



Education

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And, what if we try this together? A community-driven approach to sustain Pedagogical Change

This essay explores the value of a community-driven approach to transforming teaching practices, arguing that sustained educational change requires the collective commitment of the academic community. It traces a progression from the individual to the institutional level, outlining how local, disciplinary or departmental communities can be intentionally woven into a coherent and ‘unique’ university-wide community, as a critical milestone on the path to system-level transformation. The essay addresses both the rationale (‘why’) and the implementation (‘how’) of a community-driven approach that leads to the sustainability of pedagogical change and transformation, drawing on the ongoing experience at Universidade Católica Portuguesa.

Why a community-driven approach?

Higher education is changing, students are learning differently, and we collectively are challenged to re-examine our practices and the way we are designing learning experiences. Rather than reflecting in isolation, we can reflect together, test new models together, and learn from one another. So, we had a dream: connect faculty, connect pedagogical experiences, and connect projects as we can work jointly toward pedagogical transformation across the university.

A community-driven approach is well-suited to this aim. It broadens engagement and accelerates diffusion: interdisciplinary and inter-departmental communities create scalable settings in which colleagues reflect together, share concrete teaching experiences,

and recontextualise practices, conditions that expand participation across disciplines and speed the uptake of effective approaches (Soares *et al.*, 2024). This approach also aligns with how faculty prefer or choose to learn: professional development gains traction when it balances formal opportunities (e.g., focused pedagogical workshops) with informal, situated learning (e.g., peer observation, short classroom experiments, and communities of learning and practice), which improves perceived relevance and sustains engagement (Gil & Tavares, 2025).

Community-led processes also enhance legitimacy through participation (Weber, 2011). Grounded in actionresearch principles, they make representation and local decisionmaking visible, distribute agency, and capture specificities and 'small' constraints that centrally designed programs may miss – thereby reducing the perceived risk of trying new approaches and strengthening the credibility of change efforts (Weber, 2011). In parallel, the community enhances institutional identity and the sense of belonging: we recognise that we are "in the same boat," facing similar challenges and uncertainties, and we benefit from a secure environment in which testing innovations and sharing vulnerabilities are part of a collective practice (Soares *et al.*, 2024).

A community orientation also supports external relevance and scalability. By connecting academic work with civic, social, and professional partners, the university can better align pedagogical innovation with societal needs and create conditions for changes to endure and scale, creating a shared agenda among communities (Fuller, Brown & Smith, 2023).

Finally, a community-driven approach supports inclusive transformation. Intentional provision for adjunct/contingent colleagues, through teaching academies, practicesharing forums, learning practice communities, mentoring, and recognition at peer and institutional levels, allowing that each one has a voice in the community (Fuller, Brown & Smith, 2023).

How does the community foster a sustainable Pedagogical Change?

Managing and sustaining pedagogical change is a complex challenge. An isolated innovation may serve as an important first step, yet it is insufficient to generate meaningful or lasting transformation. Aggregating multiple 'first steps' can, however, begin to build the collective momentum towards pedagogical transformation. It is precisely at this point that

Kotter's 8 Step Change Model becomes a valuable framework for guiding and sustaining institutional change.

1. Create a Sense of Urgency by highlighting the importance of working together towards common challenges that all university stakeholders are facing. Joining efforts, sharing practices, learning together and from each other, for collective innovation rather than isolated innovation.
2. Form a Powerful Coalition: Assemble a group with energy, interest and enthusiasm to lead the change (faculty from different departments, who want to work together: a team of 'suspects' of and for pedagogical innovation).
3. Develop a Vision and Strategy: Create, in a participatory process, a shared vision to direct the team effort and define an action plan to achieve these collective goals.
4. Communicate the Vision: Share the vision and strategies with all institutional stakeholders to gain support, using the team as a vehicle of connection across departments, blurring disciplinary silos.
5. Remove Obstacles: Identify and eliminate barriers to change, at a micro and macro level, empowering faculty to take action; reinforce the team agency, integrating all on new projects, "all on board".
6. Create Short-Term Wins: Plan for visible improvements and recognise and reward those involved in the change; identify microactions grounded in peer learning and shared practices (such as cycles of pedagogical workshops and communities of learning and practice) and acknowledge the contributions of those engaged in innovative projects.
7. Consolidate Gains and Produce More Change: Use the increased credibility to align systems, structures, and policies with the vision, shifting from a bottom-up approach to one that is also supported topdown, thereby strengthening institutional commitment, support, and recognition.
8. Anchor New Approaches in the Culture: Reinforce the changes by embedding them in the organisation's culture, for example, by integrating a comprehensive faculty professional development programme into the core of the Institutional Strategic Plan, ensuring both a strong formal and informal presence across all departments, and consolidating a shared commitment to pedagogical transformation grounded in community praxis.

And, what if we try this together?

Trying, working, reflecting and creating together is essential: pedagogical change endures only when it is done in community. We advocate for a community-driven perspective that brings all stakeholders into the process as the key drivers of institutional transformation. Using Kotter's model as an iterative governance framework to coordinate action, adapt to evidence, and ensure that pedagogical innovation is both meaningful and lasting. *Let's continue trying together!*

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