

# **Shepherding from Within the Flock: Role Perspectives of a Faculty Developer Participating in a Faculty Learning Community**

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## **Abstract**

A staggering percentage of faculty developers (96%) report experiences with Impostor Phenomenon (IP) (Rudenga & Gravett, 2020). How can a new faculty developer overcome feelings of IP to create a Faculty Learning Community (FLC)? What roles would a faculty developer play to create conditions for success for the FLC? This autoethnographic study examines the actions a new faculty developer took to overcome feelings of IP to lead a FLC in scholarship development. Special attention is paid to the roles I played at various stages of the FLC. New faculty developers can use this case study as a map for navigating feelings of IP to lead a group of new faculty members, while experienced faculty developers might use the results of this case study to mentor and guide new faculty developers through feelings of IP toward success.

## **Keywords**

faculty development; facilitation roles; multi-disciplinary; impostor phenomenon; faculty learning community; scholarship of teaching and learning

## **Introduction**

As a new faculty developer in a center of one at a teaching institution, I wanted to respond to a need amongst the faculty to support scholarship. Faculty members wanted to engage in scholarship that would resonate with their first love, which was teaching. Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) have been successfully used to support faculty development of scholarship (Daly, 2011), so I decided to start a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) around the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to help a group of faculty members get started. The problem was that I had never led an FLC before, and I had never done SoTL myself, which led to feelings associated with the Impostor Phenomenon (IP). Because of IP, the work to support scholarship productivity was delayed for a semester. This autoethnographic study reflects on my experience as I worked to overcome IP, started the FLC, and shepherded this group of faculty members through a research

process while going through the process myself for the first time. Special attention is paid to the roles that I took on throughout the process, which may serve as a guide for new faculty developers who struggle to get started in similar ways.

## **Situational Context**

My center is located at a faith-based regional university with a focus on teaching. We serve approximately 12,000 students in Southern California with a wide range of undergraduate and graduate degrees. The focus on teaching is reflected in the 4/4 teaching loads as well as the fact that teaching accounts for 60% of every faculty member's evaluation. Additionally, all academic leaders, including associate provosts, deans, department chairs, and program directors, teach classes as a portion of their contract.

Our institution has hired between 20 and 40 new faculty members each year for the last five years. Most of our faculty come to us from industry and have spent the majority of their career in the workforce rather than in higher education. As a result, most of the new faculty are new to teaching and many have not completed any scholarly work since completing their doctoral dissertations.

The center for teaching and learning is a recent addition to the university, having started just a few years prior to my appointment as the director. My role is to continue the valuable work that had already begun and to grow the offerings in the center to meet more needs throughout the university. Gillespie and Robertson (2010) distinguished instructional development from faculty development by saying that instructional development focused on learning how to teach "ever more effectively" while faculty development helped "faculty members with all aspects of faculty work across their careers" (p. 39). I was tasked with looking beyond teaching and learning to create supports for faculty in other areas.

## **The Challenge**

Because of the strong emphasis on teaching, scholarship is not a focus of most for the faculty. Scholarship is a topic of conversation on campus, as faculty members express a desire to do more scholarship but generally feel that the time constraints around their teaching load preclude them from doing much with scholarship. As a faculty member myself, I face the same constraints and struggled to find time to engage in scholarship. However, scholarship is still part of the evaluation process, academic administrators want to see scholarly effort and productivity, and faculty members are interested in doing scholarship, if they could find the time.

I lead the new faculty orientation and seminar, which consists of approximately 12 sessions throughout the year. The focus of those seminars had been on teaching and learning topics until I had a conversation with a mentor at a conference. She said that, in her experience, faculty members who did not start engaging in scholarship in their first year struggled more in future years because they had not laid a foundation of scholarship. In reflection, I realized that I had not engaged in scholarly production up to this point, and I was four years into my time in higher education. I worried that the new faculty members I was serving would not "find time" to produce scholarship in the future if I did not help them lay a foundation during the first year. This led me to begin looking into ways to support faculty members in starting with their scholarly agenda.

## **Impostor Phenomenon**

Despite knowing that I wanted to begin supporting new faculty with their scholarly agenda, I found I was not able to launch the project. Each time I started the work, I found myself questioning whether I was the right person to carry it out. I discovered that I was not alone in experiencing these feelings. Impostor Phenomenon (IP) affects both faculty and faculty developers alike.

Faculty members who are new to academia and those in non-tenure track positions are more likely to experience IP than their more experienced peers (Hutchins, 2015). These faculty members face high expectations for teaching, service, and scholarship to earn tenure. Scholarship production is one of four incidents in faculty life that have been shown to provoke feelings of IP in faculty members (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017), which increases the importance of creating support systems for new faculty members around scholarship.

In a recent study, 96% of faculty developers noted that they also experience IP (Rudenga & Gravett, 2019). New faculty developers often come to faculty development from other disciplines, so they likely need to spend time developing skill and expertise in faculty development strategies, such as leading learning communities. Nevertheless, new faculty developers may need help processing through feelings of inadequacy while creating opportunities for faculty members to do the same.

Consistent with findings from faculty members, faculty developers rated producing scholarship as the highest trigger for IP (Rudenga & Gravett, 2019). This finding is notable for institutions where faculty members look to faculty developers to help them learn how to produce scholarship, but the research shows that faculty developers also feel inadequate in scholarship production. In a sense, this may present a catch-22 scenario in a teaching institution where there may not be enough faculty members with strong scholarship experience who can mentor others. Rudenga and Gravett (2020) posit that one solution is for faculty developers to use their own feelings of IP to inform their work with faculty members. Just as our classroom experiences help us identify with the challenges that instructors face, our experiences with IP can help faculty developers identify with internal challenges that faculty members face as they attempt to produce scholarly work.

## **SoTL as Signature Pedagogy**

The faculty I serve are interested in teaching well. They came to a teaching institution with the intention of providing high-quality instruction and ensuring that their students learn the material. Therefore, I felt that a focus on Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) would be the best way to engage faculty in scholarship because they could work on improving their teaching practices while also producing scholarly products.

Felten and Chick (2018) argue that faculty developers should view SoTL as a signature pedagogy for working with faculty. Viewing faculty development from this lens, faculty developers can support faculty members in learning the processes of SoTL, which will empower them to engage in SoTL throughout their career. By doing so, the teaching and learning center will have a broader reach as faculty members take their SoTL skills and engage with members of their departments and around the university.

Additionally, SoTL provides an opportunity for faculty developers to come alongside, rather than direct information toward, faculty members. Strong faculty development experiences are “collegial so that all those who participate (including the developer) learn from each other through ongoing conversations” (Grant, 2006, p. 486). Because I was aware that I had a lot to learn through this process, a collegial learning opportunity supported my goals for this project, which cemented my decision to use SoTL as our focus.

### **Faculty Learning Community as Structure**

Richlin and Cox (2004) argue that Faculty Learning Communities provide an ideal model for what academic life should look like. Faculty members from across the university come together to learn and grow together. The dimensions of an FLC, “including self-directed activities, opportunities to identify and build areas of competence, and venues for relationship-building across departments and academic units” lead to faculty learning and growth (Daly, 2011, p. 12).

Specifically, participation in FLCs has been shown to improve scholarly activity (Daly, 2011) and has been successful in engaging faculty in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Beach, 2009, as cited in Stowell et al., 2020). Given the documented success of FLCs in supporting scholarly production, I felt this was the best choice as the structure for the project.

### **Role Identity Formation**

There are only a few studies on identity formation in faculty developers. What little has been studied points to the fact that faculty developers face identity challenges along the way and often see shifts in their practice along the way (Wilcox, 1997). Truly identifying oneself as a faculty developer takes two to four years (McDonald, 2011) as faculty developers shift their thinking from focusing on teaching, scholarship, and service to embedding their work in teaching practice and educational development. Understanding the importance of this shift and noting the time needed to make it happen, it is unsurprising that new faculty developers face feelings of IP while doing their work.

Additional challenges face those who move into the director role in faculty development. Wunsch (1993, p. 274) says, “Such a professional transition challenges even the most stable ego.” This is significant, considering a survey in 2001 revealed that approximately 19% of our faculty developers are in a center of one, where they are the director as well as the only faculty developer (Sorcinelli et al., 2006).

I was a triple threat to myself. I was fairly new to higher education, a new faculty developer, and a new director of faculty development in a center of one. The challenges to my ego were real, as were the feelings of IP. Yet, the work needed to be done, so I had to navigate through those challenges to serve my faculty.

### **Faculty Learning Community and Shifts in Roles**

In reflecting on the experience of launching this FLC, I found that I used several techniques to combat IP, which allowed me to move forward. I capture the moments where IP was a barrier to forward progress and the techniques I used, which may be helpful to others facing instances of IP.

Additionally, I found that my experience could not be captured in a single role as “leader” of the FLC. Instead, I navigated several roles throughout the experience, which allowed me to move the project forward.

### **Step 1: Create the FLC**

Starting the FLC was challenging due to my feelings of Impostor Phenomenon (IP). I kept thinking that it would be better if I conducted a study on my own first or ran a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) on a topic I was more familiar with prior to starting this one. Although both of those options were rational, the reality was that the new faculty I was serving would only be in the seminar for one year. I wanted to be sure they had the opportunity to participate in a SoTL project before the year was over, so the FLC needed to move forward. When I invited the new faculty to participate, I let them know that this was the first time I had done this work, so it would not be perfect. I also informed them that I would be asking for their feedback along the way as well as at the end, so I could improve the practice for future participants. In doing so, I had used the most popular method of coping with IP amongst faculty developers, which is to accept that some tasks will not be done perfectly (Rudenga & Gravett, 2020).

#### ***Role: Event Planner***

To start the FLC, I took on the role of an Event Planner. I had to create the opportunity to engage in the FLC and tailor the experience to the needs and wants of the clients. In this case, that meant considering the specific issues that new faculty were facing.

Because I wanted as many new faculty to join as possible, I needed to reduce other barriers to participation. I set the time of the meetings for the FLC to be as convenient as possible to encourage participation (Tison & Horne, 2020). I invited all members of the group to join, and I sent reminders and encouraging emails to garner as much interest as possible.

Even though event planning is not a strength of mine, this was the most comfortable aspect of running the FLC because the process of planning an event is structured, and a process I had already practiced in setting up workshops. This is still a challenging role for a faculty developer to play because there are so many variables to consider. Selecting a date and time that will increase the likelihood of participation is key to the success of a learning community.

### **Step 2: Collaborative Research Design**

My hope was that the first meeting would generate enthusiasm for the project that resulted in scholarly activities. Instead, I found myself sitting at a table with all eyes expectantly looking at me, waiting for direction. I realized that I had not provided an appropriate transition from being the leader of the FLC to being a member of the FLC. Therefore, the group was expecting me to take charge of the situation and guide the next piece.

This is where I experienced the strongest feelings of IP. I remember my stomach sinking as I realized that I did not know what to do. I was not sure how to get the group talking about a collaborative research design focused on SoTL. As the silence lengthened, I leaned into a teaching technique that I use to start discussions in my classroom and asked the group to share what they were thinking, why they joined the group, and what they hoped to accomplish. I hoped the

discussion would wind around to a SoTL topic organically. Instead, the group shared their hopes to learn more about SoTL and the research project from me.

With all eyes back on me, I chose to share with the group my research interest in pre-post assessments. Having previously worked in the K-12 setting, I was interested in Hattie's (2009) work on effective teaching, and, specifically, on the use of pre-post measures to determine whether students were learning in class rather than simply demonstrating proficiency (Hattie, 2017). The group got excited about that topic, and we began to work on establishing the SoTL study.

During this meeting, I addressed the IP I was feeling by using the second most frequently used coping method for faculty developers, which is "focusing on your strengths" (Rudenga & Gravett, 2020, p. 13). I relied on my tried-and-true teaching methods to get the conversation going. Then, when the group needed more direction, I shared a topic that I was familiar with that might be interesting. Fortunately, they were also interested in that topic. In future iterations of the FLC, I will want to engage faculty members to come up with studies that match their interests instead of mine, but focusing on my interests allowed me to move past my feelings of IP to keep the project moving.

### ***Role: Facilitator***

During this phase of the FLC, I tried to transition out of the role of the leader of the group too quickly. Because I did not feel qualified or ready to lead the group in designing the research project, I tried to be a team member instead of the leader. This was not successful because I had not prepared the group for that shift, nor had I set up a process either for someone else to lead or for the group to share the leadership. When I noticed that the process was stalling, I shifted into the role of a facilitator to guide the group discussion. This was a more successful approach because it gave enough guidance to keep the group moving while allowing me to shift into the role of a member.

### **Step 3: Data Collection and Analysis**

The statewide shutdown caused by COVID-19 ended our ability to meet in person. This created challenges for how to share and analyze data, which we had planned to do together. We shifted our meetings to online Zoom meetings, and we created digital collaboration spaces to continue our work. Additionally, my time as the faculty developer was significantly impacted by the tasks needed to support the pivot that faculty across the campus were making to live synchronous instruction. As a result, I was not able to make several of the meetings for the FLC. Different team members stepped into that gap to schedule meetings, set the agenda, keep minutes, and distribute the minutes to the whole team. That was invaluable to keeping the project moving forward.

One issue we discovered was that we had a wide range of experience and comfort running a statistical analysis of data and interpreting the results. I met with the two members who had the most experience with statistical analysis, and we created and shared with the other group members a step-by-step guide for analyzing our results. After we gathered and analyzed the data together, the group agreed to take the pieces of our research and create scholarly products individually. This decision was largely made due to the pandemic, which kept us from continuing to meet in person.

Although this was a difficult time due to the shifts caused by COVID, I did not experience IP at this stage of the project. By this point the participants had started to step into different leadership roles on their own. The two experts on data analysis led the work on creating the process, while others set up and facilitated meeting discussions.

### ***Role: Cheerleader***

The global pandemic created a situation where I was no longer able to lead the group. Instead of the project grinding to a halt, the participants took on leadership roles. With others taking on leadership tasks, I was able to devote my time to gathering my own data and participating in the discussions. The little bit of time that I spent as a leader was in the role of cheerleader. As participants took on leadership tasks, I sent them thank-you notes and encouraged their leadership abilities. I also encouraged the other participants to continue to gather their data and conduct their analyses.

While reflecting on this experience, I can see that the transfer of ownership from the faculty developer to the participants is a powerful shift that I will actively work to cause in the future. Creating space for others to lead, encouraging participants to share different tasks within the group, and encouraging them by being thankful will facilitate this leadership transition in future FLCs.

### **Step 4: Creating Scholarly Products**

Roughly a year after our last FLC meeting, I checked in with the participants to find out if anyone had created scholarly products based on our study. Two of the participants had created scholarly work, while three had not. I engaged with the three who had not yet participated in a scholarly activity. We identified a SoTL conference and submitted a conference proposal. The conference proposal was accepted, and we presented at the conference, so all five of the participants in the FLC have presented or published an article based on our study.

This was another point where feelings of IP affected my work. I was worried about the three members who had not created a scholarly product, and I was not sure how to encourage them to get that piece completed. I reached out to my mentor and asked for advice. She pointed me toward a conference that was aligned with our study, and that is where we presented. This is the fifth most common method for faculty developers facing IP: “Talking with an adviser/mentor in your professional network” (Rudenga & Gravett, 2020, p. 13). Doing so helped me find the path forward, so I could help all the participants achieve their goals.

### ***Role: Teammate and Coach***

I offered coaching and advice to each of the participants after our last meeting. Some were able to find success presenting or publishing their work. Others encountered barriers such as lack of time to work on the project and lack of comfort submitting their work for consideration. Because I wanted to be sure that each participant got the opportunity to present their work, I pulled the group together as a team and submitted a conference proposal for the group as a member of the team.

On reflection, I plan to coach the participants of future FLCs earlier in the process and more consistently to ensure they are able to navigate the process of making their work public. Supporting faculty members in their individual endeavors is important to ensure they feel capable of engaging

in the process on their own in the future. At the same time, as a faculty developer, it seems to be important and necessary to, at times, do some heavy lifting to support faculty members who are overwhelmed with multiple task and time demands. This will be a role shift that I will navigate as each situation may need a different role.

## **Discussion**

### **Coping with IP as a Faculty Developer**

Impostor Phenomenon is more likely to affect those new to a role, and faculty developers are no exception. Throughout this project, I experienced IP, which, at times, threatened to end the project. By relying on effective coping methods that have been employed by other faculty developers (Rudenga & Gravett, 2020), I was able to move beyond those feelings and take the next step in the project. The three coping methods I used were:

1. Accept that some tasks will not be done perfectly
2. Focus on your strengths
3. Talk with an adviser/mentor in your professional network

New faculty developers who are facing new tasks may wish to make a plan to employ coping methods in a more planned and purposeful way. Selecting coping methods in advance may help new faculty developers navigate issues and feelings of IP more quickly. Additionally, understanding the various types of roles that faculty developers inhabit and the methods used to navigate those roles may support new faculty developers in developing identity and lead to more success.

### **Roles of a Faculty Developer**

The role of a faculty developer is multifaceted at the macro level, with developers creating workshops, developing strategic partnerships, supporting organization-wide change, and shifting teaching practices, amongst other tasks (Gillespie & Robertson, 2010). This case study examined the shifts that also occur within a single task of leading an FLC. The term “leader” often elicits images of faculty developers standing in front of a group to share expertise and espouse wisdom. However, in this experience, I had to take on a variety of roles from different positions within the group. For a large part of the FLC, I had to allow others to lead the group either because of their greater expertise or because of time constraints on my schedule. Leading while participating in the FLC was a humbling and empowering experience for me and led to important shifts in the teaching and scholarship of participating faculty members. I took on the roles of Event Planner, Facilitator, Cheerleader, Coach, and Teammate at various stages of the FLC. This demonstrates the flexibility and broad range of skills faculty developers need to effectively implement Faculty Learning Communities.

### **Shepherd and the Flock**

I conceptualized the various roles above under two broad categories—shepherd and flock. At a faith-based institution, our work as faculty is often viewed through a biblical lens, which is applicable here. Shepherds are leaders of the flock, but they are more than just leaders. Shepherds



care for the well-being of their flock, ensuring that they are healthy while also guiding their path. There were times throughout this process where I was leading and guiding the group, always with the intent to help the participants be successful with their scholarship. Those leadership roles—Event Planner, Facilitator, Cheerleader, and Coach—are all aspects of the role of a shepherd.

Other times in the process, I was a member/participant of the FLC, contributing to the work, but not the leader nor the guide. In those instances, I operated as a member of the flock. I am a faculty member in the university as well as a faculty developer. The FLC experience was a benefit to me as a faculty member, and my ability to participate as a member of “the flock” was a valuable experience. Additionally, this study and the role shift from shepherd to flock demonstrates that new faculty developers who are also faculty members can use Faculty Learning Communities as a vehicle to engage other faculty members on substantive projects while developing their own skill sets as well.

### **Limitations**

This study reflects a single faculty developer’s experience conducting one Faculty Learning Community. The experiences noted are not generalizable to the broader group of faculty developers. Many experienced faculty developers will see the roles discussed here as familiar and expected. However, new faculty developers may not already know that roles may shift while leading a Faculty Learning Community. This case study can help new faculty developers prepare to launch a Faculty Learning Community. More experienced faculty developers may find they resonate with these roles or others that they have taken on. This may lead to more specific mentoring of new faculty developers as well as further research on whether these types of role shifts are common and how they might be applied in a more purposeful manner.

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