

Sabbatical Proposal

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Background

One of the most often used but most misunderstood pedagogical tools is classroom discussion. One would be hard pressed to find anyone who has been a college student who has not felt both the power of real insight and the frustration of “wasted time” which classroom discussions can engender. Why is it that the same tool can deliver such profound moments in students’ academic lives and also cause such frustration and a sense of profound confusion? It seems a bit arbitrary.

The problem is that successful professors produce effective classroom discussions, but often they can’t explain how they do it. Is a successful discussion a product of personality and instinct only? Recent research would suggest no. There are more and more arguments that effective discussion facilitation techniques can be learned and applied by even the most inexperienced professor. Within the past two decades, there seems to be an increase in scholars and educational theorists trying to explore and analyze the merits and methods of classroom discussion. My sense is that this coincides with the rise in interest in a more student-centered approach to teaching and learning. Some of the more interesting and exciting theoretical approaches have come from those who see culturally responsive teaching and democratic learning environments as the key to learning in a twenty-first century. Whatever the reason, I believe there is now enough interest and new understanding to warrant a closer look.

Sabbatical Proposal

Over the course of my one semester sabbatical (Fall of 2009, preferably), I will pursue recent research and thinking within the educational community on effective classroom discussion, specifically within the framework of culturally responsive approaches to teaching. This would involve reading and researching numerous texts and sources with the intent of not only developing my own professional understandings and competence, but with the intention of producing a handbook and video script from which other faculty would benefit.

Outcomes

My goal is to achieve three things. First, by constructing a knowledge base of the latest theory and practice concerning classroom discussion I will be able to integrate this knowledge into my teaching for what I believe will be overall improvement for me and a benefit to my students. Second, I will produce a handbook for Moorpark College and district faculty. This handbook will be a comprehensive, yet user-friendly, source which summarizes theory and provides practical applications across the curriculum. Third, in collaboration with a Moorpark College student (through the student internship program), I will produce a script for a video which will be completed in a subsequent semester. This video will be a supplement to the handbook and will be used for professional development on campus, especially for new faculty.

Reading

Most of my research will come from reading the following texts and online sources:

Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. 2004.

Bain is a veteran professor who sets out to examine the foundations of effective teaching at the college level. Some of his conclusions apply to my pursuits because of their relationship to student-centered learning and cooperative environments.

Barton, Jennifer, Paul Heilker, and David Rutkowski. *Fostering Effective Classroom Discussions*. <http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/discussion.htm>

This site is somewhat general in content, but it looks like a good portal for links to other sites on the subject.

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2001.

Not all of this text appears to be on point, but several chapters deal with active learning and small group effectiveness which have overlap with discussion building.

Brookefield, Stephen D. and Stephen Preskill. *Discussion as a way of Teaching*. 2005.

Brookefield and Preskill, both educational scholars, have constructed an examination of the entire process of successful discussions within the classroom framework. Most notably, they have expanded their original study to include online classrooms and democratic strategies of participation and inclusion. This text, most likely, will be central to my research.

Dantonio, Marylou and Paul C. Beisenherz. *Learning to Question, Questioning to Learn: A Guide to Developing Effective Teacher Questioning Practices*. 2000.

I'm very interested in effective questioning as a sub-category to overall discussion. This source touches on the very nerve of this overlooked skill.

Finkel, Donald L. *Teaching with your mouth Shut*. 2000.

As the back cover states, ". . . Finkel proposes an alternative vision of teaching--one that is deeply democratic in its implications." This exploration of student-centered learning offers insight into what makes discussions successful.

Hale, Michael S. and Elizabeth A. City. *The Teacher's Guide to Leading Student-Centered Discussions: Talking about Texts in the Classroom*. 2006.

Strong, Michael. *The Habit of Thought: From Socratic Seminars to Socratic Practice*. 1997.

Strong, a professor at St. Johns College where seminar and dialogue are the methods of instruction, makes a case for student-focused, conversational learning.

Weimer, Maryellen. *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. 2002.

As the front cover states, this text “presents the meaning, practice, and ramifications of the learner-centered approach, and how this approach transforms the college classroom environment.”

Wlodkowski, Raymond J. and Margery B. Ginsberg. *Diversity and Motivation: Culturally Responsive Teaching*. 1995.

This text focuses on the diverse populations found in post-secondary education and seeks to define a cohesive theory for addressing this reality as well as mapping out a practical application of these theories for teachers.

Zull, James. *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching the Practice of Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning*. 2002.

The book's premise is that learning and thinking are biological. On its face, this text may appear to be outside the realm of my research, but I'm hoping it might offer some new insight into brain processes which I could apply to discussion building in the classroom. It would be interesting to look for connections between the prevailing educational theories and the biology we now understand.

Handbook

The second step of my project will be to produce a short handbook (preferably 8-10 pages in length) which would comprehensively summarize my research and integrate the theories for practical applications in classrooms across the curriculum. The following are “working” ideas for sections/chapters:

Purposeful Discussion: Structuring and facilitating; Building dialogue between students

Diversity and Inclusion

Asking effective Questions

Motivating Participation

Physical Space

Outcomes for Discussion

I want faculty to use this, so it can't be overwhelming or saturated with information. It has to be clear, concise, and applicable. This will eventually be posted online for easy access for all three colleges within the district, but I also want to distribute it to faculty and every New Faculty Orientation group at Moorpark College (I currently am one of the New Faculty Orientation Facilitators, so I'm aware of the value something like this could have for our new faculty).

Video Script

I have arranged with Candice Larson (Communications professor at Moorpark College) to set up an internship with one of her students for the Fall 2009 semester. Creating a video of this kind will be quite an involved process, so we decided to organize my efforts into two phases. The first phase will be developing a script and the second phase will be producing the video from this script. I will work with a student in both phases. The basic vision is to produce a series of vignettes which would teach the “dos and don'ts” of classroom discussion through role playing. I want to limit the video to about twenty minutes in length in order to maximize the teaching opportunity. Once produced, this video could be shown to all new faculty on campus, both part-time and full-time, distributed to departments for use, and even shown at a flex workshop with discussion as part of the presentation. Of course, this too will be put online and easily accessed through our college website.

Conclusion

Developing more effective classroom discussions is clearly a priority for any post-secondary institution, but especially for community colleges. Ours is a world where often professors don't have experience or instruction in teaching methodologies. Professional development is necessary, but not always a priority. Improving my own understanding of and practices with culturally responsive and democratic approaches to discussion is a worthy endeavor not only for me, but for Moorpark College and the district, as well. I believe this project successfully meets all five criteria from the sabbatical proposal rubric and I appreciate your careful consideration of my proposal.