Growing our Teaching Praxis: Piloting the Instructional Skills Workshop at the Mount

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Abstract

At the Mount, we recently adopted the Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW), which is an experiential peer-to-peer teaching development opportunity. In this report, we reflect on the successes and challenges of our first iteration of this workshop in August 2018. We share how this experience has impacted our faculty and what its implications could be for implementation across Atlantic Canada. Our adoption of the ISW works in tandem with a larger project to establish this internationally-recognized workshop in Atlantic Canada. One of the goals of this report is to share best practices with faculty and facilitators at other institutions who are also beginning to deliver these workshops. We know that trial and error is a part of the teaching experience and we want to use the pilot as a jumping-off point to create a richer dialogue about teaching both at the Mount and across Atlantic Canada.

Keywords: Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW); Faculty development; Atlantic Canada Network; Implementation strategies

Teaching, like learning, benefits from being experiential. This means testing out teaching strategies and embracing feedback on our teaching performance. To build the capacity of our faculty in the field of teaching and learning, we are exploring an exciting workshop model that is highly experiential and grounded in rich reflection. At the Mount, we recently adopted the Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW), which is an experiential peer-to-peer teaching development opportunity. In this report, we would like to briefly reflect on the successes and challenges of our first iteration of this workshop in August 2018. We will share how this experience has impacted our faculty and what its implications could be for implementation across Atlantic Canada.

What is ISW? What role does it play in Atlantic Canada?

The Instructional Skills Workshop is an instructor development program that is grounded in peer feedback and reflection. According to the ISW program description "the underlying principles of the workshop include: participatory learning, diversity of learning, adult learning, and the building of community that can be utilized in classrooms and institutions" (ISW International Advisory Committee 2017, p. 5). The program is usually run over three or four days, and takes the format of mini-lesson cycles and theme sessions. The workshop begins with an overview of the format and some initial sessions on creating learning outcomes and lesson planning. With those two skills in mind, participants then plan their first of three mini-lessons. Beginning on the second day, the participants go through

mini-lesson cycles that emphasize multiple modes of feedback. As illustrated in figure 1, the mini-lesson cycle involves set-up for the lesson, delivery of the lesson, written feedback from the participants and verbal feedback from the facilitator, as well as verbal feedback from the group facilitated by the facilitator.
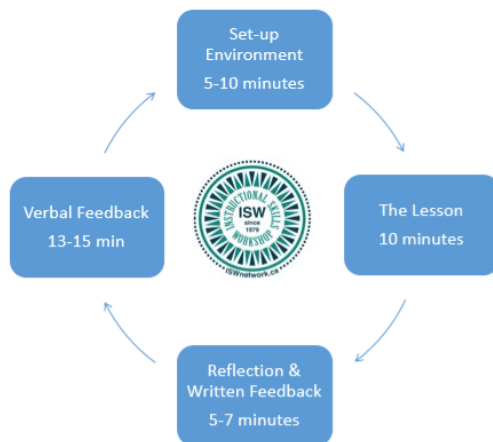

Figure 1. ISW Mini-Lesson Cycle

Perhaps the most effective feature of this workshop is its experiential nature. Fenrich and Johnson (2016) describe that: "The learner has a real teaching experience and then learns from that experience through self-reflection, making conclusions based on the received feedback, and then planning for the next teaching experience based on what was learned" (p. 12). The trained facilitators demonstrate the fundamentals but, primarily, the real core of the program is participant-led. Participants are brought onto an even plane because they are all equally responsible for moving through the positions of instructor, learner, giver, and receiver of feedback. By moving through all of these positions over the course of a day, the participants quickly build trust and vulnerability that help them become more open and receptive to improving their teaching performance.

Our adoption of the ISW works in tandem with a larger project to establish this internationally-recognized workshop in Atlantic Canada. ISW was originally developed in British Columbia in 1979 and it is currently delivered worldwide in dozens of countries (ISW Network, 2019). It is a program that is widespread across much of Western Canada but is still burgeoning in Atlantic Canada. Thanks to the joint initiative of Dalhousie University's Centre for Learning and Teaching and Saint Mary's University's Studio for Teaching and Learning, various educational development professionals across Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada are receiving training (O'Brien & Kay, 2017). In order to make the ISW network thrive in Atlantic Canada we needed to reach a critical mass of trained facilitators in the province. We have built a strong, local Halifax network that includes trained facilitators at Dal, SMU, MSVU, NSCAD and NSCC. Thanks to this joint initiative, we received Facilitator Training in May 2018 and were able to bring this expertise to our positions at Mount Saint Vincent University. We were the first facilitators to offer a workshop upon completing the facilitator training in May. One of our primary motivations in offering this report is to share our findings with our local Atlantic community so that we can better support the growth of the ISW network in our region. We want to able to share best practices with faculty and facilitators at other institutions who are also beginning to deliver these workshops. We know that trial and error is a part of the teaching experience and we want to use the pilot as a jumping-off point to create a richer dialogue about teaching through experiential learning both at the Mount and across Atlantic Canada.

Our Pilot

Perhaps the largest challenge with a non-mandatory faculty development program is recruiting participants and finding the right time to offer the program. We targeted new faculty in our promotions as well as used our existing network of teaching and learning advocates within the Mount to find participants. We also considered strategic breaks in our faculty's teaching schedules. We identified the last week of August as the best possible time in the teaching calendar, as faculty are thinking about the fall term and are gearing up for their next round of classes.

In the end, we kept our pilot small to ensure our pacing was appropriate. We recruited six participants from six different departments. Their experience with teaching varied from little experience to more than twenty years of experience. We had a mix of part-time and full-time instructors. We chose to run a three-and-a-half-day workshop in a face-to-face format that we supplemented with a rich resource site on our learning management system. The online resource site provided additional resources on each of the theme sessions we offered, as well as provided material for theme sessions we did not have time for in the workshop. Our hope is to continue to build the site as we expand the community over multiple deliveries of the workshop.

Successes & Challenges

Perhaps the biggest success of the program was its universal support from the participants. They became our best advocates and established some new connections within the Mount community. Relationship building, both across disciplines and department boundaries and with our own Teaching and Learning Centre, was the absolute best outcome of the workshop.

We also found the decision to provide the participants with choice worked to our advantage. On the first day, the participants selected the topics they wanted to cover in the theme sessions. This meant that the workshop became tailor-made to the needs of the group. They were able to focus on their teaching challenges, including facilitating discussion, creating an inclusive classroom and reflective practice, while also identifying additional areas for future workshops such as increasing motivation and incorporating technology.

The biggest challenge of the workshop was the time commitment from the faculty. Three and a half days is a lot of time, and if that synchronous meeting time could have been reduced, we could have attracted more participants. We feel that if we blended the learning in future sessions, bringing in more opportunities for online learning, we may have better recruitment numbers. Recruitment, ultimately, will be the largest challenge going forward. While there is interest at the Mount in attending workshops of this nature, it is difficult to find an appealing time, and attrition can be high in the days and weeks leading up to the beginning of the program.

Recommendations for Future ISW Implementations

Given that Halifax now has its own network of facilitators, our biggest strength is in our ability to share resources and participants across the network. Therefore, we recommend that going forward we bring together faculty from multiple institutions to attend the workshop and share the load across our institutions. Though this comes with its own complexities, Dalhousie and Saint Mary's have shown us that it is possible. We hope to build upon this network going forward and to give opportunities to facilitators even if they do not currently have scheduled offerings at their own institutions. We are operating under the ideal that if we build it, faculty will come!

Second, we recommend that online and blended learning continue to be explored as a delivery option for the workshop. Given the intensive time commitment, if part of the workshop can be delivered asynchronously, then it reduces the face-to-face time. However, we would not want to lose out on the rich community building that happens in those meetings. In order to strike a balance, it will be useful to explore some flipped modules in future offerings.

The ISW is a rich opportunity for faculty development that is faculty-focused and grounded in experiential learning. It is a transformative learning experience and we look forward to continuing to support its delivery across Atlantic Canada in the years to come.

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