Abstract

I request sabbatical time to develop an online professional development course on the science of learning and instruction for faculty. This course would unite my passions for the science of learning, instructional design, teaching, and professional development. The intended outcome would be research-based instruction by faculty that supports deeper learning by students.
Presidential Sabbatical Proposal
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My Proposal

I request sabbatical time to create an online professional development course on the science of learning and instruction for NOVA faculty. The sabbatical would free me from my normal duties as an instructional designer with the Extended Learning Institute (ELI) for the 2014 Summer Semester. Following the sabbatical period, I would begin teaching the course each semester as an adjunct instructor.

The course will be learner-centered, inquiry-based, and interactive. It will address the latest cognitive neuroscience research. It will also make use of emerging scholarship that integrates learning research with teaching practice (Weimer, 2013), such as Richard Mayer’s Applying the Science of Learning (2011). The course will be online, to allow faculty from any NOVA (or VCCS) campus to participate easily, and to insure that materials and activities can be shared for other professional development activities. I will follow the ELI course development process and consult with instructional design colleagues at ELI.

Why I Want to Do This

For decades, I have sought to answer this simple question: How can we make learning, which happens easily and unconsciously in daily life, easier and longer lasting in an academic setting? I have found and shared my answers to this in workshops, conference presentations, and learning communities, on topics such as meaningful learning, student motivation, and teaching critical thinking.

Learning is a complex process studied by many disciplines (Weimer, 2013). Learning is seen as the strengthening and weakening of connections between neurons (Kempter & Van Hemmen, 1999), the record of an individual’s adaptations to its surroundings (Bor, 2012; Linden, 2007), the internal representations of the world around us (Edelman, 2012), and an emergent property of self-modifying networks (Spitzer, 1999). I am fortunate that my academic training in zoology and education, and my thirty-five years of instructional design experience across many disciplines, enable me to understand research on learning from many sources.

I want to share what I have learned about learning. I want to ignite in my colleagues the same sense of awe that I feel about human cognition. I want to challenge colleagues to better understand the process of learning that is both commonplace and mysterious. I agree with Barr and Tag (1995), who say that colleges need to redesign themselves
around learning, rather than around lectures and seat time. I am saddened that many of us in higher education do not better understand the learning process (Halpern and Hakel, 2003) that is at the core of our mission, and I want to help change the situation. Our faculty are hired for their expertise in their discipline; through no fault of their own, they may have limited knowledge of learning and teaching (Feden, 2012). It is the college’s responsibility to help them develop their pedagogical knowledge (Halpern and Hakel, 2003).

I enjoy designing and teaching courses. I have led major redesigns of gateway online courses for ELI, such as ENG 111, ENG 112, ITE 115, and BUS 100; these efforts have resulted in success rate increases from ten to twenty-five percent, and durability over many years and thousands of students. BUS 100 and ITE 115 won Blackboard Catalyst Exemplary Course awards. For the past five years, my focus has been on professional development for ELI faculty. I have taught EDU 285 (Teaching Online) and EDU 287 (Instructional Design for Online Learning), and received high ratings for both. I helped to redesign a version of EDU 287 that received a perfect score on a Quality Matters™ peer review. I helped lead the VCCS EIE award-winning Topics in Online Teaching and Learning (TOTAL) project, and developed and taught almost half of the project’s fourteen online workshops. I want to apply my design, facilitation, and professional development skills to promote better understanding of learning and instruction at NOVA. The sabbatical would free me from my normal focus on ELI courses and ELI faculty to address a broader concern, as well as providing the scarce resource of time for a substantial development project.

How This Will Benefit the College

My work during this sabbatical will directly benefit NOVA faculty. Faculty who participate in this course will develop an understanding of learning supported by research. Faculty who better understand learning make better instructional choices (Groccia and Buskist, 2011). Unfamiliarity with the education research literature is a barrier to faculty development (Weimer, 2013). Participants in this course will be more likely and better able to seek research-based answers to instructional problems. What participants learn in this course will also serve as a foundation for EDU 285, EDU 287, and the TOTAL workshops.

We are all here to serve students, and students are the ultimate beneficiaries of faculty professional development. Everett (2013) observed that educational improvements require faculty development. As faculty move away from an information transmission style, they adopt a more facilitative and interactive style, focusing on motivating students toward self-directed learning. This correlates with students taking a deeper approach to learning (Kember and Gow, 1994). Dr. Templin stated in his recent Town Hall meetings that NOVA has twin priorities of access and success. In an open-access environment like ours, student diversity and under-preparedness make sound instruction both imperative and challenging.
I believe the college will also benefit because I will improve my abilities as an instructional designer. McKeachie (1986) observed that the best way to learn something is by teaching it. The research that I do for this course will improve and update my own understanding of learning, which will directly affect my design decisions and the design recommendations I make to faculty. As a former associate with NOVA’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), a current member of the advisory council for the VCCS northern region’s Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), and a frequent and well-received contributor at the Power Up Your Pedagogy and New Horizons conferences, I will have many other opportunities to apply and communicate what I learn from this project.

Thank you for considering my request for a sabbatical. I hope that you agree with me that an investment by NOVA in my project will produce a needed resource that can help improve teaching by faculty, and thereby support deeper learning by students. The project will help me update my own understanding of learning, and unite it with my skills and deep interests in professional development.
References and Resources


