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## “Changing Education”: Helping to Conceptualize the First 360

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## **"CHANGING EDUCATION": HELPING TO CONCEPTUALIZE THE FIRST 360**

*Elliott Shore, Chief Information Officer, Constance A. Jones Director of Libraries and Professor of History*

The idea was a heady one — one that appealed to me on many levels and one that turned out to be of enormous impact on many of us involved in the work. Never before had I had the experience of students wanting to meet together to continue the conversation that the cluster of courses had occasioned, nor had I ever learned as much from my colleagues — and in this rubric I mean the students as much as the faculty — in the classroom. But I get ahead of myself.

Historians should start at the beginning, or try to find a beginning from which to start. I am fortunately positioned simultaneously in two different parts of the College's structure. I am an administrator: I report to the President of the College in my role as Chief Information Officer and Director of Libraries. In that role, I often have the opportunity to hear about initiatives as they develop, and so could suggest jumpstarting the 360 process with an inaugural offering connected to the College's own history. I am also a faculty member who teaches one course per semester and have been unofficially named the historian of the College. The last bit was self-inflicted, to a large extent.

One of the afflictions of historians is to remember dates — some of them stick with you without your consciously thinking about them. The date of the founding of the College was something I had had in my head and one day in 2008 I added 125 to 1885 and got 2010. We were embarking on a new College Presidency, and had selected someone who wanted to raise Bryn Mawr's visibility. With the active support and encouragement of the President of the Friends of the Library, Teresa Wallace, we floated the idea to our volunteers and they responded generously with resources and ideas. One of the ideas — which has taken a lovely form — was a book on the history of the College from the point of view of the students. Not a history of buildings, boards or presidents, but one about the life of the student of this significant institution in the history of women's education. In order to create what would be called "Offerings to Athena," Teresa suggested that I teach a course on the history of the College in order to have students mine its rich archival collections.

### **Working with a Student Consultant to Develop My Course for the 360**

That first class on the history of women's higher education with a strong emphasis on the history of Bryn Mawr College — one could argue that Bryn Mawr was the institution that was founded in order to prove the point that women and men were equal in their intellectual strengths — was a collaborative effort put together with the help of students who had taken others of my courses and the student consultant who was then working with me on my class on the History of Philadelphia, Erica Seaborne. Erica and I agreed to switch our work to this new class — you can read Erica's thoughts on this process in *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, Issue 1 — and to bring the group of students together and craft a course together from scratch.

We thought about the readings, the assignments, the ways in which the class would operate, the speakers we would invite, the places we would visit and the students who would be invited to

take the class. We agreed to invite the teaching assistant for the course and several other students who had taken multiple courses with me to a meeting. I put on the table the idea that I wanted them to imagine a course that would be conducted along lines that would maximize their learning. I told them that everything was open for revision. The only area that we did not discuss were the actual readings — none of us in the room was formally connected to the literature on the history of women's education — but we all shared a deep interest in the College.

We discussed issues of time and timing for a long stretch. The students thought that one of the big problems at the College was the lack of sensitivity to the amount of work that faculty assign for their courses; they seem to assume that all that a student has to do is work for their one course. But even more important in the notion of timing was a sense of pace: how to stagger work along the semester, what to expect and how to think through assignments that built on one another and that would be engaging in ways that would bring out their best work. We agreed that only seniors would be admitted to the class, but that we would not restrict it to history majors — we wanted the full spectrum of majors represented.

This collaborative planning approach focused on students' learning needs worked so well because Erica had just worked with me as a student consultant in the History of Philadelphia class, for which her assignment had been to explore with me not only how to be responsive to student needs but, more specifically, how a culturally responsive classroom might function. In that class, one is faced with a daunting issue: Bryn Mawr College sits in one of the world's most exclusive neighborhoods, with per capita incomes at the highest rung in the United States. The campus has the bucolic look of a late nineteenth-century American fantasy of an Oxford College, flanked by fancy shops on one side and a neighborhood on the other side filled with large estates and mansions amid rolling hills.

The people of the area around Bryn Mawr, which is set into what is called the Main Line, have played crucial and lasting roles in the shaping of Philadelphia. Students come to Bryn Mawr often because it appears to them to be this safe haven, this special place, this college on a (small) hill. The city of Philadelphia looks quite different and has a much different makeup in terms of race, class, ethnicity and the attendant issues that come with years of differential treatment of funding for schools and public amenities: the US system of local taxation for most public and social services yields a stunning order of magnitude difference in what is spent on a Philly kid as she/he makes her way through school.

The class confronts these issues of difference at a number of points throughout the semester, especially through repeated trips into the city, together, in groups and alone. Driving from Bryn Mawr to Center City has in the minds of some of the students reinforced what some of us would call the prejudices of a casual passerby, who sees deterioration and neglect with the eyes of someone accustomed to mowed lawns, impeccable housing and clean streets. The ease with which one blames the inhabitants for their circumstances can ooze quite readily into the classroom. Erica and I agreed we would concentrate on how that played out in my classroom. As with most things in life, it played out in a way that was surprising, as a particular moment illustrates.

During one session, a student of color spoke up about how she experienced Philadelphia as a less racist city than her city of birth, Boston. She spoke from such a position of confidence that it seemed to me as if the class had gone silent. I felt that in what she had said, she had made assumptions that were difficult for me as an historian to accept. So I gently engaged her in conversation and tried to move us away from a conversation where absolute judgments were based, it seemed to me, on anecdotal and partial evidence, and toward a more considered but still engaged analysis, all the time wondering if what I was doing was effective and useful. To my surprise and relief, Erica reported that at that moment, an important change came over the class: the exchange had helped give us all permission to question received wisdom, or statements made from a position of perceived privilege.

It was this insight that came from the other class that was central in the ways that the 360 course on women's education played. There were numerous moments in the class that were fraught — we had high officials of the College, important alumnae and many levels of difficult conversations. The key insights I had gained through my work with Erica — that being straightforward, listening to what is being said and respectfully disagreeing are the keys to a culturally responsive classroom — have not only carried over to my other teaching, but have been of enormous help in my work as an administrator. In the context of the course, they helped me work with Erica and the students in the class to structure a set of assignments, and pace them, in a way that afforded students an opportunity to engage as fully as they could.

### **Situating My Course within the 360**

Another role that I play in the wider world of higher education is to help to prepare recent Ph.D.'s to enter the hybrid world of libraries, computing organizations and teaching. This program [The Council on Libraries and Information Resources \(CLIR\) Postdoctoral Fellowship in Academic Libraries](#), attracts some of the country's leading young scholars. Through one of these fellowships we were fortunate to appoint Anne L. Bruder to the role of producing the work on the history of the College of conceptualizing and organizing the conference [Heritage and Hope: Women's Education in a Global Context](#). The book and the conference were to play a central role in the 360, especially in the class that I taught. In addition, Anne would teach one of the courses in the 360: "Finding Knowledge Between the Leaves: 19th Century Literature of Education" — go [here](#) for a list of all of the courses taught in the first 360.

Jody Cohen, who describes her work on another 360 later in the issue, "Perspectives on Sustainability," and I were in the same TLI faculty pedagogy seminar in the spring of 2008, when Erica was my student consultant. Sharing that experience was central to the ease with which the group of courses started to shape up. Everyone agreed that Jody would be the key person, teaching the "core" course, "Identity, Access and Innovation in Education." As a professor of Education, she very quickly sensed what the unifying idea needed to be — "Changing Education" — in all of its meanings. [See [this article](#) in the *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin* for a longer description of Jody's class.]

My course was to be about changing education in the sense that women would for the first time in human history be accorded the framework that would permit them to develop their full selves, an education that was equivalent to that which men of means had always had access. Jody's

course looked deeply at the issue of access not only from the angle of vision of gender, but also the angles of race, ethnicity and class. Anne's course explored the ways in which women took it upon themselves to educate themselves before they had access to higher education. And there was already a course on the College's books, taught by a biologist, Greg Davis, which delved deeply into the role of women — Bryn Mawr women in particular — in the creation of a new field of evolutionary developmental biology. His course, called "The Historical Role of Women in Genetics and Embryology," was one in which I had had the privilege of guest lecturing, and it fit naturally into what we were trying to accomplish together.

Jody's artistic sense had us all thinking about a concrete expression of the ideas that would infuse our courses and so she connected us with the Mural Arts Program of the City of Philadelphia to see if there might be interest in the creation of a mural that would embody the values, issues hopes and dreams of women and education. Jane Golden and Shira Walinsky helped the students in the 360, high school students in West Philadelphia, and other members of the Bryn Mawr College community to create the mural. It was the fifth class and the work stretched over two semesters, as did the 360 itself, with Jody's class and mine in the first semester and Anne and Greg's in the second semester.

### **Working with a Student Consultant for the Entire 360**

Anna Chiles was the pivot person in the 360. (She relates her perspective on that process in the next article.) It was through her vision and tenacity that we were able to make this work for everyone. She held us together, she roamed from one class to another, she polled the students, she set up meetings, she continually called for more coordination. It was somehow a relief to see her in the class: since not all of the students were registered in all of the classes, it was Anna who embodied connectedness, and she could carry insights from one of the classes to the other.

The main venue for that connecting was weekly meetings together with all of the instructors during the semester. There Anna would relate what she thought was working in each class and what wasn't. I remember one tense moment that we experienced in my class right after a class trip to a formal dinner at the "Heritage and Hope" conference where the students were each asked to interview two people on camera regarding their views on women's higher education. This class was held the day after the conference ended and we were all relating what we had learned during that long weekend. The general mood in the classroom was buoyant; the semester was just a short month old, and we all seemed thrilled to be learning together about something close to everyone's hearts. One student who had not yet said anything in class changed the temperature in the room with an observation that led to a hushed, tense silence. It seemed like all eyes were on me and that the students seemed to me to be wondering whether I would try to meliorate or explain away what she had experienced.

I thought hard about what I could say and realized that anything that I said at that point would weaken the power of the student's observation and the developing solidarity of the classroom. So I let the silence hang in the air while locking eyes with the student. After a while, we continued our conversation in a more sober and somber way. I did not know that I had actually done something that was useful to all of us by not doing anything until I debriefed with Anna later in the week. She noted that there were a number of students in the class who were skeptical about

this class, that they thought it might be some kind of rah-rah isn't Bryn Mawr great celebration. That I had not answered in a defensive way — that I let the student's observation be the last word and did not attempt to gainsay her — was a sign of respect to her and an indication to the students who were wavering that we were all serious about our work and that we respected one another. What Anna did was allow me, in the ways that Erica had done, to be more present in the classroom and more aware of the multiple perspectives that needed to be present, too.

While Anna's comments on my own class were helpful to me, her larger role was in keeping all of us together. One of her most successful devices was the use of food: she called us together both during and after the first semester for dinners or lunches with pizza. She wanted to have us all talk across the classes, to share insights and to just enjoy each other's company. Those dinners were as informal as one can get when there are teachers and students in the room — especially those after the semester was over. Anna always had some strategy to get us started: we wrote something, or reflected on a question. One time she had the faculty wait outside while the students talked together first. All of her ideas were connected to a notion that we were building a learning community, that we were all in it together even if we were differently positioned.

Since this was the first 360, Anna's presence was necessary to stabilizing an idea that has become, in its short timespan, an integral part of the life of the College. She embodied the 360 in a way — especially as it moved over two semesters, being present in those two classes as well, as I remember when I spoke in the biology class in the middle of the second semester. Her comments in that class connected students who had not had any of the courses in the first semester to the larger whole of "Changing Education." And she was instrumental in developing a concluding exercise that brought out all of the participants in a final exhibition in the College's library that engaged our Bryn Mawr College students with the West Philadelphia high school students who worked together on producing the mural.

### **Extending the Collaborative Meaning Making to Include Students Enrolled in the Class**

Five courses — one a praxis course over two semesters — in the first offering of the 360. Not only were there students who wanted to take part, there were faculty too who wanted to teach in the cluster to whom we had to say no. It turned out that we likely bit off more than we could chew; we found that we could not live up to one of the original goals of the 360 — all of the courses taken by all of the students together — but we did manage to have enough of an overlap that the original idea of the 360 was honored and the original concept confirmed as one that produces a sense of learning that seems deeper and more profound than even the best single course can offer. I had a number of experiences during the process of planning and teaching the 360 that are not only indelible, but have led to further collaborations:

- One of the students in the first iteration of the course on the history of women's higher education, Evan McGonagill, an English major, was taking a history course for the first time, and one of the assignments that the team of students helped to devise for the course — reading the letters and diaries of students separated from them by almost a full century — had thoroughly engaged her, as it had all of the rest of the students in the class. As we described our research so far, she talked about how much she had fallen for her student and how much she identified with her. Then, in the most matter-of-fact way, she told us

all about a letter her student sent home that praised a wonderful speech by the College's fabled first women president, M. Carey Thomas, that talked admiringly of the (first) World War as a war for the supremacy of the white race. The class took in a collective breath and seemed to hold it for an eternity. We spent the rest of the time unpacking what Evan had discovered: identifying with individuals from the past, the tendency to read back into the past one's own set of values, teasing apart the motives and causes of historical events, separating one's own desires for a pristine history of the College one has come to love from a deeper understanding of its complexity. Evan gave a version of this discovery as a speech at the Convocation opening the 125<sup>th</sup> year, and has since come back to the college to work further on the history of women's higher education at [The Albert M. Greenfield Digital Center for the History of Women's Education](#).

- A student in most of the 360 courses, Sarah Jenness, a member of [Posse](#), was indignant about issues relating to the wealth of the founding generation of the College, and concerned that we were going to visit the sites of the wealth of the funders of Bryn Mawr in Baltimore, a field trip that we all took together. Her remarks charged our discussions in class. She was seeing in Jody Cohen's class the effects of wealth disparity on access to education in the US, and was outspoken when confronted with what looked very much to be the same thing at her own college a century earlier. She threw herself into the creation of the mural, into work with the high school students of West Philadelphia and lost no chance to bring up what she saw as inconsistencies and fissures in the fabric of Bryn Mawr College. As was the case with Evan, the class struggled together to try to understand how there might be a deeper connection with the access that women had to a quality higher education and the munificence of those with the power of wealth. This conversation is still ongoing with Sarah, who decided as a result of the 360 experience to dedicate her years in college to the independent study of access to education.

The contradictions, the connections, the fissures, the fault lines become not only more evident but more profound when one immerses one's self in looking at a problem from 360 degrees. Another Posse student, Jomaira Salas, riveted our attention one day when she mused about the way she felt walking through the grounds of Bryn Mawr, feeling the generations of the women who came before her and will come after her. In both iterations of my class, the roster of the students included almost all of those who carried weight in the community — class and college presidents, customs mistresses (these are the students appointed to the coveted position of maintaining all of the local traditions that many women's colleges developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including things like May Day and something called Hell Week), officers of student organizations. The theme of access brought back to the College some of its alumnae, who shared experiences with students sometimes more than fifty years their juniors, shocked them with their frankness, and explained to them why things were the way they were. It was at those moments when I especially felt a wonderful admonition in a little book called the [The Ideal Teacher](#), by George Herbert Palmer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908): The readiness to be forgotten by keeping out of the way.

## **Lessons Learned**

When to speak and when to be silent — two lessons I learned from Erica Seaborne and Anna Chiles — remain with me from the heady experience that was the 360 and the build-up to it. Creating a class with the active participation of the people who take courses — students — cemented in my mind the centrality of the notion of student voice: without it, we can sometimes be successful, but we miss out on the opportunity to learn from the experts in learning. Creating a course and a series of connected courses that employ the already developed interests of the students — in this case, the college they attended, the notion of single-sex education, the idea of equality and social justice, the desire to make a lasting contribution, the mural — constitutes what I hope will be a lasting legacy. I am honored to have worked with Erica and Anna in their role as consultants and with the other students who planned and took the course — to have been part of an experience that supported students in understanding themselves and their place in the line of the women that came before them and will follow them. I am grateful to have been among these students as we learned together to enjoy one another's ideas and presence, to travel and eat and laugh and cry together.