UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Slow Facilitation:
A collective, inquiry-based approach to designing peer supports for teaching development

Robin Alison Mueller, PhD
Educational Development Unit
Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning

Context and Questions

In 2014, the inaugural year of the University of Calgary's Teaching Awards program, 18 educators were recognized for their contributions to teaching excellence at the U of C. The 2014 award winners became known as a group called the Teaching Academy, a group of "on-the-ground" professionals who were interested in supporting the development of individual and collective teaching practices at the U of C. The Teaching Academy met for the first time in May, 2014 to discuss the identity of the group and to decide how group members would like to offer teaching and learning support.

Robin Mueller, an educational development consultant and faculty member at the Educational Development Unit of the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, led the Teaching Academy's development over an eight month period. At the outset of this process, several conditions required a unique approach to development: the group consisted of 18 university teachers from different career stages and disciplines, many of whom were very busy and already engaged in formal or informal leadership roles; it was important that the voices and opinions of all group members were captured and considered in the development process; and, clarity about the purposes, structures, and processes of the group at the outset of its formation were minimal.

The strategies used to prompt the Teaching Academy's development were appreciative in nature (Hammond, 2013), and were driven by the questions: How do you engage a large group of instructors in ongoing educational development activity? How do you focus the effort in order to (a) foster teaching and learning networks of practice, and (b) deliver effective, sustainable teaching development and support?

The inaugural Teaching Academy group (2014 University of Calgary Teaching Award winners)
Photo credit: Jae Im

Slow facilitation: A hybrid approach to group development

There are many models to use for the purpose of engaging in developmental activity. Didactic knowledge transmission, for example, is characterized by the one-way passing of detailed information, whereas facilitation involves guiding groups to engage in largely self-directed exploration (King, 1993). However, leading the development of a Teaching Academy support initiative required a hybrid approach; a new type of role was needed to provide facilitative leadership, gather research evidence to inform decision making, and create structural resources in order to support the ongoing development process. "Slow facilitation" is the name that we have given the hybrid approach that evolved in this context.

Using and creating evidence: An action research framework

The process used to engage in slow facilitation with the Teaching Academy was developed in alignment with an action research model. Action research is a kind of structured inquiry, conducted by practitioners, that is meant to directly influence and guide day-to-day practices (Baumfield, Hall, & Wall, 2013; Mertler, 2009). Action research is characterized by iterative phases of: (a) planning, (b) conducting inquiry, (c) observing and analyzing results, and (d) engaging in structured reflection (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010).

The action research framework was adapted to suit the needs and context pertaining to the Teaching Academy's development process (see Figure 1). Because the process mirrored an action research approach, the Teaching Academy group could see that each iteration of development was grounded in inquiry, and that they were are also producing evidence throughout the process.
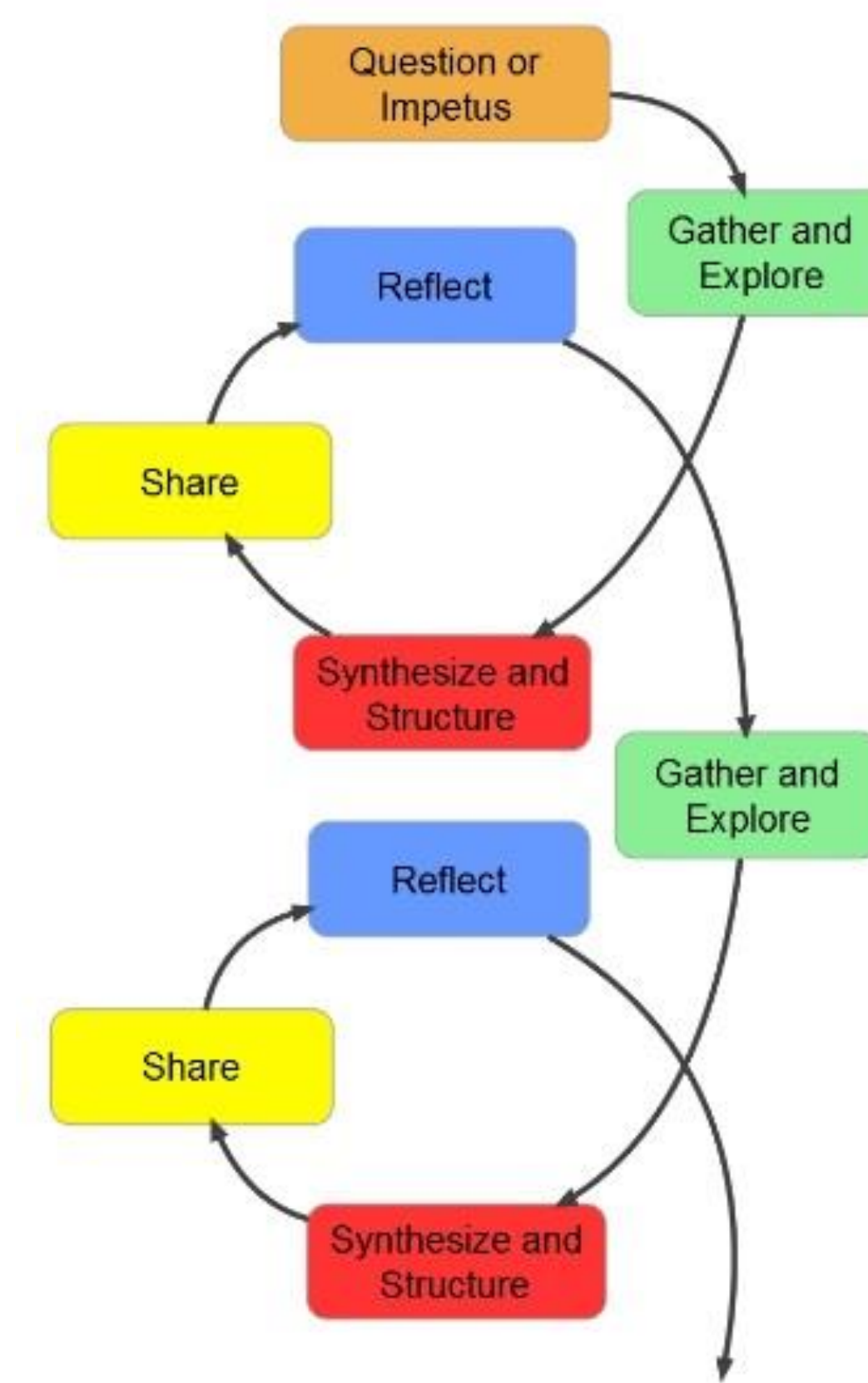

Figure 1: Modified action research framework used to guide slow facilitation with the Teaching Academy

Slow facilitation: Process

The Teaching Academy met six times in 2014/15. In total, the group had roughly nine hours of face-to-face development time, during which the goal was to use a "funnel approach" to development in order to flesh out the structure of the teaching support that they would provide as Teaching Academy members (see Figure 2).

Each meeting was structured similarly, with aspects of the meeting designed to correspond to a particular element of the action research loop (see Figure 1). Meetings began with a re-cap of the decisions that had already been made, an outline of the meeting goals (questions), and a proposed process for achieving the meeting goals (gather and explore). After each meeting, the facilitator analyzed the data that was generated (synthesize). This analysis created the foundation for the next step of development (structure), which was shared with the Teaching Academy group at the next meeting for feedback (reflection).
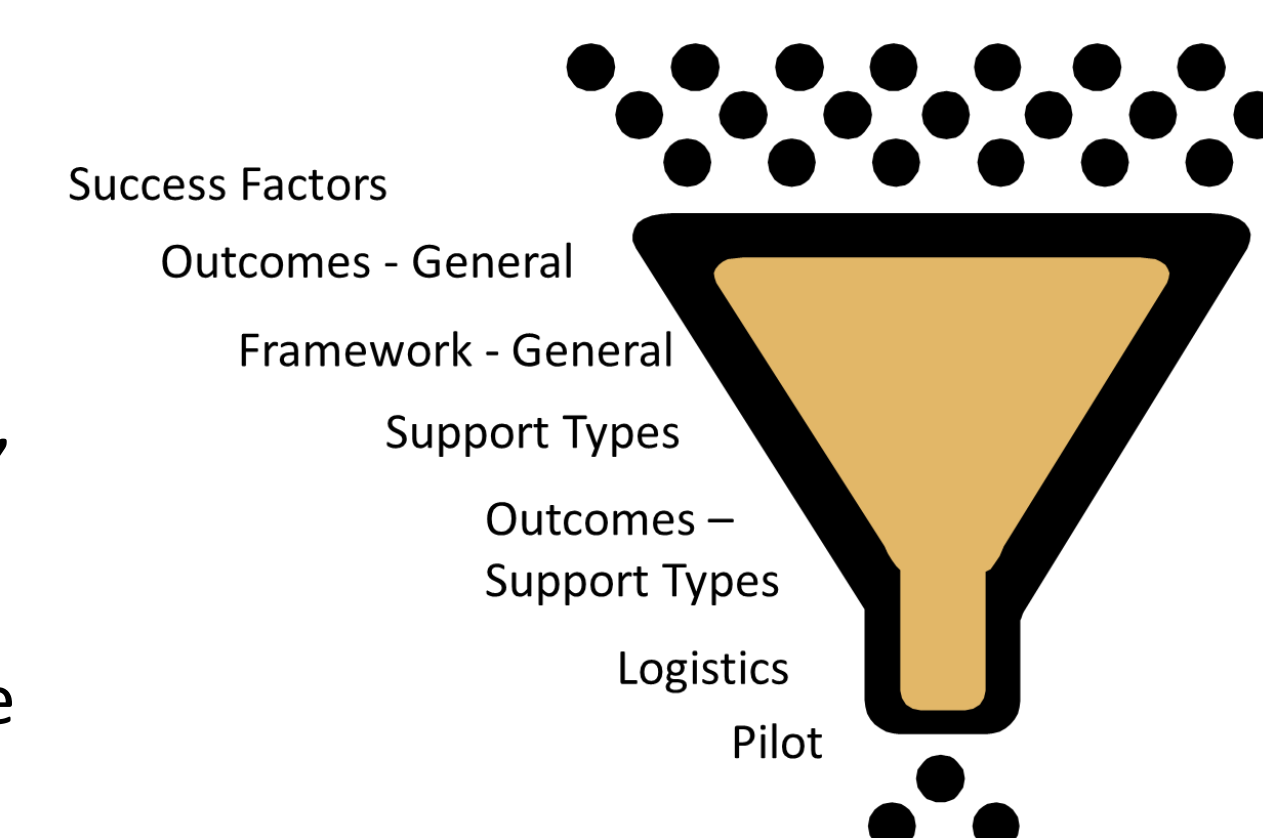

Figure 2: Funnel approach used for exploring Teaching Academy structures and supports

Slow facilitation: Outcomes

Through the process of slow facilitation, the Teaching Academy was able to articulate a purpose and principles of practice, design a teaching support framework, determine objectives for each support type within the framework, and achieve pilot implementation of two of the three support types featured within their teaching support model (see Figure 3). These achievements are also supported by ongoing review, reflection, and assessment on behalf of Teaching Academy members.
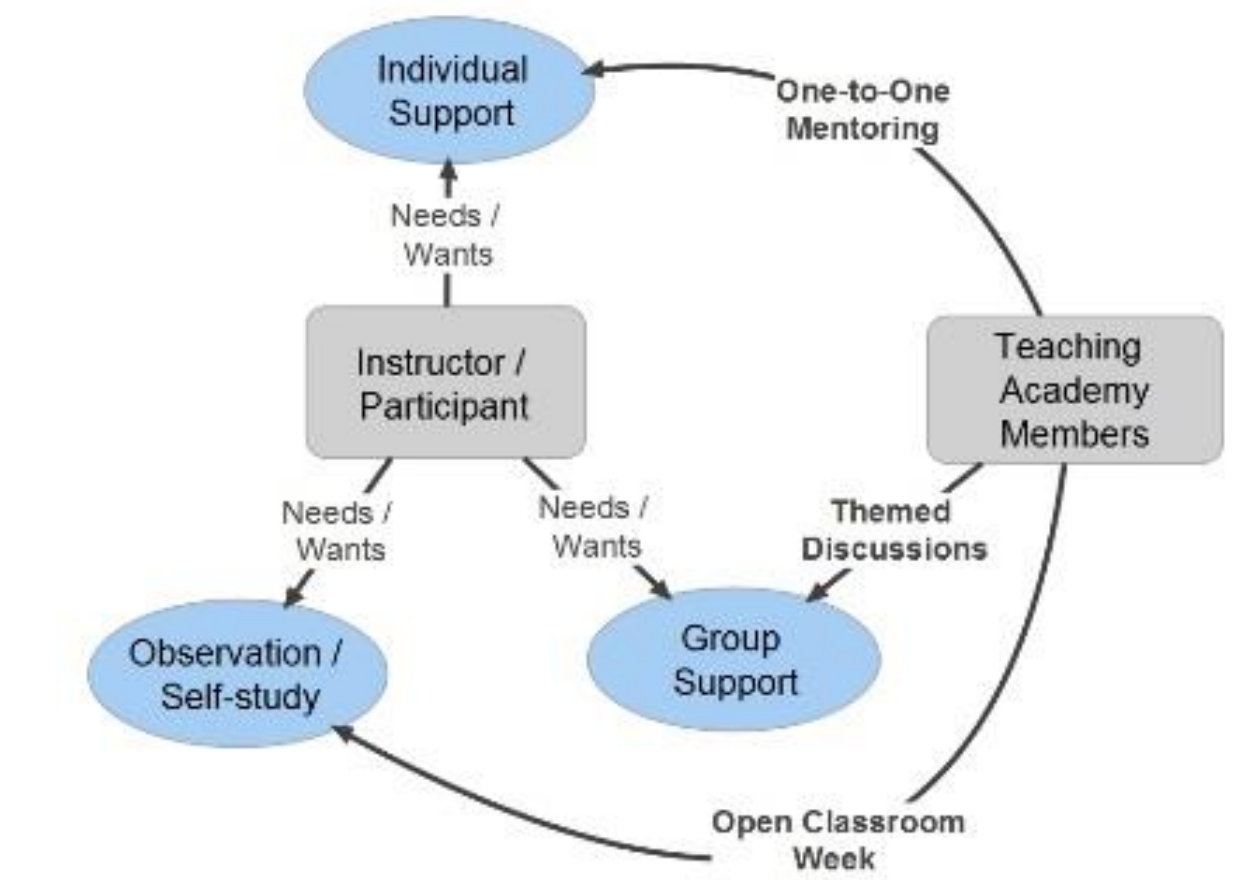
The Teaching Academy's Open Classroom Week initiative was piloted during the week of March 9, 2015, with the goal of providing University of Calgary teaching colleagues an opportunity to observe classroom settings, teaching practices, technology applications, and learning experiences across a variety of disciplines and contexts.

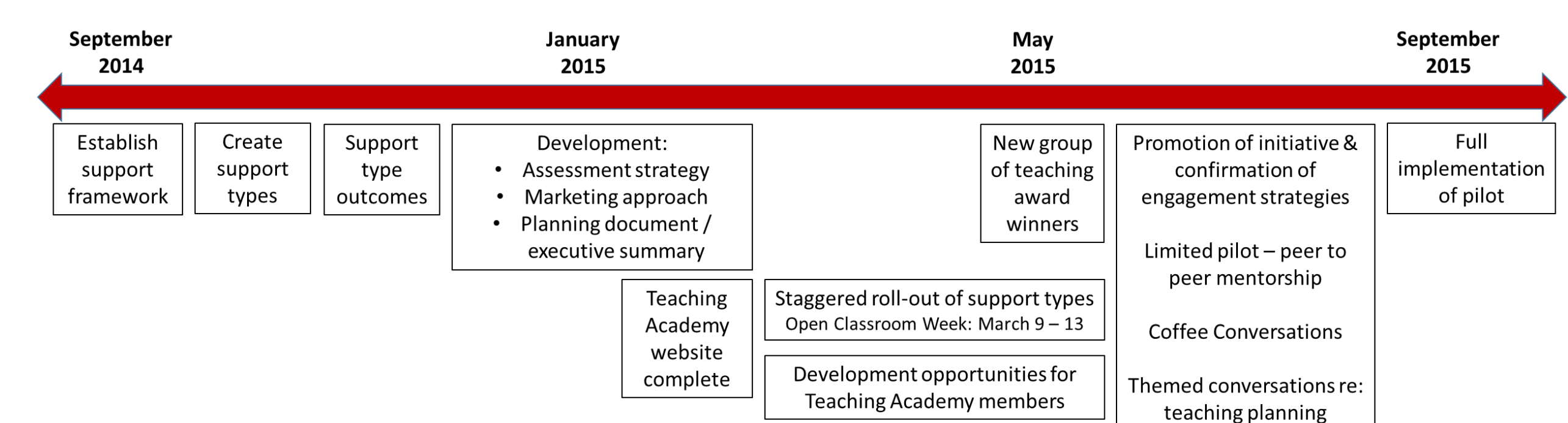The Teaching Academy is aiming for a full-scale pilot implementation by September, 2015 (See Figure 4 for a timeline).

Figure 3: Overarching design for Teaching Academy teaching and learning supports

Ken MacMillan is a Teaching Academy member who opened his classroom to observers during Open Classroom Week
Photo credit: Joni Miltenburg

Figure 4: Timeline for Teaching Academy development and pilot implementation

References

Baumfield, V., Hall, E., & Wall, K. (2013). *Action research in education* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2010). Applying educational research (6th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Hammond, S. (2013). *The thin book of appreciative inquiry* (3rd ed.). Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing.

King, A. (1993). From sage on the stage to guide on the side. *College Teaching, 41*(1), 30-35. doi: 10.1080/87567555.1993.9926781

Mertler, C. A. (2009). *Action research: Teachers as researchers in the classroom* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.