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Laurel Black

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Mary Ann Cessna

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Teaching Circles: Making Inquiry Safe for Faculty

Laurel Black and Mary Ann Cessna
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

As college instructors, we are hired for our expertise. Most students look to us for the "final word" in their classes. Colleagues ask us questions about our field, looking for assistance. Department chairs and promotion, tenure, and evaluation committees determine our futures based on how well we present ourselves and our knowledge. Our ability to engage students, develop effective teaching strategies, and track the success of our efforts affects student evaluations and even our ability to manage time and set priorities to do other forms of scholarship and research. In too many contexts, there is little room to acknowledge deficiencies or gaps in knowledge without great risk, not only to our careers but perhaps even to our personal identities.

Yet, in one crucial area, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), many college professors lack expertise, because graduate programs and work in most disciplines has not prepared them for engaging in this new form of scholarship. Even so, revealing the need to become scholars of teaching and learning can carry risk. Teaching circles provide one of the safest havens for such revelation.

As Lee Shulman (1993) points out, because teaching has not been included in the "community of scholars," we experience "pedagogical solitude" (p. 6). That solitude has allowed many

teachers to structure their priorities around more visible and institutionally valued work. But as SOTL draws increasing attention from administrators and managers, we must find ways to learn ourselves how to energize our teaching and how to become learners ourselves. Those ways must take into account the risk involved in saying, "I don't know how to do this."

Teaching Circles: Definition

Pat Hutchings (1996) defines a teaching circle as "(1) a small group of faculty members... (2) [who] make a commitment to work together over a period of at least a semester (3) to address questions and concerns about the particulars of their teaching and their students' learning" (p. 7). Also called "faculty learning communities" (Cox, 2001), they can be cross-disciplinary or departmental. But the basic idea is that teaching becomes more "public" in some way and that "community building (Cox, p. 71) takes place. And while both kinds of groups encourage participants to acknowledge their need to enhance their teaching skills, the composition of a group (i.e., departmental or cross-disciplinary) and its size changes the degree of risk and the nature of the interaction.

Teaching circles comprise teachers. While that seems to be commonsensical, it belies the fact that teaching exists in a larger context, with administrators and managers and structures that impede or support teaching. When we participate in teaching circles, we must interact with our peers, free from the fear that an admission of inability may become part of summative evaluation.

Teaching Circles: The Basics

Like any small group activity, teaching circles work when members feel a public commitment to enhance their teaching expertise, a sense of accountability to peers, and self-efficacy as well as a sense of social support and safety.

We have found that some basic elements help insure the success of teaching circles. Three to seven members is an optimal size with leadership provided from within or by a designated mentor. All members should agree on a major theme for the group (e.g., teaching in large classes, teaching portfolios, problem-based learning, constructing good writing assignments). Having a clearly stated,

overall goal for the circle including a final written product is important as well as specific objectives for each meeting. And assigning specific tasks to each member (e.g., logistics, resource locator, moderator, recorder) provides a sense of shared ownership for the performance of the teaching circle.

Cross-Disciplinary Teaching Circles

Because it's difficult to see beyond what is always done in our own field, discussions with faculty in other fields can be stimulating. Cross-disciplinary teaching circles focus on exploring specific practice that is common across disciplines.

When a teaching circle forms from multiple disciplines, members must explain themselves, define terms, avoid assumptions and quick judgment, and must move from the general to the specific—the practice and scholarship being explored and the context in which teaching will take place. We may feel safer in some ways speaking with "strangers" than with immediate colleagues. The lack of knowledge about another discipline can transform us into listeners and learners instead of lecturers and teachers. Since cross-disciplinary groups may be smaller than departmental teaching circles due to the difficulty of establishing a common meeting time, the discussion seems more intimate. For this reason, reliance on one another to help meet the group goals is increased. And fewer people know that you don't know something!

What are the risks? That people across campus now realize that you lack some knowledge. However, talking across disciplinary boundaries helps us understand that while there may be a common base of experience, we might struggle with our teaching for very different reasons, some of which are not always within our control (e.g., class size, course content, and student demographics). It also helps participants understand how complex teaching is and helps them realize that developing as a scholar of teaching and learning parallels development as a scholar in a content field.

Departmental Teaching Circles

While cross-disciplinary teaching circles are often formed around exploring a specific classroom practice (e.g., the use of student journals) or developing teaching portfolios, departmental teaching

circles are likely to form around content issues. Jean McGregor (1996) says, "The best conversations begin not around a teaching method...but around ideas that people care about...Starting with content provides the necessary platform for discussion about the teaching strategies that will work best with a particular group of students" (p. 69). Discussion in a department begins with the understanding that sub-fields abound, and of course no one knows all there is to know about the field as a whole. (In contrast, in interdisciplinary teaching circles, members are sometimes surprised to find that there are so many sub-fields: for example, isn't computer science just computer science?)

However, in most institutions, these are the people who will be observing us in classrooms, evaluating our performance most immediately, examining our syllabi, and sitting in the closest proximity of judgment. The larger number of people often involved in a departmental teaching circle can make it more difficult to leave old alliances and beliefs behind., And members may feel that their admissions of lack of knowledge or skill may later affect important decisions.

Despite these risks, however, some real rewards can accrue from departmental teaching circles as well. When serious and collegial discussion takes place at the departmental level, even about a single course, the benefits can spread, resulting in a more coherent sequence of courses in the major or reconsideration over time of many courses and even a department's mission and goals. And of course we all care about the substance of what we teach in our field; recognizing equal concern in our colleagues balances out the risk of making our teaching public.

In conclusion, an institution or department wishing to support teaching circles needs to acknowledge and help faculty understand that there are risks as well as benefits. Balancing these two aspects provides some of the energy and excitement of participating. To ensure safety, however, we must emphasize the formative aspects.

Note: More information about teaching circles is available at <http://www.iup.edu/teachingexcellence/>.

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Laurel Black (Ph.D., Miami University, OH) is Associate Professor of English and Reflective Practice and Co-Director for Cross-Disciplinary Teaching Circles, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Mary Ann Cessna (Ed.D., The Pennsylvania State University) is Director, Center for Teaching Excellence and Professor of Food and Nutrition, Indiana University of Pennsylvania..