

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 5 *Winter 2012*

Article 4

January 2012

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Recommended Citation

Grossman Tabak, Karen "From a Teaching Focus to a Student Centered Classroom: Building Collaboration in the Classroom," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 5 (2012), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss5/4>

FROM A TEACHING FOCUS TO A STUDENT CENTERED CLASSROOM: BUILDING COLLABORATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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The Beginning

I have to admit to being somewhat ill prepared as a college professor. I developed my initial teaching style based upon the way I was taught in lectured-based classrooms with faculty that updated their note cards once a decade. Faculty conveyed a sense of clarity and definitiveness; any sense of ambiguity could be overcome by studying hard, working “countless” problems and reading numerous articles. Critical thinking in accounting took too much time, and it was far more important to learn how to pass the CPA exam. While I was well versed in accounting, I had little preparation in teaching, in the theory of education, and in theories of learning.

My teaching style initially reflected that of my professors: I lectured, I reviewed, I tested, and I went on to the next topic. I was the expert and students were a vessel to be filled with knowledge where knowledge consisted primarily of facts. Reflections, appraisal of my teaching, and assessment of student learning were limited (if they existed at all) to the compulsory student evaluation. But Maryville University is an institution that demands excellence. At the same time, the university allows faculty to take risks. It encourages innovation and creativity. Faculty members share ideas, concerns and solutions. Collaboration among faculty members is facilitated through committees, size, and tone. I had a chance to see the inspiring and stimulating activities happening in other classrooms. I realized I could bring my creative side into the classroom and began using art projects, field trips, scavenger hunts and other unique activities. I brought all of my creativity to the classroom to turn students into active learners.

The Middle

When the university president encouraged us to move from a “teaching focus” to a “learning focus,” I was baffled. I believed it is my job to teach, using my own style, and it is the job of the students to figure how to learn, given my style. As an accounting professor, I understand that employers will expect our graduates to master material and tasks regardless of how the information is explained. The skill of learning from all types of instruction is a skill students must have to function once they leave the protective environment of the university. I continue to believe it is the job of a university to give students the opportunity to learn from different instructional methods and techniques. But that does not free me from the responsibility of using a variety of teaching styles to facilitate student learning. It becomes incumbent upon me to explain more about how and why I am teaching in a particular manner. I recognize student competence and lack of competence in particular areas. I am careful to make suggestions as to ways students might use their own strengths to overcome their weaknesses. Such skills are necessary because my students will go out into the workplace and eventually need to teach the employees that work for them.

In an effort to improve my confidence and ability with a variety of teaching modalities, I participated in two inspiring programs:

- Teaching for Understanding & Making Thinking Visible at Harvard University
- Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Action Research Program at Maryville University

Teaching for Understanding helped me to focus on the learning process. It expanded my understanding of the types of learning and understanding that take place in the classroom. I struggled with the notion of teaching for understanding. I was committed to the idea that some items were facts students needed to “know” whether or not they understood them and that there were some skills students needed to have even if they did not “understand” them. While an elementary school teacher may have time to focus on understanding, I was concerned that the vast quantities of knowledge my students must possess upon graduation did not allow for a focus on understanding. But I gradually moved to the realization that obtaining these vast quantities of knowledge became easier for students if they did understand the context of the material. Clearly, some items are fact: every publicly traded firm must file forms with the SEC on a regular basis. But understanding why, how, and what would happen if we did it differently takes the facts from knowledge to understanding.

Making Thinking Visible provided me with a variety of teaching tools to improve my teaching and provide greater opportunities for student learning. I found ways to introduce common techniques such as teach-pair-share and storyboards. I introduced art to encourage critical thinking about accounting. As I saw how students learn, I was able to see opportunities to change their role in the classroom — and move toward collaboration.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning seminar provided a systematic framework for deliberating upon and examining my teaching. I was able to analyze my classroom beyond me as the teacher. The research helped me to focus on all aspects of the classroom including the students, the technology, and the environment. My first research question focused on examining what happened when I used computerized spreadsheets in Excel to teach capital budgeting. I followed up that research with an examination of the impact of a community-based course on student learning. Initially, I thought I was studying my teaching, but I came to see that it was not “all about me.” Instead, I came to see that in a classroom, it takes two to learn.

The Harvard courses and the Maryville University SoTL program allowed me to see the value in expanding my role as an educator to include a more active role for the student. Just as I built a course curriculum to teach the material, I built a series of activities that addressed learning, creative thinking, and engaging questioning. While my classroom activities varied, they were not necessarily purposeful in outcomes and design. Now, I organize the activities and teach methodologies to lead students from being ‘vessels of knowledge’ to being engaged learners.

The Now

Once I finally became comfortable with the idea of focusing on learning rather than teaching, I started hearing about a “student-centered” classroom. This included the need to “hear student voices” and to design learning activities through faculty-student collaboration.

Really? All I could think was, “Haven’t my students always had a voice in my classroom?” I have no problem recalling the many times they ‘voiced their concerns.’ They never seemed to hesitate to complain. I constantly heard how difficult my assignments were, that my expectations were too high, and that every problem should have a “right” answer.

Collaboration implies an ability for students to negotiate. Was that what I really wanted?

My parenting style was based on negotiation from the time my children could speak; I allowed them to negotiate many things although some things remained non-negotiable. But did I want negotiation in my classroom?

Again, I am the reluctant participant. My initial reaction was “no!” I am the teacher, they are the students and they should do what I say. But just as I advise parents of new college students, we have to assume that there will be many times when students will be right, even if we are not necessarily wrong. While I am the expert on the material, they know themselves (hopefully) much better than I do. They are in a better position to know the highest and best use of their time as well as what will help them master that material most effectively.

When I look at my teaching style through the lens of engaging and including students in the learning process, I now see that collaboration has become an integral part of what I do now. That means I must better understand my students. Whether that means I pay attention to the demographics of the student body or that means I make sure to take classes on my own that take me out of my comfort zone, I deliberately work toward understanding the student. The result is that I now better understand the expanded role the student can and should play in the classroom.

Below are several examples of my deliberate use of collaboration in the classroom.

Using Classroom Management Software (Desire2Learn)

I will admit to being an “efficiency freak.” I strive for order and documentation. I did not learn to journal until I found out it could be done with Excel. Therefore, I make heavy use of classroom management software. At Maryville University, we use Desire2Learn. It turns out that classroom management software, such as Blackboard and Desire2Learn (D2L), facilitates faculty/student feedback if you are listening.

a) *Discussion Boards* – I use discussion boards to facilitate responding to questions regarding “administrative details.” While some faculty members use discussion boards as an instructional technique, I use it only for feedback. Students who are reluctant to ask questions in class often find it easier to post their questions on the discussion board. Seeing student questions and the response of other students allows all students a voice in the classroom. Such dialogue helps me better understand student needs and concerns. Students have suggested additional lecture time on difficult topics, deadline changes for projects, and changes in test format. Generally, I comply with their suggestions. When I cannot, I explain my reasoning. Thus, students have a voice in the management of the classroom, and I am clearer in voicing my reasoning in relation to my approaches.

b) *Feedback for Electronically Submitted Work* – In my classroom, going “green” means that all assignments are submitted electronically through the “dropbox.” Initially, I simply provided the same comments as I would have written on a paper version of the assignment. Now, I see the “feedback” area as an opportunity to engage students in a dialogue about their assignment. I often ask “why...?” “what if...?” “how would your answer change if we assume...?” Such questions allow for critical thinking and a deeper understanding on my part as well as theirs. No, we do not always come to the same answer, as there is often not one correct answer. But we both have the opportunity to see and understand the basis for the other’s conclusion.

c) *Submission Before Class* – Prior to the use of class management software, I collected assignments at the beginning of class. With D2L, students turn in assignments in advance of class and I have sufficient time to review the assignments before class begins. Accordingly, I can adjust my lecture or classroom project to address issues noted in the homework. I close the feedback loop when I teach the class.

The Consulting Project

In an effort to provide students with the opportunity to apply their knowledge, I created an assignment in the capstone accounting course. The project requires students to find an organization/company and design a project that will solve a problem for the organization/company. Collaboration comes in many ways.

a) *Choice of Project* – Students, working in teams, are encouraged to find projects in any area of accounting. The open nature of the project encourages students to use their expertise in areas of interest to them. The first part of the on-going assignment requires the student to submit to me the proposal they will send to the “client.” We then discuss the project, the expertise of the team, the time commitment, the needs of the client and more. As we explore the details, we refine the project together into a manageable undertaking. Students and the “client” determine the deliverable, and students prepare time budgets to ensure completion. I review each of these and make suggestions. Projects include developing a strategic plan for a business, determining the profitability of individual trucks for a trucking firm, advising an organization on a move from accrual to cash basis accounting, the use of contractors’ verses employees and the selection of computer-based accounting software for a non-profit organization.

b) *Student Developed Grading Scale* – Each project is unique and developing a grading scale to cover all projects is not possible. Accordingly, I require students to develop the grading rubric for the project. We look at it together to determine the ultimate point distribution for the project. Generally, students’ suggestions prevail.

c) *Project Presentations and Deliverables* – Student must present the deliverable in an appropriate manner. In addition, they must prepare a presentation to the class. I attend the client presentation. I do not review it in advance unless I am asked. At the presentation, I do need to correct errors or address omissions. While errors are rare, I often need to identify risks in other areas. The key point, however, is that with this project, the students become the expert on the topic and I become the learner.

Classroom Advisory Board

Obtaining systematic information from students can lead to continuous improvement of both the instructor and the student. Recently, I created the Classroom Advisory Board to assist with a new class. My hope is that the advisory board will help me manage the class and obtain feedback immediately. This is my first attempt at such a project and I look forward to a unique learning experience.

a) *Select Students* – Students wishing to serve on the Classroom Advisory Board must submit a resume. The resume allows me to fill the positions with a diverse group of students. I encouraged all students to apply to be on the board, however, only two students applied, and both were selected. Should I reach a point where there are more students than can practically serve, I will set up a task force as well as an advisory board allowing the task force to address a particular topic of concern.

b) *Continuous Feedback* – Every course at Maryville University encourages students to complete a course evaluation at the conclusion of the class. But the usefulness to current students is questionable. The Advisory Board allows for immediate feedback from the students. I am encouraging any student that has a concern and is not comfortable coming to me directly to express their concern to members of the advisory board. The Classroom Advisory Board meets once a month with me and provides a vehicle for all students to express their concerns.

c) *Systematic Feedback* – Each meeting includes an agenda, action points and feedback. Students take turns running the meeting. Typically, issues require a response from me. I can provide the response to the Advisory Board, or I can address the issue with the entire class. The safe nature of the setting and dialogue should allow me to hear their concerns and then address the concerns in an open and honest dialogue.

The End

In the end, it is truly not about me, but about the student. Intentionally, purposefully, and systematically including them in the learning process as collaborators improves the classroom experience. In the process of going toward a student-centered classroom, I have expanded my role. I am no longer simply the “expert,” I am a learner as well. This evolution has affected me outside the classroom as well. I am now looking for more understanding in my daily life. Cooking was always a simple recipe-following process for me. Now, when I find myself simply reading recipes, I have begun to ask questions like, “Why I am adding salt?” I hope that searching for understanding will make me better at anything I choose to do. I watch the thinking process of students. I watch how students break down the complex consulting project and delegate tasks among the team and I try to learn from their strategies. As I watch how they solve problems and address issues, I hope to improve my own problem solving skills. I watch how they negotiate the frustration, fear, and sophomore moments in learning new things. When I am faced with a new technology or unanticipated problem, I ask myself, “How would they solve this?” When I develop a class rubric, I look at the grading scale they developed to see what they value. And when the field of accounting looks straightforward to me, I try to see it with awe as they do.

As I continue to learn and grow as a teacher, I know that the words from the Talmud are true: Much have I learned from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but most from my students.