

# Faculty First Steps: Supporting Faculty Development for the First Stages of Teaching in Canadian Colleges

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## Abstract

Canadian colleges play a crucial role in vocational training, helping to develop a skilled workforce. Many college instructors are hired for their subject-matter expertise, tasked with equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed for their chosen careers. However, while new faculty are often selected based on their potential to effectively share this expertise, they may lack formal training in teaching methods. This paper explores the educational training and support, both formal and informal, that could be offered to help instructors strengthen their teaching practices. Additionally, it will address the challenges and barriers faced when implementing this type of training within post-secondary institutions.

**Keywords:** Adult Education, Faculty Development, Canadian Colleges, Teacher Training, Instructor Learning, Professional Learning, Vocational Education



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## Pre-Training Vignettes

### Craig

*Craig had spent twenty years as an Interprovincial Red Seal electrician. He ran job sites and could easily handle complex, but standing in front of a classroom at his local Community College, he felt like an apprentice again. His lectures on electrical systems, packed with technical details, were met with blank stares and restlessness from his students. Craig felt like he was sharing all the necessary information and context that apprentices at this level should know; however, the expertise and knowledge that he thought would make him a great instructor now seemed like a barrier. While his students appreciated his positive attitude and professionalism in class, feedback on his course evaluations indicated that he knew the material well, but really didn't know how to connect it to the class, that he talked over the students' heads, and that students were becoming increasingly frustrated with his classes as their interprovincial exam was getting close. This type of feedback was discouraging for Craig, and he was feeling like leaving the role.*

### Laura

*As a seasoned nurse with fifteen years of experience in emergency rooms, various hospital floors, and community work, Laura thought transitioning to teaching at her local Community College would be a natural step. However, her first weeks were filled with frustration as her detailed lectures on patient care protocols were met with confusion and disengagement. Several students had become problematic in her class, stating that they felt like the class was just one big ball of information continuing from class to class, with an excessively weighted exam at the end. The same students had also reported to Laura's chairperson that the course was unfair and did not set any of them up for success. Laura was beginning to resent her students, believing they needed to buckle down and put the time into studying like she had." That was the kind of dedication students should have if they wanted to enter the field.*

### Marcus

*After years of navigating the fast-paced world of corporate finance, Marcus stepped into his new role as a business instructor at their local Community College with confidence. Yet, his lectures on market analysis and financial strategies seemed to fall flat, met with disinterested gazes and distracted students. Some students accused Marcus of not teaching the course, but rather reading the textbook to them twice a week. Marcus felt as though he was doing what was required of him, and that the students were mostly interested in the material. The first round of test results came back with most of the class failing. Feedback from the students had spread to Marcus' colleagues. Marcus was embarrassed and did not feel like they fit in the department.*

## **Introduction**

To understand the paradox that exists in gaps around training for educators, we must look at the role of colleges in Canada and define what a vocational educator is and does. Canadian colleges provide training and education to support labor demands in their local area. College and other vocational instructors teach applied arts, academic, technical, and vocational subjects to students at a college level (Government of Canada, 2023). These instructors are utilized to help support and develop the workforce through post-secondary training programs. To provide adequate instruction to support this initiative, Canadian colleges typically hire industry subject matter experts to be instructors in their programming. While some instructors have a variety of training backgrounds, including informal and non-formal teaching experiences many subject matter experts entering college classrooms lack formal teaching experience. There is a notable gap in training for new instructors across post-secondary Canadian institutions. These gaps can lead to poor instructor self-efficacy; struggles for students and instructors in terms of facilitation, classroom management, and communication; unachieved learning outcomes; and turnover in faculty.

This paper examines the areas of formal teaching training that would best prepare new college instructors to begin their work in a post-secondary educational system, and what barriers and gaps may have prohibited this type of training from being developed in the past. This paper will review guiding questions to provide focus around what topics are being examined; a review of current literature around preparing college faculty to teach, pedagogical considerations of adult learners; supports for faculty; and barriers and gaps in training for new faculty members, which will be used to help develop relevant training to help solve this issue.

## **Guiding Questions**

- What areas of education training have the most impact on training and developing new college instructors, as they begin their work in teaching?
- What barriers and challenges exist in training new college instructors as they begin teaching?
- What training programs and research currently exist to develop future training for new Canadian college instructors?

## **Literature Review**

There is a notable gap in the literature regarding training for new Canadian college faculty members. The review of the related literature brings forth opportunities for further research, and considerations around what areas of focus may play a role in the development of training regimes for new instructors. Research in this area includes formal and informal learning experiences; mentorship practices; and existing programs in other countries that could guide further development on the topic.

## **Learning as it Occurs in the Workplace**

The work of Hoekstra et al. (2018), examined learning as it occurs in the post-secondary educational workplace. They identified that most of the preferred learning experiences in the post-secondary workplace occurred in either a pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) or a formal educational setting. PCK is “the teachers' ability to synthesize pedagogical knowledge within subject matter knowledge” (Sewell & Main, 2023). Considerations of these findings may direct us to develop scaffolded learning approaches, where new faculty learners gain knowledge through formal educational experiences, and then transfer and build on what they have learned through PCK learning experiences. PCK experiences may not always be able to occur organically in a way that aligns with formal training. Efforts between educational professionals and program instructors could lead to an alignment of formal and contextual learning experiences.

Lead time also influences the ability to train and prepare new instructors. Hoekstra et al. (2018, p.237) also mentioned that “instructors in western Canada typically receive up to two weeks of teacher training before they start teaching”, the author would like to note that this statement isn't consistent with several college-level institutions across Canada, and that these timeframes can be impacted by variable in hiring processes and start dates. This presents a need to implement formal foundational educator training in flexible formats to meet training needs within the constraints that institutions face regarding staffing and hiring dates.

## **Effective Mentorship in Post-Secondary Instructional Training**

Mentorship was found to be an area of strength in developing and supporting college faculty members, as found by Hubbard Murdoch et al. (2021). Their work showed the benefits of mentorship processes from one colleague to another, within the context of a program. Collegial mentorship could help to work towards the unique considerations around content and delivery of vocational training programs, by helping connect new instructors to foundational and applicable knowledge from the lens of a specific department. These mentorship programs, assisted by trained educational professionals, could support new instructors from both a quality-assured pedagogical standpoint and through pedagogical content knowledge, more coherently and efficiently. Mentorship can provide experiential and contextual value, which could help support the pedagogical content knowledge, but may also limit new faculty to a bias of perceptions on how to teach. This could prompt the training designers to consider incorporating multiple mentors, to provide viewpoints and experience from both internal and external to the context of the program. The work of Hubbard Murdoch et al. (2021), also points out the shortcomings of some formal training and mentorship programs, as they often occur after someone has been in a position for an extended time. More immediate and front-end training for faculty is a more effective strategy than the “sink or swim” method which has been more common in the past (Hubbard Murdoch et al., 2021).

## **Vocational Instructor Training Outside Canada**

The literature on vocational instructor training provides valuable insights, particularly when considering formal training for new college faculty in Canada. Zhou et al. (2022) emphasize the dual expertise required of vocational instructors, who must balance roles as both educational and industry subject matter experts. Their review offers practical models and global examples of vocational training programs. However, the applicability of these models to the Canadian

context is limited. Canadian colleges not only serve densely populated urban areas but also extend to community-based educational settings, where unique communication, support, and financial challenges arise. Additionally, the varying definitions and contexts of vocational education across different regions further complicate the direct application of Zhou et al.'s findings in Canada. Nevertheless, their research provides valuable insights for developing adult educator programs or guiding further research on training regimes for vocational instructors in Canada.

Australian studies also provide relevant parallels due to similar instructor qualifications, such as vocational certification and industry experience. Dymock and Tyler (2018) explored ongoing professional development (CPD) for vocational education teachers in Australia. Their findings highlight key considerations for instructor training, particularly after instructors have entered their roles. They note that a one-size-fits-all approach to CPD is ineffective and that CPD is often pursued to meet certification requirements rather than to enhance teaching quality. This underscores the importance of instructor self-efficacy, motivation, and the perceived value of training, both individually and within their institutional context. These insights are crucial when designing training programs for new faculty in Canadian colleges.

### **Resistance to Formal Education**

Initially, one might think that efforts to train instructors to prepare and navigate the challenges that come with the role of a formal educator would be met with eager participants. However, Kemmis & Green (2013) also studied the pedagogical considerations of vocational education and training in Australia, with their findings pointing to potential issues of a formalized vocational instructor preparation and training program, due to issues of vocational perception. These issues were recognized through a quote by Kemmis & Green (2013) stating that "Discussions of curriculum, pedagogy and the centrality of student learning and the responsibilities of all those involved have been excluded at worst and devalued at best by the cultural discursive environment that has come to dominate the VET environment" (p.110-111). While formal training programs may meet resistance from more seasoned instructors, staging the training for new faculty to begin with formal training, gives them a valuable foundation to start their work. This could be followed by a formal collegial mentorship; all while being supported by department heads and managers. This may ultimately foster a culture shift in the perceptions of training programs, as they will be developed to address new instructor challenges and be further supported by people within their own department/field of study. This could promote a culture of learning and development, rather than a means of filling a quota for meeting professional development (PD) obligations as identified earlier by Dymock & Tyler (2018).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

There has been a gap identified in the literature when examining the research available training and development of Canadian college-level instructors. This is substantiated by the work of Zhou et al. (2022), who identified that there were 54 available studies on professional learning for vocational educators. This research gap grows even broader when the scope is refined to professional learning for new Canadian college instructors, which only found two studies in North America. With a consistent demand for quality post-secondary education in Canada, we need to invest in research regarding what areas of educational training and support would best support new instructors to begin their work in their classrooms. The gaps in the literature on training for new college instructors present an opportunity for future research.

## **Training Design & Considerations**

### **Considerations of Context in a Discipline**

Given the expansiveness of college offerings, it is essential to tailor training methods to the professional contexts they are supporting. Below, we suggest the implementation of training around key pedagogical areas to support new instructors. This is not an exhaustive list, nor does it replace future areas of training that may arise throughout an instructor's career; they are simply foundational areas of training to help support instructors as they begin their work. These areas of training could be introduced in a formal educational setting, and then developed with the departmental, contextual lens of a mentor/colleague. The blend of the two approaches could allow for quality approaches to pedagogical training, as well as development in pedagogical content knowledge, that align with quality-assured approaches in education.

### **Adult Learning Principles**

College education is primarily centered around working with adult learners. There is a range of research on adult learning theories and principles. These theories and principles provide overarching guidance to help adult educators consider how they preface and present their material for the engagement and success of the learner. Some principles of adult learning theory that may be considered for the training, as discussed by Gantwerker & Lee (2022), include:

- Motivation of the learner
- Relevance of the subject matter to the learner
- Autonomy of the learner in the learning process
- Acknowledgement and incorporation of prior knowledge and learning of the adult learner
- Situational and applicable learning

### **Curriculum**

Course outlines and syllabi act as an agreement between the students, instructors, and institutions, on what is to be delivered in the course work and how it will be delivered. In addition to this consideration, these documents also provide clear and concise overview for other institutions when are considering transferability of credits and prior learning assessment recognition. These considerations point to the need to provide adequate training around interpreting learning outcomes, alignment, and associated levels of learning. Understanding alignment of learning experiences, within course curriculum, can be valuable to help engage students and help them to understand what is expected of them. These considerations can help to ensure instructors are meeting their expected deliverables in a program, while helping to support learners to regulate their contributions to their learning, by providing a more coherent picture of what is expected of them (Ambrose et al., 2010, p.85).

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## Assessment Foundations

New college faculty should possess a foundational understanding of the principles and applications of both formative and summative assessments, as well as the provision of constructive feedback, and scaffolding of the learning process. This knowledge is essential for integrating effective assessment practices, which thereby promote student success and enhance learner engagement through more meaningful educational experiences

## Facilitation strategies

There is an emphasis in many post-secondary institutions on keeping learning experiences directed toward student-centered learning, active learning, and applied learning. While there are strengths in these approaches, new instructors may not gravitate towards using them, as they may lack skills on how to prepare and deliver this type of training. Basic training on facilitation strategies to have students actively participate and build on their prior knowledge should be considered. Oleson & Hora (2014), took a deeper look at what factors come into play when influencing how an instructor will begin to teach in their classroom. They identified that instructors' teaching practice is not only influenced by the way that they were taught; but also, can be affected by professional and social influences; trial and error in their classrooms; feedback; professional development; as well as interactions with other instructors (p.36). Proactive efforts, in training instructors on effective facilitation strategies could yield a more beneficial learning experience for instructors and learners.

## Classroom Management and Engagement

Adult education theories point to the need to engage students with their own intrinsic motivations. Ambrose et al. (2010) stated that "Motivation influences intensity, persistence, and quality of the learning behaviors in which students engage" (p.68). Proactive strategies to engage learners with coursework and their colleagues results in a decrease of challenges in classroom management. Adult learner classrooms also benefit from having input on how their classroom is managed, this helps learners to hold themselves accountable for their actions as they progress through their coursework. The author suggests developing lessons around foundational pieces towards proactive classroom management strategies to help them foster healthy and productive classroom dynamics.

## Limitations to Training

While the author suggests a range of elements focused on learning theory and strategies, it is recommended to clearly determine the levels of learning that can be effectively achieved by new instructors, who may not have a great deal of educational experience in their past work. There is an ideal end goal to train an instructor to be a well-rounded and effective adult educator, however, the author understands that development in education is a continual process, and would recommend limiting the levels of learning within the proposed training to a level that will support the instructor to begin their work, and then built on to achieve a higher level of understanding and application, as the instructor progresses in their practice and can build on their classroom experience. This type of approach will help to support instructors but still allow them to determine and connect with their own epistemology.

## **Barriers, Gaps & Challenges**

### **Technological Barriers**

With a wide range of professionals being hired to be college faculty comes a wide range of experience with technology. A certain level of proficiency with standard office technology and learning management software is commonly required to begin coursework as a post-secondary instructor. There should be efforts to provide basic training in this area, to support instructors to be able to successfully start their training program. While ensuring a basic level of proficiency with these tools is important, the author suggests that remediating gaps in these types of technology be front-loaded and made optional for new instructors to self-assess whether they need to participate in this portion of training. A checklist of basic technological skills could be provided to the learner to assist them in self-assessing their level of proficiency with the required technology. If this training were made mandatory for learners who already had this skill set, it could be a demotivator, as the instructor's developmental time for their upcoming coursework is limited.

### **Changing Landscape**

Education has and will continue to see various changes that can cause a range of variations in how it is facilitated, assessed, delivered, and received. Hoekstra (2018), discussed the need for instructors to continually develop as job requirements bring forth needs in understanding and adapting to diverse student populations, changing industries, practices, and technologies, and the expanding role of the instructor (p. 238). As institutions bring forth more opportunities in learning for their prospective student populations, new instructors may have to learn and adapt to new learning landscapes and modalities that they did not encounter when they were students, depending on the institution, this could include Learning Management Systems (LMS); online meeting platforms; Interactive whiteboard technologies; and even basic office applications, along with their ever-evolving features.

### **Location of Campuses and Instructors**

Challenges can exist in developing formal training for new faculty, particularly when the training is intended for centralized locations. Many college-level institutions across Canada offer training through various campuses and community-based programming. This can provide challenges for new faculty needing to attend in-person group training. Options to work around this challenge include synchronous training sessions through online meeting platforms; asynchronous online training; and release time for instructors to attend training in centralized programs. While these options exist and have been tried in various training and professional development initiatives throughout institutions, they are met with a variety of their own challenges; some departmental budgets do not allow for instructors to have their travel and accommodation covered to attend training, some newly hired faculty lack technical skill sets needed to attend (and fully benefit from) online training, and some instructors may have teaching schedules that do not align with synchronous offerings.

### **Gaps in Knowledge**

Even though there are a range of resources and professional development opportunities available for college-level instructors, it can prove challenging for new instructors to connect



with the resources they need at that time, due to knowledge gaps around context and terminology in the adult education realm. Institutions may provide guidance and boundaries for academic staff through policy, but without a sufficient foundation of educational terms and practices, these efforts could fall short of reaching their desired impact.

### **Current Training and Access**

With a non-exhaustive scan of post-secondary institutions, we can see that there are valid efforts being made to provide supports to faculty members in post-secondary institutions. Many institutions provide funding for professional development opportunities and in-house training through learning centers, workshops, lectures, and communities of practice.

Hoekstra et al. (2018), pointed to continued employment of instructors being contingent on the completion of a three-year, staged, formal education program (p. 249). This type of arrangement is already a contractual part of employment at several institutions across Canada, with some being mandated through legislation via a provincial college act. However, they also addressed the need for formal teacher training programs within the first year, as adaptive learning seems to be most prevalent in the first years of teaching. While the author agrees that formal training should take place within the first year, there is a need for more immediate training as instructors begin their work. This initiative will help prevent some common struggles and pitfalls encountered when entering the teaching profession, as well as improve the learning experience of students and their respective institutions.

In addition to mandatory training, several institutions across Canada provide formal educational training as an in-house, non-contractual orientation. This type of teacher training has been noted to be supportive and beneficial, however, depending on hiring dates, course loads, and other work confinements, some participants are unable to attend this type of training. These programs can have a range of offerings that are formatted in two to three-day intensive offerings, whereas others were completed over two to ten weeks. An even more immediate form of training can and should be implemented, but this may require additional resources that include training personnel, training development, and multi-modal methods of presentation to serve all new instructors.

### **Key Takeaways**

- There is a need for formal training that involves trained education instructors, as well as colleague mentors to support the transition from SME to educator.
- There is a need for research on training and developing new Canadian college educators
- Future formal training for college educators will need to be designed and developed in collaboration with professional educators and seasoned college classroom educators, soliciting feedback from new instructors to meet the demands of this unique area of work.

## Post-Training Vignettes

### Craig

*As Craig wrapped up his first class with his new group of apprentices, he took a moment to appreciate the confidence he had in the lesson and the connection he'd already built with his students. He had worked on a new pre-assessment activity that he learned in the new faculty training session to see where his students were at in terms of terminology and experience with the upcoming coursework. The students shared their work experience and background, which helped to form collegial bonds throughout the classroom and develop the learning community moving forward. Craig was able to identify how many students had a strong foundational understanding of the terminology and subject matter, and who would need some extra guidance to get up to speed on the content. While some students seemed like they had a lot of work ahead of them, the class seemed to appreciate Craig's lesson and expressed interest in learning more next class.*

### Laura

*While the term had been busy, Laura and her class were looking forward to the upcoming break. There was a great deal of content to cover in the course, but the scaffolded formative assessment strategies that Laura had learned and adapted to her classroom, gave both Laura and her students a sense of confidence in how their learning had progressed throughout the term. Laura received recognition from her chairperson for the continual improvement she had made in her coursework, as well as her support for her students. Mid-term feedback described how the students felt supported, and provided constructive feedback on ways that the course could continue to be facilitated in future offerings. Complaints about the course have been replaced with appreciation of the student's learning experience. Engagement and learner satisfaction were now apparent in the group.*

### Marcus

*Feeling disheartened after another lackluster class, Marcus sought out advice from a colleague in their department, as well as support from their teaching and learning center. Both resources suggested some active learning strategies and activities that could be used in the classes to help engage the students. This, paired with integrating real-life business challenges and interactive discussions, helped to promote participation in the class. Students were more apt to share what they wanted to get out of the coursework with Marcus, and they connected the course content to their goals where they could. The transformation was immediate—the students' engagement soared as they grappled with authentic business problems. Marcus realized that teaching business wasn't just about imparting knowledge; it was about fostering a dynamic environment where students could apply concepts, think critically, and prepare for the complexities of the corporate world.*

## Conclusion

This paper has explored common gaps in the training initiatives for college-level instructors entering the field of teaching. While this paper does not represent situations in all post-secondary institutions across Canada, the struggles that are identified in this paper are common to many colleges across our country. The findings and gaps in the literature shed light on further

research and development opportunities focused on the training and development of new college faculty members. In the effort to provide quality post-secondary education through quality learning experiences, and open opportunities to promote transformative experiences through the development of our workforce, we need to invest in the opportunity to shape and develop our new post-secondary educators as they enter their classrooms.

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Mitchell Hengen is working towards completing his Master of Education, specializing in Educational Technology and Design. His research interest is focused on the development of college faculty; trades education; and supporting the transition from subject matter expertise to facilitator.

### Conflict of Interest

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

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