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ABSTRACT

This lecture, by a professor of English and literature who is a recipient of the AAU (Association of Atlantic Universities) Instructional Leadership Award, states that the lecturer does not have a lot of faith in faculty development as a way of improving university teaching. The lecture also states that the professor is generally skeptical of lectures by outstanding professors--like the one he is giving. The lecture focuses on the professor's objections to faculty development (and he once was a faculty development officer), especially when there are lots of faculty members who have not the slightest interest in improving their teaching. There are many professors who do not believe it is their responsibility to be wonderful teachers; they believe that university students should be wonderful learners and that wonderful learners will learn from pretty well anybody who understands a discipline or area of knowledge. As an example, the lecture recounts the educator's experience when he was involved in a revision of the course numbering system at St. Thomas University (New Brunswick, Canada). It also gives the example of developing English department curricula. The lecture suggests that if situations are arranged in which people talk about learning in the context of "collaborative investigation," as opposed to the context of attention to individual, isolated teachers, everybody's attention will be directed to something other than whether an individual professor's teaching is "up to snuff." (NKA)

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Talking about Curriculum, Thinking about Teaching.

by Russell A. Hunt

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Russell A. Hunt
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Notes for

"Talking about Curriculum, Thinking about Teaching"

University of New Brunswick / St. Thomas University
15 February 2000

I don't know about you, but I'm not so sure about bringing award winning teachers on to campus to talk about their teaching. You've probably had the experience, if you attend these things at all, of having the award-winning teacher, who's almost certainly dynamite in her own classroom and with her own students, spend an hour spouting an unorganized list of platitudes drawn from guidebooks. Often those people who are brought in to lecture about teaching never lecture themselves, because they're so awful at it and because it's not how they believe people learn best -- but here they are, doing it anyway (like me, perhaps). And those who *do* lecture often have never thought about what it is they're doing until they get the award and the AAU says, you and me, babe, how about it? Even more depressing, occasionally you get a really good lecturer who knows what she's doing and can talk about it, and it turns out to be enjoyable and inspiring, but to have nothing whatever to do with your own practice.

This may be a surprising confession, because in some sense I am here not only as a representative of the faculty development community, but because of the AAU Instructional Leadership Award -- but I don't have a lot of faith in faculty development as a way of improving university teaching, in general. I'm not only skeptical of visiting lectures like this one; I've started questioning most of the things we "instructional leaders" do. I was a faculty development officer for a few years, and I've been involved for most of the last decade, one way or another, in trying to find ways to help undergraduate students have more engaging and transformative experiences at university. I've been involved in organizing and bringing in visiting speakers, in setting up conferences and workshops, in sponsoring faculty attendance at conferences, and in umbrella organizations like the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and the International Society for Exploring Teaching Alternatives -- and, yes, the AAU Faculty Development Committee -- which are specifically aimed at fostering better teaching.

I don't want to be entirely negative about this. I've enjoyed those conferences and those experiences a great deal. When you go to a gathering like the STLHE's or ISETA's annual conferences you encounter an atmosphere very much more open and collegial than I've ever been accustomed to at single-discipline academic conferences. I think it's partly because the people at the conference are all from different disciplines, so they have a pretty firm basis of expertise, and don't expect it to be challenged; so they can plead ignorance about the subject of the conference without embarrassment. After all, we're all ignorant together. My colleagues in Eighteenth Century Literature studies may find my work contemptible or almost nonexistent, and may think what I have to say about Restoration tragedy is hopelessly out of date -- but at STLHE I don't have to worry about being challenged when I draw an example from my teaching or scholarship, because chances are I'm the only person in the room who's ever read Nathaniel Lee, or even heard his name. Perhaps equally important, we all feel marginalized together: we know all about the relative status, at most institutions, of research and teaching.

There's also very little on the line when I'm talking about teaching and bluffing about literature: if my expertise in learning and teaching are questionable, I can afford to confess myself just a learner. We're all in this new field together, after all. And of course, when the traveling mountebanks come to campus, and when we organize in-house conversations about teaching, many of the same things apply.

And yet, and yet. My father grew up on a farm. He told me this story about my uncle, his older brother, who, unlike my dad, stayed on the farm, and whom I idolized when I was a kid. (I have no idea whether the story's literally true: my father often told the truth slantwise.) Elmer was out cultivating one afternoon when a car pulled up next to the gate by the road. Elmer always had time for a chat. He finished his row, shut the tractor down and walked over. Leaning on the car was a drummer, a traveling salesman. Seems this guy was selling a super encyclopedia of farming, full of all the latest tricks and the current hot technology, new ways of storing feed and laying out your milking parlor. Elmer let the salesman talk for a few minutes. Finally, he said, "You know, sonny, I already know how to farm three times as good as I'm farming."

What I always liked about that story was that it seemed to me it reflected something about my own life. Knowing something about a practice and actually implementing that knowledge aren't always so easily related.

I think it's the same for most of us, in most of what we do. As a teacher, it's certainly like that. When I was a faculty development officer, I often felt myself in the position of that drummer at Elmer's gate, trying to sell people information they already had. The kind of cognitive overload we have to deal with in our lives usually leaves us doing what we're used to, doing what we've integrated into our lives. Minor improvements we might be able to make from time to time, but the re-thinking and re-engineering of an entire activity is something we don't often do.

Suppose you've got a whole industry full of farmers who are doing it pretty much as they've always done it -- not because they're ignorant, not because they're lazy, not because they don't want to be efficient farmers, but just because wholesale and radical -- and risky -- change simply doesn't fit into an agenda focused on surviving from season to season, and having things to talk about with other farmers. And suppose there's no crisis -- they're perfectly successful as farmers, comfortable in their positions and productive. You just happen to have this wonderful encyclopedia that would improve their lives, and you'd like to spread the word, actually get some of those ideas implemented. How do you do it?

Especially when there are lots of faculty members who haven't the slightest interest in improving their teaching. In fact -- we need to admit it -- many of them are pretty fine teachers, and their confidence is entirely well placed. Some of the fine teachers I know never go to those sessions -- often because they've had experiences of sessions that turn out to be at best, tip-swapping, and at worst, maxim-swapping. And, well, of course it's true that some of the folks who don't go to such sessions and such conferences (as well as some who never miss one) aren't such great teachers. Often that's because they don't believe that it's their responsibility to be wonderful teachers: they believe that at university students should be wonderful learners, and that a wonderful learner will learn from pretty well anybody who really understands a discipline or an area of knowledge, and that we shouldn't be worrying about the others. Most often, they're just not very unhappy with their current practice.

I'm just not convinced that we all are making a lot of difference to the experience the average undergraduate has. The people who go to STLHE and attend the local faculty workshops and read the university newsletters with respect and attention are, well, the choir. We don't really need to preach to them. And when it comes to the crunch, many of them are a lot like Elmer: they've heard all this often enough, and it's never made much difference to the way they farm.

So when I hear all the glowing reports from the teaching and learning centers, when I attend the faculty development meetings at the STLHE conference, I have to confess to a nagging feeling of agnosticism. When I walk around campuses, I really don't think I see a lot more committed, enthusiastic, innovative

teaching, or excited, engaged undergraduates, than I did a decade ago, when the AAU Faculty Development Committee, and most of our teaching support centers, didn't exist at all. I don't mean to say we're wasting our time, or that we're not making a difference, but I remain concerned that the teachers who might profit most from becoming more reflective practitioners, in Donald Schön's phrase, are being left out of the process.

I've only had two or three times in my career when my and my colleague's talk -- and thought -- about teaching seemed to become more than platitudes and more than tips, and get to real reflection. It occurred to me a while ago that the occasions where that's happened have almost always been times when we weren't concerned with our individual teaching, but rather with the structures in which we were doing it.

Here's an example of what I mean. A few years ago I was involved in a revision of the course numbering system at St. Thomas. We wanted to identify consistently, though the course numbers, which were the introductory courses in a given discipline, which were the secondary course, offered mainly to second- and third-year students not majoring in the discipline, and which were the advanced courses, available mainly to students in third and fourth year majoring in the discipline. Some departments had already begun a numbering system whereby the first set of courses began with 1-2 (for first and second year), the second with 2-3, and the third with 3-4. The history department, when we asked them to rethink their numbering system, said quite seriously that they didn't *have* any introductory, secondary, and advanced courses. They suggested numbering all their courses 1-4. Their argument was that it didn't make any difference which period in history you studied first, or which next. Students changed and grew, they conceded, and perhaps got better at things like research and writing and historical analysis, but there was no argument for putting 19th century Latin America ahead of Revolutionary Russia, or, for that matter, ahead of 20th century Latin America. When we asked whether it didn't make sense to put more general courses first -- Western Civilization before the French Revolution, for instance -- they suggested that it could just as reasonably come afterward, as a large-scale synthesis.

The university committee overruled them, of course, and they wound up designating some of their courses as introductory. As a result of that designation, many of them later said, the courses *became* introductory, in large part as a result of who enrolled in them. But I understand their position much better now than I did then, and it was coming to see what assumptions underlay their position that helped me to see why addressing such issues is particularly important for university communities.

The history department was operating on the assumption that subject matter was the only reasonable or practical basis on which to distinguish between courses. Sometimes information has sequence built in, but often not: it's just *more*. In English, is there a reason why Chaucer should be studied before Shakespeare? Why sonnets should be studied before satire?

In spite of all this, it seems clear that many of them changed their teaching in this new situation. For instance, the sheer fact that some courses came first, and thus had mainly first year students in them; and others came later and were populated with third and fourth year students, had consequences for the level at which research and discussion could be conducted, to the presumptions that could be made about the students' familiarity with conventions of discourse and normal historical questions and methods.

A more immediate example is the way our Aquinas Programme developed. I won't tell you the whole story here, but the short version is that, having decided that we weren't happy with the smorgasbord or Chinese restaurant menu approach to first year (two from column A, two from column B), we conducted a university-wide discussion asking faculty to write about what they hoped students would encounter in first year.

What we decided we wanted to help first year students achieve turned out to have very little to do with content. We decided we didn't want a core curriculum based -- for example -- on a list of great books or a set of disciplines or even

What we agreed on was eventually codified into a set of goals for the program, goals stated in what seemed to most people involved pretty alien terms. We're mostly used to thinking in terms of content, but when people had written about what they wanted first year students to come into their intermediate and advanced courses with, not much of it was what we traditionally call "content." They tended to be what might be called "developmental aims."

Here's what we agreed on. In "The Aquinas Programme Statement of Goals" we said that the program should offer the following opportunities to students (this is a truncated version; the items with more explanation of each can be found on the Aquinas Programme Web site).

- significant assistance with the social and intellectual transitions involved in moving into the university community and the community of scholars.
- the chance to have the feeling of belonging to a group, of having a place and a role in a learning community.
- personal interaction with faculty (and other students). First year students should have the experience of seminar discussions, tutorials, and scheduled individual meetings with professors.
- the freedom to choose to take courses in disciplines which interest them and to express their beliefs and ideas freely.
- help in developing or enhancing the fundamental skills and dispositions appropriate to learners, in a context of attention to important ideas, understanding, and information.
- assistance in making connections between disparate disciplines, modes of practice, and bodies of knowledge.
- support in developing the highest levels of writing and general literacy. Writing as a mode of learning (rather than writing to display or knowledge or skill) is a powerful means of promoting active learning, and first year students should write frequently, at length, and for a range of purposes.
- an equal chance to participate in the learning process regardless of social differences.
- occasions to learn through a variety of methods.

I should stress here the importance of creating a situation in which people can buy in, can participate in the development of the curriculum. This sort of thing can't be imposed from above. When it is taken seriously, it can make profound differences. For me, for instance, it meant a deep rethinking of how my first year course might help students become engaged in the life of the campus, and the addition of an entirely new component of the course, and the programme (the Occasions exercise, which is described elsewhere).

This is important to people because it has consequences for their own teaching, but what's interesting is that the only language we can use to talk about the way various courses fit together is the language of curriculum, and of learning as a transformation of individuals. If we think

Another example of developing curricula - the English department document.

Through a similar process, the English department agree on a "Statement of Goals for English 1006, which included the following goals for our students' dealing with texts (this was very different from, and has very different consequences than, a list of geographical places, time periods, or writers to be

covered):

- Be able, and disposed, to read and value literary texts from a wide variety of genres and periods
- Have increased, and growing, ability to read and derive pleasure from texts
- Be accustomed to reading texts in circumstances which foster seeing them as human voices in social dialogue, and attributing social intentions to them, and thus to recognize that the social contexts in which reading and writing occur are important
- Recognize that initial responses to texts are often different from responses made after reflection, or in different circumstances, and that reflection is valuable -- and pleasurable
- Know that what they and others think and feel in response to a literary text is important
- Be encouraged to view texts as vital parts of the intellectual-aesthetic culture of communities or nations, and to see them as expressions of their hopes, struggles, limitations, assumptions, expectations and preoccupations.
- Be disposed to attend, and attend to, public realizations of texts (for example, the theatre, movies, readings, lectures, and able to be engaged with them in a reflective and responsive manner
- Be increasingly disposed, and accustomed, to value diversity in cultural, social, and political matter.

Even further, in recent years our department has, in part as a consequence of a particularly imaginative external review, redesigned its curriculum to pay attention to such matters -- on principle, and as part of the requirements of the program -- as the concept of authorship, the nature of genres and kinds in literature, the performative aspects of literature, the idea of national literature, and so forth. We require students to take courses in which such matters will be attended to, and in writing our course descriptions and designing our courses we find ourselves thinking about issues we'd not considered before.

What kinds of issues get attended to in this larger situation that don't when we talk about individual teaching?

One thing is that these specific curricular goals invite us to look at education from the learner's perspective, and from the learner's perspective *over time* -- that is, as a historical process. We're also invited to see students not merely as cohorts, nor merely as individuals, but as people making choices and undergoing experiences in a structured environment. We can ask ourselves, for instance -- as we did in setting up both these structures, what experiences do we want our students to have, what do we want them to have opportunities to learn, and how can we ensure that they actually *have* such experiences, and don't fall through the cracks?

One consequence of these rethinkings of curriculum on my own teaching is this: I've come to use, in most of my classes, a strategy I've developed since about 1983 which I call "collaborative investigation." It invites students to learn some kinds of things and not others. For examples:

- writing and reading "executive summaries"
- arguing effectively, orally in and writing
- conducting library (and Internet) research
- coping with other people
- understanding the social structure of a discipline (knowing there *is* such a thing)
- becoming accustomed to using texts for immediate motives

Now, all this is in some way in addition to (say) ensuring that they have some idea how John Dryden sounds and what he wrote about, and how. I don't believe I sacrifice "coverage" as part of ensuring that my students have opportunities to learn this, but I do know that that "coverage" is achieved in very

different ways.

It may be worth saying, too, that if everybody the average student took courses from were teaching in that way, I'd be very uncomfortable with the situation: if you look at the situation from the student's perspective, you want her to have a range of experiences. I often tell my students, as I explain this new way of participating in a course -- a way which is unnervingly unfamiliar to most of them -- that if most of their courses were like this I'd be finding another way to teach, that a powerful reason I teach the way I do is to offer students a different and challenging way to think about learning and teaching.

I need to say near the outset that I'm not offering evidence that this sort of process has transformed anybody's teaching (though I believe it has, and I believe it has had more consequences for my own teaching than any number of workshops in which I listened to people tell me about learning styles and personality types); I want to make the suggestion that if we start arranging situations in which people talk about learning in this context, as opposed to the context of attention to individual, isolated teachers, we direct everybody's attention to something other than whether my own teaching is up to snuff or whether I'm getting the ratings I want.

I'm not arguing that we ought to measure them: I don't think we can. This isn't about "outcomes measurements." But we do need to think about what the goals of our own courses are, and how those goals fit into the developmental patterns we might expect among our students. When we start to ask ourselves about that, we wind up -- or at least I have -- rethinking some pretty fundamental things about what we do in the classroom and with our students.

[A footnote]

In general, I have more faith in situational change that affects how people act indirectly than I have in conversions on the road to Damascus. I believe this in my teaching, too. But our society tends to want to think about these issues in individual, personal terms. I remember, during the oil crisis and the changeover from leaded to non-leaded gasoline, in the mid-seventies, the way people in North America found ways to get around the restriction that you couldn't use leaded gasoline in the new cars with catalytic converters. Leaded gas was cheaper, and people tended to put it in their car anyway. So there were publicity campaigns designed to increase people's consciousness of the damage they were doing to the environment by disabling their car's catalytic converters. Most people cheerfully ignored the campaign: after all, how many public consciousness-raising campaigns have people been subject to in the last century or so? Around 1972, gas stations and car manufacturers conspired to make the opening on the gas tanks of new cars smaller, and the nozzles on unleaded gas pumps smaller as well, so that old leaded gas pumps wouldn't fit. Faced with increasingly ruinous prices for gas, people began buying funnels to fit over the nozzles (I remember seeing them for sale in stores). More PR campaigns about smog and ozone resulting from leaded glass and crippled catalytic converters followed.

In the summer of 1974 I went to Germany, and noticed that there was no problem there at all. The reason was simple: leaded gas was more expensive than unleaded in Germany. When I discussed this with my German friends, they were incredulous: why, they asked, didn't the government simply raise taxes on leaded gas? Most of the real price of gas was taxes, anyway.

I was astonished to realize that this had never occurred to me. I'm a product of my own society, I guess.

North American individualism vs. European communalism? Too simple an opposition, of course, and yet there's something there. It doesn't map on to the culture so neatly; but there is an opposition here in two ways of thinking, and we *do* tend to think in terms of changing individuals as the way to change

society (remember Orwell on Dickens) rather than the other way round.

But there are some reasons why it's not silly to say that making an effort to think the other way might open up some possibilities to make substantial differences in the texture of our undergraduates' experiences.

Outtakes

In general, teachers -- like others -- find change difficult, uncomfortable, unacceptably risky, and this is mainly because the situation around them doesn't change.

To understand this, we need to consider some of the different elements that go to make up what I'm calling "the situation around them":

One is the Social (friends, colleagues, shared assumptions and values of the workplace and the discipline). For instance, do one's colleagues talk about teaching as though it were a central shared concern? Do people in the situation habitually talk about ways of lightening "the teaching load"?

Another is the Institutional (how the university's organized -- its structures of rewards and expectations; and how the profession to which the teacher belongs is organized). For instance, when a professor is evaluated for tenure or promotion, or for a new job, how much does teaching really count, and how is it defined and evaluated? When a junior faculty member finds herself in difficulty with her teaching, is she tacitly or even explicitly encouraged -- by colleagues, by her department chair, by the dean -- to conceal her shameful secret?

Then there's the Educational (particularly, how the curriculum and the educationally shaped contexts -- credit hours, courses, organizational matters -- are structured). Courses are seen as separable modules, self-contained globs of information or skills, like bricks in a wall. They're pretty much all the same size, and pretty much interchangeable.

There's also the Physical context (the classroom, but also the fact that the university is structured in certain ways, and classrooms are assigned to serve many different kinds of classes in the course of a day, for 50 or 75 minutes at a time). Classes are scheduled, in rooms, students are there at determined times and with determined expectations -- expectations shaped not only by their reading of the calendar, but by their own pre-existing knowledge about university, about courses, etc.

Curricular reform & rethinking

Consider, for instance, changing our systems of requirements and prerequisites. For example, we can introduce the ideas that curricular and educational goals might be stated in terms that go beyond credit hours and numbers of courses and grades. Simply the process of finding ways to state curricular goals in more than superficial ways is a powerful force to liberate teachers and to get them to talk about what they're actually doing. For example, our English department a couple of years ago create a statement about our first year courses -- one that defines its goals not in terms of texts or materials, but in terms of opportunities we all agree to give the students for behavioral change and cognitive growth. Similarly, the university as a whole decided what we wanted first year students to know and be able to do, and then thought about creating a situation in which teachers could figure out their own ways to do that.

For some years the English department has been rethinking its curriculum. Once, back in the good old

days, we did "Beowulf to Virginia Woolf" and everybody was happy, because we knew what texts every civilized person ought to be able to quote and allude to at dinner.

When that comfortable agreement collapsed -- when we discovered that there were literatures not British, and writers not male and white -- we found ourselves in a crisis. If the order of the curriculum wasn't coverage of British literature, what was it?

In our case, building on the introductory course, we decided that students should encounter courses which attended to important concepts in the study of literature -- for example, literary history, the idea of forms or genres, the concept of an author or authorship, the experience of reading literature from other periods or cultures. We also managed to sneak in a requirement for attending to literature as performance. I'm working on getting attention to literature as a social institution in there.

The real question here is the same one we confronted in setting up the Aquinas Programme -- is there more than an accumulation of information that we want to have some assurance our students have encountered?

When you're teaching a course that has now been publicly identified -- in the calendar, for instance -- as one that attends to authorship (as well as one in which students come to grips with *Paradise Lost*), you may well think differently about it. You don't necessarily do this -- remember the story about the unnamed medical school move from lectures to PBL). But this year I'm teaching 18th century literature as a drama and theatre course, and among other things students are doing research in theatre history, and reading scenes aloud for each other.



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