

Building the Teaching Commons

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Abstract: Posits the emergence of a “teaching commons”—a conceptual space in which communities of educators committed to inquiry and innovation come together to exchange ideas about teaching and learning and use them to meet the challenges of educating students.

Essay:

A long weekend in a hotel with hundreds of people in conference mode may not be everyone’s cup of tea but the October gathering of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning was energizing and inspiring. Now in its second year, the International Society was established to bring together educators from different countries and disciplines to share scholarly work on teaching and learning in higher education, and to discuss policy developments and initiatives that affect teaching in college and university classrooms around the world. The inaugural meeting of the group drew over 400 participants to Bloomington, Indiana, last year, and this year’s event, in Vancouver, British Columbia, attracted 650 from fourteen countries, a wide range of fields, and diverse institutional types.

As evidenced by these numbers, the idea that teaching, when conducted with systematic attention to learning, might be considered a form of scholarship has been attractive to many in higher education. And the sessions and conversations in Vancouver reminded us why. The scholarship of teaching holds special promise for improving student learning because it works *within* the culture of academe, inviting faculty to bring their skills, values, and commitments as scholars to their work as teachers. It’s a powerful idea, and one that the Carnegie Foundation—and scores of campuses and scholarly societies has worked hard to advance for the past fifteen years.

It is commonly said that university teaching will not improve until reward systems examine it more carefully, and give it more weight. But what we heard in Vancouver underlines what we already suspect from experience in the United States: the relationship may well be the other way around. The scholarship of teaching and learning is advancing because of its intrinsic interest and its usefulness in helping faculty address pressing issues in the teaching and learning of their fields. And in the process it is producing artifacts and results that are accessible to peers (and thus peer evaluators), enabling the kind of discussion and recognition that teaching has long done without.

The power of this approach to prompt improvement was on full display in Vancouver. For example, a panel of faculty from the sciences reported results from their experiments using case studies to teach their disciplines: improved scores on final exams, greater facility with key concepts, and an ability to make connections with other disciplines that one presenter called “three-dimensional learning.” In another session, participants heard about doctoral dissertations that include chapters on teaching and learning in the field as well as the more traditional research in the discipline. Thought-provoking comparisons were on offer as well: for example, two historians, one from the U.K. and one from the U.S. engaged in a “cross-Atlantic dialogue reflecting upon the nature of teaching and learning in medieval studies.”

The different size and structure of higher education in countries like the U.S., UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand makes it hard to compare the policy climate for faculty work on teaching and learning, but support is growing and widespread. In the U.K. this means an incredible infusion of funds—including 300m pounds (around \$U.S. 530m) for 74 new Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning. In Australia, the Commonwealth government has established a new institute for learning and teaching in higher education, increased the number of national teaching awards, and, more controversially, instituted a learning and teaching performance fund, which will “reward those institutions that best demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching.” Of course, much activity is going on at the campus-level, too. For example, the University of New South Wales in Sydney has reformulated its guidelines to allow faculty to elect teaching as a major focus for promotion to even the highest academic levels. And in Ireland, at University College Cork, the strategic plan calls for “parity of esteem” for work in teaching and research. Developments on campuses in the United States include new promotion and tenure guidelines that give better recognition to pedagogical inquiry and improvement, endowed professorships in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and new roles in facilitating such work for teaching centers and offices of institutional research.

As many conference-goers pointed out, these developments are still in an early stage. Making a place for serious intellectual work on teaching and learning in higher education is a long-term agenda, and there’s much still to be done and plenty of questions still to be answered. But the conference program (which can be viewed at: <http://www.issotl.indiana.edu/ISSOTL/programabs.htm>) also points to the emergence of what we have described elsewhere as *the teaching commons*, a conceptual space in which communities of educators committed to inquiry and innovation come together to

exchange ideas about teaching and learning, and use them to meet the challenges of educating students for personal, professional, and civic life.

Higher education has long fostered the robust academic commons created by scientific research and disciplinary scholarship, but until recently the same could not be said for teaching, which, for faculty in many settings, has been largely private work, guided by tradition, but uninformed by shared inquiry or understanding of what works. The ethic in Vancouver was quite a different one. The scholars of teaching and learning gathered there were keenly interested in learning from, critiquing, and building on one another's efforts. They were, in short, building—and operating in a teaching commons.

Higher education is often likened to a battleship—a metaphor that points to the difficulty of change and its painfully slow pace. But metaphors can conceal as well as reveal, and we would argue that the image of a slow-moving behemoth makes it difficult to see the kinds of changes that *are* occurring as faculty around the world deploy their scholarly curiosity and skills towards understanding and improving what's happening in the classroom on their watch.

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