

Plain Talk for Provosts About The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: The Community College Context
(Adapted from a speech delivered at the Carnegie Teaching Academy Campus Program Conference in 2000)

Charmian B. Sperling, Ed.D.
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs (retired)
Middlesex Community College
Bedford and Lowell, MA

The AAHE definition of the Scholarship of Teaching reads “The scholarship of teaching is problem posing about an issue of teaching or learning, study of the problem through methods appropriate to disciplinary epistemologies, application of results to practice, communication of results, self-reflection, and peer review¹.” Representing a fairly traditional research model, it makes certain assumptions about what I call “flow”. In traditional research, theory informs practice—and the definition underscores the notion that scholarship is systematic. Research universities perhaps best model this understanding of scholarship. They generate knowledge; the knowledge is shared and shaped by peer review and discourse; it is applied both within the academy and outside, and that knowledge both directs and frames the way we understand what happens—or can happen—on a practical level.

Several years ago I began embedding a particular line of questioning into interviews with final candidates for faculty positions at Middlesex Community College. Since most of our applicants had had years of prior teaching experience, I would reference that experience and ask, In the many years that you have been teaching students, what are some of the most important things you’ve learned about how students learn? (I ask this, by the way, in front of members of the faculty screening committee, who are invited to attend final interviews of their recommended candidates.) Most often the question will be interpreted—or at least answered—as, What have you learned about teaching? In fact, if there is an uncomfortable silence or a question about the question, I will reword it in that way, and then move on to my original question afterward. Candidates usually

¹ American Association for Higher Education (1998) invitation to the Carnegie Teaching Academy Campus Program.

describe what works for them: practices that they have found effective, often after a good deal of trial and error. They typically mention that these strategies differ significantly from those they used when they started teaching years before. Examples of responses are: When I want them to contribute or build on one another's ideas, I find that groups work well; I do more frequent testing than I used to; I try to use examples from their lives and get them to contribute their own: In most cases, these experienced teachers can speak with great conviction about how much more effective these approaches are than ones they used to employ. But if and when I decide to go back to the "learning" question, they usually have little to say and are often uncomfortable with the question.

Why that is so is interesting to me. What I've learned over the years is that very few community college teachers are accustomed to coming at teaching through a "learning portal". Unlike elementary or secondary school teachers who learn their craft in schools of education, few community college faculty are grounded in learning theory; most have never formally studied—or even read much—about cognition, learning styles, human development, moral development, or taxonomies of intellectual growth. There is very little theoretical scaffolding or framework on which to build or refine teaching practice. After all, you can't apply experience to something you don't even know about.

According to Bloom's Taxonomy, learning activities are structured to either match particular developmental levels or to attempt to push students to levels beyond the ones at which they're currently operating. A framework for understanding intellectual development permits a teacher to intentionally sequence expectations so that students move from the specific to the general *after* they have demonstrated that they can go from the general to the specific. Faculty who are familiar with a range of learning styles can build in activities that give students opportunities to learn by doing, or to learn by visualizing—in addition to by reading or listening.

In contrast to such intentionality, our faculty most often back into these understandings. They discover them in a hit-or-miss fashion, through practice and observation. And

teaching wisdom in community colleges is often passed along, like folklore, from one faculty member to another. There is nothing wrong with that, but the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning holds out a promise of something richer and deeper—something that provides greater grounding, allowing faculty to connect the dots between theory and practice, between one individual teaching strategy and the next.

One phase of our Carnegie Teaching Academy project at Middlesex Community College has focused on motivation. I have observed that motivation—or lack of it—in students evokes in faculty the same feelings often associated with a grief reaction: anger, denial, depression, perhaps acceptance. There is certainly much wringing of hands regarding unmotivated students, sometimes followed by a call for effective strategies to combat low motivation. But those strategies are often arrived at through an unplanned process. Those that seem to work with some students go into the bank of “successful strategies”, “best practices”, “teaching tips”. Other approaches fall by the wayside.

In an effort to bring scholarship to this issue, a group of Middlesex Community College faculty endeavored to begin at the beginning, by asking questions such as: What do we know about motivation? Why do some people want to learn (my subject) and others don't? What sustains motivation? What hinders it? What practices promote high motivation over time? They dug into the theoretical literature on motivation in an effort to understand its dimensions. One of the pieces they spent a good deal of time discussing was Edward Deci's *Why We Do What We Do*?² Their discussions explored intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-esteem, competence, autonomy, and the place of structure and expectations in enhancing (or inhibiting) motivation. They reflected on their own teaching practices through a new lens, recognizing in new ways why some things had worked and others hadn't. They then linked these ideas together by intentionally structuring new teaching practices around principles they had learned.

² Deci, E. & Flaste, R. (1995) *Why We Do What We Do*. New York: Penguin Books.

In so doing, they connected the dots which might have remained separate and seemingly unrelated fragments. They used theory to better *understand* as well as to *inform* practice. And they went further by conducting research on their own newly-informed practice, and sharing their findings with colleagues at Middlesex and beyond through monographs describing their work and their conclusions. Through their scholarship, they and others on campus have grown in their comprehension of an issue that baffles and frustrates many community college faculty, and have modeled a process for productive inquiry and informed teaching practice.

In working with these faculty, I developed the following principles for making the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning a significant part of campus culture:

1. **Talk the Talk.** Use language such as “the scholarship of teaching and learning”, “theory”, “teaching practice”, “intellectual development”, “cognition”, “research”, “reflection”. The use of such terms reinforces the notion that effective teaching is not just a gift from above, trial and error, or a question of good or bad chemistry in a class. It reminds everyone on campus that learning theory can inform practice—and that if it can make us more effective in helping students to learn, it is worth knowing more about.
2. **Develop a culture that values inquiry and doesn’t expect teachers to have all the answers.** The Latin root of “educate” means “to lead out.” We must give encouragement, space, and time for faculty’s search outward—often into unknown territory. This message can, and must, be sent in many ways.
 - Again, the interview process is key because it sets a tone right from the beginning and says something about expectations on a particular campus. In addition to the question to which I referred earlier, I always ask one about a candidate’s own development path, usually phrased as, How do you want to grow as a teacher? or, What do you want to learn more

about? The question sends a clear message to each candidate that we are a college that wants and expects faculty to grow and to change.

- When faculty are funded for projects, always expect that they will utilize such opportunities for exploration and will, as a result, learn something. And then, of course, **ask them what they've learned** as well as what new questions they may have.
 - Report often about what **you've** learned about student populations, specific interventions, successes and failures, new approaches that may be worth trying and why. **Discuss failures as openly as successes**; view them as even stronger opportunities for growth and new learning. Teachers, who so often expect themselves to get it right—primarily for students who expect them to have it right—need to be reminded.
3. **Promote an environment in which taking risks is not risky.** Make it safe and desirable to experiment; encourage “messing around.”
- I no longer consider it irresponsible to claim *Ready, Fire, Aim* as an occasional *modus operandi* and to encourage others to take a leap and then fix whatever they have landed in as they go along. Sometimes *aiming* can go on forever and can serve as a barrier to well-*enough*-informed innovation.
 - In keeping with talking the talk, it's important to put your commitment where you say it is: Support activities **throughout the campus** that underscore the value of inquiry that connect the dots—linking teaching and learning, innovation, and careful assessment.

- Don't ask, just **assume** that practice can be improved, because, of course, it can, and encourage reflection on what works, what doesn't, why, and where improvements may be made.

Several examples on my own campus illustrate these ideas. At Middlesex, individual faculty members may apply for minigrants to research and develop their own versions of new curricular approaches. Group inquiry and development occur through our Distance Learning Initiative, MCC's Carnegie Academy project, Activating Learning in the Classroom program, a Skills Enhancement Program (through which faculty work together to integrate basic and study skills instruction into introductory college courses), and academic program reviews. We support conference attendance and follow-up reflection papers, inquiry-based sabbaticals, involvement in the University of Delaware's Problem-Based Learning Institute, and we provide peer and individual support for faculty who develop and integrate service learning into their courses

The specific initiatives themselves are not so very important. Nor is the source of their instigation. Sometimes it's a faculty member who becomes excited about new ways to engage students in better learning; sometimes it's an administrator. That it's important to "catch the wave" with students also holds true for teachers: Go where the excitement capitalizes on interest, motivation, and energy. Excellent initiatives run their course and are replaced—not necessarily by better ones, but by ones that, for the moment, capture a new wave of interest and stimulation. For instance, research and development of distance-learning pedagogy can be just as powerful an experience for a faculty member as problem-based learning is in a more traditional classroom setting.

4. Remember that all of this is about students. The goal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is ultimately to enhance student learning. While that may sound patently obvious, there are times when educators discuss what they need or want as if the enterprise were about them. When we talk about *scholarship*, it's not unusual to lose one's compass. It takes reminders from time to time that we invest in faculty work in this domain because their growth and development is essential to our students. The work is

particularly important not *just* because it stimulates and enriches those who engage in it, but because it is intended to break new ground and enhance effectiveness in the teaching/learning process.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is ultimately about our students. Faculty and administrators are where we are *because* our students are where they are. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is one of the most significant investments we can make in promoting effective education. It joins together students, teachers, teaching strategies, and learning theory; all are linked in an open spirit of inquiry, collegiality, and experimentation. And, in recognizing teachers as the lifelong learners they need to be, we honor and serve our students, who deserve the very best that our faculty's ongoing scholarship can provide.