Reflections on the scholarship of teaching and learning

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When I was working in the Quebec-Canada Studies programme at Vanier College in Montreal, we worked in space that was unique. The space had been designed by the first chair of the programme to reflect the interdisciplinary, modular nature of the courses the programme intended to teach. The largest space was set aside for a classroom, but the rear of the classroom included two offices with spaces for three instructors. Besides that, the back of the classroom included display space for an indigenous peoples' artefact collection. From the backside of the display area next to the offices, a door led into a small seminar room that was situated in front of two more offices housing another four instructors. When I first started teaching in that programme, a programme that a few years later won the Secretary of State's Prize for Excellence in Teaching at the college level, I was struck by how the physical area affected the dynamics of teaching. It was not uncommon for people to be walking across the back of the classroom going to and exiting from the offices when classes were in session. At first it felt rather daunting. Individuals who taught in that classroom had classes that were exposed to everyone else who taught in the programme. I was amazed how that changed the dynamics, not of the classroom, but of how the people who taught in the area viewed one another. I have never worked in a facility like that anywhere else. If instructors had a good class, everyone knew about it before they left the classroom; if they were faced with an obstinate student, everyone knew about the situation and had suggestions or stories that informed the experience. Dialogues on pedagogy, critical theory, and the relation of one text or one set of ideas to another became a natural part of the day to day conversations that occurred outside of the classroom, in the offices and in the seminar room. It was a liberating experience. We learned to learn from one another and to accept the different pedagogies that all of us used. I don't think anyone would find it surprising that this group of instructors ended up having book nights and arguing away many a pleasant evening discussing a wide range of texts over meals. What made the programme work so well was the fact that the teaching and learning that went on in the programme was transparent. Students who took classes from one of the programme instructors often took classes from other instructors in the area too. We shared students and we shared ideas.

The scholarship of teaching and learning can be a natural part of instruction when there is trust and sharing. However, when programmes work in classrooms that are closed, when the individuals teaching in programmes only see each other teach when they are asked, as a part of a formal evaluation system, to sit in on a class, the honesty that comes from sharing an open space with colleagues and students disappears. Suddenly embarking on openness when the facilities themselves work against it can be a challenge. Like most concepts that work well, collaboration works well when individuals decide to work together out of interest. Getting together as a department to talk about standards on a yearly or semester basis when individuals leave the common space and enter their own private teaching world cut off from their peers can be a sham and futile.

How then do you embark on review that is meaningful, shared and constructive? It cannot be generated in a profound way simply by sharing "graded examples of student performance representing a range of how well students had achieved the course goals," the method Bernstein (2005) reports in the *Academe* article "The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," the Peer Review of Teaching Project at the University of Nebraska attempted to employ using a peer system. Yet, Bernstein admits that what the process needed was "a community of teachers inquiring into the success of their students" and that "[t]hese communities function like informal groups of scholars who discuss the early stages of their research and creative efforts; participants receive intellectual commentary and social support." The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is not simple, nor does it offer simple solutions, but as Bass points out in the same article, unless teaching and the study of teaching and learning is valued properly within institutions, and given value in the way that traditional research that reaches audiences "through conventional outlets, then outstanding and successful teaching per se will have been put again into second-class status." The challenge is large for any institution. The traditional concepts of academia can negate and discourage the study of teaching by rewarding, both in workload and in incentives, traditional research at the expense of the study of teaching and learning.

References

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