



Northeastern University

Teaching Matters Newsletter

Center for Effective University Teaching

April 01, 2006

Teaching Matters : Vol. 11, No. 2

Northeastern University

Recommended Citation

Northeastern University, "Teaching Matters : Vol. 11, No. 2" (2006). *Teaching Matters Newsletter*. Paper 2. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20000455>

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TEACHING

The Newsletter of the Center for Effective University Teaching • Volume 11, Edition 2, Spring 2006

MATTERS

The Whole IS Greater than the Parts!

Donna Qualters, Director of CEUT

There are many urban myths in higher education. One of the most prevalent and most dangerous is the image of the professorate as independent entrepreneurs working long, lonely hours to individually rise to the top! Granted there are some instances where faculty and staff must work alone, but the reality is that we all need to work with others to accomplish our teaching and research goals.

Recent research focusing on how professionals learn and grow has contributed to the development of the concept of “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998, 2002). Communities of Practice are composed of professionals who use structured activities to explore beliefs, assumptions and practice around a topic with the goal of understanding and improving learning and practice. The literature on situated cognition (Lave, 1988, 1991; Brown, Collins, Duguid, 1989) tells us that new learning takes place during the process of practice but that it often remains hidden unless we have a means to uncover our tacit knowledge – be it around teaching, research or even service. By working together with like-minded professionals, individual practitioners not only add to their knowledge base, but can actually reorganize and create new knowledge through interactions with others. In addition, by reflecting collectively, professionals are able to challenge their beliefs in a non-threatening environment to create real change. In other words, the whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

Personally, I found communities of practice invaluable in my teaching (and research) role. Three years ago, I was assigned a course and charged with rethinking how it was taught. I discovered that two other faculty

were also teaching this course. I called them and asked if they would like to meet weekly to reflect on the last class and simultaneously plan the next class. Initially there were concerns over the time commitment, but the development of the course and our own professional growth laid that fear to rest. Over the last three years, this practice has continued even as the faculty who teach the course have rotated. All in all, five different combinations of faculty have come together to work on this course. The change in the syllabus over the last three years has been sustentative as each member of the community refines or adds new ideas and concepts. More importantly the discussions around this course have caused all of us to think differently about the class, the content, our role as teachers, and the research we wish to pursue.

This issue of *Teaching Matters* focuses on “communities of practice” that are currently growing and flourishing at Northeastern to enhance our teaching mission. We hope that you enjoy reading about their work. But more importantly, we hope that you will consider joining a community, or even starting your own.

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From the Board

Andy Rohm, Assistant Professor, Marketing

On behalf of the CEUT Board, I am excited to welcome you to the Spring 2006 CEUT newsletter addressing the important concept of “Communities of Learning.” The idea behind Communities of Learning is that we can become more effective teachers by coming together as a true community to talk about our teaching, our experiences and reflections from the classroom. This is a particularly important and relevant topic given that the Northeastern community has grown significantly over the past several years in terms of numbers of faculty as well as reputation. Inside this Spring issue, you will read about some of the many venues at NU with which to access and be a part of the ever-growing community of learning



here at Northeastern. It is our hope that this issue will foster dialogue and encourage us all to talk about our reflections, experiences, and goals as teachers.

Yours in the Northeastern Learning Community,

Andy Rohm
Assistant Professor, Marketing
College of Business Administration

From the Desk of the Assistant Director

Janna Jackson, Assistant Director of Academic Programming, CEUT



As the new Assistant Director of Academic Programming at CEUT, I am excited about the variety of programs CEUT coordinates and we are always eager for new ideas and suggestions. With the help of faculty, we hope to develop even more ways to support teaching at Northeastern. What has been most exciting for me has been meeting so many people at Northeastern who are truly dedicated to improving teaching.

Everyone in the CEUT office has eased my transition into this job. Certainly Donna Qualters’ words of wisdom and Audrey Aduama’s practical advice have made my life much easier. Melanie Reeves, CEUT’s new administrative assistant, keeps everything running smoothly and is always on top of all the little details, including the ones that escape my mind. Kuheli Dutt, CEUT’s graduate assistant, has been especially helpful and a joy to work with. As one of her fellow TA’s states it, she “saved” CEUT by filling in for this position before I was hired.

Unfortunately, Kuheli will be leaving us this summer. All of us at CEUT will miss her tremendously.

I look forward to working with all of them and working with all of you.

Sincerely,

Janna M. Jackson

The POE Fellows: A Community of Practice Dedicated to Mutual Learning

Joe Raelin, Director of the Center for Work and Learning

Can scholars in an academic environment come together to share perspectives on a subject, such as practice-oriented education and research, in a way that surmounts their separate disciplinary mindsets? Another way to frame this is to consider whether multidisciplinary faculty can form a community of practice (CoP), defined as a collective entity that evolves as people united in a common enterprise develop a shared history as well as particular values, beliefs, ways of talking, and ways of doing things. They come together because they are involved with one another in the process of reflecting on their own work.

The Center for Work and Learning's POE Research Fellows program attempts to create such a CoP by assembling dedicated scholars across the university who wish to develop research on the critical processes and outcomes of POE, including approaches in use at NU and at other comparable institutions or organizations. POE learning integrates experience in the workplace with experience in the classroom within both the liberal arts and professional education.

The Fellows meet on a monthly basis and serve as resources to each other in the form of a learning team. Initially, they arrive with different perspectives and intellectual traditions, but over time, they come to depend on each other's feedback to not only advance their own personal projects but to develop a collective identity to promote POE scholarship. Some of the common themes that have emerged are: how to capture local knowledge, how to consciously apply conceptual knowledge

into learning, how to make use of multi-generational experience, how to engage in reflection that is both concurrent and collective, how to learn from experts to create mastery, and how to construct real-world learning in professional settings.

Now in its third year of operation, the POE Fellows' projects are described on the Center for Work and Learning's website at: <http://www.poe.neu.edu/community/facultyresearch.html>. Tangible outcomes so far, mutually, include an international professional workshop and a poster presentation at a local meeting, and individually, a number of national professional platform presentations. Some members have also submitted grant proposals to national foundations and granting authorities. Most importantly, the fellows, past and current, continue to form a collective presence as a CoP to support POE teaching and scholarship.



Deck Chairs on the Titanic?

Stephen Nathanson, Professor of Philosophy and Religion



I spend most of my time preoccupied with my own work—the courses I am teaching, papers I have to grade, book orders for the next term, papers or talks to prepare—and with things going on in my own department. I know that others—faculty, administrators, and staff—are similarly focused on their specific duties, chores, and projects. Since these are all demanding tasks, they need our attention if we are to do them well.

Occasionally, however, I read or hear things about “higher education” that catch my attention and that make me think: “We should be worried about this. Why aren’t we talking about it?” I had this experience years ago when I read Allan Bloom’s best-selling diatribe *The Closing of the American Mind* and the less noted but equally critical book *Tenured Radicals* by Roger Kimball. I thought, “These people are slandering college and university faculty members. They make statements about thousands of people, statements that are based on no serious investigation but that play in to popular conceptions of what professors are like.” It seemed to me that we should be defending ourselves in some way, but mostly these attacks were ignored.

My one effort at defense was a letter to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which had published a speech by the neo-conservative

writer Irving Kristol, who made the ridiculous claim that most faculty members were devotees of Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher who was a Nazi sympathizer. Though Kristol’s claim was clearly a distortion and a smear, the *Chronicle* printed it. Now, after years of such attacks, there is talk about passing laws and policies to protect students from left-wing professors and other un-American teachers. Are we simply hoping that these efforts will go away?

This isn’t all. In recent months, there have been reports of studies that show that many college graduates do not score well on various reading proficiency tests. These studies are in fact disturbing. And they come at a time when students and their families are increasingly pressed by the costs of a college education. It is one thing to sacrifice for a genuine education, but what if the education is not the real thing?

One day last month while walking to school, I imagined the possible eruption of a parent revolt against colleges and universities. People who have made serious sacrifices to pay their children’s tuition are not going to be in a good mood if they conclude that their money has been wasted. Public universities may be most vulnerable, but private ones will not be immune since higher education relies on federal money.

Lo and behold, the next day’s *New York Times* [February 9] carried a front page article with the headline “Panel Explores Standard Tests for Colleges.” According to the article, “A higher education commission named by the Bush administration is examining whether standardized testing should be expanded into universities and colleges to prove that students are learning and to allow easier comparisons on quality.”

While you and I certify students in individual courses with grades and credits, this system has lost credibility. A 2003 press release from the

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce notes that:

“Congress has been inundated in recent years by ‘horror stories’ that point to a lack of accountability in higher education. Among the problems legislators are concerned about:

- *College graduates are entering the workforce and being forced to take remedial courses in subjects such as basic memo writing.*
- *Teacher colleges are graduating teachers who are not prepared to teach, contributing to the shortage of qualified teachers in America’s K-12 schools. . . .*
- *U.S. employers are having difficulty finding American college graduates with the skills they need to compete.”*

The committee chair, Republican John Boehner, who has just succeeded Tom DeLay as Republican Whip in the House, is quoted as saying, “These are problems we shouldn’t be seeing with such frequency in a nation that invests tens of billions of dollars each year in higher education.”

Personally, I am very suspicious of these political initiatives, but they are likely to become stronger in the years ahead and, unlike some of the other concerns raised about colleges and universities, these initiatives raise serious issues that should be addressed.

How do we know that we are graduating students with a full range of knowledge and intellectual skills? Are we doing all that we can to educate students successfully? Are there ways that we could change our ways of working to make ourselves more effective as teachers and, more broadly, to make our own university more fully dedicated to education?

My belief is that we are not doing enough, in spite of the fact that so many dedicated people work so hard to teach well. I see two kinds of obstacles to our succeeding.

First, as Northeastern and many other

schools seek greater academic recognition, pressures increase for faculty members to generate research, and these pressures create incentives to cut corners in our work as educators. Can I make more progress on my book by giving multiple choice tests and thus saving a lot of time on grading? Can the University save money by offering bigger classes? Can we pass off grading to less experienced teachers and advanced students? All of these are attractive strategies, but who will actually do the hard work of giving students feedback on serious writing and analytical work?

These corner-cutting strategies are not the only problem. A major obstacle to effective teaching is the continuing assumption that either we all know how to teach already or, if some people don’t, nothing can be done about it. Surrounded by colleagues who are dedicated, experienced, and intelligent, we seldom tap into one another’s experience to improve our work and to transform ourselves into professional teachers. Speaking for myself, I can say that after more than thirty years of teaching, there is still a lot I could learn.

Here is the \$64,000 question: How would we organize our work life if we really aimed to maximize learning, if we really wanted to guarantee that the result of our efforts was a generation of knowledgeable graduates who possess genuine intellectual skills and genuine knowledge?

As far as I can tell, this question is not at the top of anyone’s agenda. I have never heard it addressed seriously by administrators, and it’s not at the top of the agenda for individual faculty members, since we are all occupied by the pressure of our own courses, research, and committees.

I predict that sometime soon, there will be either a parent revolt or a political attack that accuses institutions of “higher education” of being neither higher nor education. What would we do in response to such a crisis? What should we be doing now to prevent it from happening? If we could figure out how we might respond to such an attack, perhaps we could change our ways now and not wait for the ship to hit the iceberg.

Teaching Circles

Stephen Sadow, Professor of Modern Languages

A Teaching Circle for Fall 2005 was convened by Bruce Ronkin, Associate Dean, as part of a new initiative by the College of Arts and Sciences designed to enhance teaching and learning across the College. Donna Qualters served as facilitator.

The seven member Teaching Circle was remarkably varied, even for the faculty of Arts and Sciences. Not only did members--David Rochefort, Susan Pilaud, Ann McDonald, Sebastian Ilbuj, Jean Phillippe Stijns, Stephen Sadow, Donna Qualters--come from the departments of Political Science, English, Visual Arts, Sociology, Economics, Modern Languages and Education, they held positions ranging from part-time lecturer to academic specialist to tenure track assistant professor to full professor. Their teaching responsibilities differed too. Some lectured to large introductory classes, one member spent many hours correcting papers for intensive writing classes, and yet others led advanced seminars.

At first, the members were puzzled by what seemed to be a lack of commonality. How-

ever, by the second session, it became clear, that they had more in common than they had imagined. All were teaching college students, with all the joys and frustrations that go with that. The differences in members' teaching experience and in the daily experiences in classroom were quickly transformed into assets. The subsequent Teaching Circle meetings were of two types. At first, discussions focused on an article about a teaching issue suggested (and in one case written) by a member of the group. For example, topics such as creativity in the classroom and managing large lectures led to intense discussion. As members came to know and trust each other, the discussions moved to problems recently encountered by the members themselves. Gradually, the participants became each other's advisors and sounding boards.

When the end of the Fall term came, the group did not wish to disband. The group decided to continue meeting during the Spring. In this second session, the members, including some new members, will do research together. They will try to learn how the faculty can better adjust to the rapid change and improvement taking place in Northeastern's undergraduate student body.

Book Group on Spirituality in Higher Education

Priscilla Lasmarias Kelso

Why would a diverse group of faculty meet twice a month to explore spirituality as a component of higher education? The answer partly lies in looking for a new vocabulary to address the role of pedagogy within the larger contexts of teaching and learning.

Several books have served as discussion guides including *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer; *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*, edited by Steven Glazer; *The Academy and the Possibility of Belief*; *Education as Transformation*, edited by Victor

Kazanjian and Peter Laurence and, currently, *The Way of the Teacher* by J.M. Haile.

Some issues explored by the book group have included teaching as rooted in the identity and integrity of the teacher, education as a lifelong journey towards wholeness, building community in institutions engaged in the life of the mind, and meeting the specific challenges of teaching this current generation of students. In this regard, CEUT's book group provides a forum for affirming teaching as a vocation committed to both mind and heart.

Chalk Talk

Jonas Chalk, Professor

Dear Jonas,

I am trying to team-teach a large course with another faculty member and I am finding it very frustrating. When I had my own course, I knew exactly what the students were seeing in each class, I could decide exactly what went on assignments and exams, and the students could come directly to me with any problems or questions. Now I seem to have to concentrate more on coordinating with my colleague than on teaching. Also, the students seem confused about who is responsible for the course.

The most troublesome part is that I don't know what to do when the students complain to me about the way my colleague is teaching. I'm not sure what to tell them, because in many cases I agree with their criticisms. Should I ask my colleague to change the way he is teaching? I am not comfortable with this. Much of it comes down to a matter of teaching style, and I don't feel confident enough in my notions of the best way to teach to impose these ideas on my colleague (who actually has much more teaching experience than I do).

What should I do?
Team Player

Dear Team Player,

I am not surprised that you are finding special difficulties with a team teaching situation. In individual teaching, one need only worry about one's own teaching practices, while collaborative teaching requires an integration of values, philosophies and disciplines. Team teaching is not just "turn teaching." Teaching partners need to be unified and cohesive about the structure and



implementation of a course. These things don't just happen by themselves; they require specific efforts and planning on the part of the collaborating teachers.

Before beginning a team-taught course, it is important to establish a clear definition of roles. Who will set the assignments and who will write the exams? How will the exams be graded? If any responsibilities are to be shared, you should determine who is responsible for what and how coordination will occur. A genuine collaborative effort on the syllabus often yields a more thoughtful set of learning objectives and corresponding decisions about course content. Once the course is underway, on-going communication with meeting and planning time built in is a necessity. Decisions should be made with a free exchange of ideas and negotiation to reach consensus. This way, all collaborators have a shared responsibility in guiding the course and a shared accountability.

To deal with student criticisms, an atmosphere of trust and respect among the collaborating teachers must be established. This can only be done face-to-face, so meeting regularly is essential. If, for example, you have a meeting where you discuss all the feedback from students and how to respond to them, participants must feel free to mention criticisms as well as any positive feedback from students. You can set the tone by being open to constructive criticism of your teaching and encouraging your colleagues' openness to student feedback. Afterwards, you can respond to your students and explain what actions are being taken and why. It is sometimes helpful to establish a pattern of giving each other feedback by attending the first few classes, regardless of who is teaching.

But a major question remains, is collaborative

teaching worth the trouble? One has to make additional efforts in team teaching in areas that don't apply to individual teaching. Sometimes a class is so large that the work is clearly too much for one instructor. Team teaching is a practical way to divide the labor so that each instructor has a manageable workload. Beyond this sharing of labor, there are other benefits to collaborative teaching. By working closely with peers, one gets a chance to see and learn from others' teaching practices. A team of teachers can bring in a much wider range of expertise than a single professor. The collaboration also provides intellectual stimulation and a natural forum for discussing teaching practices as well as providing new ideas that you might experiment with in your own teaching.

Collaboration is much easier for (and with)

some people than others. By the nature of their research discipline, some faculty will be quite accustomed to working in collaboration with colleagues, while others will be used to working alone. Keep this in mind when requesting or making teaching assignments.

You may be team teaching because of its benefits, or because of departmental requirements. In either situation, as in any relationship, communication between the partners is essential to success.

Hope this helps!

Jonas

Quick Tip: Conduct a midterm assessment (see [Jonas on Midterm Assessment](#), 11/07/01) and review the results together with the teaching team. This is a good starting point for a discussion on how to improve teaching practices.

Upcoming Fall Events:

- ~ New Faculty Orientation
Teacher Academy
- ~ Scholarship of Teaching and
Learning Day

Tentative Fall Workshop Topics:

- ~ Learning Disabilities
- ~ Transforming Lecturing into
Active Teaching
- ~ A Backbone, and how to get one

If you have any ideas for programming
you want to conduct,
please let CEUT know!



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CEUT would like to thank Isabel Meirelles for designing this newsletter