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Introduction: From Order to Chaos to Transformation

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INTRODUCTION

FROM ORDER TO CHAOS TO TRANSFORMATION

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During the course of the 2006-07 academic year, I had the honor of directing a faculty development seminar in the scholarship of teaching and learning at Eastern Michigan University. This work was a logical outgrowth of my year spent as a Carnegie Scholar in the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Program. The Carnegie Foundation bills itself as an advanced study center for teaching; it is all that and more. In addition to developing my own work, Carnegie required that I participate in advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning movement on my campus. My goal was to see if we could replicate the advanced study center model, writ small, at EMU. With ten willing and eager faculty members, we set out to see if an interdisciplinary group could help each other develop and implement scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) projects.

The scholarship of teaching and learning movement is a relatively recent development in academia. Ernest Boyer's (1990) classic, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, is often regarded as the first sacred text of the movement. Boyer argued for a broader definition of scholarship rather than the traditional narrow definition (what Boyer

called the scholarship of discovery) that had come to dominate the academy. To the scholarship of discovery, Boyer added the scholarships of application, integration and, most relevant for our purposes, the scholarship of teaching (later broadened to the scholarship of teaching and learning).

There are perhaps as many definitions of the scholarship of teaching and learning as there are practitioners (and, of course, many people are practicing the principles of the scholarship of teaching and learning without even being aware of it!). At its heart, the movement aims to restore teaching to a position of prominence within the academy. The movement encourages teachers to not only innovate, but to use rigorous scholarly methods to *investigate* and *assess* student learning. And, in addition to undertaking these kinds of investigations, scholars of teaching and learning should take what they do and make it public through articles, presentations, course portfolios, websites and other ways that make learning visible. In the words of current Carnegie Foundation President Lee Shulman (1993), this would make teaching “community property” and put an end to “pedagogical solitude.”

The members of the Faculty Development Seminar on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning were an multidisciplinary group of strong teachers who came together to improve their practice, and to document the learning that they observed. The group met approximately every other week during the 2006-07 academic year, either as a large group or in smaller “project groups.” Most participants spent the fall semester developing their project (including student surveys and other data collection instruments) and the winter term implementing the projects. As many of the authors explain, the interactions within the group led to some wonderful discussions that generated significant refinement and enhancement of almost all the group members’ projects.

From the conception of the seminar, Karen Busch (Director of the Faculty Development Center) and I envisioned a volume much like this one, which would consist of contributions from each of the participants. Throughout the year, as the projects were being developed and implemented, the group spent time thinking about what a volume could look like. Questioning how to make our work visible to others

in the Eastern Michigan University community and outside it was paramount. In my original conception of this volume, I foresaw eight contributions that all pretty much followed the same mold. My vision was Pat Hutchings' (2000) wonderful volume, *Opening Lines*, in which eight early Carnegie Scholars discussed the first stages of their work in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The pieces in the Hutchings volume were mostly reflective, as the authors discussed the process by which they came to do this sort of work.

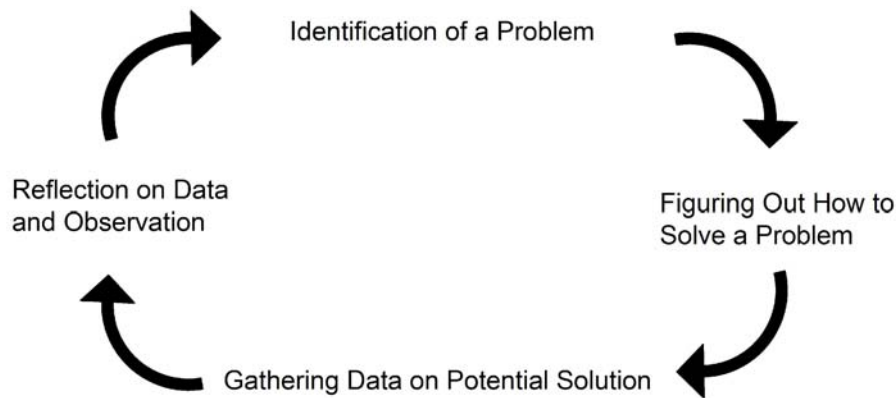
As the early days of May arrived and the papers began to show up in my INBOX, I was taken aback by how *different* they all looked. The first one to arrive (by Sarah Ginsberg) was a fairly short, first-person, extremely reflective piece, in which the author walked the reader through the process by which her project developed and evolved. The second, by Myung-sook Koh, had the feel of a professional research paper. Both were as different as night and day (as even a casual glance at the papers in this volume will reveal). As later papers came in, they were all over the map as well. The nice, neat, orderly volume I had conceived was becoming more and more elusive; order became chaos.

My first thought was to consider this as a failure on my part – maybe my guidelines and prompts to the participants were not all they could have been. I instantly began to regret the relatively “laid-back” approach I took to offering guidelines for what to write. Perhaps if I had been a little bit firmer in telling the participants *exactly* what I wanted and did not want, I would have gotten a set of papers that looked just like what I had been expecting. Maybe I should have put my foot down a little bit more!

And then I read the papers. They were, for first drafts, quite good. And, when one considers that most of these papers were early drafts of work that, for some authors, represented a significant departure from previous modes of writing, their high quality stands out even more. As editor of this volume, I thought all of these pieces made a contribution to the understanding of teaching and learning, and, pending minor revisions, easily merited publication in a volume such as this one. But if the pieces were published as is, my nice, orderly volume might appear chaotic and “random.” I wondered if my somewhat rigid personality could handle editing such a volume.

In carefully reading the papers and assessing the variation in what I saw, I came to believe that this variation reflects, more than anything, a cycle of scholarship of teaching and learning work. Through my own experiences, and through close observation of the work of both my Carnegie colleagues and the members of the seminar, I have now come to see this sort of work as being circular, represented in Figure A-1.

Figure A-1: Cycle of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning



My own example speaks to this cycle. About two years ago, I identified a significant problem in my American government classes. I had been using a character-playing simulation that I was proud of – it engaged the students and helped them learn the course material. But in thinking more about what I was doing, I came to fear that my class, and the simulation, was not doing enough to prepare students as citizens and teach them the skills they would need to act effectively should they ever wish to affect government policy. In figuring out how to solve this problem, I decided to create a different simulation, one that placed more of a premium on skill acquisition and on helping students to develop, articulate and defend their positions on political issues.

I've been doing this for two years, collecting much data on students (pre- and post-class surveys, content analysis of essays, interviews, etc.) and going public with papers and articles that pay *very* close attention to the learning that is taking place. Through all of this, I've now become concerned about other aspects of the class that no longer seem to be going quite right. For example, I worry about

students' tendency to reach "false consensus" on the issues rather than engaging with legitimate differences of opinion. I also observe and want to address the struggles students have in making sense of contradictory positions expressed in the readings they do on the simulation issues. My reflections on what I have seen lead me to conclude that, while I remain generally proud of what I am accomplishing in the class, there's a problem. I'm now spending much time in the summer of 2007 thinking about this and working on solutions. Once I get my students where I want them to be, the cycle will undoubtedly continue.

I observe this pattern in the pieces in the volume, each of which can be located somewhere around the circle depicted in Figure 1. Having watched these projects unfold, I can attest that each went through all the steps – some more than once. All of the authors began with a problem, attempted to solve the problem, gathered data on whether the solution was working, and then carefully reflected on their success and challenges. As such, the way they engaged in all phases of the cycle is plainly evident in this volume.

Each of the chapters here begins with an engaging problem, whether it is student failures to perform successful Internet searches (the problem Paula Storm and Laura Eidietis struggle with), student struggles with understanding chemical reactions (Larry Kolopajlo's project) or getting students to believe they can be successful teachers in urban settings (Myung-sook Koh's goal). These are all important problems within the scholars' respective disciplines; I can speak for all participants when I say that throughout the year our group, as a whole, enthusiastically engaged in these issues and the issues raised by other seminar participants.

Once a problem is identified, the next step becomes to identify possible solutions. The reader of this volume will certainly find some interesting solutions to problems. For example, Mary Brake attempts to help her engineering technology students build more confidence in their math ability by introducing them to the mathematics program Matlab. Pam Walsh uses online threaded discussions and case studies to engage her students and ensure they actually do the reading *before class*; radical stuff! But more than just hearing about these innovations, the reader of this volume will get a chance to examine the careful,

meaningful reflections that led them to their innovations; I would submit that this sort of intensive, reflective thinking about teaching is a very, very good thing (Greene 1978; Schön 1983).

The scholarship of teaching and learning is characterized by gathering data to help assess the impact of teaching on student learning; all of the authors in this book used innovative data collection techniques to open a window into their students' work. For some, like Paula Storm and Laura Eidietis, the data used consisted of class assignments and student reflections upon them. Other seminar members, such as Mary Brake and Liz Stevens, used surveys of students in an attempt to see what students were learning. Some of Sarah Ginsberg's data on student learning in a hybrid class consisted of reflective essays from students; in addition to this, Sarah found that she learned a lot by talking directly to students about their learning. As these multifaceted examples teach us, the good scholar of teaching and learning is like a good carpenter, armed with a well-stocked tool belt. When the situation calls for a survey, a survey is done. If interviews, or close reading of assignments, or another method is needed, the researcher pulls that tool out of the belt.

One of my favorite aspects of many of these pieces is the steps toward true transformation embodied in them. As each author continued to learn about their projects, they often found themselves, and the projects, radically altered. Thus, Sarah Ginsberg's work on learning in a hybrid environment is still about that, but is now also about the role of reflection in student learning. Larry Kolopajlo remains *very* interested in chemistry animations, but has now added an interest in student learning styles to his work. Liz Stevens remains interested in the role of service learning in educating speech pathologists, but is also now quite engaged by what professional development looks like in that field; like Larry, she is also exploring learning styles. Paula Storm and Laura Eidietis' work not only deals with Internet searches, but also begins to explore the meaning of professionalism in teacher education.

I am proud to be associated with the projects reported on in this volume. They are all interesting and engaging, and each addresses an important issue in the teaching and learning of our students. All

of the work in this volume is action-oriented; rather than ivory tower work, every bit of scholarship reported here has as its ultimate aim helping students to learn. I commend to readers of this volume the diversity of approaches used to study student learning and the very meaningful reflections on the role of the teacher as the facilitator of student learning that so many of the authors directly address.

But when I think of my favorite part of the year, I am reminded of Randy Bass' (1999) oft-quoted work on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Bass wrote that the difference between scholarly research and teaching can be seen in how problems are treated in each:

In scholarship and research, having a “problem” is at the heart of the investigative process; it is the compound of the generative questions around which all creative and productive activity revolves. But in one’s teaching, a “problem” is something you don’t want to have, and if you have one, you probably want to fix it. Asking a colleague about a *problem* in his or her research is an invitation; asking about a problem in one’s teaching would probably seem like an accusation. Changing the status of the *problem* in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about. How might we make the problematization of teaching a matter of regular communal discourse? How might we think of teaching practice, and the evidence of student learning, as problems to be investigated, analyzed, represented, and debated? (Bass 1999, p. 1, italics in original)

In our seminar this year, a group of exceptional teachers came together, bared their souls, and announced that they had a problem. Whether that problem was being unsure how students would handle a hybrid learning environment, or how to make engineering technology students more confident in their math ability, or how to get speech pathology students to think like professionals in the field, the shared

goal was to use tools of scholarly investigation to advance the cause of student learning.

In checking their egos at the door, all admitted that they did not have the answers, and that they sought both data and discussion to help them deal with their challenge; in Randy Bass' words, they sought together to problematize their teaching, investigate it, and engage in communal discourse about it. Their results are interesting, to be sure, but the process is even more fascinating. These scholars took steps to end the pedagogical solitude that characterizes Eastern Michigan University, and the academy in general. We are all better off for their efforts.

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