Align And Refine: Using The Taxonomy Of Significant Learning To Plan For FYS Faculty Development

By: **Martha McCaughey, Lillian Nave, Tracy W. Smith,** & **Kelly C. Rhodes**

Abstract

Our faculty development (FD) work applies Dee Fink's (2013) integrated course design model. In this article, we describe the situational factors related to supporting faculty who teach a required, academically-focused First Year Seminar course at a large public university. We then describe how we designed a suite of FD opportunities with goals that directly responded to those situational factors. Finally, we offer a process for designing FD initiatives that can work for other programs even when their situational factors and goals are different.

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Our faculty development (FD) work applies Dee Fink's (2013) integrated course design model. In this article, we describe the situational factors related to supporting faculty who teach a required, academically-focused First Year Seminar course at a large public university. We then describe how we designed a suite of FD opportunities with goals that directly responded to those situational factors. Finally, we offer a process for designing FD initiatives that can work for other programs even when their situational factors and goals are different.

DEE FINK'S INTEGRATED COURSE design model influenced the design of our First Year Seminar (FYS) faculty development (FD) efforts. Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning and Model of Integrated Learning (2013) have been used widely in many institutions around the world to guide faculty in developing college courses that are responsive to the needs of students as well as the situational factors of the program and/or institution. The model of professional development described here is further grounded in experiential learning theory (Boud & Walker, 1991; Dewey, 1938; Fenwick, 2001, 2003; Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin, 2003; Knowles, 1984; Kolb, 1984; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1987), constructivism (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978), problem-based learning (Schwartz, Mennin, & Webb, 2001), and andragogy (Brookfield, 2006; Knowles, 1980, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Merriam & Clark, 2006).

Fink's Model of Integrated Course Design (2013) emphasizes that all careful designs for significant learning begin with an analysis of the situational factors of the teaching and learning situation. Further, the model acknowledges the recursiveness and interrelatedness of the following elements for promoting significant learning: situational factors, learning goals, feedback and assessment, and teaching and learning activities. We interpreted the situational factors so that our "learners" are FYS faculty. To model integrated course design and the alignment of outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessments, our group of FD providers used a modified version of Fink's model for creating significant learning experiences for students as a model for planning, implementing, and assessing an ongoing FD model for FYS instructors.

Situational Factors of First Year Seminar at Appalachian State

General context. Although some FYS courses on other campuses focus on student success strategies, offer an extension of orientation, and/or use student peer leaders, our FYS courses focus on a specific scholarly topic (that varies by course section) and meet a set of common academic goals that emphasize information literacy, effective communication, and critical and creative thinking. The academic focus of our FYS course is in keeping with Kuh's (2008) work on high-impact practices, which notes that "the highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies" (p. 9). It is also in keeping with our own state university system's definition of student success as including "the development of competencies — critical and creative thinking, lifelong learning, technological mastery, resilience, effective communication, flexibility, and collaboration, among others — for meaningful engagement in 21st-century life" ("Higher Expectations," 2017, para. 53).

Specific context. FYS on our campus is a required, three-credit academic course that is part of the University's General Education curriculum. All incoming first-year undergraduate students (except for transfer students who come in as sophomores or higher) must take FYS. The vast majority of our students are traditional full-time students who have just completed high school and who live on campus. FYS sections meet face-to-face and are kept to a maximum enrollment of 22 students each, which on a campus of our size translates to running 150+ sections per year taught by approximately 65 different instructors.

Characteristics of the "learners." The instructors teaching FYS include tenured and full-time non-tenure-track faculty members who have traditional departmental homes on campus, full-time non-tenure track lecturers whose duties are in FYS exclusively, and part-time adjunct faculty members who teach nowhere else on campus. Some of those adjunct instructors work as full-time staff on campus and teach a FYS course after hours, while others have no other employment on the campus outside of their adjunct instructor position in FYS. All have taught college courses before, and all go through a course proposal process and consultation with the FYS Director before teaching their FYS course.

Nature of the subject. Training the faculty in the goals of our FYS is an ongoing challenge due to regular turnover in instructors, some of whom have taught at other institutions that had a different model for FYS. Because FYS is a campus-wide program rather than a single academic departmental unit, FYS instructors are scattered in offices and classrooms across the campus. Physical distance compounds the challenge of bringing instructors together, nurturing their connections as members of a faculty, helping them feel valued for the important work they do teaching FYS, and encouraging them to recognize each other as valuable resources for ideas and support.

Characteristics of the facilitators. Our FYS Program is directed by a tenured faculty member (McCaughey) with 50% release time to administer the program. Our Center for Academic Excellence offered a release from teaching to a full-time FYS faculty member (Nave) for FD efforts in the unit. Further, our budget allowed for paying a faculty expert (Smith) to help plan and run the immersive FD retreats. Finally, our University Libraries Coordinator of Information Literacy (Rhodes) collaborates with FYS by engaging in FD efforts and providing librarians to work with faculty of each FYS section to convey the needs of all FYS students and work with FYS faculty on teaching information literacy skills. Our group draws on our individual personal strengths and characteristics, finding its synergy in serious playfulness.

Special pedagogical challenges. Despite our explicit academic purpose, many campus programs outside FYS striving to meet students' needs for well-being, development of study skills, and success overall have sought ways to become part of FYS courses. We thus have to acquaint these groups, and all new and potential FYS instructors, not only with the specific mission and goals of FYS but also with the legitimacy of FYS faculty as the ultimate trustees of the course.

To address the situational factors, we developed faculty learning goals based on Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning, worked as a team to develop a variety of FD activities aligned to the goals, and created assessments that ask participants to provide evidence that they had met the various goals. Table 1 outlines our FD design; however, we continue to refine and adjust our goals, activities, and assessments as the situational factors change over time.

We offer multiple FD entry points and model teaching and learning methods we want faculty to experience and adopt in their practice. For example, we offer overnight retreats in which faculty connect with each other, learn more about FYS goals, and workshop specific assignment (re)designs. At these retreats, we engage in small group activities, formative assessment, peer review, role-playing, gamified learning, gallery walks, team-building activities, multimedia presentations, and text-focused seminars. We use these strategies to introduce readings and examples of contemporary, research-based models of learning. These immersive retreats are further characterized by community-building activities such as singing, storytelling, dancing, playing games, and sharing meals. We have used humor, creativity, playfulness, and an "invitational" style (see Smith, 2018) in our approach to FD.

As facilitators, we research models and frameworks and curate resources to bring to the

FYS faculty. Currently, we are involved in sharing information and resources about Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Information Literacy (IL) competencies, and Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (TILT), for example. UDL is a set of neuroscience-based guidelines that encompass the affective, recognition, and strategic networks of the brain to provide multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression to increase learning ("Universal Design," 2018). Once faculty have learned about UDL, they are better able to design experiences and assignments that foster accessible, equitable learning environments.

The core competencies of IL outline a "set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, understanding of how information is produced and valued, and how information can be used in creating new knowledge, and participating ethically in communities of learning" ("Framework for Information Literacy," 2018, p. 3). Since developing students' research skills is a central component of FYS, we provide multiple opportunities for faculty to develop and/or redesign scaffolded research assignments that address how students find and use information in today's digital environment.

TILT is an easily replicable teaching intervention that enhances the success of first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented college students (Winkelmes, 2013). Transparent design accommodates learner variability and provides a template that helps instructors clarify the purpose, task, and criteria for success so that teachers and learners are clear about expectations. During the immersive retreat, we guide faculty to redesign at least one assignment or activity using the transparency framework.

We facilitate ongoing support in the form of short workshops, peer reviews of teaching, a syllabus checklist, a FYS Faculty Facebook discussion group, and informal FYS faculty lunch discussions. To champion and model transparency in course design, we provide syllabus and course calendar templates that model how to align activities and assessments with course goals. For instructors who have trouble meeting synchronously, we offer access to online professional development webinars and post resources on our website. Table 1 outlines our initiatives and their alignment with our goals.

Reflections and Next Steps

Our multi-pronged approach to FD in FYS is intended to increase instructors' sense of connectedness and professionalism while building their capacity to teach FYS using research-based models of

Table 1. Alignment of FYS Faculty Development Goals, Activities, and Evidence

Goals Using Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning	Examples of Teaching and Learning/Faculty Development Activities	Examples of Evidence
Learning How to Learn		
How to be a more effective FYS instructor: Learn how to engage with FYS FD offerings including online and face-to-face (f2f) resources that provide ongoing support.	**Face-to-face** • Immersive Retreats • Lunch discussions • Short workshops • Peer reviews • Consultations **Online** • Facebook group • Resources on website • Professional development seminars	• Participation records • Website data analytics • Written peer reviews • Participant evaluations • Redesigned assignments submitted for review
Caring		
Desire to design engaging teaching and learning experiences that fulfill the promise of FYS as a high impact practice.	• Model engaging, inclusive communities. • Invite discussion about current issues in teaching via the Facebook group. • Share research on best practices. • Interactive activities during workshops, retreats, etc.	• Increased participation in breadth and depth of offerings • Instructors offer workshops • Participants seeking support, offering resources in lunches, Facebook group • Depth of face-to-face and online discussions • Participation in FYS proposal review/ search committees

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Human Dimension		
Professionalism: Learn how to participate in and contribute to a campus community of practice.	• Provide many various opportunities for participation in online and f2f communities. • Engage in team-building activities. • Role-play how to facilitate difficult dialogues. • Create FYS faculty podcasts.	• Reflective discussions on what it means to teach today's students • Professional presentations and publications on and off campus • Stories of instructors using team-building and role-playing activities in courses
Integration		
Interdisciplinary and [transferrable] learning: Connect to campus FD resources (e.g., Center for Teaching and Learning, university libraries, civic engagement office, writing center)	• Include campus partners as planners and participants in FD offerings. • Provide videos about co-curricular resources (e.g., career development, wellness).	• Record of instructor interactions with their library liaison • Record of faculty participation in FD offerings from various units • Stories of instructors assigning videos
Apply teaching and learning frameworks and principles (e.g., UDL, transparent design) to individual class meetings and assignment planning.	• Provide readings, explicit instruction, guided practice, independent practice, and feedback on transparent assignment and activity design. • Present content about UDL along with resources including many examples of means of engagement, representation, and assessment.	• Assignments that incorporate UDL, IL competencies, and transparent design principles • Peer reviews that indicate that student expectations are clearly articulated in syllabi • Lesson plans that incorporate UDL, transparent design, and other techniques in their non-FYS courses
Application		
Teaching and learning: Design teaching and learning experiences that explicitly incorporate the FYS learning goals (e.g., critical and creative thinking, effective communication, information literacy, intercultural competence).	• Introduce FYS learning goals through retreat readings, activities, video, and online resources. • Provide syllabus and course calendar templates that guide faculty to align course activities and assignments to FYS goals. • Plan immersive retreats on a cycle that emphasizes different FYS goals each year.	• Syllabi that show alignment of assignments and learning activities with FYS goals • Dialogue in lunch and Facebook discussions that include faculty interactions about integrating FYS goals into course • Assignments and syllabi that articulate IL competencies
Teaching and learning: Use (or apply) transparent assignment design to clearly state the purpose, task, and criteria for success.	• Incorporate explicit teaching of transparent assignment design in immersive retreat, including its research base; models of assignments; analysis of assignments and rubrics. • Create and perform songs about transparent design, "How Will I Know (that They Really Learned it)?" and "Mention that Intention." • Share samples of transparent activity design for the activities done at immersive retreat. • Share models of revised assignments within FYS.	• Assignments and activities that clearly articulate purpose, task, and criteria for success • Instructor requests for sample transparent design assignments • Instructor reports of increased student clarity about expectations
Foundational Knowledge		
Conceptual understanding: Understand the major concepts associated with, and reasons for teaching, the FYS learning goals.	• Provide guided practice using rubrics aligned to FYS learning goals at retreat. • Close reading activity on the General Education Mission Statement. • Use of games and activities to explain the foundation of FYS goals and concepts. • Consultations with library liaisons on IL online module.	• Facilitators' observations of instructor depth of engagement with concepts • Discussion map from text-based seminar with transcript of participant comments • Course calendars that accurately map learning goals to assignments and activities • Assignment design that reflects understanding of four key competencies of IL

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Conceptual understanding: Understand the varied and situated learning needs of today's college student.	• Introduce and integrate research-based frameworks during consultations, on website, in workshops, and at retreats. • Teach UDL model during immersive retreat and UDL workshops • Distribute podcast on UDL.	• Peer reviews indicate incorporation of UDL principles in course design • Dialogue in faculty lunch and online discussions include strategies for offering multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression
Teaching and learning: Understand that alignment among learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment optimizes student learning.	• Provide explicit instruction on course design models and templates that align outcomes, activities, and assessment (e.g., transparent assignment design, Fink's Integrated Learning Model). • Provide opportunities for guided practice, consultations, and peer review during and following retreats.	• Syllabi that include learning activities and assignments mapped to goals • Course assignments that show alignment among purpose, task, and criteria for student success • Peer reviews that indicate classroom activities support stated learning outcomes

learning. As situational factors continue to evolve, so too must our FD efforts evolve. For example, when the University made global learning the focus of its Quality Enhancement Plan, FYS courses incorporated global learning. Also, the makeup of the FYS faculty continually changes.

In addition, while some instructors did not eagerly participate in FD, many saw themselves as benefitting from the activities or even as complying with a basic expectation. As professionalization and accountability increased through our FD efforts, a few instructors simply opted out of teaching FYS altogether. Others went through FD only to leave FYS for other positions, necessitating the hiring of new people who need FD. For these reasons, we must provide entry-level support as well as opportunities for advanced professional development.

Ongoing FD is a constant process of (re) evaluating our situational factors and adjusting. For example, many instructors expressed regret that they were not available to attend a FD webinar we scheduled to watch together on campus. In response, we invested in asynchronous FD webinars; however, few instructors viewed any. It thus became clear that part of the appeal of our offerings was the camaraderie found in our in-person events.

We also found that some faculty either skipped events or attended but were distracted by their devices during instruction time. Facing the same challenges to motivate and engage faculty that instructors face with their students, we modeled ways to get students engaged, incorporating strategies to reinforce commitment. For example, we held our retreat at a location with no Internet connection, wrote and performed the parody song "50 Ways to Leave Your Smart Phone," and established group norms at the start of the retreat.

As we continue planning a variety of FD events with entry-level access points, we also have a critical mass of faculty who are primed to engage in more advanced FD. For example, having articulated clear "criteria for success" on assignments during an immersive retreat, these instructors are prepared to analyze assignment outcomes to determine how their students performed on specific criteria and make adjustments to teaching, course explanations, and exemplars to work toward continuous improvement. Going forward, we need to gather and analyze data on the learning outcomes of students whose instructors have participated in FD to correlate instructor quality and student performance.

Though we are fortunate to have resources such as faculty lines, dedicated FD professionals, release time for a faculty director, and collaboration with librarians, we are also challenged by instructor turnover, a lack of instructor proximity, and disparate understandings of the institutional purpose of FYS. In sharing our experience, we hope other FD planners might be able to reference Fink's integrated course design model to identify and design opportunities for FD initiatives that are reflective of situational factors and institutional differences.

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