phase (four focus groups). The proposed framework presupposes the development of learning and practice communities and comprises five phases (i.e., contextualize the challenge, lay out the principles, idealise learning scenarios, launch and implement the learning scenario, and understand the outcomes). The results allow us to implement an innovative evidence-based approach to faculty professional development in Higher Education.

Full paper

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions have been faced with emerging challenges. There are many barriers to overcome to deal with this changing reality. Faculty professional development is one of the most outstanding. This study aims to answer the following question: How to support collaboration among faculty members to foster innovative teaching practices? Thus, the main contribution of this study is to present a framework to support faculty collaboration towards innovative practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study focused on faculty professional development in Higher Education, specifically research into the implementation of learning and practice communities (Harvey et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020; Bold & Blevins, 2020; Sherbert et al., 2017). We understand 'innovative practices' as a set of active learning approaches, i.e. those aiming at involving students in the teaching and learning process, based on meaningful and active experiences.

The framework is based on the intersection of different but related approaches: action research (Kemmis et al., 2013), Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Felten, 2013; Theall & Centra, 2001) and design-based research (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Contributions from Design Thinking (Design Council, 2024) and Innovators Compass (Innovators Compass, 2020) were also included in the resulting framework.

Methodological Procedures

This study followed a design-based research approach. The main goal was to develop a framework to support interdisciplinary collaboration in the implementation of innovative teaching practices.

Phases

The design-based approach involved three central phases, namely (i) an iterative design process; (ii) an implementation phase (with 52 faculty members); and (iii) an evaluation phase (questionnaires and focus groups).

Phase I involved an extensive literature review to identify professional development models aimed at higher education faculty and targeted at pedagogical innovation. Also, recurring design elements in the reported faculty development programmes were identified and the foundations for the framework were established. This phase was carried out collaboratively by a group of three researchers, who carried out each step independently, then met to discuss and define the next actions. The foundations of the framework were built through an iterative design process.

In Phase II, scholars were invited to integrate one of five communities of learning and practice, between March and the end of June 2023. Each community of learning and practice included an interdisciplinary facilitation team and scholars who wanted to learn collaboratively about a specific theme. The framework initially designed was implemented.

In Phase III, the implementation was evaluated. The dataset comprised participant's answers to a final questionnaire and four focus groups discussions. These data were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed independently by two researchers using NVivo. In this presentation, we will focus on results for question 3 (i.e, what would you stress as the most positive and the most challenging in this experience? Why?), to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of the framework, and for question 7 (i.e., How could your integration in the community of learning and practice have better corresponded to your expectations when you decided to participate?), to address the needs of reformulations in the framework.

Participants

The participants of this study are scholars affiliated to one of four autonomous *campi* of a Portuguese HEI. A total of 52 faculty members integrated the communities (34 participants, 18 elements facilitators). Of these, 19 scholars (11 participants, 8 facilitators) participated in the focus groups discussions, and 30 (17 participants, 13 facilitators) answered a questionnaire about their experience.

Results

Overall, the implementation was evaluated positively by the participants. The average score for the final questionnaire was 5.61 (SD = 2.08), on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to 'very low' and 7 to 'very high'. During the focus group discussions, the main strengths identified were the development of a reflective attitude towards practice and the opportunity for collaboration among peers. The main weaknesses were the timing for the implementation of the communities of learning and practice and the lack of a clear yet flexible structure to the life cycle of the community.

Informed by the evaluation phase, the revised framework presupposes the development of learning and practice communities and comprises five structured phases, namely: (i) contextualize the challenge; (ii) lay out the principles; (iii) idealise learning scenarios; (iv) launch and implement the learning scenario; and (v) understand the outcomes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results allow us to implement an innovative evidence-based approach to faculty professional development in Higher Education aiming at strengthening innovative teaching practices.

As further steps, the implementation of the proposed framework is already underway and research into the implementation of the model is ongoing.

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