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The Synergy of Making Teaching Public

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CONCLUSION

THE SYNERGY OF MAKING TEACHING PUBLIC

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The synergy of these faculty authors engaged in deliberations on teaching and learning was both exciting and energizing. Larry Kolopajlo explained it best:

... when we gathered, we seized the opportunity to provide constructive suggestions reflecting the range of our backgrounds. When, as a result of periodic group discussions, we stepped back and viewed the big picture together, we found that we shared these student-centered commonalities: effectuating performance, imbuing a sense of professionalism, appreciating the concept and importance of scholarship, and eliminating roadblocks that effaced student self confidence. *This synergy expanded projects to the meta-cognitive realm...* [emphasis added]. (p. 15)

It is that *synergy* - that coming together of faculty from very disparate disciplines and levels of teaching expertise - that makes these papers shine. These faculty opened up to each other - and now - to the world.

They risked making their teaching public. Each author began with a specific research question originating from his/her own teaching and disciplinary concerns. Just as students learn by coming together with their teachers, so did these faculty. The authors brought their data to the table, and openly shared their thinking. They reached out to each other, listened to ideas and suggestions, and made decisions about how to proceed. They were willing to change the directions of their journeys. They learned from each other, re-shaping their research, classroom teaching and, inevitably, student learning. In short, this group's listening and communication effort made it possible to co-construct new knowledge – both with their colleagues and students. It changed them, and will hopefully impact the reader as well.

This volume illustrates that it is possible to create safe spaces in which faculty can take the risk of making their teaching public. It is the *synergy* of bringing very diverse faculty together and their willingness to listen, reflect, create, implement and evaluate that makes it possible. When that occurs, deeper, more powerful and meaningful student learning emerges.

Jeff Bernstein's introduction and the authors' chapters bear witness to personal struggles to transform research and teaching. Primarily, the authors perceived themselves as participating in *personal, individualized* scholarly journeys. However, upon closer inspection, their individual concerns are the very themes being debated in higher education today. Whether it was their intent or not, the authors also participated on a larger journey to transform higher education. It is these larger themes in higher education to which I wish to draw attention here. I submit that such scholarly work on teaching and learning is the key to the survival of public higher education in the United States.

Toward Transformation in Higher Education

The debate over the purposes of higher education in the United States dates back to the 1600s. Suffice it to say, the purposes are many and often depend upon the individual or institution that is declaring them. These authors address some of the most critical issues facing

higher education today. I have selected only those most frequently mentioned by the authors: creating a skilled and educated workforce; developing lifelong, learner-centered learners; exploring forms of diversity; and sustaining linkages to public, private and local/global institutions, including primary and secondary education (Newman, Couturier and Scurry 2004; Tierney 1999).

Toward Creating a Skilled and Educated Workforce

All of the authors had a goal of improving student learning, leading to a better educated and skilled workforce. But how do we get from the formal knowledge of the classroom to the workforce? There are several phases: 1) defining the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the “expert” or “professional;” 2) providing a wide range of varied learning experiences that permit students to move from novice to expert; 3) evaluating the outcomes of student learning and teacher teaching; and 4) using the evaluation results to refine and revise the next cycle of teaching/learning.

Defining “experts/professionals”

In order to make a profession or discipline accessible, the specific skills, knowledge and attitudes required in any given discipline or profession must first be defined and/or made explicit. Often, the experts cannot explicate the set of skills, performances or actions that comprise their expertise. In the university, knowledge is often taught (and learned) as a “disembodied entity” (Freidson 1986). However, in the work force, this formal knowledge becomes transformed and modified by the necessities of the organization, time and resources. It is this more practical set of skills and knowledge that these authors have sought. Storm and Eidietis have done an excellent job of explicating the critical components of searching for valid references. Brake struggles with the question of how more novice students can “think” like a professional by using more sophisticated software. Stevens discovers that even the discussion of a simple case can expose significant differences in expert and novice speech language pathologists’ approaches.

By clearly delineating what is meant by an “educated/skilled”

professional, students can prioritize their learning and focus on key skills and knowledge sets. This in turn, provides for a smoother transition to the workforce, and will reflect well upon the university as a necessary institution for democracy.

Providing varied learning experiences that permit students to move from novice to expert

Herein lies the most fascinating part of any teacher's journey. In order to provide and support learning experiences, the teacher must bring to bear his/her knowledge and experience, disciplinary and professional content and skills, teaching and learning strategies, and a deep understanding of students. This is a very complex process. Students and faculty have differing skill and knowledge sets, as well as diverse background experiences, prior knowledge, and learning styles.

In addition, the teacher must factor in the organizational resources, time constraints and intertwined relationships. The time provided to complete the assignment and the manner in which it is graded contribute to learning. Walsh notes that even the specific choice of assignments matters. Koh points out the difficulty of finding quality field placements. These papers and other research provide evidence that one semester is insufficient for most of the in-depth kinds of knowledge and skills that students must learn to become professionals (Bucher and Stelling 1977).

During teaching/learning interactions, a wide range of varied teaching/learning strategies must be available at the teacher's fingertips. As Kolopajlo pointed out, the diversity of students' learning styles alone requires more than one teaching strategy. The variety of learning strategies noted by the authors include: Koh's ten hour field placement, Kolopajlo's use of Flash animation, Walsh's and Stevens' use of case studies, Storm's/Eidietis' and Brake's hands-on computer training. The authors are at the early stages of evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies. With time, the questions must become more sophisticated. How do we provide students with the most effective learning strategies, given all of the constraints noted above? How do those learning opportunities differ by individual student and teacher?

Many of the authors' teaching/learning strategies were tech-

nologically sophisticated, such as Kolopajlo's use of Flash animations to assist students in visually understanding the sequence of chemical reactions. Walsh enabled students to learn the terminology through her online quizzes, leaving her free to discuss the cases in the classroom. But Ginsberg's struggle with her online quizzes points out the difficulty of knowing what works best in an online world. We now know that students can learn as much in online classes as they do in a face to face class (Bernard et al. 2004; Zhao et al. 2005). What we do not know, as Ginsberg rightfully points out, is what works best in a hybrid classroom. This is a fertile area for research. Not only do we struggle with such technology usage as teachers, but from these reports, we note that some students also struggle.

These faculty (and certainly many others) have provided a large and varied number of learning experiences for their students within each course. However, it takes many years to move from novice to expert, and requires a considerable amount of practice. The artificial time limit of the 15 week semester makes it difficult for students to attain mastery or expertise in any given discipline, or to become autonomous, learner-centered learners. A spiral curriculum is needed. In such a model, the same skills and knowledge are revisited several times over, adding more complexity and refinement, and autonomy/responsibility each time.

This raises larger questions for the university beyond the scope of this book. Are there spiral curricula available for each program? Have key skills and concepts been built, layered and scaffolded throughout the curriculum? Are there discussions among program faculty about how, when and where to offer a sufficient number and variety of opportunities for students to become experts/professionals? One or two practice sessions, as Storm and Eidiotis point out, are insufficient to produce autonomy. Without autonomy, the movement from novice to disciplinary expert is incomplete. An expert must be both responsible and successful in his/her performance (Bucher and Stelling 1977).

Evaluating the outcomes of student learning and teacher teaching

When can we truly say that a student has reached "expert/pro-

fessional” status, or at least sufficient autonomy to leave the university and obtain an entry level job in a given profession/discipline? Can students now perform those skills and use that knowledge to address real-world problems? Will students have sufficient skills to continue to learn throughout their lifetime? We evaluate these outcomes either as the teaching/learning occurs, i.e., during the semester, or at the end of the term/year/program. Oftentimes we rely only on formal assessment methods, but when Ginsberg began questioning the learning in her classroom *during* the term, and asked the students to discuss their own learning, learning was enhanced. All of these authors will need to continue to explore the longer term learning outcomes that emerge from their projects.

There is also a need for the same sort of high performance outcomes for teachers as those we have set for students. Sharing reflections on teaching serves as one very profound form of evaluation. However, just as for student assessment, there must be multiple forms of teaching assessment. Such assessment must be viewed as a component of the faculty’s professional development, not as a punitive measure. Scholarly research on teaching and learning may be carried out by both students and faculty. In the process, there will be better forms of evaluation for everyone concerned.

Using the evaluation results

Evaluation should always be seen as the *first* component of a new cycle of change - as well as the *last* component of an old cycle. The process of evaluating learning outcomes must be directed back to the original delineation of the skill and knowledge sets. We so often forget to focus on this - but this completes the quality assurance cycle. It is a necessary step that all of these authors will need to take before they teach their courses again.

Accountability for results is already present for experts/professionals in the forms of certification and licensing. Accountability for the *training* of the professional workforce is also present in the professional schools, but has not yet reached the liberal arts to the same extent. The warning signs have been posted. As public funding for higher education declines, government officials want more account-

ability. They hear from industry that students do not have the skills needed for a 21st century global workforce. Universities must become actively engaged in ensuring that students can actually become productive, engaged, and global citizens. If not, universities will be forced into even more state and federal regulation (Fairweather 1996; Newman, Courturier and Scurry 2004). It will only be avoided by directly addressing the entire process discussed here. Making this process transparent to all will provide the accountability demanded from the larger community.

Toward Developing Learner-Centered, Life-Long Learners

We were privileged to have L. Dee Fink at Eastern Michigan University in March 2007. His taxonomy of significant learning outcomes was much in evidence throughout these papers. Fink's work incorporates Bloom's earlier taxonomy (Bloom 1956), and takes it considerably further. He concludes that six general types of learning must interact: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring and learning how to learn (Fink 2003). When achieved, significant learning addresses several of the public purposes of higher education.

In Fink's work, "learning how to learn" is an essential component to significant learning. Schön termed this "reflection-in-action" (Schön 1983). Using the example of the tightrope walker, Schön pointed out that true experts are reflective *in action*. Experts reframe problems to find new solutions or to use the same information differently, i.e., they are able to improvise while they are in the middle of *doing* or *acting*. To apply knowledge in a situation, problem-solve, or have a field experience and actually do the work of a professional is much more complex learning than memorizing facts, characteristics, or theories. At a professional level, knowledge is both transferred and transformed from one situation to the next. Professionals continually construct and re-construct their own professional skill and knowledge set (Freidson 1986). In order for students to practice these kinds of actions, students' performances must be made visible and open to critique so that reflection and change are possible.

The authors in this book created opportunities for their students to do just this. From Walsh's case study analyses, to Koh's field experiences, to Steven's encouraging students to think how they learned different course objectives differently, to Ginsberg's outright asking the students to reflect with her, these faculty encouraged students to learn how to learn through performance. Many of the others asked students to reflect upon their learning at the end of the term. This provided students with more formal opportunities to assess their individual knowledge and skills. However, lifelong learning and reflection-in-action are critical for the future of our global sense of well-being. The needs are great for additional timely, and sophisticated opportunities for students to learn how to reflect, but reflection alone is insufficient. Students and faculty must subsequently either justify and/or change their actions, based on their own learning.

Toward Exploring Forms of Diversity

Primarily, the authors explored diversity by focusing on the diversity of learning styles. This derives, at least in part, from the group's synergy. The authors point out the difficulty of addressing more visible forms of diversity in small classes, where there are only a few students of one gender, race, or ethnic group. This is a problem that all educational researchers face when there are an insufficient number of students to do a quantitative data analysis, and limited resources. Perhaps in the future, it will be possible to pair faculty scholars with others who could skillfully serve as external researchers. Determining how all forms of diversity make a difference in student learning is important. There is much work to be done - and the urgency of the global shift in the economy requires academe to do more than it is currently doing.

Toward Sustaining Linkages to Public, Private and Local/Global Institutions

It is through the linkages to the larger world around us that we both define and validate our work. When alumni specify a need for more training in a skill, process or topic, faculty can more clearly

define the skills and knowledge needed. When our students graduate; obtain good jobs; and become productive, reflective, learning citizens, our work is validated.

While community service often receives short shrift in the faculty evaluation process, it is critical to the formation of excellent student learning. Faculty must continually learn what the expectations will be for their students, upon graduation. Koh, Ginsberg, Kolopajlo and Storm/Eidietis speak directly to the linkages necessary with primary and secondary education. Others also address the needs made explicit by external advisory boards and/or accreditation standards bodies.

In sum, each of these authors has touched upon some of the key questions and issues in higher education today. While they have made progress on their own personal journeys, they have also advanced the global journey toward the transformation of higher education. With this volume, we hope that there will be others who will join them.

Teaching and Learning at EMU

Much as student learning will always remain a challenge, faculty learning (i.e., professional development) will always remain an even larger challenge. Faculty time to commit to professional development is very rarely provided, particularly in regional universities with a heavy emphasis on teaching. During the time that the authors were involved in this project, they were also teaching four courses per semester, conducting research, and engaged in community service. Two faculty dropped out because of difficulty with the time commitment. There must be a larger commitment to providing such professional development opportunities for all faculty.

We must now ask: how do we build scholarly practices of teaching and learning into every teaching/learning experience at EMU? How do these practices become coordinated, sequenced, and evaluated such that we can assure the world that EMU students are coming to the global marketplace well prepared for the 21st century? How do we assure that EMU students are life-long learner-centered learners? How do we assure that our students become actively engaged

in the civil society? The resolution of these struggles is critical to Eastern Michigan University.

It is through the work of faculty such as these authors that public higher education will remain strong. The days of accountability for student learning are already upon us. What a difference it would make if Eastern Michigan University, taking responsibility jointly with its students, could provide the public with a money-back guarantee that our students have the expertise/professional knowledge and skills to join a global economy; are lifelong, reflective learners; engaged in civil society; and make contributions to global diversity! We hope that the synergy of this faculty group will inspire others in pursuing the rewards of this challenging journey. The university, public higher education and the workforce can only be transformed when such important questions are addressed and answered.

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