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From the Advisory Board: The Heart and Art of Collegial Conversations

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FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD: THE HEART AND ART OF COLLEGIAL CONVERSATIONS

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*Most of the gifts higher education has given us have come through good conversation.
~ Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc*

This third issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* represents a compelling, collective response to Palmer and Zajonc's recent call to renew the academy through "collegial conversations." By "placing relationships at the center of teaching and learning," as co-editor Cook-Sather terms it, all the contributors enter into a dialogue about the processes for building and sustaining those relationships. Indeed, the journal itself provides an inviting virtual parlor for bringing all of us interested in this joint inquiry together into a collegial conversation initiated at Bryn Mawr.

As Strober has highlighted in making a similar call for conversations across disciplines, having successful and significant interdisciplinary conversations does not happen simply by bringing people from various sites together. This work requires deliberate, ongoing attention and expert facilitation. That's one reason why this journal is so crucial to us all.

Some of the contributors highlight the heart of these collegial conversations by focusing on the qualities needed to advance them, such as the distinctive kind of *cultivation* that Tensuan uses as a controlling metaphor for tilling the common ground together, as well as a special kind of *confidence* that emerges from these kinds of mutually engaging faculty-student partnerships (Teaching and Learning Insights). Others address the art of creating, developing, and sustaining these conversations in more operational terms, such as providing "core principles" for facilitating them (Powers), modeling the relationship as a "*dialogue of radical equality*," (Goldsmith and Gervasio), and detailing how technology can help advance the collaboration (Ruark, Eichel, Talbott, and Thornton).

These artful and heartfelt efforts by the contributors in *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* rely on a pedagogy of mutual engagement and the necessity of productive disruptions to facilitate collegial conversations. At Western Washington University, we are also working to foster reciprocity and to productively disrupt institutional hierarchies by inviting not only faculty and students, but also staff and community members into our conversations. Including participants from all four of these groups, our Teaching-Learning Academy (TLA) serves as a university-wide, face-to-face dialogue forum meeting bi-weekly to study and enhance our learning culture. By expanding the conversation to these diverse participants, we are working both to sustain the collegiality of these conversations, as well as to make them as invitational and inclusive as possible. So a question perhaps for future dialogue: How might we invite even more students and also staff and the public into the parlor? Instead of coming upon

teaching and learning together conversations by “accident” (Chiles), how might we structure them so that the invitation is a standing one for everyone and, in the process, renew the whole academy.

While *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* advances a still fairly new-fangled idea that seeks to cause a scholarly and pedagogical shake-up in the idea of institutional expertise, partnering with students in research on learning has increasingly broad appeal, as these contributors suggest. Instead of focusing on faculty and student perspectives separately, the authors here highlight how the true value of these partnerships comes from building reciprocal relationships (Powers), where expertise comes together *in the process* of inquiring together, including assuming what may be an unfamiliar role. Just as Tensuan suggests that we can gain from being unlocked from “our habitual places” in reading literary texts, we can also gain from *forgetting* our traditional institutional characterizations as faculty and students. By participating in these conversations as partners in co-inquiry as our colleagues at Bryn Mawr are doing, we can also all take lead roles as active learners.

Palmer, P. J. and Zajonc, A. (2010). *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal Transforming the Academy Through Collegial Conversations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Strober, M. H. (2011). *Interdisciplinary Conversations: Challenging Habits of Thought*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.