



CAMPUS CASE STUDY • SIDEBAR 3.3

Reflective Practice Groups

Faculty at Monroe Community College (MCC) are harnessing the power of reflection to help them deepen their professional learning and improve their practice. With support from the campus professional learning hub, they engage in Reflective Practice Groups, a structured process that unfolds over the course of a semester.

MCC's Teaching & Creativity Center is collaboratively led by a full-time administrator, faculty on partial reassigned time from teaching, and faculty advisory boards on each of the college's two campuses. The Teaching & Creativity Center (TCC) first developed a positive campus reputation through its New Faculty Orientation, a seminar that meets monthly in two-year cycles. Participants expressed an eagerness to engage in other cohort-based professional learning after their orientation experience concluded; more senior faculty also indicated interest in opportunities that would go beyond workshops and brown bags.

The TCC leadership group gathered faculty input and learned that an MCC faculty colleague had once been trained to facilitate Reflective Practice Groups (RPGs).⁴⁰ This variant of Faculty Learning Communities uses structured protocols to guide discussion of pressing problems of practice in an equity focused environment. The protocols foster high-impact professional learning as they “offer structured processes to support focused and productive conversations, build collective understanding, and drive school improvement.”⁴¹ The TCC seized the opportunity to offer RPGs as one option on a “menu” of cohort-based professional learning experiences.

A small group of educators participated in a week-long training to learn how to design and facilitate RPGs. The TCC then began offering a few groups each semester. This option has grown in popularity with increasing numbers of full-time and adjunct faculty participating and learning how to facilitate sessions. RPG members are accountable to each other, pushing each other to be more equity focused in their work, and supporting each other as they strengthen their classroom practice.

Meetings typically involve group members bringing pieces of work that are meaningful to them; this could be a dilemma, a lesson plan, student work that was confusing or surprising, or data from one's class. The group then focuses on their colleague's goals. In examining an artifact from a colleague's classroom practice, the group might ask, What aspects of this are worth keeping because they are supporting your goal? What are the pieces that are not useful? What are the ways this could be improved?

This process is revelatory for educators. It strengthens their use of the iterative process of inquiry and reflection, helping them regularly pause, reflect on something they have tried, and improve on their teaching. Working as a group, faculty note, empowers more meaningful progress than could be made individually. “A lot of times people feel like this is the place where they go and they are heard,” said Gena Merliss, Coordinator of MCC's Teaching & Creativity Center. That feeling of being heard enables faculty to embrace the tension they might experience around being vulnerable with colleagues.

Pausing, taking time to reflect, asking questions rather than just solving problems—these are essential group facilitation techniques that participants do not necessarily anticipate learning when they sign up for a new professional development opportunity. But RPG participants quickly find that this experience provides significant opportunities to learn and practice these skills. Before long they are applying them to their other commitments at the college, bringing a new lens to committee work and department meetings.

The TCC has experimented with different compositions for RPGs, at times offering one or more groups specifically for adjunct faculty and an RPG that brings together MCC faculty with educators from local high schools and nearby four-year colleges and universities. Most recently, they have also reached new groups of colleagues through virtual RPGs. Each semester, one RPG is designed to bring together facilitators of all the other RPGs. This creates an opportunity to process and debrief experiences from each group and to support continuous learning for everyone involved.

40 Visit the School Reform Initiative website for more information about Reflective Practice Group design, facilitation, and protocols: <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org>

41 *School Reform Initiative protocols*: <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols>

In Sidebar 4.1 we discuss the NIOA Assignment Design Charrette, which can be thought of in a vein similar to these protocols.