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Marilyn Cohn
Maryville University

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DISCOVERING THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT VOICE AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

From the Guest Editor

Marilyn M. Cohn, Director of the Finch Center for Teaching and Learning and Facilitator: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Seminar Program, Maryville University

This special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* represents, in many ways, a departure from the prior issues. Instead of featuring narratives that describe and reflect upon existing collaborative activities and relationships between faculty and students, this Spring 2012 edition tells the story of collaboration in the making. Each article points to different but unifying ways in which Maryville University's six-year commitment to a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Seminar Program is developing new levels of faculty understanding of the critical role that student voice and active participation play in the education of post-secondary students.

The individual essays grew out of the collaborative work of faculty from various disciplines who have examined and explored together in seminars their struggles to teach well. Participants have been surprised to discover the many commonalities they share and the differences upon which they can build. One of the unexpected commonalities is the power of collaborating with students.

None of the contributors to this issue joined a SoTL seminar expressly for the purpose of working more collaboratively with students. Rather, they volunteered to participate because of a generalized interest in understanding more about teaching and a personal desire to deepen student learning in their particular classrooms or programs. Within the seminars, there were few, if any, explicit discussions of theories of teaching or learning. Instead, faculty were encouraged to identify a significant "problem" (Bass, 1998) or issue to study in one of their courses and then use the methods of action research to discover new insights or approaches for addressing it. Therefore, all of these storytellers have, at one time or another, moved through the stage of wondering how they could teach better to the stage of actually creating alternative strategies and relationships in their classrooms. They have moved from the stage of systematically collecting data on the results of their changes through observation, interviews, and student work samples to the stage of analyzing that data and sharing their insights in public forums.

At Maryville, we call this collaborative inquiry process The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Boyer, 1990). Although there are differing definitions of SoTL (McKinney, 2007), Huber and Hutchings (2005) capture well the broad way in which we think of it on our campus: "It means viewing the work of the classroom as a site for inquiry, asking and answering questions about students' learning in ways that can improve one's own classroom and also advance the larger profession of teaching" (p. 1). Since this view does not specify any particular type of research methods, as seminar facilitator, I have chosen to operationalize the SoTL approach using the methods of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1991; Stringer, 2008). The definitions and practices of action research are many and varied, but at Maryville, it involves faculty in "a spiral of self-reflective cycles" of planning a change, acting and observing the consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then

replanning (Kemmis & Wilkinson 1998, p. 21). Although SoTL and action research are clearly different in scope and specificity, Maryville faculty often use the terms interchangeably to describe their classroom inquiry.

Despite the fact that each essay in this issue has different goals and aspirations, one theme cuts across them all: the study of classroom pedagogy through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and action research leads to increased awareness of the value and power of learner inclusion and empowerment. The closer Maryville faculty look at their classrooms, the clearer it becomes that meaningful and lasting learning requires dialogue, collaboration, and partnership with students. As you will see, each story shows, to varying degrees, movement toward enabling students to assume a more central role in their own learning and, in many cases, in the analysis of learning. While examples of well-developed practice can be both inspirational and instructive, vivid images of winding paths that ultimately lead toward such practice can be highly motivating and equally useful.

The issue begins with an introduction by Mary Ellen Finch, the Academic Vice-President at Maryville University. Her account provides history and context for the SoTL program and explains how a fortuitous confluence of people and events culminated in the creation of a center for teaching and learning that endorsed faculty studies of their classrooms. It also portrays how a single determined and respected administrator can be the impetus for a university-wide directional change and sets the stage for the following essays that describe faculty contributions to the effort.

"Toward A Blended Student/Teacher Voice In The Classroom: Reflections Of A Teacher Who Was 'Pulled Up Short'" by Shawn Pohlman tells of a journey that took many twists and turns before Shawn fully recognized the value of seeking and listening to her nursing students' perspective on a change in teaching strategy. With the best of intentions, Shawn introduced a structured "student-centered" approach called Team-Based Learning (TBL) in her course that required students to take more active responsibility for their learning **prior** to her lecture or instruction. Students "revolted" at the added responsibility and Shawn describes the initial struggle and ultimate resolution as she grew to understand that "student-centered" had to involve student voice in classroom decision-making.

"From A Teaching Focus To A Student Centered Classroom: Building Collaboration In The Classroom" by Karen Tabak is the reflection of a self-described "reluctant participant" on the path to increased student voice and participation in the accounting classroom. As she traces her journey from a beginning belief that she was "the expert and students were a vessel to be filled with knowledge" to a shift from a teaching to a learning focus and ultimately to a "student-centered" classroom, Karen clearly portrays the many tensions and doubts that accompanied the process. Like Shawn's story, Karen's is a candid account of how significant experiences caused her thinking to evolve from "I am the teacher, they are the students, and they should do as I say" to "I am no longer simply 'the expert,' I am the learner as well."

"The Evolution Of A Scholarship Of Teaching And Learning Participant" by Michael Kiener is a career-long reflection on how the examination of his pedagogy has encouraged him to bring student voice and collaboration into his courses and, in the process, develop his own voice and

identity as a teacher and researcher. Reflecting on his early days as a wrestling coach and analyzing his first SoTL study of the ways in which beginning rehabilitation counseling students learn counseling skills, Michael explains how he has come to view students as primary contributors to their learning.

"Regarding Student Collaboration In Art & Design" by Cherie Fister focuses our attention on programmatic rather than personal issues and insights. She begins by acknowledging that her field of study creates an almost natural environment for the fostering of strong and individual relationships with students. This reality can, however, produce a satisfaction with the status quo rather than an incentive to seek deeper levels of teacher/student collaboration. Cherie's essay explains how the participation of five of nine of her full-time faculty and one senior adjunct in SoTL seminars is changing that situation by moving the faculty into more explicit dialogue with students and bringing students into the role of partnership within the art and design community.

"Magic Words: Students Learning And Teaching Writing In First Year Seminar" by Jesse Kavadlo, Abbie Nicoloff, Jess Burgess, Amelia Coplen, and Kevin Olsen is the first of three essays written either by faculty or faculty with undergraduate students who participated in the Fall, 2010 University Seminar Program. Jesse, who serves as coordinator of program, briefly explains the program's structure, which includes a peer mentor who serves as a liaison between faculty and students. With the inclusion of peer mentors, the university seminars have a structural collaborative component, and this essay and the one that follows examines that relationship. Jesse describes the research questions for his composition course, "Secret Worlds: Fantasy Novels and their Fans," and then turns most of the story over to Abbie, his peer mentor, who played a major instructional role, and his first-year students. Through their accounts we learn about the nature of the collaboration between Abbie and Jesse as well as the students' perceptions of their collaborative writing experience.

"Structuring A First-Year Seminar To Facilitate Self-Authorship: Developing A Shared Understanding Of Self" by Tammy Gocial and Juliana (Jules) Fussell is the story of their collaboration in a course designed to help first-year students "discover and develop their own voices" through exposure to pedagogical strategies from the literature on self-authorship. The learning activities they created for students were a synthesis of their different perspectives, and Tammy and Jules speak both independently and together about how they perceived the development of their collaborative relationship. At the end of the essay, we hear the voices of all participants speaking to the self-growth they attribute to the experience and the analysis of it.

"Dialogue On Our Action Research Experience" by Jen McCluskey and Johannes Wich-Schwarz offers us insight into how both, for apparently different reasons, became dissatisfied with their research projects and decided to go in different directions. The dialogue expressed in this essay is a very open and honest reflection of some of the insights, reflections, and challenges they faced during this process of self-study and how that has affected the way they think about their relationships with their students. As they speak of existing power relationships in classrooms along side of their desire for a more egalitarian form of learning, a discussion of vulnerability is begun but left unfinished, with the thought that perhaps more research is needed.

These essays, individually and collectively, point to the power of the SoTL process both to work toward and achieve the challenging imperative of this journal: *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*. But close reading of the stories also reveals that once that goal has been realized, there is still much work to do. In each instance, we can see that teacher-student collaboration is full of complexities and tensions that require ongoing innovation, inquiry, and analysis. We also see that, as Jesse Kavadlo argues, “collaboration—making students feel as though they are not merely participating but rather producing—helps students think critically, communicate effectively, and create the classroom community, not because they have to, but because they want to.”

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is both a way of thinking and a practical tool that can enable us to better understand and continually improve our efforts. It carries with it a mandate to disseminate our findings for both application and critique (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). All of us at Maryville University are appreciative of this opportunity to make public the current status of our journey, and our commitment to continue. We invite readers of this journal to respond to our stories so that as we move forward we can be stretched and inspired by the insights of others.

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