

TEACHING

Want to Help Professors Become Better Teachers? Find Them a Mentor

By Beth McMurtrie | JUNE 28, 2018



Justine Schluntz

Justine Schluntz, a lecturer at the U. of Arizona, poses with her "Intro to Engineering" section.

As a lecturer in aerospace and mechanical engineering at the University of Arizona, Justine Schluntz takes pride in her commitment to teaching. So when the university began inviting instructors to use its new collaborative learning spaces, she decided it was a great chance to move away from the traditional lecture format toward active learning. But she was also nervous about trying a form of teaching that was unfamiliar to her.

For help, she turned to Kasi Kiehlbaugh. The professor of civil and environmental engineering had been involved with faculty learning communities on campus and was familiar with active-learning techniques.

"The week before the summer course started we sat down and she said, Tell me what you're going to do," Schluntz recalls. Her plan, as she told Kiehlbaugh, was to go over the syllabus on the first day of class and give students the highlights.

Kiehlbaugh encouraged her instead to get her students involved early by having them take charge, first by reading the syllabus themselves, then telling her what they thought was important. "It was such a small thing," Schluntz says, "but it completely changed how I thought about teaching that class."

Want More Insights on Teaching?

Sign up to receive *The Chronicle's* new newsletter, focused on teaching and learning. You'll get ideas, news, and resources delivered to your inbox once a week. And check out the rest of our teaching coverage [here](#).

Sign Up Now

The value of faculty mentorship to young instructors and researchers has long been known. But it may not occur very often: According to one survey, only about one in four undergraduate-teaching faculty members mentor others "to a great extent." Typically, mentors help their less experienced peers do things like learn how to navigate campus hierarchies, plan their careers, or map out research agendas.

But mentorship can also help improve teaching. As professors, including seasoned faculty members, explore new ways of teaching in online and active-learning classrooms, they too find that having a strong mentor is critical to their success. Instructional designers may be great at helping redesign a curriculum. And academic technologists are key to understanding new technologies. But for day-to-day teaching challenges, nothing beats an ally who has been there, done that.

Some campuses include a formal mentoring component in their training programs. At Muhlenberg College, a semester-long training program for professors who want to teach online comes with a group of faculty digital fellows to guide them. In its training program for online course development, the University of Central Florida taps the expertise of experienced faculty members so they can share their stories and offer advice.

In other cases the mentorship occurs through serendipity, arises as part of a collaboration, or happens informally when senior professors make a point of reaching out to young faculty members.

Those kinds of ties are critical to people like her, Schluntz says. When she wanted to figure out how to use technology in her classes, for example, she jumped at the opportunity to co-teach a course with a tech-savvy chemical-engineering professor, Paul Blowers. Watching him incorporate clickers, iPads, and videotaped lectures gave her ideas for her own teaching. He was also a big advocate for collaborative learning spaces.

"I would have never switched to the collaborative learning spaces if I didn't have Kasi and Paul's guidance from the beginning," she says. "Frankly, it's a vulnerability of putting yourself in a situation of the unknown. I wouldn't have had the nerve to do it."

Mentors for Online Teaching

Faculty members new to teaching online often have those same feelings. So when Muhlenberg, a small liberal-arts college in Pennsylvania, developed a training program for faculty members to create online versions of their courses, it added a mentorship component. Every semester, five faculty digital fellows, all of whom have taught online, commit to helping their colleagues who are new to the experience. And they remain available once the courses go live.

Lora Taub-Pervizpour, a professor of media and communication and associate dean for digital learning, says that because Muhlenberg's online courses are intentionally small and specifically designed for its students, professors often worry about how to replicate the sense of community they would find in a face-to-face class. Their colleagues can share their experience with eliciting intellectually engaging discussion-board posts, or how they make sure all students contribute.

"Technical expertise is the least important thing here," she says. "Our digital fellows are not outstanding mentors because of their expertise with digital tools. They are outstanding mentors because they have been really intentional about the design of online learning experiences."

So far 27 faculty members have been through the training, says Taub-Pervizpour, developing 20 courses online. Each digital fellow receives \$1,000 for his or her time. (Faculty members who participate in the training get \$3,500.)

Some institutions might find it hard to create a formal mentoring program. But there are still ways, says Flower Darby, that faculty members can learn from one another. One possibility: encouraging faculty members to sit through the kind of course they hope to teach.

Darby, a senior instructional designer at Northern Arizona University, recalls her first experience with online teaching about a decade ago. Before she'd taught her first digital course she observed a colleague's class. "All I did was lurk in class," she said. "I didn't talk to the faculty member about her approach."

Darby noticed how the professor created immediate connections with her online students by letting her personality come through in her communications. She shared information about herself, used positive emoticons, was encouraging, and sent regular messages to her students.

It's a lesson that stayed with Darby and influences how she teaches others to teach online. "New online faculty tend to think of it like a slow cooker: Set it and forget it," she says. They may not even respond to discussion-board posts. Yet, Darby notes, "if you told students to discuss something and then walked out of the classroom, how demotivating would that be?"

As Schluntz's and Darby's experiences demonstrate, watching a senior faculty member teaching with techniques new to you — in an active classroom, with technology, or fully online — can be immensely valuable. Darby says that the opportunity can be a simple one to grab. Just ask your department chair if there's a class you can sit in on. Typically, other faculty members are happy to help.

She also thinks mentorship solves some of the problems that teaching specialists like her face: Many faculty members don't like workshops or other formal training. "We know what works is to have a coach or mentor walk the journey with you," she says. "That sustained model, that's what we need to work toward."

Beth McMurtrie writes about technology's influence on teaching and the future of learning. Follow her on Twitter @bethmcmurtrie, or email her at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037