IDC Proposal:

Faculty Inquiry Groups (FIGs) Focused on the Success of Transitional Studies Students

Proposal Submitted by:

________________________________
Dr. Annie J. Gray
Associate Professor of English
March 30, 2009

Proposal Approved by:

________________________________
Dr. Mary Monroe-Ellis
Dean, Transitional Studies Department
Faculty Inquiry Groups (FIGs)  
Focused on the Success of Transitional Studies Students

I. Project Overview

A. The Problem.

It is understood among community college faculty that training in how to teach college courses is not a mandatory requirement of the job. As higher education faculty, we are subject experts, and it is assumed that, due to our intensive study in our fields, we can successfully navigate our own classrooms. However, the reality of teaching community college courses can be quite demanding, something that stretches us beyond subject matter expertise and asks us to take a deeper look at how we do what we do as teachers. It can be argued that nowhere is this stretch of our abilities more evident than when teaching our remedial/developmental (r&d) students.

Transitional Studies faculty--full-time and adjunct--often find themselves teaching students with heavy cognitive and affective deficits. We do our best to teach r&d students despite semesters of disappointingly high attrition rates; classrooms packed with frustrating, problem-plagued students; and off-hours at home with briefcases laden with heavy grading. With that said, those of us who teach Transitional Studies courses each semester understand that working with r&d students can be the most rewarding aspect of our academic year.

But it is important for us to see our work in Transitional Studies for what it is. The tendency is for us to teach our courses, do our assigned duties, and go home exhausted—and, yes, on some days, even fulfilled that we have made a difference. But before we know it, the academic year has passed. It often has been a year of much activity but little time for reflection. If we do reflect, it is likely with faculty of the same status (full-time or adjunct) as ourselves in hurried moments between classes and departmental duties. Full-time faculty members do not habitually engage in regular opportunities to reflect on the work they do with adjunct faculty or even one another, despite being in the same field. There is simply too little time and few dedicated occasions to do so.

Then there is the nature of our individual efforts in professional development—opportunities we take to fill our tool-boxes with additional skills intended to improve our practices. Every so often, we engage in these professional development activities in the form of one-hour in-service workshops or the occasional conference squeezed between classes to hear a speaker in our field of interest. We often sit beside our colleagues in rapt interest, but once the event is over, we rush back to our classrooms to get back to business as usual. If the event was particularly meaningful, it is often the case that these “one-shot” opportunities for faculty interaction and professional development are soon forgotten or too hard to put into actual practice in one’s own classroom (Erklenz-Watts, Westbay, & Lynd-Balta, 2006).
Research has shown that faculty risk becoming burned out due to lack of support, lack of fresh ideas, and sheer isolation (Erklenz-Watts, et al). This is a situation that can be avoided with the right preventative medicine. Since the split of Transitional Studies from the rest of the college curriculum, PSTCC faculty members have a renewed opportunity to work together toward the success of our r&d students. Because of the challenges inherent to teaching this student population, Transitional Studies faculty need to support one another in meaningful ways as they strive toward their common goals. How can we create that meaning is the question.

It is true that those of us who have been teaching r&d courses for many years have found certain ways of engaging with our students that seem to work for us and for them. It is all too human to find a way of going on together in the classroom that becomes unquestionable—leading to the formation of habits that can blind us to what is really going on. Assumptions can kill a practice. In fact, the numbers indicate that what seems to work for us as faculty may not always be the best for our students. In DSPW, for instance, success rates for writing courses hover around 50% each year. In DSPM, the rates are even lower. It is possible to increase these numbers. The solution lies in becoming reflective and interactive about what it is we do, especially about the assumptions we bring into and let guide our practices.

Now that TBR has asked that we change our approach to our r&d courses, the pressure is on to become highly adaptable to the changing needs of our students. In such an atmosphere, cultivating a reflective practice can be enormously helpful to the effectiveness of our teaching practices and to the success of the Transitional Studies Program as a whole. In particular, reflective practice has been suggested by TBR as an excellent method of program and self-evaluation (TBR, 2007). Most faculty do not have training in methods of individual self-reflection on their teaching practices. Without that training, they do not stand to gain from instruction and participation in collaborative reflection, which has been cited as a highly effective method of professional development (Casey, 1996; Dunbar, 1996; Erklenz-Watts et al., 2006; Ludwig & Taymans, 2005).

There is, however, a way to combine that much-needed training in individual and collaborative reflection. Recent research corroborates the effectiveness of ongoing, faculty inquiry groups, or FIGs, for teachers working with r&d college students (Huber, 2004, 2008; Harper-Marinek, 2004; McKinney, 2007; Savory, Burnett, and Goodburn, 2007; Wilson, 2007). Such support groups, facilitated by a fellow faculty member trained to guide participants in methods of individual and group reflection, bridge the gap between research and practice. Initiated to continue indefinitely as an ongoing, support mechanism for full-time and adjunct faculty of Transitional Studies students, a FIG can:

* create professional communities where educators can share what happens in classrooms
* articulate and negotiate the most important outcomes for student learning
* use the tools of classroom research to understand the experience of students more deeply
* share insights and findings
* examine a wide range of evidence, from examples of student work to campus-level quantitative data tracking patterns of student performance
* invite and offer critical reflection and peer review
* foster collaboration in the design of curriculum, assignments, and assessments
* build trust as an essential component of ongoing improvements
* support professional identity and responsibility among educators.
* choose effective pedagogies for teaching r & d students.

(qtd. in Huber, 2008, p.12)

B. Proposed Approach

I propose to establish ongoing, collaborative faculty inquiry groups (FIGs) for full time and adjunct faculty in Transitional Studies to systematically explore how they may improve their teaching practices. I initially propose three separate FIGs: one each for DSPW, DSPM, and DSPR full time and adjunct faculty. My intention is to meet regularly in an ongoing way with the group I belong to, the DSPW FIG, and also to train interested DSPM and DSPR faculty members in facilitating FIGs of their own. The three FIG groups would be formed by open invitation but proposal funds would be limited to the first 12 faculty members who commit to attending the group regularly. Small group size is vital for group cohesion and comfort with the FIG process. Additional FIG groups can be formed if there are more than 12 interested faculty members per division of Transitional Studies; however, these additional groups will not be part of this proposal funding for 2009/2010.

Groups will be facilitated using the first part of Peters’ (1999; 2002) method of action research, called DATA-DATA. The first DATA stands for several steps of reflection and action one uses to examine one’s teaching practice: Describe, Analyze, Theorize, and Act. As a trained facilitator, I will use a method of dialogical facilitation called Levelising (Peters & Ragland, 2005), designed to help participants unearth and examine the assumptions they have about their own teaching practices, reframe their thoughts about their practice (if necessary), reach a new level of understanding about their practices, and take meaningful action in their practices that translates into greater success for their students.

Each FIG in each Transitional Studies division will meet twice monthly—once on main campus and once on a site campus—to dialogue about members’ individual teaching practices as well as the aims of Transitional Studies as a whole. One explicit goal of a FIG is to help participants pinpoint particular aspects of their own, individual teaching practices they would like to improve. All group members will engage in individual reflection projects as well as support one another as a FIG part of Transitional Studies.

C. Expected Learning Improvements: The primary learning improvement from this activity will be on the part of faculty gaining increased competency in teaching r&d students. Thus, a FIG lends itself to professional development. There are several aspects
to this ongoing professional development. A survey conducted as part of Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC), sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, revealed the following outcomes, processes, goals, and learning improvements for faculty participating in FIGs:

* experimentation with new teaching strategies
* a deepened understanding of student learning
* more confidence about responding to student learning challenges that arise in the classroom
* a re-energizing of teaching
* raised expectations of student learning
* more evidence that student learning has improved
* a change in the kind of assessments used
* a heightened interest in reading research on teaching and learning
* the development of a new network of colleagues
* a better understanding of how to get things done at one’s institution
* a taking on of new leadership roles
* an interest in new opportunities as an institutional member

(Huber, 2008)

Secondary learning improvements from this project will arise from the students whose lives are touched by faculty members participating in an ongoing process of action and reflection on their own teaching practices. As each FIG faculty participant will locate his/her particular areas of interest and research, expected student learning improvement could range from improved individual performance on individual assignments to overall increased student retention and learning in Transitional Studies courses.

II. Additional Project Information

A. Consistency of Project to IDC Purposes: This project will directly support faculty development and implementation of innovative teaching techniques that should lead to improved student learning and retention in Transitional Studies courses. Training opportunities will also encourage interdisciplinary collegiality among different divisions of Transitional Studies.

B. Links to College and Departmental Goals: Engaging in reflective practice emphasizes critical thinking and improves problem-solving skills, links which are consistent with the college’s General Education Goals for 2004-2007. See also TBR comments on the value of reflective practice (2007) in realizing college and departmental program goals.

C. Cost Efficiency Considerations: This project will directly support the participating faculty members to increase the effectiveness of their teaching practices at PSTCC. Faculty trained in how to facilitate FIGs can form FIGs of their own in order to increase the incidence of reflective practice college-wide and within Transitional Studies. These
efforts will create long-term self-sustaining improvements in quality of instruction for our r&d students. As a FIG is an ongoing venture, after initial training of faculty members, the cost efficiency of this project should translate into better performing, better trained full-time and adjunct faculty even more qualified than before the FIG in how to teach Transitional Studies courses thanks to their participation in the FIG. In contrast, sending up to 45 faculty members to weekend-long professional development seminars or teaching and learning conferences would cost thousands more than starting and maintaining FIGs within the Transitional Studies Program.

III. Project Evaluation: This project will be evaluated at the faculty level.

A. Evaluation by Participating Faculty: Twice during the academic year (Fall 2009 and Spring 2010), participating faculty will record their perceptions of their FIG collaborations through a questionnaire using an online tool from SurveyMonkey.com. The questionnaire will be anonymous and confidential and will be based on questions derived from a similar questionnaire used by Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC) to assess California Community College participation in faculty inquiry groups. The questions on the original SPECC assessment were formed in conjunction with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. As facilitator, I will also keep a journal to record my impressions as leader of these FIG groups. The results of the anonymous questionnaire and journal impressions will provide a rich and detailed description of the FIG experience during the 2009-2010 academic year, something that will become part of my final report to IDC. It is possible that in the future, in teamwork with PSTCC’s institutional research professionals, this data will translate into published articles co-authored by FIG members.

B. Evaluation of Student Impact: Since FIG participant research interests will differ, each faculty member will choose how to evaluate the impact of FIG participation on his/her own students’ learning. FIG members will be asked Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 to evaluate student learning resulting from their FIG involvement. One possible method of evaluation could include using a Likert scale survey of student perception or possibly statistical comparisons of test performance between course sections that use innovative, FIG-inspired assignments and those that don’t.

C. Final Report Plan: I will conduct a full report of FIG activities in Spring 2010 as a compilation of Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 FIG data from all three FIG groups; I will submit a final report to the IDC by the end of August 2010. That report will include my analysis of FIG participant perspectives and each participant’s personal evaluation of student improvements.

IV. Project Budget: $5,800 total: $1120 /release time + $1080/books + $3600/ stipend

A. Materials: No special materials for this project are needed other than already existing copying and computing resources.
B Reassigned Time: 2 hours for the lead FIG facilitator: $1120 or (2 hr. x $560/hour)
That time will be used to:

1) Research, copy and disseminate literature related to FIG projects
2) Drive to site campuses to conduct monthly meetings
3) Facilitate DSPW FIG meetings and provide individual support to FIG members
4) Train selected DSPM and DSPR faculty to be FIG leaders of their own groups
5) Conduct participant surveys and personal journal reflections
6) Maintain online communication with FIG members
7) Plan and execute (with other Transitional Studies faculty) 2 Transitional Studies Teaching Innovations Workshops

C. Professional Development/Stipend: As an incentive to regularly attend FIG meetings and to attend trainings in innovative, teaching strategies and classroom management tools, (such as Inspiration Software and VISION Media Console Software), 12 top-attending FIG participants from each of the three FIG groups who attend at least 80% of monthly meetings and attend 1-2 Transitional Studies Teaching Innovations Workshops (one in Fall 2009 and another in Spring 2010) receive a one-time stipend of $100 to be awarded at the end of Spring 2010. (12 X $100 X 3 = $3,600)

D. Books: As an additional incentive for faculty to participate regularly in FIG meetings, the 12 top-attending FIG participants from each of the three groups who attend at least 80% of the monthly meetings and attend 1-2 Transitional Studies Teaching Innovations Workshops will receive Amazon.com book credits totaling $30. The 12 top-attending members in each group at the end of Fall 2009 will receive book credits totaling $15, and the 12 top attending members in each group at the end of Spring 2010 will receive the remaining book credits totaling $15. (12 X $30 X 3 = $1,080)

Here is an example of two books from which members may choose. Others in a similar price bracket will be added to the list before the final books are chosen for Fall and Spring incentives.

What the Best College Teachers Do, by Ken Bain:
http://www.amazon.com/What-Best-College-Teachers-Do/dp/0674013255/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1238386845&sr=8-1

My Freshman Year, but Rebekah Nathan:
http://www.amazon.com/My-Freshman-Year-Professor-Becoming/dp/0143037471/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1238387405&sr=1-1
Appendix 1: Time Line and Meeting Schedules

Fall 2009 FIG Meetings & Other Events

August 2009: Division Street & Main Campus
   Transitional Studies Innovations Workshop #1

September 2009: Magnolia & Main Campus
   Training of DSPM FIG Facilitators
   Training of DSPR FIG Facilitators

October 2009: Blount County & Main Campus

November 2009: Division Street & Main Campus
   Questionnaire to FIG faculty
   Reports from FIG faculty on FIG-influenced student learning

December: No FIG meetings
   Awarding of first book credits

Spring 2010 FIG Meetings & Other Activities

January 2010: Magnolia & Main Campus
   Transitional Studies Teaching Innovations Workshop #2

February 2010: Blount County & Main Campus

March 2010: Division Street & Main Campus

April 2010: Magnolia & Main Campus
   Questionnaire to FIG faculty
   Reports from FIG faculty on FIG-influenced student learning

May 2010: No Meetings
   Awarding of 2\textsuperscript{nd} book credits and Teaching Innovations Workshop stipend

June 2010: Blount County & Main Campus (summer meeting/no data)

July 2010: Division Street & Main Campus (summer meeting/no data)

August 2010: Submission of final report to IDC (includes data from Spring and Fall)
References


