The Role, Character, and Importance of Teaching during the next five years.

We are convinced that teaching will remain the central issue confronting the College during the next five years. Our concern collects a number of related challenges: how we improve good teaching, how we assist deeper learning, how we nourish an institutional culture dedicated to developing good teachers and rewarding their efforts, how we learn about teaching and learning from each other. These challenges will require us to see teaching from the perspectives of student learners—for some, a shift from the more familiar *ex cathedra* posture—who, after all, are the main reason we teach.

In that respect (if not in others), the outline of teaching responsibilities may well change over the next five years. One obvious difference may result from instructors who shape syllabi that privilege the learning needs of their students, and devise strategies and exercises for their courses which engage students actively in the learning encounter. Simply put, students need to understand the reasons or goals for a day’s lesson and, more broadly, the importance of the learning they currently undertake. “Inviting the student in to the structure” makes them feel part of the encounter in an instrumental way, and encourages them to take the responsibility to learn which, itself, becomes reflexive: students learn skills of self-analysis to build their own scaffolds of discovery.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the faculty’s need to be conversant (if not fluent) with innovative instructional technologies, and to be encouraged to keep current with advances in this sphere. For one thing, some of our students are often much more adept at tapping technological resources than some senior faculty, and all of our students are likely to have already developed learning strategies shaped by technology. This commitment requires the support of an engaged and sustaining administration.

In addition, we need to recognize that part of the responsibility of teaching will be developing the learning skills our students will need for the rest of their lives.
We are convinced that fostering the metacognitive heuristics and strategies that will enable our students to "learn how to learn" is increasingly essential in a world distinguished by technological innovation and change.

But we are not blinded to the far-reaching implications such changes are likely to cause. For one thing, designing (or re-shaping) curriculum takes time and effort. We must progress past the lip service teaching is accorded and recognize that significant change demands equally significant investment—especially for junior faculty who are pressed by scholarship and research demands.

What strategies can move us toward learner-centered teaching?

We are fortunate to have a faculty—both at the junior and the senior level—overwhelmingly dedicated to improving their teaching; some would argue that this means a major achievement is already possible. Now we need to find the ways to give this eager faculty the opportunities to learn the latest information about sound pedagogy in their courses. We propose several mechanisms:

- Provide significant encouragement to faculty to take the time to make the change. A major endowment opportunity can be established which funds reassigned time for the purposes of curricular innovation, and significant curricular innovation receives the recognition currently accorded significant publication.
- Engagement in teaching, improvement of teaching, and demonstrable (and documented) skill in teaching should significantly influence promotion and tenure decisions.
- Encourage informal, peer-to-peer discussions of teaching practice, both within the discipline and across the disciplines. The discovery of how very specific problems are confronted in a physics lecture or in a painting studio can encourage both innovation and imagination.
- Invite students to join the discussion—especially by responding to the interests of majors on a departmental level. We can thus empower them to consider their own role in learning and help them devise unique profiles for the lifelong acquisition of knowledge we expect them to pursue when they graduate. Students always seek faculty advisors, and these gatherings can be publicized as informal venues where one can meet and consider likely mentors.
- Bring classrooms into the 21st century. Classrooms need to be technologically updated, with complete web access, flexible-seating arrangements, and environments conducive to unimpeded inquiry, including more ergonomic and learner-centered designs.
- As our students use the campus more and more at non-traditional times (evenings, weekends), we need to make offices and counseling available
to them during these hours. Technology can greatly assist with instant chat, but training and support must be provided to faculty, staff, and students on the optimal use of synchronous communication strategies.

- Target adjunct faculty to improve teaching methods by encouraging adjuncts to participate in Center for Teaching activities and in departmental discussions of pedagogy and curriculum, by focusing peer reviews with greater specificity on syllabus change, curriculum innovation, and pedagogical development, and by seeking a change in the current contract to pay adjuncts to expand their office hours.

- Seek the advice of experts in cognitive psychology who can help us to put teaching and learning on firm, scientific foundations. The challenge of data on how people learn should provoke each of us to question and modify (or, even, justify!) current teaching practices. Furthermore, if such conferences are videotaped for later streaming and archiving, their content can be part of a larger pedagogical knowledge base.

**How can we integrate best practices into our teaching?**

Teaching requires that we engage students to risk learning. Their movement to discover and learn (to become that constantly changing character, a “learner”) requires courage on their part and savvy on our part. They must leave relatively comfortable surroundings in which they know, recognize, and have rationalized their worlds and find a new way in a world they neither know nor recognize, and which is quite likely to disturb them for some time.

Our challenge is not all that different, we believe. Good teachers remain “students” until well after retirement, we submit, because we are constantly learning how to teach. Central to our professional equipment must be the ability to be an accurate self-assessor, someone who can frankly recognize when teaching succeeds and when it fails. One mark of the good teacher is the ability to admit when it flops—and to begin the search for strategies that can succeed. Even previously successful assignments can fail in a new offering, and the wise teacher recognizes that two sessions of the same course (even in the same semester) are really two, very different, courses.

Moreover, we discover the unique intelligences that students bring to our classrooms—and these riches are not always consistent from semester to semester or course to course. Tailoring instruction to the students we face each term in each course means valuing their questions (to enable them to move to more complex kinds of reasoning), affirming the thinking patterns that are likely to be essential as they progress, and permitting their unique creativity room to explore and discover. When we approach a class—even (or
especially) a class we have taught for years—our goal must be to emphasize not only that which is classic but also that which is immediate, to assess our students’ achievements as well as their needs. To that end, we need to encourage faculty to learn the value of administering “learning skills diagnostics” at the beginning of a semester. Their results can assist in devising those strategies which encourage students to “own” their learning and, thereby, become familiar and comfortable in the discipline to risk even more discovery.

Attention to teaching and concern for improvement is not unique to Brooklyn College. Several professional organizations currently provide consultation and advice about innovation in teaching for higher education. We recommend that the College investigate hiring professional consultants who are aware of our student demographics and faculty profiles to assist us with specific tasks such as portfolio creation, management of small groups in large classes, and a host of other areas.

The Role of the Center for Teaching

The Center for Teaching already plays an important role in providing the forum in which many of these questions can be explored. However, it in no way operates at optimum efficiency and we regret that it is still an undiscovered resource for some faculty. There can be many explanations for this low profile—and most of them are probably accurate—but undeniable is that such a slender reputation corresponds to the professional esteem in which teaching is held on campus. We hazard that infinitely more faculty know about the PSC-CUNY grant opportunities (and apply for them) than know about the Center’s roster of activities and participate in them. When teaching is equated to research in the consideration of personnel actions, we are convinced that the anomaly of a Center which offers excellent programs on a number of the issues we describe above and yet which still remains an insufficiently tapped resource would vanish.

For one thing, the Center can be just that: a Center from which spring all the teaching/learning activities sponsored by the College and which links symposia, conferences, and informal offerings. Once again, such a multi-purpose occupation is likely to require significant resources: simply publicizing the calendar of all teaching-related events is both complicated and tremendously time-consuming. It also provides incontrovertible, prima facie evidence that teaching matters and that the Administration is willing to invest resources to prove it.
Academic Information Technologies provides a host of faculty training and development opportunities, instructional software and hardware, student support through the Library Café, and are the nexus of current information about new media technologies for classroom instruction. When their offices work effortlessly with the Center for Teaching, the result is the fullest engagement of the faculty in discovering, developing, and refining state-of-the-art fluency in instructional technology.

The Seamless Web of an Engaged Faculty

A faculty committed to improving its teaching needs to know that resources are available to enable them to improve so that Brooklyn College improves. Specifically, they need to know how their students learn and how others have shaped curriculum to respond to that knowledge. They need an opportunity to discuss teaching strategies—very specific issues of practical pedagogy, like building a syllabus or devising an exam or refining a writing assignment—with others who have devised them and succeeded, attempted them and failed, or are considering them. They need access to the most current information about teaching in their discipline that their professional societies and associations provide. They need the time to develop new courses or reconsider existing courses as part of the curricular landscape. They need the reassurance that teaching matters at least as much as any component in their portfolio when personnel actions loom. They need to be reassured that questions about teaching are not signs of inadequacy, that improving teaching does not imply prior failure, that recognizing how students learn does not signify weakened rigor, that just down the hall or across the quad are faculty struggling with the same questions. They need to know that the quest for splendid teaching always energizes, always challenges, and never concludes. And they need to know that this quest is foremost in Brooklyn College’s future.

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