

Opening The Campus Door: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Rockhurst University

Pat Hutchings

[Pat Hutchings is a consulting scholar with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, senior scholar with the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, and a scholar in residence with the Center for Teaching and Advising at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington.]

Author's Contact Information

*Pat Hutchings
Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
51 Vista Lane, Stanford, CA 94305*

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Introduction

In 1999, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching invited campuses of all kinds, in the United States and beyond, to make a commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning. The idea, still new at that time, was to invite faculty to bring their skills and habits as scholars to their work as teachers, framing and investigating questions about their students' learning--and, along the way, beginning to build an institutional culture in which such work was recognized, supported, and valued. I had the good fortune to be one of the leaders of that program—CASTL as we called it (the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning)—and I recall long discussions with my colleagues, and even some sleepless nights, wondering whether anyone would sign on for such an agenda, and what exactly they would *do* if they did.

Now, almost 15 years later, we have answers to those questions. During the several stages of CASTL's work, over 200 institutions participated. And, as documented by a 2009 Carnegie survey, at least some of those institutions made significant progress toward integrating the principles and practices of the scholarship of teaching and learning into institutional culture. For instance, of 56 responding campuses (we were surveying only the final cohort of campuses, not all 200), 23 reported that their work had had a wide impact on other campus-level initiatives, such as faculty development, curriculum revision, and the first-year experience, with deep impact in some settings and less deep in others (Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone, 2011, p. 144). But knowing

what lies behind these numbers is another matter, and it is here that the collection of essays brought together in this issue of *Transformative Dialogues* is such a treasure, offering an up-close view of the experience and accomplishments of participants in the faculty learning community established at Rockhurst University in response to CASTL's 1999 invitation and continuing for more than 10 years. What emerges is a story about impact at multiple levels---on faculty, students, administrators, campus governance, departments, and the institution--and about what it takes to sustain and integrate important new work in teaching and learning in ways that make a larger and lasting difference.

As Renee Michael tells us in her introductory essay, the central cast of characters in Rockhurst's work necessarily evolved. The original faculty group, assembled in response to the CASTL invitation, comprised 15-20 individuals from a range of fields--biology, math, communications, management, accounting, psychology, and others. Of course not all members of the original group were actively involved for all ten years; over time, some, naturally, came and went, as Michael tells us, and a few retired. Even so, one of the notable features of the work reported in their essays is its duration—a step in the direction of sustainability, certainly. Often, for lack of a better term, scholars of teaching and learning speak of their work as a project--a word that suggests a more or less discrete beginning and end. But what we see in these essays is work that unfolds in stages and (again, for lack of a better term) “morphs” over time in ways that defy neat boundaries—especially endings. In this spirit, I was struck by Steven Brown's “project,” which felt much more like multiple projects as he worked his way through several rounds of data collection, interventions, and cycles of reflections and redesign. And by Jennifer Oliver's, which also unfolds in stages, over several semesters. Perhaps both would agree with what Mairead Greene and Paula Shorter say at the end of their essay: that the work they've done thus far (on building and assessing conceptual understanding in precalculus) “is still a work in progress.” In fact, the process of writing their paper has, they tell us, “opened our eyes to the limitations of our current exams....” And—the good news--looking ahead they see ways to “improve our assessment of conceptual understanding not just in Precalculus but also in our other math courses.” As Carnegie's former president, Lee S. Shulman, once quipped as CASTL was coming to an end, “the project ends, but the work continues.”

One of the reasons it continues is because, once it begins, one sees (as evidenced by Greene and Shorter's comments) how much remains to be done. One of the most important developments in teaching and learning over the last two decades has been turn toward learning—or what Barr and Tagg described in a still famous, much-cited 1995 *Change* magazine article as a “paradigm shift” from teaching to learning. Today we are nicely acclimated to this shift of focus; the language and invocations of learning roll off the tongue so easily (no savvy educator would talk about teaching improvement without invoking learning) that we can sometimes forget how very difficult it is to deeply understand and significantly affect the latter. These essays, especially when seen as a group, are a vivid reminder of those challenges. Indeed, one striking feature of them is that all of the authors are starting at a very advanced place; these are reflective and well-informed practitioners, already employing high-impact practices, engaging students in their learning, making all the pedagogical moves that would seem, by most measures, to ensure the very best learning. But somehow that's just not enough for

these teacher-scholars. They start asking questions, looking beneath the surface a little further, seeking out more and better data, asking more of themselves as teachers and more of their students as learners. All, it seems, have caught a bad case of what some higher education scholars have called “positive restlessness,” the refusal to be satisfied (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt, 2005, p. 46). Consider again Steven Brown, whose interest in critical thinking has already led him to a variety of very thoughtful, research-based course-design modifications; his scholarship of teaching and learning then pushes him toward further modifications and much more fine-grained (and demanding) examinations of their impact on learning. Probably Brown and his learning community colleagues are already inclined toward this restlessness, whether by training or disposition, but I would bet money that the condition is also a contagious one, made more acute by ten years of active engagement with one another in the scholarship of teaching and learning group.

Which brings us to the importance of the community in Rockhurst’s story about “Sustaining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” to borrow Renee Michael’s title. Her essay notes a variety of forces in play that helped to set in motion the campus’s early commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning: prior work in the math department, awareness of a general pressure on higher education to pay greater attention to teaching and learning, new ways (nationally and locally) of thinking about faculty roles and rewards, and, of course, the inauguration of CASTL. Small stipends provided an incentive for faculty participation in the faculty learning community, as well. But what was also powerful, Michael tells us, was “the very real human motivations” for camaraderie and a sense of “belongingness.” The members of the faculty learning community “had fun and interesting academic exchanges” that “kept us in the community.” Not surprisingly in this context, mentoring became an active component of the group’s work. Its explicit focus was, predictably, the shaping of projects, and that sense of shared purpose is critical (in fact, definitional) to a community of practice. Jennifer Oliver recalls how the group helped her move from “the general idea” she had for her project early on, to a much more focused design and clearer reflection on “what I wanted students to get out of” a particular assignment she was studying. This kind of support is at the heart of good mentoring. But it does not take much imagination to read between the lines and envision a broader kind of support—a feeling of belonging, connectedness, advice about career choices, a sense of common cause with colleagues. When asked about their motivation for undertaking the scholarship of teaching and learning, one of the top reasons listed by CASTL Scholars (those selected to participate in the national program run by Carnegie) was the desire to find new colleagues who shared their interests (Cox, Huber and Hutchings, 2005, p. 134). Being able to step out of one’s departmental role and rank, to be part of something cross-disciplinary, multi-generational, and larger—that’s something many faculty are hungry for, even in times like these when expectations are on the rise and everyone is busier than ever.

And what is that something larger? In part the answer may be that intangible thing called culture, the Geertzian web of meanings and significance we weave as we work and live together, which is of course one of the main ways a civilization or institution passes important values and practices along to those who follow. But, more concretely, “something larger” may be aspects of institutional mission, shared goals, and agendas

for student learning. Too often, educational reform initiatives never break out of their “special project” status—perhaps engaging a small group of people in wonderful work but in ways that never connect with (or alter) larger institutional realities. In part because of its longevity, but also because of careful leadership and positioning within the institution, the work undertaken by participants in Rockhurst’s faculty learning community has not only helped individual instructors strengthen the learning of her or his own students; it has also connected to and advanced larger campus agendas.

One connection, certainly, is with student outcomes assessment. Several of the essay authors have been involved in (and in some cases leaders of) Rockhurst’s assessment efforts, and that experience clearly overlaps with these projects. Jennifer Oliver reflects in her essay on how her participation in campus assessment activities led to her inquiry into students’ critical thinking in her research methods course. Mairead Greene and Paula Shorter focus extensively on assessment and its challenges, and among the outcomes of their study are several tools and processes that appear (to me at least) to offer real potential for strengthening assessment of conceptual understanding in settings beyond math. In these ways, the Rockhurst essays are a reminder that good things might happen if the scholarship of teaching and learning and assessment communities on campus were more closely in touch than they have been in most settings.

Another point of connection and integration is around particular learning goals. Several members of the Rockhurst group have been looking at critical thinking—and making important strides in breaking that valued but often vague goal into much more specific, discipline-inflected terms that can be more effectively taught for and assessed. Service learning figures prominently as well. Annie Lee’s work in chemistry focuses on a course required for nursing majors in which she has created opportunities for students to tutor nearby high school students; her study looks at the impact of that experience on her own students and on the high school students as well, looking both at their skills and attitudes. This is good grist for addressing questions (we should be asking them ourselves, and certainly those whose support we need for the scholarship of teaching and learning are asking them) about the impact of the scholarship of teaching and learning on student learning. But it is also an excellent example of how what began as a special campus initiative (prompted largely by CASTL) was connected to larger elements of the campus mission and goals, in this case Rockhurst’s long-standing commitment to community engagement and service learning. That connection is also front and center in the work of Laura Salem, whose essay tells the story of a “SoTL Project in Cell Biology” in which her students work as mentors with students in a local high school, engaging them in group work involving open-ended, authentic scientific questions. These kinds of connections with larger shared agendas are key, as my co-authors and I argue in *Scholarship Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact* (2011), for moving the scholarship of teaching and learning from a special project to a sustained and sustainable part of the institutional fabric.

One final connection bears (demands) mention, as well, and it is in fact the one that rises to the surface at some point in nearly every discussion of the scholarship of teaching and learning: the system by which faculty work is evaluated and rewarded. In the closing essay in the group, Cheryl McConnell addresses a variety of institutional

supports for the work of Rockhurst's scholars of teaching and learning—conditions for, or phases in, the pursuit of sustainability. But, she says, “the single most important element of creating and sustaining a SoTL campus initiative is the inclusion of the work in promotion and tenure decisions.” This is certainly a familiar refrain in scholarship of teaching and learning circles, and for some it has probably seemed a dispiriting one. To paraphrase what my Carnegie colleagues and I heard from CASTL participants in our 2009 survey, there remains a troubling gap between recent rhetoric about the growing value attached to teaching and the realities of what work gets rewarded. And this is why the Rockhurst story is not just interesting but exemplary, for it is one of the places that has managed the transition to a system in which the scholarship of teaching and learning is now fully ratified and recognized as legitimate scholarly work. In saying this I do not presume that this shift is now smooth going or that every decision is unproblematic; nor should it be. But Rockhurst's documents are a model of clarity, and the process of consultation, with the original faculty group assembled under CASTL auspices, the promotion and tenure committee, the vice president for academic affairs, deans, and departments is, as McConnell describes it, a model of patience, care and intentionality in the service of institutional change. What has been possible at Rockhurst will not be possible everywhere, but there are clearly lessons to be learned here, perhaps language and processes to be borrowed, and hope to be drawn.

It is in fact this possibility that I mean to suggest by the title of this essay. The notion of opening the *classroom* door--making teaching public, available for peer review and collaboration—is now commonplace, in theory if not fully in practice. But we also need open *campus* doors—opportunities to understand in detail the dynamics of important institutional change efforts over time. Of course this genre is not unknown (think for instance of Alverno College's accounts of its work on assessment). But so far there are very few extended accounts of campus-level engagement and work over time around the scholarship of teaching and learning. All the more reason, then, to be grateful to Rockhurst—not only for what the story in these essays tells us about its own work for the past decade but for its ability to spawn more such accounts. The time is right, and now, as the scholarship of teaching and learning develops and matures, there will, one hopes, be many more campus doors to be opened and stories to learn from.

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