

## **What We Value about the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

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### **Forging our Own Path: Dialogues on Teaching and Learning**

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Thank you for this invitation to think more carefully about what it is I value about the scholarship of teaching and learning. As I reflected on my own list of things that I have come to appreciate about being involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning, my long list boiled down to one unifying concept: connections. In my comments in the opening panel for "Forging our Own Path: Dialogues on Teaching and Learning" I focused on the ways in which the scholarship of teaching and learning is uniquely positioned to create connections in and across our academic communities.

#### **1. Connections in our Disciplines**

The first kind of connections I came to appreciate were those within my own discipline. When we follow the advice of Pat Hutchings and Lee Shulman (1999) to "frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning - the conditions under which it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it" (p. 13) we:

- ask more authentic questions about aspects of learning in our classes: the answers to which have a real impact on the quality of students' learning experiences in our courses
- pay more attention to the evidence of learning generated every day as students interact with our learning plans, each other and us
- get better answers: we connect, in deeper and more insightful ways to how learning in our disciplines takes place.

My first foray into systematic inquiry in my own classroom grew out of an observation that while my first-year students were successful in accumulating information about biology, they were not learning to be biologists in the sense that they were not demonstrating an ability to solve problems using their knowledge of biology. I set out to understand my dilemma by taking a "natural history" approach to investigating students' problem solving processes. Through this investigation I came to understand the challenges experienced by students and evolved some teaching and learning strategies that explicitly focused on developing problem solving capacity. In this process I was able to connect with student learning in new ways, understand some of the challenges they faced in becoming more effective problem solvers in biology, and engage them in the learning process in more explicit and meaningful ways.

Although the connection with student learning was most profound, I also gained from a connecting in fundamental ways with the discipline of biology itself. The irony of developing expertise in a field is that many of the concepts, processes, ways of thinking and communicating, and even how knowledge is organized in our disciplines become second nature to us (Boshuizen, Bromme & Gruber, 2004). As we examine why a concept, process, or way of thinking in our discipline presents students with difficulty, we gain new explicit insights into the knowledge of our disciplines, how it is connected and why it is important.

A third kind of connection within my discipline emerged as colleagues became aware of my interest in problem solving. Our hallway discussions extended to an interest in our shared dilemma of how to help students develop as problem solvers, and I made connections with an new dimension of the work of colleagues and gained new colleagues on the way.

Through these connections, it is easy to see how the scholarship of teaching and learning emerges in the disciplines. The upside of this genesis is that, within our disciplines, the "social reach of knowledge" (Brown & Duguid, 2001, p. 205) is quite efficient because we already have in place an established communication infrastructure for sharing and building knowledge: our listserves, meetings, conferences, and journals. Consequently, the knowledge generated through the scholarship of teaching and learning is much more readily shared within a single discipline across institutions and countries than it is across disciplines within a single institution. As a result, the disciplines benefit immensely from the connections that flow from systematic inquiry into the learning that takes place in our classrooms.

The downside of how most scholarship of teaching and learning originates in specific learning contexts in individual disciplines is that this knowledge often remains isolated within our disciplines (Shulman, 2004). That was certainly my own experience. Even as I joined a colleague in a more systematic approach to investigating the development of problem solving abilities, I saw our work as a "biology" problem to solve.

## **2. Connections Across Disciplines**

From this collaboration in pursuing our biology interests, new kinds of connections emerged: ones that crossed disciplines. In our search for who else might be working on similar learning challenges we discovered a wealth of knowledge in disciplines such as physics, math, and medicine. We also discovered an established body of conceptual and empirical knowledge in the learning sciences that opened a whole new level of understanding of our students learning with respect to problem solving.

In addition to these connections to work in other disciplines, we also discovered colleagues who shared our interests. In a session we presented at the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in 1988, we were surprised when faculty from diverse disciplines joined us. This event was the beginning of my appreciation for teaching as a "meta-profession" (Arreloa, Aleamoni, & Theall, 2001). Regardless of our discipline, we share many common interests, areas of expertise, and dilemmas in facilitating our students' learning. By "going public" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Shulman, 1993) with the knowledge generated through the scholarship of teaching and learning,

we make what we have learned accessible to colleagues who share our teaching and learning interests and challenges across disciplines. Over time, I learned a lot from our cross-disciplinary discussions of how what I was learning could be applied in different learning contexts.

It is through this kind of collaborative building of the scholarship of teaching and learning that we can contribute to a culture of teaching and learning in our institutions. As Parker Palmer (1998) notes, this building process has affective as well as substantive dimensions:

*The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it. We grow by trial and error to be sure -- but our willingness to try, and fail, as individuals is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks. (p. 144)*

### **3. Connections across Institutions**

Most recently, I have come to appreciate the value of fostering the flow of knowledge generated through the scholarship of teaching and learning not only across disciplines within institutions, but also across institutions. Many institutions share systemic challenges with respect to issues such as how to provide learning experiences that help first-year students make a successful transition to post-secondary study. Even within disciplines, there are common areas of concern for student success, particularly in math and science. The collective scholarship of teaching and learning generated on topics like these has the potential to create "networks of practice" (Brown & Duguid, 2001, p. 205) that can in a relatively short time, bring a huge base of problem solving power to these issues.

### **4. Connections with Learning**

At the heart of the capacity for the scholarship of teaching and learning to forge connections -- across individuals and within and across disciplines and institutions -- is our common interest in and commitment to learning. When all members of our communities, regardless of their disciplinary expertise, engage in a "social process of inquiry" (Lattuca & Creamer, p. 5), we contribute (albeit in different ways) to a body of knowledge about learning and how it can be facilitated.

Our participation in the scholarship of teaching and learning helps us to engage in the learning process with our students in ways in which we see, hear, and learn more.

### **5. Connection with Connections**

So what I value most about the scholarship of teaching and learning is the power of the connections it creates: with our students, our colleagues, our institutions, and our disciplines. Perhaps most importantly, our systematic efforts to reflect on evidence of the impact of our teaching helps us to connect with self. We maintain our integrity as teachers by creating a space where we are constantly challenged to examine the reciprocal connections between what we believe about student learning and our teaching practices. As Palmer (1998) observes, it is not so much in the connections as at the points of disconnect that we grow as teachers.

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