

Sabbatical Proposal

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2009-2010

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 a growing interest in 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

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.

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).