

Creating Windows on Learning

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Abstract: The author reports on recent promising efforts by community college faculty to make the teaching and learning from their classrooms more visible.

Essay:

Every year hundreds of thousands of students begin their higher education in community colleges. Of course, these institutions also bring in large numbers of new faculty. For both groups, students and faculty alike, there are plenty of challenges to go around.

Imagine yourself in the shoes of a newly hired instructor at a community college. If you're lucky, you've landed a full-time position, but more likely you're working as an adjunct, teaching on one campus in the morning and another in the afternoon. You put in years writing an English thesis on, say, spiritual autobiography in the 18th century, or a math thesis on primal decomposition in modules and lattice modules, only to find yourself teaching basic literacy or numeracy skills in a class three levels below the first course in the transfer sequence. You don't object to teaching students basic skills; in fact, you find it fascinating. You've just never had so much as a day of training on the subject. So what do you do?

Faculty members at California community colleges have been asking that question in large numbers lately, spurred on by numerous reports—from the Academic Senate, from the Hewlett Foundation, from the Chancellor's office—that all point to the urgency around basic skills education. They have asked it of themselves, certainly, in private moments of bafflement or frustration, but as part of the Carnegie project Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC), they've also asked it of each other, transforming the question from "What do I do?" to "What do we do?"

Their work together has led to a number of improvements in teaching basic skills, including the innovative pairing of classes through learning communities and experiments with high-intensity teaching formats, particularly in math. But their initial questions have also led to further, sharper questions: Why do so many of my students earning a C or higher wind up dropping the class? What makes word problems so difficult for so many math students? How much of the homework that I assign do my students actually read? What is going on in my student's head when he tackles a new equation? Is what I'm doing even working?

The faculty at work on the 11 SPECC campuses have tackled these questions through a variety of methods: observing each others' classes; creating common finals and assessment methods; devising pre- and post- tests as a way of pinning down desired student learning outcomes; videotaping student "think-alouds" in mathematics; adapting metacognitive or "intentional" reading strategies to math and ESL classrooms, and many more.

Beyond sharing the results of these pedagogical experiments with each other, some faculty have taken the extra step of documenting their work on the web. These websites are rich with data. In one, the instructor posts the results of her department's common algebra final and reflects on her students' performance. Another site includes a video of four beginning ESL students, with four native languages between them, working together to unpack a poem in English. Indeed, as well as affording teachers the chance to cringe at their wardrobe choices on the day of filming, video allows instructors to capture student learning in all its compelling complexity, from a single student explaining where he gets stuck on a word problem to an entire class speculating on why an anonymous student from a previous semester had dropped out and what lessons they can take from that experience to increase their own chances of success.

These multimedia sites have been collected in the SPECC Windows on Learning Gallery. The sites can be used in a variety of ways: as archives of teaching and research materials; as hands-on resources for teachers who can download materials and study their implementation in an actual classroom; and as tools for professional development. A number of faculty presented their sites at the annual Strengthening Student Success conference held in San Jose, California in October, among other venues, and have used their sites to forge connections with community college instructors across the country doing similar research and exploring similar formats for making their work visible. An especially nice feature of these sites is that they preserve the trace of both teaching and inquiry, so that the complicated process of properly identifying a problem of learning; designing an intervention to address it; and evaluating the success of the intervention becomes clear.

Through this kind of documentation and exchange questions about teaching that once might have lead merely to migraines—or to a growing sense of isolation and disillusionment—lead to discussion, research, experimentation, data collection and further inquiry. All of these are processes that can be recorded and shared, and it is this act of recording, of making teaching visible, that creates a crucial difference between the

sort of teaching that Carnegie President Lee Shulman has described as "evaporating at room temperature" and a more durable alternative. The more visible teaching becomes, and the more durable its best practices, the better for students.

And the better, certainly, for that new hire tackling the risks and rewards of teaching basic skills for the first time.

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