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# Exploring the Inner Landscape of Teaching: A Program for Faculty Renewal

**Libby Falk Jones**  
Berea College

*To improve the quality of faculty life, Berea College developed a yearlong program exploring teaching as a vocation. Sixteen faculty from different departments participated in the series of seven experiential, dialogic sessions. Participants reported experiencing increased empathy and patience, deeper engagement with their work, a stronger sense of community, and encouragement to meet the challenges of being educators.*

If a single person is teaching, the whole universe shifts and makes room.

—Maria Harris, Berea College's

Exploring the Inner Landscape of Teaching Seminar

## INTRODUCTION

The need for faculty renewal in higher education is increasing today. As faculty face demands of heavy course loads, department and institutional responsibilities, accountability to varied constituencies, and budgetary constraints, faculty quality of life has eroded (Atkins, Brinko, Butts, Claxton, & Hubbard, 2001; Austin, Brocato, & Rohrer, 1997; Menges, 1996; Smith, 1990). Many faculty also experience a disconnect with today's students, who bring to their education a different set of learning approaches, motivation, and expectations from students of previous generations (Parks, 1986).

In response to the need for renewal, most colleges and universities have developed programs where faculty can investigate their teaching practices,

experiment with new approaches, learn new skills, and share their successes and challenges. The focus of such programs may be encouraging active learning, teaching critical thinking, using instructional technology, understanding today's students, or a mixture of these important topics. At Berea, for example, our Communication Across the College Program, begun in 1989, brings together a dozen faculty and staff to form a one- to two-year learning community for comprehensive, ongoing reflection, research, and dialogue on learning and teaching topics. The success of such programs often flows largely from the development of a community in which participants build trust, speak honestly, and connect deeply with one another (Cox, 2001). Within such a community, faculty are able to gain information and develop new teaching skills and to explore themselves and their paths as teachers, an exploration on which all long-lasting faculty development must be based. What might happen, we wondered at Berea, if we offered a program for faculty renewal where inner exploration of the teaching life was not a byproduct but a center?

### SEMINAR DESIGN

A yearlong program, titled *Exploring the Inner Landscape of Teaching*, was developed and led in 1995–1996 by three faculty. The goal of the seminar was to enable planners and a dozen colleagues to examine our callings as teachers, to explore the deep hungers leading us into and keeping us in our profession. Our hope was to understand teaching as a “graced activity . . . which, when dwelt in with fidelity, has the power to recreate the world” (Harris, 1987, p. xvi). If a primary goal for educators is “to bring students to a knowledge of the world within, its geography and anthropology, depths and heights, myths and primary texts” (O'Reilly, 1993, p. 32), then teachers need to mine these depths in themselves. Robertson (1999) argues that to function at the highest level of teaching, faculty need to draw on their awareness of their inner experience as it interacts with learners' inner experience. We believed that Berea College, with its historical and current commitments to educating 1,500 students primarily from Appalachia, black and white, women and men, within an inclusive Christian, liberal arts, and service tradition, offered both opportunities and challenges for our work as educators. We wanted to explore our own teaching and learning paths as a means for encountering the very hard yet crucial questions facing us today about the nature and shape of education.

Informing the seminar design were writings by several scholars: Parker J. Palmer (1983; 1991; 1998; 2000), who taught at Berea in 1993–1994, while he was writing *The Courage to Teach* (1997); Maria Harris (1987), who explores

the artistry of teaching; and Mary Rose O'Reilley (1993; 1998; 2000), who probes teaching (and living) as a contemplative practice. Another important resource was the work of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (a division of the National Council of Teachers of English), whose publications, conferences, and workshops provided theory and practices exploring teachers' inner lives.

Simple but crucial principles undergirded the seminar's design.

- Self-exploration, sharing of experiences, and reflection must be central at every session. Short readings and theoretical materials could support each session, but our time together must draw deeply on ourselves.
- Session leaders should come from both inside and outside of the college. We wanted to ground the seminar in available talents as well as enrich it with outside expertise.
- Sessions must be involving and experiential, the pace calm and slow. The impulse to overfill the time must be resisted.
- The tone of each session must be open, honest, and supportive.
- Participation should be voluntary; the group should reflect diversity in field, gender, ethnicity, belief, and length of time at the college. Group size, including planners as full participants, should be 12–16.
- The number of sessions should be great enough to allow for the creation of community, but not so numerous as to become a burden. We settled on seven half-day sessions, spread throughout the academic year.

Thus the following seminar description appeared in the letter of invitation to faculty:

This seminar series is designed to encourage reflection and dialogue among faculty from the four divisions of the college on the values and beliefs that inform our vision and our practice of teaching. Through readings, discussions, and exercises led by faculty and other presenters, participants will explore the inner geography of teaching—the ways our teaching informs and shapes us, nourishes or depletes our inner lives. Participants will investigate the spiritual base that underlies learning and teaching and on which we draw to meet the challenges we face as educators today. Participants will also reflect together on how as teachers we can help students meet their need for a deep learning that grounds them in their inner selves and at the same

time opens them to creative intellectual and spiritual relationships with others in community.

Twelve faculty—four men and eight women representing the departments of art, foreign languages, religion, English, music, psychology, biology, chemistry, nursing, education, business, and general studies—expressed interest in joining us in this exploration. Four of these participants were in their second or third year of teaching at Berea; four had taught at Berea more than 20 years each. We were also joined by our new president, Larry Shinn. In his inaugural address the previous spring, President Shinn had called on the campus to “find ways to be both rational and compassionate beings and nurture the whole person in our teaching and learning.” In asking to participate, the president made it clear that he too was a seeker, eager to pursue this journey in the company of colleagues. We benefited throughout the seminar from his passion for learning and learners and his willingness to share his own experiences, struggles, and insights.

Funding for the program was provided by President Shinn and the Office of the Associate Dean for General Education and Faculty Development. The budget totaled \$5,000, including expenses and stipends for three outside session leaders, books and articles, refreshments, and a \$200 stipend for each participant.

### SEMINAR PROGRAM

The half-day, three- to four-hour sessions typically occurred on Saturday mornings, occasionally on Friday evenings or Sunday afternoons, in various comfortable and private campus locales. Participants were invited to dress comfortably. Following are descriptions of five seminar sessions, illustrating the variety of means of engagement.

Our program opened with a visit by Maria Harris. After a Friday evening discussion of what had led each of us to this seminar and how each of us understood “inner landscape”—a sharing which lay the groundwork for the honest exchanges that followed—Harris invited us to explore our teaching through religious imagination, as a work of art. Teaching is artistic work, Harris argues; teachers are makers of others. Harris (1987) suggests five steps in exploring what she calls the holy work of teaching: contemplation, engagement, formgiving, emergence, and release (p. 25). The following Saturday morning, in a studio in the art building, Harris led us in an exercise she describes in *Teaching and Religious Imagination* (1987, p. 34). We were each given a glob of clay. After playing with the clay to discover its possibilities and

limitations, we were blindfolded and asked to continue letting this material find a form expressing the self each of us brought to our teaching. The discussion following our display and commentary on our creations was rich indeed. At the end of the discussion, we returned our clay creations to their original form, releasing their potential to be recreated by us or others.

A local cellist, Suzanne McIntosh, made use of a different art form, music, as a means for prompting our inner journeys (Chitouras, 1993; Leviton, 1994). Experiencing a variety of sounds made by the cello led to reflections on the nature and kinds of listening central to teaching and learning. We also explored improvisation, discussing ways to create environments that give permission for our students to experience creative insights. In a closing exercise, we together produced sounds that wove into a surprising resonance, reaffirming the power of the community we were creating.

Parker Palmer led the group in a discussion of teaching as a vocation centered on Chuang Tzu's poem, "The Woodcarver" (Merton, 1965; Palmer, 1991). After two participants read the poem aloud to the group, Palmer asked us to reflect on the woodcarver's preparation for his work, the materials for his work, and his relation to the object he creates and to the master who sets him the task. How might the woodcarver's experience of his vocation enlighten us as teachers? How might his path inform our work in our classrooms? Small-group discussions of these questions yielded deepening levels of insight that were then shared with the whole group.

Robert Schneider, professor of classics and general education and one of the seminar's designers, invited us to reflect on ways we relate to our students and the personal resources we bring to various challenging pedagogical situations. He began with a short presentation, titled "Teaching as Relationship: 'Thou Shalt Love Thy Student as Thyself,'" in which he explored the historical model of the teacher-pupil relationship and narrated the teaching journey which had brought him to his understanding that we teach from the heart to the heart. Then Schneider asked the group to inventory the personal resources—qualities, life experiences, and knowledge—that each of us brought to our work as teachers. Participants' lists included such qualities as empathy, ability to stay calm in a crisis, caring and kindness, grit, toleration of ambiguity, and parenting skills. Small groups were then presented with three classroom scenarios, each embodying challenges faculty may face in exploring Biblical texts, the theory of evolution, and issues of sexual preference. Schneider asked us first to freewrite, then to share our thinking on ways our personal resources could help us respond to the intellectual and moral difficulties presented in the scenarios. (This exercise is included in Appendix 8.1.)

In a session titled “Who Are the Learners We Teach?” Larry Shinn, Berea’s president and a religious studies scholar, drew on his research on the Hare Krishnas and on Sharon Parks’s (1986) model of young adult faith development to help the group probe some important questions related to our college’s commitment to “explore the Christian faith and its many expressions.” He invited participants to respond to such questions as the following: What does it mean for faculty to encourage students to seek “safe spaces” for “inner work”? How can we promote the academy’s search for “truth” and its inclusion of all ideas—including the rejection of all religions—and still nourish students’ spiritual growth? Together the group discussed ways to help our college become a mentoring community inclusive of all individuals, regardless of their particular beliefs.

### **ASSESSMENT: TEACHING IS “NOT EASIER BUT . . . BETTER!”**

At the end of the year, the group of 16 was asked to reflect individually in writing, then in dialogue, on the value of the seminar. Key questions were whether the seminar had met the needs and desires which led individuals to join, if the seminar had opened new ways of seeing teaching and learning, whether and how participants had applied any of the insights gained in the seminar, and what might help strengthen future seminars and continue this work.

All participants reported that the seminar had met at least some of their goals and needs, including needs whose existence they had not fully realized. “I viewed the seminar as an opportunity to share experiences and insights with more seasoned teachers or those in other disciplines, and I have not been disappointed,” wrote a new faculty member. “What surprised me was the extent to which I became reflective on my own goals and intentions as a teacher,” she noted. For several faculty, the opportunity to reflect was the key to the seminar’s success. “I ended my first year at Berea disappointed and tired,” wrote another new faculty member. “‘Exploring the Inner Landscape’ has assisted me to regroup. I have been able to find sources of quiet and renewal in the preparation for and participation in the workshops.” Renewal was important for senior faculty participants as well. “I needed an opportunity to reflect upon my own teaching and search for ways to transform it,” wrote one professor. “Through ideas from colleagues, session directors, and readings, I was able to engage deeply in such reflections.” Another participant wrote of the power of the self-discovery she experienced in the seminar, particularly in the work with Maria Harris.

I was stunned with what I produced in clay with Maria Harris. That poor little clay bird flew out of my inner landscape with no conscious intent. It became part of me, so much so that I felt that it existed only in my hand. Strangely, I felt no loss when I returned the clay to a lump. What was it? What did it mean? Where did it come from? The whole experience has made me ponder about what else is inside me and how do I access it?

Several participants confirmed the value of the seminar in affirming their approaches to education. A senior professor noted, "The seminar endorsed the understanding that as we teach, we learn, and underlined the significance of the inner landscape of all participants in the educational transaction." He added that he was able, in class, to undergird his teaching presence "with the understood support of the premises of the seminar." A new faculty member credited the seminar for giving direction to what had been largely unconscious approaches in her teaching. Others praised the seminar for giving them the confidence to try new approaches. "The experiential exercises gave me the opportunity to be in the role of a student rather than that of teacher," wrote a senior professor. "This role reversal is essential in giving me the confidence to take more risks in the classroom and to develop more empathy," he noted. An important new idea for several participants was the concept that the material in the course guides the teaching, rather than vice versa. "I have become much more cognizant of how the subject matter functions as a teacher in the course, and I have sought to become better at facilitating students' access to the material," wrote a senior professor.

The seminar also succeeded in helping faculty to embrace the emotional, relational dimension of teaching and learning. "I find myself thinking more about the motivation and emotion behind my teaching than I have before this," wrote one professor. "I also try to listen to what my students mean, rather than what they say." Another noted, "I am a better listener today than I was in September. I listen better to others and to myself." A third faculty member wrote that the seminar had helped her develop more patience with her students and with herself.

By far, the most important value of the seminar was the development of community. One participant wrote that the seminar

internally and spiritually provided a bonding situation for us faculty (too often physically isolated in our own offices as well as on intellectual and emotional circuits). . . . This bonding function is the most important to me—the sense that we are an educational community of



caring as well as informed individuals. I now know each participant in ways I never would have otherwise.

Others wrote and spoke of the loneliness, fear, and separation that faculty experience and the ways the seminar encouraged the connection, hope, and energy that can overcome this isolation. "Although the outside speakers were wonderful, and I gained much from their presence and presentations, it was the nurturing experiences of the seminar participants—sharing frustrations, concerns, and challenges—which really helped me to grow as a teacher," wrote a new faculty member. "I have found a sense of intimacy with colleagues that I honestly had not realized could occur," noted another professor. A senior faculty member wrote of the valuable "climate of trust and honesty" that characterized the seminar. "The value of this increased collegiality cannot be measured," wrote another professor. The seminar did not offer easy answers, noted a new faculty member, but sharing challenges with colleagues encouraged her to continue to struggle with the challenges. "Things do not seem to get easier but maybe they get better!" she concluded.

In addition to affirming the value of the seminar experience, participants also noted challenges and suggested changes. Despite our attempt not to overload sessions, several participants wrote of the need for time for more discussion, particularly in sessions led by outside presenters. Faculty also recognized the risks involved in participating in the seminar. One faculty member defined three manifestations of risk that participants incurred.

First would be the risk of being seen as superfluous, or even silly, in an era which is rejoicing in its secularism. This Age of the Zen of Technology is embarrassed by spiritual considerations and is rapidly losing the ability to resolve difficulties and plan futures through spiritual means.

Second . . . is the risk of being viewed as light or less than rigorous within academia. . . . Berea still falls prey to the demands of graduate schools, the workplace, the "real world . . ." The [desire] to be . . . regarded as viable academics . . . can wash away the strength for risk-taking.

The most difficult form of risk-taking is that involved in encountering oneself and the constitution of one's inner being. Speaking in a group and waiting for responses is so very hard, but this pales in comparison to that small, quiet voice awakened by a search for the inner

landscape of teaching. It pales in comparison to the new reflections and hard changes we all know are inevitable.

A senior professor echoed her analysis. "I have seen how easy it is to escape from this more intimate approach by fleeing into the intellect, reveries, or cynical detachment," he wrote. "The right balance requires discernment and practice." He noted that he found this challenge "both exciting and daunting."

Participants' evaluations demonstrated that the seminar's benefits had justified their taking those risks and that the seminar experience had helped them begin to meet the resulting challenges. Participants expressed their hope that this group's dialogue could continue and that this work could be extended to involve other faculty.

### CONCLUSIONS: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The work of the Inner Landscape of Teaching Seminar has had several outcomes at Berea and beyond. Seminar participants agreed to continue meeting for a second year, to explore together topics led by members of the group. Seminar planners designed a new series for the next year as well, *The Art and Soul of Teaching and Learning*, facilitated by an Inner Landscape participant and involving 15 new faculty participants, including the college's new provost. During that year, the seminars gathered for two joint sessions, one on voice, led by Peter Elbow (1981; 1986), the other on soulful practices, led by Mary Rose O'Reilley (1993; 1998; 2000). Another outcome was a proposal for a mentoring program for new faculty, developed by seminar participants and others, which received funding from the Lilly Foundation. That successful program led to the development of a yearly seminar for new faculty held during our January short term, where new faculty are invited to become a learning community exploring multiple dimensions of teaching. Recent discussions of the nature of Berea's commitment to explore the Christian faith and its many expressions—within a community reflecting a wide range of religious beliefs, including no-belief—have been conducted in an open and thoughtful spirit stemming at least in part from the voices of seminar participants.

Reports on the seminar at several national conferences have been enthusiastically received, one manifestation of the growing interest in this work among a host of postsecondary institutions. Readings and resources, plus information on workshop and conference opportunities, are available now from several organizations: the Center for Teacher Formation and its *Courage to Teach* Program established by Parker Palmer ([www.teacherformation.org/](http://www.teacherformation.org/)), the Education as Transformation Project ([www.wellesley.edu/RelLife/transformation/](http://www.wellesley.edu/RelLife/transformation/)),

the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society ([www.contemplativemind.org/](http://www.contemplativemind.org/)), as well as from the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning ([www.bsu.edu/web/aepl/Home.html](http://www.bsu.edu/web/aepl/Home.html)).

Our hope is that faculty and administrators everywhere will recognize the benefit of this approach to faculty development and will devise ways to realize this work in their particular institutions. The fact that Berea is a small college with clearly stated commitments to undergraduate teaching, to faith exploration, and to community may have made it easier for us to engage faculty in dialogue about their vocation as educators. Yet despite this favorable context, we found that our faculty's need for such dialogue and awareness of the risks of engaging it were as strong as might be expected from faculty at larger institutions with different commitments. The positive response our program elicited from a diverse group of faculty confirms our sense that such faculty renewal is broadly needed in higher education today.

Meeting the challenge of finding resources—people as well as funds—to support our program turned out to be easier than we had anticipated, once we began looking. We accomplished much on a small budget; a fine program could be put together on an even smaller budget, by drawing more fully on local people (campus and community) who are engaged in inner work and are willing to share it, and by supporting participants in ways other than providing stipends.

What is important for faculty renewal programs—and indeed, for all good faculty development efforts—is to identify and empower planners who have a vision based on a deep understanding of faculty need, the creativity to find resources, and the commitment to make this journey in the company of others. Our seminar experience is one small piece of proof that many faculty members do believe that education involves whole people, and that many of us are willing to take on the hard work of living in community so that our inner selves, as well as those of our students, may be nurtured.

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**APPENDIX 8.1****TEACHING AS RELATIONSHIP: THREE CLASSROOM SCENARIOS**

Robert J. Schneider, Berea College

Read carefully the assigned scenario below, then share with one another your immediate thoughts and feelings about the way you might handle the topic in the classroom in the light of the inventory of personal resources and strengths you began earlier.

- I. Imagine that you have been asked to teach a course in one of the natural sciences or a course in western intellectual history. The paradigm of evolution either informs the subject matter of the course throughout or is covered as a specific topic. You expect that many students will be curious and open to learning about evolution, but you also expect that some may be troubled by this topic, since they have been taught that evolution is "just a theory," or contrary to the Bible, or atheistic. In fact, a colleague has informed you that one of your students told her that he had become physically ill when a biology teacher talked about evolution in another course. What thoughts come to mind about addressing this situation in your teaching about evolution?
- II. Imagine that you are teaching a course in the Bible or a humanities course which includes texts from the Bible, such as the *primaevae* stories in Genesis, the Book of Isaiah, the Gospel of Luke, and other texts. You will approach them using historical and literary criticism. You expect that many students will be interested in and stimulated by this approach, but you also expect that some will be fundamentalist Christians who believe that the Bible is the literal and inerrant word of God, dictated by Him to the writers. Some of these students may respond with anxiety or hostility to this new and different approach. What thoughts come to mind about addressing this situation in your teaching of biblical texts?
- III. Imagine that you are teaching a course in psychology or sociology or child and family studies or nursing. The syllabus includes the topic of homosexuality and/or homosexual behaviors and lifestyles. While you know that many students are open to learning about this topic, you also expect that there will be students who have been taught and believe that homosexuality is a sin and that homosexuals are condemned by God and are going to hell. You also assume, or may know, that the class includes one or more students who are uncertain about their own sexuality; gay but in the

closet; lesbian and out; and a few who are contemptuous of men or women whom they perceive to be effeminate or “mannish.” What thoughts come to mind about addressing this situation as you teach the subject matter?