

Building a Better Conversation about Learning

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Abstract: A commentary that addresses efforts to enable conversations between and among faculty members and administrators that will lead to improved teaching and learning.

Essay:

One of my colleagues here at the Carnegie Foundation has been exploring the different "forums" for work on teaching and learning in higher education. What Mary Taylor Huber has uncovered in her research is an impressive array of such occasions, bringing faculty together by department or discipline, across the campus, and in national networks and scholarly communities. "What has been surprising," she writes, "is not only how many forums there are, but how surprised people seem to be to find this out." Huber's findings are notable because much of the rhetoric over the last decade (and I confess I've contributed to it) has portrayed teaching as largely private work that faculty don't talk much about. Clearly that situation is changing.

Consider, for example, the energetic conversations and communities that have grown up around various teaching approaches. Faculty interested in collaborative learning--where students learn from one another in structured small groups--can now find colleagues on just about every campus in the country, as well as a growing body of literature. For those interested in learning communities--arrangements that link courses in ways that help students connect what they learn in different contexts--a national resource center located at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, brings together the most exciting people and practices in the country. For other faculty, it's problem-based learning that has captured their interest, and thanks to important initiatives on several campuses there are now national conferences and publications on that approach. Service learning, too, has its champions: Campus Compact brings together institutions committed to service learning,

and the American Association for Higher Education has recently issued nineteen discipline-based publications exploring how and what students learn through engagement with the community.

These developments represent real progress. Teaching, like any craft or art, advances when people find like-minded colleagues to work with, review their efforts, and push them to the next stages of thinking. The communities that have grown up around different teaching approaches are doing wonderful and important work.

Like many good things, however, these evolving communities present what (as I learned from an essay by Lisa Ruddick in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* a couple of years ago) the Tibetan Buddhists refer to as the "near enemy," the idea that "any virtue has a bad cousin." The bad cousin in this case--the downside of these encouraging developments--is the potential for a kind of insularity and balkanization, with the various teaching camps each going their own direction, in isolation from the others.

The problem is dramatized by a comment I heard from an administrator at a large research university. "The problem on my campus," she said, "is not that there's nothing going on around teaching agendas. It's that there are so many different things it's impossible to connect them all--or even to be aware of them." That's too bad because faculty can learn a lot from colleagues who teach and think about teaching differently.

It's not, mind you, that faculty aren't interested in drawing from the widest possible range of classroom approaches. But higher education's efforts to improve teaching often are organized around discrete pedagogies (the campus decides, say, to adopt problem-based learning or to put a special focus on service learning). The various efforts attract different people, meet at different times, and depend on different funding sources. What's missing are structures and habits for exchange across the emergent communities of conversation about teaching and learning. Such exchange would lead to a healthy cross-fertilization of practices and to a greater awareness of common underlying principles that can and should shape the use of a wide range of approaches.

And here is where the movement for a scholarship of teaching and learning comes into play. Instead of beginning with a commitment to this or that approach, the scholarship of teaching and learning begins with questions about how and under what circumstances students learn, and with a commitment to inquiry and evidence about those questions. It invites faculty to bring their habits, skills, and values as scholars to their work as teachers. Thus, faculty using different classroom approaches (and coming from different disciplines and institutional settings) can work together to build a greater collective intelligence about the best ways to promote student learning in the varied and unpredictable circumstances of teaching today. Seen in this way, the scholarship of teaching and learning is not a separate, self-standing initiative but a set of principles that can undergird and connect diverse approaches to improving learning.

Come to think of it, the ability to pull things together (teaching camps, curricular developments, reform efforts of various kinds) into a more integrated whole is a pretty good test of any new educational initiative.

Resources:

The Scholarship of Teaching: New Elaborations, New Developments by Pat Hutchings and Lee S. Shulman, published in the September/October 1999 issue of *Change* magazine.

Approaching the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning by Pat Hutchings, from *Opening Lines: Approaches to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Developing Discourse Communities Around the Scholarship of Teaching by Mary Taylor Huber, published in the *Carnegie Chronicle*. Transforming Undergraduate Education: Moving Beyond Distinct Undergraduate Initiatives, by David Schoem, published in the November/December 2002 issue of *Change* magazine.



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