Guidance for FLC Facilitators: Cultivating a Thriving Community of Learners

A Faculty Learning Community (FLC) offers a structured and supportive space for instructors to engage in sustained inquiry about teaching. The ultimate goal is to create an environment where education is not merely formative, but truly **transformative**—opening new ways of being and thinking for its members.

Your role as a facilitator is distinct from that of a traditional chairperson or content expert. You are a **process guide, not a content expert**; a **"co-learner"** whose primary function is to guide discussion, provide structure, and help the group achieve its goals.

Foundational Practices for Success

Your success rests on intentionally fostering a specific kind of environment.

- **Architect a Safe and Collaborative Climate**: Your first task is to create the conditions for a thriving community. This means actively cultivating an atmosphere of safety, trust, openness, respect, and collaboration. This climate is the foundation that allows for the intellectual risk-taking and genuine inquiry necessary for growth.

- **Establish Co-Created Goals**: While the FLC has a guiding topic, the first session should be dedicated to collaboratively setting specific goals and group norms. This shared ownership is critical for engagement and counters the "insistent individualism" common in academic life.

- **Catalyze Tangible Outcomes**: A facilitator helps bridge theory to practice. FLCs should lead to tangible results, whether it's the implementation of a new teaching strategy, the redesign of a course, or a collaborative scholarly project. Your role is to keep the group focused on these outcomes and maintain forward momentum.

Laying the Groundwork: The First Sessions

The initial meetings are where you begin to architect the community climate.

- **Break the Ice:** Start the first meeting with a structured activity to begin building trust and safety. A simple, topical prompt—such as asking members to share how they became interested in the FLC's focus—can be highly effective.

- **Establish Group Norms** Guide a discussion to surface mutual expectations about how the group will operate. Topics might include confidentiality, how to handle disagreements, and shared responsibilities. This process of co-creating norms is a powerful step in building group cohesion.

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Structuring a Productive Meeting

A consistent structure respects faculty time and fosters deep engagement. This four-phase model is highly effective for a 90-minute session:

1. **Phase 1: Check-In (10–15 min)**: Build community with a structured question, like sharing a recent teaching success or challenge.

2. **Phase 2: Engage with Content (40–50 min)**: Use active learning strategies—such as structured protocols, case studies, or peer feedback—to foster equitable participation and avoid lectures.

3. **Phase 3: Application & Action Planning (20–25 min)**: To catalyze tangible outcomes, end the main discussion by having members commit to a small, specific action to try before the next meeting.

4. **Phase 4: Wrap-Up (5 min)**: Consolidate learning by summarizing key takeaways and confirming the next steps.

Navigating Group Dynamics and Dialogue

FLCs evolve through predictable stages, and challenges like conflict or low energy ("storming") are a normal part of the process. Your most skillful work is in managing these dynamics and the quality of the group's conversation.

Your goal is the **skilled management of dialogue**. This involves:

- **Ensuring balanced participation**, actively encouraging quieter members to contribute their voices.

- **Fostering "constructive controversy,"** where differing ideas are explored respectfully to deepen inquiry, while actively managing disruptive or destructive conflict.

- **Using specific techniques** to promote understanding, such as asking members to check their assumptions or explain the reasoning behind their views.

By guiding the process of conversation, you help the group build the capacity for deep, collaborative learning. This work, though challenging, helps weave the "rich tapestry of community and learning" that successful FLCs can achieve.

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Annotated Bibliography

This guide was developed based on key insights from the following scholarly sources.

Cox, M. D. (2013). The faculty learning community (FLC) program: A name and a history. *Learning Communities Journal,* **5**(1), 5–26.

This foundational article provides a historical overview of the FLC model, detailing the ten key characteristics essential for success (e.g., safety, respect). It frames the facilitator's primary role as intentionally cultivating these characteristics.

Ortquist-Ahrens, L., & Torosyan, R. (2009). The role of the facilitator in faculty learning communities: Paving the way for growth, productivity, and collegiality. *Learning Communities Journal,* **1**(1), 29–62.

This article explores the unique ethos of FLC facilitation, emphasizing the dual responsibilities of managing both **Task** (intellectual work) and **Process** (interpersonal dynamics). It offers in-depth guidance on navigating group stages and conflict.

Richlin, L., & Cox, M. D. (2004). Developing scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning through faculty learning communities. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2004*(97), 57–67.

Focusing on productive outcomes, this article highlights the facilitator's role as a catalyst who guides participants from discussion to tangible scholarly work, such as Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) projects.

Servage, L. (2008). Critical and transformative practices in professional learning communities. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 35*(1), 63–77.

This source offers a critical perspective, arguing that facilitators have a responsibility to steer the community beyond "tips and tricks" toward deep, transformative reflection by posing challenging questions and creating a safe space for vulnerability.

Shadiow, L. K. (2011). What are they talking about? FLCs and the facilitator's role in managing talk. *Learning Communities Journal, 3*(1), 77–92.

This article zeroes in on the critical skill of managing group dialogue. It argues that the quality of conversation determines an FLC's success and highlights the facilitator's role in ensuring discussions are focused, inclusive, and analytical.