Building the Teaching Commons

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There are many ways to improve the quality of education, but we believe that the scholarship of teaching and learning holds special promise. Watching the movement gain momentum over recent years, we have been struck by the power that comes with viewing teaching as challenging intellectual work. The scholarship of teaching and learning invites faculty from all disciplines and fields to identify and explore interesting questions in their own teaching—and, especially, in their students’ learning—and to share what they discover with colleagues who can build on their insights. Such work has the potential to transform higher education by making the private work of the classroom visible, talked about, studied, built upon, and valued—conditions for ongoing improvement in any enterprise.

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This transformation will take time, and it will require long-term commitment and leadership on many levels. To be sure, considerable work must still be done to bring institutional rewards to scholarly work on teaching and learning. But a focus on institutionalization may obscure a quieter but dramatic development going on at the faculty level—the development of what we’re calling “the teaching commons,” a conceptual space in which communities of educators committed to pedagogical inquiry and innovation come together to exchange ideas about teaching and learning and use them to meet the challenges of preparing students for personal, professional, and civic life.

In what follows we explore the growth of this commons, its features and elements, and what it will take to build and sustain it as a vital, open, and productive environment for the advancement of teaching and learning.

The Growth of the Commons

Higher education has long fostered a robust academic commons for sharing the results of scientific and scholarly research; this tradition of open exchange is essential to the advancement of knowledge and its uses for social improvement. But teaching has enjoyed no such tradition. While one might think it would be the most social of work, teaching is a private activity for most faculty, taking place behind doors that are both metaphorically and physically closed to colleagues.

Not surprisingly, then, teachers have developed few habits or conventions for exploring what they do in the classroom and how it affects their students, or for sharing what they know with colleagues who might build upon it. In contrast to most professions, teaching, as Lee Shulman argued in a 1987 essay, is “devoid of a history of practice.”

Of course there are exceptions; there has always been a literature about the classroom. But systematic attention to teaching has largely been the province of small, disconnected communities of faculty reading and contributing to the few newsletters, journals, and conferences where pedagogical issues in their fields were aired. This work always had much to offer, but many faculty were unaware of it. Certainly, it was not work that they imagined doing themselves.

But as new developments and forces have entered the scene, serious engagement with matters pedagogical has become much more widespread. For one thing, research on learning has become increasingly available to educators—for instance, in the much circulated and quoted 1999 National Research Council publication *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. Such work has captured the attention of faculty who find themselves, as so many do today, struggling to work effectively with students who are more diverse in all kinds of ways that matter in a classroom.

Meanwhile, new technologies have raised new possibilities for exchange of instructional materials and ideas. Whereas in the past a few faculty may have shared syllabi in the hallway, they are now able to tap into vast repositories of teaching materials online and participate in lively listerv exchanges about teaching and learning with colleagues from around the world. Add to this a general sense—within the academy and beyond—that the educational mission of higher education deserves more status and visibility, and the conditions are ripe for expanded interest and engagement in teaching and learning.

The sense that pedagogy is an appropriate topic for serious scholarly attention follows as well from changes in knowledge practices and educational goals in many academic fields. In the humanities, for example, the new media and the access they afford to primary documents in history, literature, and culture have transformed possibilities for undergraduate education and along the way have spawned lively communities of exchange among interested faculty.

The sciences, in turn, have enjoyed unprecedented levels of funding for pedagogical projects. These reflect increased interest in attracting, retaining, and teaching students in these fields, as well as national policy priorities that have emphasized increasing the numbers of women and minorities in these disciplines and raising the level of scientific literacy for science and non-science majors alike. Faced with the opportunities and uncertainties posed by such developments, faculty today are exploring new ways of conducting themselves as teachers in colleges and universities of all varieties.
Consider the case of Dennis Jacobs, a chemistry professor at the University of Notre Dame, who until 1997 taught in a conscientious but conventional way. Writing about his experience in the Carnegie Foundation volume *Opening Lines*, Jacobs notes that things changed when “I began teaching a large general chemistry course with nearly 1,000 students divided into four lecture sections. It was a traditional introductory science course, but for me it became a concern when my office hours for the course were dominated by students who were struggling.”

Poorly prepared in high school, they were “caught off guard” by exams that required real problem solving. And, after getting low marks on one or two exams, they would withdraw from the course. Jacobs realized that introductory chemistry is a gateway to a number of majors, so for many students dropping out of “101” meant dropping a dream of being a scientist, an engineer, or a doctor.

Feeling an obligation to help these students succeed, Jacobs consulted the growing body of literature about chemistry and physics education, got help from Notre Dame’s teaching and learning center, and created an alternative learning environment for at-risk students, where lectures are interspersed with opportunities for students to work together on challenging problems, defend their ideas, and articulate their understandings. He might have stopped there, content with a general sense that things would improve.

Instead, Jacobs approached his work as a kind of scientific investigation: carefully documenting his efforts, videotaping in-class collaborative learning sessions, conducting focus groups with students, and working with Notre Dame’s Office of Institutional Research to track student success in subsequent science courses. The data he collected showed that the alternative approach significantly improved retention and achievement in subsequent courses, results that he shared with his colleagues.

That documented success convinced faculty in physics and engineering at Notre Dame to adopt a similar model—and administrators to fund additional scholarship of teaching and learning projects by faculty in other fields. Jacobs has received national recognition for his work, and he has presented it in scholarly forums where other faculty can learn from, engage with, and critique his results (see Jacobs’s electronic portfolio for more information: http://kml2.carnegiefoundation.org/gallery/djacobs/index2.htm).

Stories like Jacobs’s are increasingly common. Often, although not always, flying the flag of “the scholarship of teaching and learning,” faculty members in all fields of undergraduate instruction and all types of institutions are taking teaching public: documenting what they’re doing, gathering evidence of its effects, and building and sharing knowledge to improve practice.

As one might imagine, it is difficult to ascertain the exact scale and scope of this work—who’s doing it, where, and in what numbers. Much of it occurs (or at least begins) in local campus initiatives around, say, the assessment of general education or new technologies that make visible aspects of student learning that were previously taken for granted and unquestioned.

But a few numbers from recent Carnegie Foundation initiatives may be suggestive. The national fellowship program for scholars of teaching and learning run by Carnegie since 1998 saw the largest number of applicants ever this past year—more than 300 for 21 slots. An annual Carnegie colloquium on the scholarship of teaching and learning has attracted over 1,500 participants from approximately 300 campuses since 1999, again with the largest number in the most recent year.

Some 8,340 individuals are now using the electronic toolkit developed by Carnegie’s Knowledge Media Laboratory to make their scholarly work on teaching and learning public and available for others (see: http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/KML/KEEP/index.htm). These include undergraduates, graduate students, faculty in a full range of fields and institutional settings, and participants in special programs—for instance, 20 prominent biologists who received $1 million grants from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to undertake serious scholarly projects in the teaching and learning of their field.

Meanwhile, many scholarly and professional societies are increasing the amount of air and column space they give to teaching and learning and creating new forums and outlets for such work. The Mathematical Association of America, for
The concept of the commons evokes a variety of settings and histories. One may think of parks and greenbelts, the public airwaves, and, once again, academic research. The Web site for the “Creative Commons,” an organization chaired by Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig, refers to “resources that are not divided into individual bits of property but rather are jointly held so that anyone may use them without special permission.” In an article about the commons as an alternative organizational structure in the global economy, Antonio Palumbo and Alan Scott posit three defining features: 1) a set of resources held in common and employed for collective ends; 2) a set of institutional arrangements devised to foster social cooperation; and 3) a set of managerial practices regularizing access to and use of common resources. But what does it mean to talk about a teaching commons?

While the teaching commons includes a wide range of pedagogical work, the scholarship of teaching and learning brings into the picture work that is often deeply contextual and tied closely to the details of classroom settings. To be sure, instructors at any level can benefit from basic research on teaching or learning, but it would be a mistake, in higher education as it has been in the lower grades, to assume that findings from such research can be simply “applied” or “translated” to practice in any straightforward way. In fact, according to studies cited in the National Research Council’s report on Scientific Research in Education, the “prevailing model of research implementation—moving from basic research to development to large-scale implementation of programs—is based on simplistic assumptions about the nature of education and education research.” The authors cite a 1999 National Academy of Education report that argues that it makes more sense to “view research production and research understanding as part of the same process.” In other words—and this goes to the very heart of the scholarship of teaching and learning—doing it enables one to use it. Practitioners must participate in the effort if it is to have real consequences in the classroom. And it is the work of practitioners that one finds increasingly in the teaching commons.

Such work is especially important because teaching and learning are highly dependent on contextual factors, and faculty often find as much to learn from the situated experience of other faculty as from studies done with methodologies designed to minimize the influence of context on research results. Lee Shulman argues that it is, in fact, the details of particular cases that allow for generalizability. As he writes in a recent volume on ethical issues in the scholarship of teaching and learning, it is these details that help the user determine “What is this a case of? How similar are the circumstances under which this study was conducted to the situation to which I might wish to generalize its findings? Is this work relevant to me and my circumstances?”

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400 participants to its inaugural meeting in 2004 and had to close registration as it approached 650 for its second meeting in 2005 (for more information about the 2006 conference, see: www.issotl.org).

Taking advantage of such opportunities, scholars in the United States are finding new colleagues in countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand, where there are strong traditions of pedagogical research in higher education and where national policies are encouraging institutions to take teaching seriously. In short, it’s fair to say that the teaching commons is growing in size, diversity, and momentum.
This is the kind of process envisioned by Barbara Walvoord when she observes in an unpublished essay, “Building on Each Other’s Work,” that the use of the scholarship of teaching and learning “may resemble how a reader uses a biography or an autobiography. No one claims that the reader ought to be able to replicate the writer’s life. Yet people read biographies and autobiographies and use them to guide their own lives and decisions.” The scholarship of teaching and learning may inform practice, she concludes, not only by providing ideas for methods, materials, or assessment, but also by inspiring, moving, and changing a teacher’s perspective, attitude, or vision.

It is, in short, precisely the contextually rich nature of practitioner inquiry that makes the scholarship of teaching and learning so useful to faculty. When such work enters the teaching commons, faculty can see how others manage complexity in the classroom and how they pose and address real pedagogical problems in situations they know how to “read.” They can identify a good question, a promising investigative strategy, an assignment or assessment design that they might try out or include in their own repertoire, and they are aided in incorporating it into their own work by their understanding of how the original context differs from their own.

The importance of context in knowledge building around matters pedagogical brings with it a crucial corollary for the commons. While there is a place for general principles and lists of best practices to guide improvement, what’s also needed are rich representations of teaching and learning—new genres that capture the blooming, buzzing complexity of real students in real settings. Clearly, this means that the teaching commons cannot be limited to conventional forms of publication. It is not only enriched but enabled by new technologies that give wide access to classroom materials, video, electronic portfolios, assessment instruments and rubrics, workshop and conference presentations, and other forms and formats that are just now evolving.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s OpenCourseWare (OCW) project is a well-known case in point. A large-scale Web-based electronic publishing initiative, this project “makes MIT’s core teaching materials—lecture notes, problem sets, syllabi, reading lists, and simulations—freely and openly available for non-commercial educational purposes.” OCW plans to publish all MIT courses (1,250 were online at the end of 2005) and then to begin a cycle of updating. Not only has the project enjoyed a lively response from educators, students, and “self-learners” from around the globe, it has also helped MIT faculty themselves become more reflective about their own teaching and more aware of what their colleagues are doing in the classroom.

Many other projects could be mentioned. For example, the Peer Review of Teaching project headquartered at the University of Nebraska, the Carnegie Foundation’s Knowledge Media Laboratory (KML), and the Visible Knowledge Project based at Georgetown University have all explored alternative or additional genres to enable scholars of teaching and learning to document their work online in ways not possible in regular talk or print. The Peer Review of Teaching project involved the development of Web-based course portfolios by faculty at five universities, using a format that is highly structured, relatively simple to create, but still somewhat “texty” (as technology people say)—thus connecting to the reading and writing habits of most academics.

The Knowledge Media Laboratory takes a different approach, developing elaborate electronic portfolios with a strategic mix of text, audio, and video to establish a “library, laboratory, and museum” of teaching and learning that other faculty can study online. And the Visible Knowledge Project has adapted the KML’s user-friendly “snapshot tool” to provide structured templates for making dynamic, visually appealing electronic posters of individual projects, as well as to facilitate the process and to represent the products of collaborative work.

In fact, technology circles in higher education are buzzing with experiments to help faculty and students make teaching and learning public in ways that can enter the teaching commons, although it is still too early to know what will result. There are many questions about archiving, indexing, and charting the life cycles of such representations that the brightest minds are working on as we write. As Tom Hatch, Randy Bass, Toru Iiyoshi, and Desiree Pointer Mace—leaders of several key efforts—argued in the September/October 2004 issue of Change, these developments can play a central role in creating a robust, user-friendly commons:

“The convergence of multimedia applications, Web-based tools, and networked information systems with the growth of a
more complex vision of teaching can lead to two critical developments....The first is the establishment of a broader, collaborative research paradigm, where a community of scholars might examine similar classroom phenomena and pool their evidence and findings. Second is the creation of a more flexible relationship between teaching processes, classroom inquiry, and published products.

In short, the teaching commons is getting richer—both in supply and in the variety of materials and representations of teaching and learning. But, unfortunately, supply doesn’t automatically ensure use. The key challenges for the future of the teaching commons are also to create and sustain demand.”

**IF THEY BUILD IT, WILL YOU COME?**

There is much to be encouraged about in the work by individual scholars and campus and disciplinary groups that have taken on tough questions about learning and teaching, leading to intriguing new evidence, insights, and materials. Even so, the scholarship of teaching and learning remains a fragile movement; most faculty do not (yet) know about it or tap into its increasingly rich networks and resources. The question, then, is how to encourage larger numbers of people to expand their pedagogical imaginations and enrich their classroom practice by engaging not only with the papers and books that result from this new scholarship but also with electronic portfolios, snapshots and posters, and other online representations of teaching and learning that increasingly populate the commons. Will they find—and find useful—the various artifacts and data from projects like Dennis Jacobs’s? In other words, what will it take to build a “readership,” “usership,” or “audience” for this diverse and mostly uncharted collection of new kinds of work? These questions carry with them a number of challenges.

The first challenge is to keep the commons open, vital, and attractive to users. This means, for starters, staying open to faculty from a full range of fields and disciplines who want—even if only occasionally and in modest ways—to contribute to pedagogical inquiry and discussion. This requires campus support for more and better occasions to talk about learning, informal working groups of faculty experimenting with particular pedagogies, departmental conversations about critical learning issues, and institution-wide seminars about important questions concerning the educational experience.

On a wider scale, openness also requires that journal and newsletter editors, conference organizers, grant proposal reviewers, and the like should recognize that scholars with different backgrounds, asking a wide range of questions and using a variety of methods, can make valuable contributions to the teaching commons.

Of course, openness will be meaningless without attention to quality. If the teaching commons becomes a home for work that cannot gain the respect of peers, it will soon be abandoned by those doing (and seeking) good work. There has, in fact, been a lively conversation over the past several years about standards for judging scholarly work on teaching and learning, and that conversation must continue and deepen.

As in any field of intellectual work, questions of quality must be debated, sorted out, and negotiated as the field itself evolves. And as is true in any field, the scholarship of teaching and learning must balance the need for high standards with the need for incentives to experiment and to push into unknown territory. The commons must serve both as a repository and a seeder bed.

Questions about who can (and can’t) put what into the commons and under what circumstances also raise issues about publicness—legal issues about copyright, for instance, and about forms of privatization and commercialization that unduly restrict access. Here it is useful to remember that in arenas as diverse as natural resources, the Internet, and scientific research, the notion of the commons has tended to be invoked—most famously by Garrett Hardin in his discussion of “the tragedy of the commons”—to mourn its passing or warn against its loss.

For better or worse, David Bollier reminds us in *Public Assets, Private Profits*, history provides many examples of shifts from public to private control: from the enclosure movement in England, in which the landed classes took over open fields traditionally managed by local communities, to the recent trend for business interests to seek greater sway over the use of public resources such as land, water, the airwaves, the Internet, and the results of federally funded research. And, as the higher education community glimpsed in the early rush to e-learning in the 1990s, pedagogical work is potentially as vulnerable to enclosure as other intellectual and cultural resources.

This means thinking through the intellectual property issues that are involved in going public with work on teaching and learning: assuring that one is in compliance with current intellectual property practices, establishing appropriate incentives for contributors, but also seeking creative ways to keep access as open as possible. As MIT’s OpenCourseWare Web site explains: “The intellectual property policies created for [OpenCourseWare] are clear and consistent with other policies for scholarly materials used in education. Faculty retain ownership of most materials...following the MIT policy on textbook authorship. MIT retains ownership only when significant use has been made of the Institute’s resources. If student course work is placed on the [OpenCourseWare] site, then copyright in the work remains with the student.”

Looking carefully upstream, the OCW team makes sure it has obtained licenses from...
the owners of materials it places on the Web. But looking downstream, MIT has made good use of legal tools employed by advocates of open access to knowledge and information and allows anyone to use or modify OCW material for their own purposes as long as it remains noncommercial, is attributed to MIT and any faculty member whose name is associated with the material, and is shared or distributed without charge “under the same terms that MIT’s OCW first made works available to the user.” This is a promising model for building the teaching commons as a rich pedagogical resource. As political scientist Stephen Weber puts it in his book *The Success of Open Source*, the key move is to configure intellectual property “fundamentally around the right to distribute, not the right to exclude.”

But this raises another set of challenges that revolve around the need for practices, as Palumbo and Scott put it, for “regularizing access and use of common resources.” In particular, the commons calls for the development of habits and conventions for citing and building on the work of others—which are essential, after all, to the recognition, reward, and motivation for such work.

In a paper presented at the Modern Language Association annual meeting in 2004, Elliot Shapiro, a senior lecturer in Cornell University’s writing program, criticized the lack of such incentives: “Colleagues who borrow from syllabi... are not obliged to acknowledge what they have borrowed as they would if, in their published work, they borrowed from articles published more formally.” In short, he says, though “all teachers depend” on the commons, they tend to do so in ways that are “invisible.” For the commons to function effectively, more visible, shared conventions need to be established for the citation of individual work, as well as for the mapping and management of knowledge in order to organize a vast and diverse collection of information in ways that allow it to be used.

These challenges of openness, quality, publicness, and organization all point to the need for higher education to see the teaching commons as territory worth tending—as work in which all involved have a collective stake and to which all must cooperatively contribute. The scholarship of teaching and learning (at least in the United States) has been largely faculty driven, and this is key to the recent growth of the commons. It is time now to find ways to build and maintain the infrastructure needed to make high-quality pedagogical work available and accessible to all.

This must be done on multiple levels, taking advantage of a kind of chicken-and-egg dynamic. The fact of a larger commons where a diverse (even international) community of scholars assembles to trade and build on one another’s pedagogical work is a condition for serious work on campuses, which often take their signals about what is important from developments beyond their local borders. Conversely, the development and use of the larger commons will depend on what happens on campuses, in the day-by-day life of faculty as they work with students and colleagues.

At both levels, building the commons will take energy, time, and money to bring people together for exchange around important questions about teaching and learning, to develop new venues and outlets for sharing the scholarship of teaching and learning, to create and maintain repositories and maps through which this work can be located and used, and to resist restrictive modes of commercialization and privatization of pedagogical work.

All who are committed to the teaching mission of higher education must seek ways to make new pedagogical practices, tools, and understandings broadly available, thus building the pedagogical commons, protecting it, and ensuring access to it. A functioning commons will widen the circulation of pedagogical knowledge, deepen it through debate and critique, and thus better inform the kinds of instructional innovation so important to higher education today.

Resources