Contents

2   From the Editor
    By Jan Worth-Nelson, Director, Thompson Center for Learning & Teaching

3   Igniting Engagement:
    Reflecting on EMBERS, the Flint Fires Verbatim Theater Project
    Andrew Morton, Lecturer, Department of Theatre & Dance

8   Online Instruction as a Route to Engagement: A Teacher-Student Exchange
    Kristina Gammon, Undergraduate Student, Sociology
    and Karen Salvador, Assistant Professor, Department of Music

12  The Student as Idea, and the Idea as Process
    Sarah Lippert, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication & Visual Art

16  Broadening My View of Engagement: Context Counts
    Laura McLeman, Assistant Professor, Department of Mathematics

18  Engagement and Active Learning: Sometimes the Teacher Learns the Most
    Marilyn Harvey, Lecturer, Public Health and Health Sciences Department

20  Dancing Towards Learning: It’s All About the Tutu
    Elizabeth Kattner, Lecturer, Department of Theatre & Dance

24  Engagement and “Competing Goods”:
    Must the Crown Always Bow Before the Altar?
    Brian Boggs, Lecturer, Department of English

The Scholarship of Teaching
Volume 5, Issue 1/Fall 2012
Editor: Jan Worth-Nelson, Director
    Thompson Center for Learning & Teaching

The Scholarship of Teaching is published by the Thompson Center for Learning
& Teaching, University of Michigan-Flint, 303 E. Kearseley Street, 241 French
Hall, Flint, MI 48502; ph 810/237-6508; fax 810/766-6803.

The Scholarship of Teaching invites submissions from faculty, staff, and
administration. Submission guidelines are available online at
www.umflint.edu/tct.

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Design and Layout: Sandra Alberto

Cover photo: Dancers from the ballet, “Sleeping Beauty,” Jaclyn Borrow
(Sleeping Beauty); Robert Anderson (Prince); Audience from left to right, Olivia
Taylor, John Hudson, Brittanay Galloway and Vaughn Davis.
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Production and printing by Commercial Graphics, Inc.
From the Editor:

“Our understanding of learning has expanded at a rate that has far outpaced our conception of teaching.”

When Randy Bass, a Georgetown University English professor and national teaching and learning guru, opened his Assessment Summit talk here last February with the above assertion, I experienced a pronounced and not altogether pleasant adrenaline rush.

He’s right. We know what helps students learn: we have a growing and incontrovertible body of evidence dangling various truths before us. John Medina laid out much of what we know in his 12 “brain rules,” in a book the TCLT has been giving out like Ritalin. Terry Doyle of Ferris State has been travelling the country, preaching at one conference after another, that “the one who does the work learns the most,” and delivering the latest neurological news. And the AAC&U, through the work of George Kuh and others, has abundantly documented “high impact practices” that yield significant learning – a list we are celebrating and exploring this year:

• First year seminars and experiences
• Common intellectual experiences
• Learning communities
• Writing-intensive courses
• Collaborative assignments and projects
• Undergraduate research
• Diversity/global learning (study abroad)
• Service Learning/community-based learning
• Internships
• Capstone course and projects

Notice anything about this list? As Bass points out in “Disrupting Ourselves: The Problem of Learning in Higher Education,” in the March/April issue of Educause Review, “many of these practices are not part of the formal curriculum but are in the co-curriculum, or what we used to call the extra-curriculum...”. In other words, most of the practices that “correlate to the most powerful learning outcomes” are NOT in the traditional classroom.

They are, in effect, the kinds of practices we associate with what we call “engagement” – the opportunities, assignments, structures and events we provide our students that thoroughly wake them up, require their active participation, invite them to “learn by doing.”

As he must, Bass poses the obvious question: “If most of the formal curriculum is not where the high-impact experiences are located, what are our possible responses? One essential response is to design more high-impact courses.” Among other suggestions, he calls for “team-based” models where teachers from across disciplines, along with e-learning experts, student support staff, the writing center, librarians and classroom technologists all come together for the students’ greater learning.

This is not the way we ordinarily do things. When planning this year’s new faculty orientation, for example, I became frustrated with how fragmented and compartmentalized everything felt: we found ourselves sending our new faculty to one mini-seminar after another, hoping that all the pieces will eventually fit together. But structurally we are not built around a team design.

In short, if we respect the evidence and live by it, as Sam Cooke so memorably told us, “Change is Gonna Come.”

Bass is sympathetic to what this means. He writes, “Instead of trying to change faculty so that they might change their courses, this model focuses on changing course structures so that faculty will be empowered and supported in an expanded approach to teaching...”

A hearty huzzah for this approach. We all know how hard it is to team-teach, for example – just that one challenge often feels terminally daunting in our efforts to innovate. In addition, the tenure process tends to favor tried-and-true routines, making course design innovations nerve-wracking and risky for junior faculty. It is probably no accident, then, that of the seven papers in this issue, four are by lecturers, and the other three by junior faculty not yet in the blast-furnace of “going up.” Most of us working with faculty across campus have noticed that a large body of the innovative work on campus comes from our lecturers – those who can take the chance to experiment, who are not required to publish in top-tier, peer reviewed journals, who can engage in the scholarship of teaching and even learn from their mistakes.

So, how do we confront what Bass provocatively calls “the post-course era”? How do we gather together with audacity and creative critical thinking to be midwives for our students’ powerful learning?

Here, seven gifted UM-Flint teachers and writers explore some answers. I am deeply thankful to all of them for sharing their experience. Their work matters. These are essays worth taking to heart. I hope you’ll enjoy every one.

Jan Worth-Nelson, Director
Thompson Center for Learning and Teaching
Igniting Engagement:
Reflecting on EMBERS, the Flint Fires Verbatim Theater Project

by Andrew Morton, Lecturer
Department of Theatre & Dance

Words of Introduction

We open with a stunning example of community engagement. Summer 2010 was the season of “The 40 Days and 40 Nights” in Flint, when arsonists torched hundreds of houses. And it kept going. One Sunday morning in October, things got personal for Theatre Lecturer Andrew Morton. He watched, horrified, as the Jackson-Hardy House, a symbol of hope for the community at the corner of University and Grand Traverse, burned to the ground. This is his account of what he did then, and how his Collective Playwriting students gave voice to a whole community’s anger, grief, doubt, confusion and yes, even hope.

It was a beautiful August afternoon on the east side of Flint. The Peace Mob Gardens, a community garden on Illinois Avenue, was the site for the fifth performance of EMBERS: The Flint Fires Verbatim Theatre Project, an original community based production inspired by the 2010 rash of arsons that plagued the city of Flint. A cast of UM-Flint students, alumni, and community members were assembled on a makeshift stage that stood across the road from the charred remnants of an abandoned home that had burned down just a few weeks before. A trio of musicians played as children chased each other in the garden, and gradually the audience began to fill the rows of old church pews next to murals that read “City pride is planted here” and “Flint is safe Tell your friends.”

Music played as the cast moved around the stage slowly and then frantically, all the while fixated on the flames that flickered from the lighters they held in their hands. As the rest of the cast took their places, three actors stepped forward. Representing the students who had collaboratively researched and written the script, one cast member looked directly at the audience and declared, “I’m not from Flint” and the play began.

Although those four words accurately describe many of our students, they also apply to me. In April 2010, for the second time in my life I found myself living in the Vehicle City. I left Flint in 2004 as an ambitious graduate ready to change the world through theatre. I then spent six years living in London, where I had the opportunity to study with and work along side many inspiring artists and activists exploring the intersections between performance and civic engagement. Even though I left Flint to gain new experiences, I soon found myself living and working as a community artist in communities that were not so different from the one I left behind. When the opportunity to return to Flint to teach in the theatre department at UM-Flint came my way, I realized that perhaps there was no better place to do the type of work I wanted to do. So I came back, still believing that when it’s done right, theatre can create significant change in our communities.

As I was about to begin teaching at the college level for the first time, I made a conscious decision to not get involved in too many new projects until I felt comfortable in my new role as a college lecturer. While living in the UK I worked primarily in the community sector, bouncing around from one theatre project to the next and working with diverse groups ranging from young homeless people in London to people living with HIV/AIDS in Kenya. While the pay was never great, I loved the work. However, I also knew from experience how time consuming and emotionally draining it could be. Returning to Flint, I felt it was necessary to take a break from this type of work until I felt more settled. However, even with the best intentions the temptation to get involved in new projects still lurked around every corner. As I settled into my new job and got to know my new neighbors in the Grand Traverse neighborhood, I didn’t need to look much further than my own doorstep for inspiration. Before long, the massively time consuming and emotionally draining project I’d been working so hard to avoid had found me, and I was hooked.

My return to Flint occurred at the same time that the city was experiencing a dramatic increase in arson fires that I later learned members of the Flint Fire Department called the “40 Days and 40 nights.” Arson is certainly not a new phenomenon in Flint, but between March and April 2010 the city witnessed a record-breaking number of fires over the course of a few weeks. Unfortunately the surge of fires occurred not long after the city had been
forced to lay off a significant number of fire fighters. Fingers were pointing, theories of who was to blame were spreading, and many residents of the city were living in fear. Immediately I was interested in the stories behind the headlines. I wanted to know why this was happening, who was being affected by it, and what I, as a community artist, could do in response. I soon realized that all of these questions circling in my head presented me with a wonderful teaching opportunity. I knew in the Winter 2011 semester I would be teaching the Collective Playwrights’ Workshop course, in which students collaboratively create a script over the course of the term. The course has been offered several times in the past and resulted in some worthy attempts to engage the Flint community, so it felt like a natural fit for me. I was looking for an interesting subject for a play that would not only engage my students creatively, but also provide them with the opportunity to get out of the classroom, challenge their perceptions of the community, and ultimately make them better artists. The more I thought about it, the question of why the city of Flint was essentially burning itself down seemed like a perfect subject for this course.

However, it wasn’t until a Sunday morning in October 2010 that I truly understood the magnitude of the situation. It was October 16th, the day that arsonists set fire to the newly restored Jackson-Hardy House that once stood so elegantly on the corner of University and Garland as a symbol of hope for the community. By the time I arrived, an audience had already gathered to observe flames engulf the beautiful old Jackson-Hardy House, and we watched together as the fire quickly spread to the building next door. In a matter of minutes, both houses burned to the ground. Once again, the residents of Flint watched their history and their hope for the future reduced to a pile of ash and smoldering embers.

Watching these fires, something also ignited in me. This was no longer just an interesting topic for a class and a play. Observing both houses burning down touched me on a very personal and visceral level, and I now knew this work needed to be done.

As I had plenty of experience of creating community-based theatre, I was fully aware of the dangers of creating a play inspired by tragic events. Often this type of work can result in those who have experienced trauma feeling violated or misrepresented. Although I now had some personal experience of how arson was impacting the city, I certainly didn’t consider myself an expert on the issue and I felt very uncomfortable about presenting this story from a single perspective. For these reasons, I felt “verbatim theatre” would be an appropriate medium to explore this topic. Verbatim theatre is often used to describe a script or performance that is made up entirely of the words of real people, spoken to an artist or group of artists in a verbatim fashion. Their words are then edited and structured in a way to create a dramatic form. I had already started speaking to people in the city about the fires and the idea behind this project, and many shared that they felt no one was truly listening to them. Many also said they felt abandoned, and that something needed to change. The more people I met, the more strongly I felt that a verbatim play would provide a perfect opportunity to create a platform for their stories, and demand attention on their behalf.

With the focus of the work becoming clearer, I developed a syllabus for the playwriting course and attempted to create a realistic schedule in which students could learn more about verbatim theatre and create their own piece in one semester. At the same time I also began exploring the possibility of securing funding to produce the play once it was written. With the incredible support and guidance of Mona Younis in University Outreach, I was able to connect with several community partners including the Hispanic Community and Technology Center, the Kearsley Park Block Redevelopment Project, Raise it Up! Youth Arts and Awareness, and the Urban League of Flint. Together we submitted a grant proposal to the University of Michigan Arts of Citizenship program, an initiative that supports UM faculty and students engaged in public scholarship. Drawing on my own experience of working in the community sector, I felt it was important to make sure all partners felt ownership of the work and I knew that this project would only be truly successful if it was an authentic collaboration. While I had experience of exploring an issue of shared concern and then using people’s experiences to create a performance, our community partners were the real experts on not only how arson was impacting the lives of people in Flint, but also on how to encourage members of the community to participate in our work.

The class itself began meeting once a week in January 2011. After a few weeks of getting to know each other, interviewing one another about our own perceptions and experiences of arson in the city and examining other plays created in the verbatim style, we finally ventured out into the community. It was a harsh winter, and one of the first activities the class did was to walk through neighborhoods on the east side of Flint where a significant number of abandoned homes had been destroyed by fire. The remains of houses covered in snow provided us with a powerful metaphor for our work. Buried underneath the snow were the stories of the people who once lived in these houses, their memories of better times, and the pain they felt as they watched their neighborhood change. As a collective
of artists, we slowly began to fully comprehend the weight of our work. It was our duty to carefully peel back the layers of this story, revealing not only the pain and sadness felt by many Flint residents, but also the hope that still remained.

About halfway through the semester we learned our project was chosen as a recipient for a 2011 Arts of Citizenship grant. Now not only did we have the challenge of completing a script that accurately represented the people of Flint and brought attention to those impacted by arson, but we also had to have it ready to perform by the end of the summer. After weeks of interviewing community members, city officials, UM-Flint students, faculty members and members of the Flint fire department, the students eventually began the daunting task of transcribing the hours of audio recordings we had collected. I heard a little grumbling from students that this was simply too much work to complete in the time that we had. As I also completed my fair share of transcribing, I understood where they were coming from and had the same concerns myself. Despite the sheer amount of recordings we had collected, eventually we got it done. Towards the end of the term we discussed how while it was tedious work, the frustrations we felt doing it was nothing in comparison to the pain and anguish of the people whose words we were transcribing.

As the semester drew to a close, we presented a collection of various scenes and monologues as a ‘work in progress’ to an invited audience. The consensus was that the piece still needed a lot of work, but the arc of the play was beginning to take shape. At this point the students had completed all of their requirements for the course so there was nothing keeping them tied to the project. However, I made it clear that anyone in the class who still wanted to work on the script or be a part of the production were very welcome to do so. While some students had to take a step back from the work because of other commitments, several other students continued to meet with me regularly to discuss the process, conduct additional interviews and continue to develop the script. I was pleased to see that for many students, this had become more than just another class. Although they weren’t getting credit anymore, they were engaged in the work and enthusiastic about the outcome.

Throughout this process I was careful to ensure that all community partners and students felt ownership of the work, and that at no point did one individual writer take on the responsibility of completing the script. However, like in most collaborative efforts we got to the stage where in order for us to have a concise piece, the script needed to be organized and edited by one individual. With the blessing of the writing team, I took on this responsibility. During this time I had also been selected to participate in a month-long artistic residency with a theatre company in South Korea, so I spent four weeks living in an old elementary school on the other side of the world, making some of the necessary changes to the script. In order to keep the writing team engaged in the process, we scheduled weekly meetings via Skype where I would tell them what I had worked on, and they would give me feedback on sections they had read that week. A few weeks after I returned, we finally had a completed script.

The next few months simply flew by. In late June we cast the play with a combination of current students, alumni, and community members including several local high school students and teachers. We rehearsed for several weeks, and beginning in late August the play was performed in community centers and outdoor locations across the city. We worked closely with our community partners to make sure the play was performed in places where community members would feel welcome, and were more likely to attend. While we also wanted to perform on campus, it was important that we first took this play to those who had helped us create it. In total the play was performed a total of 7 times to more than 500 audience members across the city. We finished the tour with two packed performances in the KIVA auditorium at UM-Flint at the start of the fall term. Thanks to the funding from Arts of Citizenship and financial support from various other departments on campus, we were able to present the play without charging admission. Following each performance, a community dialogue took place where students and community members discussed the complex issues addressed in the play, and what we should do to respond to the changing landscape of our city.

After our very first performance in a tiny room at the Hispanic Community and Technology Center, I remember feeling incredibly nervous as the first dialogue session began because I was anxious to hear how people would respond to the piece. Some of the people interviewed as part of the process and portrayed in the play were also in the audience, so I also worried whether they would approve of the way they were represented. On this occasion we didn’t have to wait very long before
several people wanted to speak. Soon many of the people engaging in a lively discussion were students from the cast and their friends and classmates who had come to see them perform.

During the semester when I taught the Collective Playwrights’ Workshop, weekly reflections were a key part of our process. As I was unable to accompany the student writers on every interview assignment, a weekly check-in was a way for me to hear what stories and themes were emerging. Additionally, it also allowed me to observe how the students were processing their individual experiences and respond accordingly. However, once we moved into the rehearsal period and our performance dates drew closer, I began to worry more about various aspects of the production. We didn’t have the time during the rehearsal process to reflect on the work like we did during the class, so it wasn’t until I listened to the students talk with community members during these dialogue sessions that I truly began to understand the impact the work had on them.

It is worth stating that many of the students who participated in the project were already incredibly engaged in their community, doing wonderful work on and off campus. However there were others for whom this was clearly a new experience, and I don’t think I was fully expecting to hear how much this work had changed them. During each dialogue session and in the smaller reflections that took place with the cast and creative team after the project had drawn to a close, I heard students say how this project had helped them grow as artists and as citizens, how they now felt a stronger connection to both people and places in Flint that they had previously not encountered, and that the work allowed them to consider new ways to use their training in theatre.

During each dialogue session and in the smaller reflections that took place with the cast and creative team after the project had drawn to a close, I heard students say how this project had helped them grow as artists and as citizens, how they now felt a stronger connection to both people and places in Flint that they had previously not encountered, and that the work allowed them to consider new ways to use their training in theatre.

and experience to engage people in new and innovative ways.

Obviously I realize I’m not the only one who can take credit for nurturing a new generation of community artists and activists. Before I returned to Flint, many of these students had participated in other similar projects on campus. Upon reflecting on our work, many commented on how they were beginning to see a connection between all of the various projects. One experience revealed something new about their community, and the next one provided them with an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the underlying issues facing the community. Observing the impact of all of this work on our students and community members has shown me that there is still a great need for this type of work in the Flint community. The relationships I formed with our community partners have deepened, and I hope to work with many of them again in future collaborative projects.

I’d advise anyone wanting to embark on similar projects never to underestimate the importance of their community partners, and understand that this work often requires us to go the extra mile to show the community that we truly mean what we say. We need the trust and the support of community partners in order to create
authentic partnerships, but in order to develop lasting and meaningful relationships that will remain even when our work ends, we need to understand it will require us to compromise, get our hands dirty, and remember that we are not always the experts.

Obviously not every opportunity for engagement needs to be as large and time consuming as this project was. However, I believe the success of our work lies in the fact that many of the people involved (particularly the students) did go above and beyond what was asked of them. The work became personal and urgent, and it changed us all. Personally, I don’t believe in theatre that attempts to simply provide solutions. I prefer theatre that acknowledges multiple perspectives, allows us to identify our own problems, and inspires us all to take action.

Storytelling can be a powerful experience for both the person speaking, and the person who listens. Whether we hear these stories first-hand in people’s homes or second-hand as an actor retells it, these experiences are a wonderful way to encourage empathy—an essential skill for anyone wanting to be a successful artist or engaged citizen.

I still believe theatre can be an incredibly powerful medium to create change, but understand that change does not always need to occur on a massive scale. As much as I wish it did, our project didn’t lead to more funding for the brave men and women of the Flint Fire Department, nor did it lead to individuals being brought to justice for their actions. However, this experience did cause many of us to change our attitudes towards the city. It also caused many students who were new to the Flint area to carefully consider ways in which they can be part of the positive change that our community so desperately needs.

I feel honored to be part of a new emerging culture of artists and citizens who are working together to bring hope to our city. While sadly it seems arson fires will continue to be commonplace across the city, these are not the only fires that now capture my attention. I continue to be inspired by the smaller fires that have ignited in the hearts and minds of those who are committed to creating meaningful and lasting change. These fires need fueling, but as long as we continue to create authentic opportunities for our students to engage with our community, I’m confident we can keep these fires burning.

Andrew Morton is a community arts practitioner, playwright and lecturer in the Department of Theatre & Dance. Originally from the UK, He has facilitated workshops and created community-engaged theatre with diverse populations in the US and abroad. In 2011 he was awarded a University of Michigan Arts of Citizenship Fellowship for Embers: The Flint Fires Verbatim Theatre Project, a project that brought together students, faculty, community members and city officials and used theatre to encourage dialogue and healing in the Flint community following a rash of arson fires in 2010.

The Thompson Center for Learning & Teaching

The Thompson Center for Learning & Teaching acknowledges and advances excellence in teaching throughout campus. The Center assists faculty members in their efforts to deepen knowledge of their current teaching practice, explore new methods for promoting active learning and incorporate new technologies into teaching.

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Online Instruction as a Route to Engagement: A Teacher-Student Exchange

by Kristina Gammon, Undergraduate Student, Department of Sociology
Karen Salvador, Assistant Professor, Department of Music

Words of Introduction

When Music Professor Karen Salvador found herself teaching an all-online course for the first time, in her first semester at UM-Flint, she harbored serious doubts about whether she and her students could truly “engage.” Meanwhile, one of her students, Kristina Gammon, arrived for her first semester on campus “poor, black and undereducated”—and terrified. This is their joint account of how their connection through an online class challenged both their sets of fears and delivered a remarkable “road to collaboration.”

Kristina:

They were everywhere in the hallways, attending my classes, teaching my classes and serving my food. They worked in the library, sent me emails, and “went Greek.” They were motivated, driven and serious, and I was afraid to compete with them. They were my new peers. Community college had felt like high school. The University of Michigan was a whole new ballgame. Its reputation of being one of the best schools in the nation was enough to make me hyperventilale. During my first semester I had never felt like such a stereotype. I was poor, black and undereducated. I believed the school wasn’t for me. I couldn’t speak up in class and was terrified to participate.

Karen:

In fall of 2011, we were both new here at UM-Flint. Kristina had just transferred from a community college, and I was in my first year as a tenure-track professor. Given a few options for my schedule, I chose to teach two sections of an online general education course and one section of a “real” class. When I imagined my role as a university professor, my predictions did not include teaching online. I had never taken an online course, and I had reservations about online instruction. I was pretty sure that students who wanted to take online courses were looking for an “easy A” and that teaching in this medium would be more like administration than instruction. How could I engage students whom I would never meet?

As a new student, Kristina shared at least one of my stereotypes—she figured online classes would be an easier way to get started at a “real” university, both academically and socially. With her feelings of inadequacy regarding her educational background, she wanted to dip her toes in the water at UM-Flint to determine if she was capable of the work. Kristina envisioned online classes as an independent study in which she would read, study, submit assignments, and not need to interact with anyone. Engagement was the last thing that she was looking for from the online experience.

Neither one of us could have predicted that we would be co-writing an article on online learning as a way to ENGAGE students. Through my experiences with online MUS 100 students in general, and with Kristina Gammon in particular, I have come to view online instruction differently. I was surprised and pleased by the quality of work I received from many students in MUS 100. While there were certainly students who did the least possible work to pass the course, or less than that and failed, most students explored the textbook and related musical materials, wrote interesting papers, blogged with regard to their developing understandings, and engaged in online discourse with me and other students regarding course materials. Furthermore, several students made reference to how much they appreciated the flexibility and individual feedback that characterized online instruction in my class.

In discussions with Kristina, it became clear that online courses were not a disconnected way to complete a course requirement as we had initially thought. Both of us benefited from engaging in online education in ways we did not anticipate. Kristina and I decided to write this article as a way to explore exactly what it was about online instruction that assisted her in her transition to the UM-Flint campus community, that allowed me to see new ways to engage students who hesitate to participate in face-to-face classes, and that allowed us to authentically engage with one other as student and teacher.

Obstacles Along the Way

Kristina:

One of my major barriers to becoming proactive in my education was my inability to speak up in my face-to-face classes.
Scholarship of Teaching

Being naturally shy and introverted, I could not ask questions or make comments. If something wasn’t clear, it would stay unclear. Growing up, I lived in a poor, predominantly black neighborhood that did not have the best schools. I had to drop out of high school for a year because of a family tragedy, and later finished my degree at an alternative school. As a result, I felt that most of my education had been inadequate. That translated to fear of looking stupid in the classroom and expectation of being judged by my white classmates. I knew I had developed a rather limited ability to verbally express myself. Basically I have (to me) a very distinct urban (ghetto) way of speaking, which is very different from the way I express myself on paper. This drives me to “sit on my hands” (not raise my hand in class) and “sit on my mind” as an old professor once said. My inability to speak up made the whole classroom experience painful.

My online classes, however, made me feel completely different. Who I was, was hidden behind the computer screen, and I could open up to my education. Online classes and classes with online components provided me with a comfortable atmosphere in which to express myself without fear of any real or imagined negative responses/reactions from professors and students.

Karen:

Freedom from preconceptions was an unexpected benefit of online instruction for me as the professor, as well. I did not know anything about my students other than how they represented themselves to me in writing. Although I could have investigated, I chose not to know how old they were, where they were from, or what they looked like, and I had no idea how they dressed, sat, made eye contact, or spoke. I work to avoid labeling or prejudgeting students, and yet I am aware that my impressions of their appearances may affect my evaluations of their efforts on a subconscious level. I enjoyed the opportunity provided by the online instructional paradigm to be freed of any preconceptions I might have unwittingly allowed to cloud my views of a student’s work.

Online Instruction as a Pathway

Kristina:

The online classes were a welcome relief. For a person as shy as myself, but who does have a lot to say, online learning provided me with the freedom to express myself. I was able to interact with other students via the discussion board and give thoughtful responses. I am the type of person who needs to think things through before I say them, and never was able to participate in the sometimes rapid-fire discussions in my face to face classes. Being able to develop rapport with my professors and hold conversations through email with them was an important part of my success in my classes. In addition, the online assignments came back with comments I don’t think I would have gotten otherwise. I felt my teachers had chance to get to know me, and I was comfortable with them.

Karen:

As I talked with Kristina regarding this article and what we wanted our message to be, it was clear that an important aspect of the engagement she felt with me and her other online instructors had to do with the individual nature of the interactions, and the amount of feedback and email communication she received. While Kristina “sat on her hands” in her face-to-face classes, the online medium, with discussion boards, blogs, and email, allowed her to compose her thoughts and say what she wanted to say. In this way, she engaged with other students and professors, and these online interactions fostered personal relationships. With regard to another online professor, she said: “He was SO encouraging that I WANT[ed] to meet him. I don’t know if he would have felt comfortable telling me [in person] that I inspired him, but it meant the world to me that he said that.”

Online interactions paved the way for face-to-face engagement, and also eased Kristina’s acclimation to the on-campus, face-to-face university environment.

Our Road to Collaboration

Kristina and I ended up meeting because of one specific email exchange: About 8 weeks into the semester she was enrolled in MUS 100, she wrote: Part of the requirements for Dr. Salvador’s Music 100 class was the attendance of a live musical performance of my choice. Having sung in a choir for most of my childhood, I decided to go see a performance given by the singing groups of local schools. The event consisted of several high school choirs as well as a couple from U of M. It was staged in a large church near downtown Flint. In the paper I wrote about the performance, I criticized the final song of the performance, which was “America is Singing.” I felt that song wasn’t for me, or anyone I knew because of the economic crisis. Dr. Salvador emailed me and asked why I felt the song wasn’t “for me.” “America isn’t singing,” I wrote in my response email, “She’s groaning.”

I was intrigued by Kristina’s review of the concert, and asked her (via email) to comment further. She wrote a passionate response, in which she shared some of her feelings about belonging and “passing” in society. We exchanged several emails over the course of a few hours,
including the following:

I have a lot of writing assignments this semester that require me to take a deep look inside myself and put my whole life story on paper to find out why I want to be a social worker and if the values of social work fit with my own. It is so much easier to be totally honest about myself to my professors because even though I am putting myself out there, the anonymity of my computer provides me shelter from any real or imagined negative responses to my personal experiences and beliefs (email communication, 10/27/11, underline added).

For me, a teacher who thought that online education was as far as one could get from engaged instruction, this statement was a revelation. I asked Kristina to meet with me for a conversation (ironic, I know) so that I could learn more about her and her ideas.

**Kristina:**

Before we met, I looked her [Dr. Salvador] up online. I expected to see a middle aged, slightly heavy Hispanic woman. What I actually saw was a slender white woman who looked younger than I was. My expectations changed. Somehow expected to be automatically judged by her, simply because she was white. I eventually learned she was a very open-minded, non-judgmental person.

**Karen:**

Perhaps it was, in part, the fact that we had already established an online rapport that helped Kristina feel comfortable still coming to meet with me. In talking with Kristina, I started to wonder about students who, like her, came from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or were non-white. I wondered if they might have similar feelings of estrangement, perceptions of judgment, and fears about fitting in at UM-Flint. I learned so much from our conversation about the potential of online instruction as a way to engage students that I asked Kristina to write this article with me.

In talking about this collaboration with other professors, I quickly learned that our experience was not unique. Others had already recognized the power of online interactions as a way to engage students. One professor shared that whenever he wanted students to discuss a difficult or controversial topic face-to-face, he first asked his students to blog and comment on other students' blogs as a way to break the ice, increase students' preparation, and maximize the effectiveness of the discussion. Another professor mentioned that online course components fostered engagement for students who had difficulty contributing in face-to-face class discussions due to limited clarity of speech. Perhaps online courses and online components to traditional courses can have a significant impact on the level of engagement from students who are new to the university, feel underprepared, are shy or introverted, need more processing time before they speak up, feel out-of-place, or who have physical limitations that affect speech.

**The Destination**

**Kristina:**

I am now in my second semester at U of M. My first semester here was full of anxiety. I was worried about not having what it takes to compete at this level. I did not make the most of my classroom experiences because I felt my prior education had been sub-par. I was afraid to speak up in class and to approach my professors for extra help. My online classes provided me with a much different experience. Without those classes and the encouragement from my online professors I would not have become as confident as I have become. This semester I am much more involved in my classes, and I look at the online classes of my first semester as a sort of ice-breaker. I was introduced to University life at my comfort level and was able to evolve. I think online courses are useful tools for new students such as myself who may be shy or introverted and who come from similar backgrounds.

**Karen:**

As Kristina and I discussed the role of online instruction in engaging her and helping her acclimate to the university setting, I asked her: "What does our story have to contribute to other students and professors?" She replied, "Our experience can't be the only one like it. A lot more people are going to school: minorities, people from underprivileged backgrounds... There are other people who are going to feel like I did. This [writing this article] will let them know that they are not alone." Online courses and course components helped Kristina find her voice in the university setting. The nature of online discussion allowed her to think about what she wanted to say before "speaking up," and the safety of her computer screen gave her the courage to speak her mind. In addition, the individual feedback she received built relationships that eased her transition into academia and convinced her that her voice is not only good enough, but is a valued and welcome asset to our school. Because we serve a number of students who are first-generation college attendees, and/or who come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, and/or who are non-white, Kristina's first semester journey may be a helpful illustration of one possible method to engage these students.

Engaging with Kristina has helped me to see ways that online courses and online components in face-to-face courses may actually be a way to draw people into university life at UM-Flint. I had not considered the possibility that students who are not contributing ideas or seeking help in face-to-face classes are "sitting on their
hands” because they are concerned they may not say things the “right way,” scared of being judged for their perceived lack of preparation, or because they like to think before they talk—a quality that is valuable in general society but perhaps not conducive to participation in the sometimes rapid-fire exchanges that characterize in-class discussions. If something as easy as providing a chance for online discussion can help these students actively contribute, then online components may be valuable additions to my face-to-face courses. Furthermore, my discussions with Kristina indicated that the amount, speed, and individual nature of communication between the professor and students in an online course led to a rapport that helped her “own” her education by asking for help and saying what she thinks. Although I see students in my face-to-face courses personally, I do not have individual conversations with them as I did with my online students, and I am not certain they receive the type of detailed, immediate, frequent written feedback about their progress that my online students did. Far from what I expected when I first set out to teach online, this collaboration with Kristina has challenged me to look for ways to more authentically engage my face-to-face students.

I think that both Kristina and I have gained a great deal from this collaboration. Kristina is recognizing that she does belong here at UM-Flint, and that we all benefit when thoughtful, prepared students contribute in classes. I have been challenged to reevaluate my initial perceptions of online instruction, and to find ways to incorporate some of the engaging facets of online media into my face-to-face instruction. Both of us have explored some of our preconceptions, shared in thoughtful discussion about “belonging” in the university setting, and developed a relationship neither of us would have benefited from had we not first communicated online. By presenting some of our conversation to the university at large, we hope to contribute to the existing dialogue regarding engagement at our school.

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**Marian E. Wright Teaching Circles**

Thanks to a generous donation by Marian E. Wright, the Thompson Center for Learning and Teaching is able to offer the Teaching Circle program for UM-Flint faculty.

Teaching circles involve groups of five to ten faculty and serve as a forum for informal discussion around a common interest in teaching and learning. Each teaching circle is awarded a $500 grant to support their work.

A call for applications for the 2012-2013 academic year will be distributed via email. Please contact the TCLT at (810) 237-6508 for more information.
The Student as Idea, and the Idea as Process
by Sarah Lippert, Assistant Professor
Department of Art

Words of Introduction
No one has delivered more engaged learning nor tackled more ambitious engagement projects in her first year than Art Historian Sarah Lippert. Here, she describes how she drew from art history for the concept of “the concetto,” and in the process, found a route to student engagement harking back to Michelangelo.

There are many things that we can learn from historical figures as illustrious as Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564). His legacy as a sculptor, painter, poet, and architect had already been hailed as pre-eminent amongst his rivals in his own lifetime. What is not as well known is that Michelangelo had a gift for teaching, insomuch as he translated the artistic process into a tangible theory, in order to inspire others. We know about his theories from his letters and poems, which have been published posthumously over the centuries.

Of particular interest to teachers is Michelangelo’s theory of the concetto, which was originally outlined in a poetic letter to a Renaissance leader of the arts named Benedetto Varchi. Michelangelo’s letter to Varchi was written in response to a questionnaire from Varchi, which asked seven Italian artists to discuss the relative merits of their arts. Upon receipt of the responses, Varchi disseminated the information in a public lecture at the Florentine Academy in 1546. Varchi used the term in potenza to explain Michelangelo’s notion of the concetto.¹ This notion had been expounded in the form of a sonnet, which was called Non ha l’ottimo artista alcun concetto.² The first stanza of the sonnet reads: “The best of artists never has a concept/ A single marble block does not contain/ Inside its husk, but to it may attain/ Only if hand follows intellect.”³ Interestingly, Michelangelo actually taught us more about his theories through his unfinished works than those that he completed. Amongst art historians the Slaves (1519-36), which were life-size human figures carved for the intended Tomb of Julius II, offer greater insight into his working methods than finished pieces.⁴ In each example his reductive method of releasing the figure from the marble block epitomized the artist’s quest to eke his idea out of the indomitable strength of the physical medium. In the same way, we must instruct our students to fight to make their ideas a physical reality, and to be unafraid of their anxious need to see it completed too soon.

What Michelangelo hoped to convey was the notion that the artist has to struggle to find the right idea, and when he/she has it, it takes a Herculean effort to draw it out of intellectual ether into concrete and certain reality. It would seem that there is something relevant here to our own students in the twenty-first century. Part of the struggle to impress upon our students the importance of the learning process has somehow gotten lost in the desperate urgency they feel in their quest for certain grades and particular outcomes, not to mention the pressures of an era of instant gratification at the click of a mouse, which has made us all impatient for results. I will come back to this, but before I illustrate how this is relevant to a project my students undertook here at UM-Flint, I would first like to share an anecdote from a colleague.

In an effort to move her students past the immediate gratification of settling upon the first idea that popped into their heads, one of our art instructors attempted one day in her class this semester to have her students put aside their initial plans, and, for a mere fifteen minutes, sit and allow themselves to experience a self-generated free association of thought, the goal of which was to ruminate on an idea for a while before committing to it, because one’s first idea might not be one’s best. This sounds simple enough, but a surprising thing happened. One of the students became agitated, and unable to see the value of sitting for fifteen minutes absorbed in personal thought and creative impulse, she announced that she would be leaving class. She did not, she explained, see the point of wasting her time in this creative process when she already had an idea picked out. Naturally, the instructor was surprised. How could such a presumably non-threatening activity produce such a strong reaction?

I am sure there are many reasons to account for the student’s response, many of which might involve socio-psychological theories. However, we might miss the pedagogical lesson that this story holds if we become mired in scientific and evidence-based evaluation. The instructor, intuitively, must have sensed that there was something missing in her students’ appreciation of the creative and working process, which is why she used the
hands" because they are concerned they may not say things the "right way," scared of being judged for their perceived lack of preparation, or because they like to think before they talk—a quality that is valuable in general society but perhaps not conducive to participation in the sometimes rapid-fire exchanges that characterize in-class discussions. If something as easy as providing a chance for online discussion can help these students actively contribute, then online components may be valuable additions to my face-to-face courses. Furthermore, my discussions with Kristina indicated that the amount, speed, and individual nature of communication between the professor and students in an online course led to a rapport that helped her "own" her education by asking for help and saying what she thinks. Although I see students in my face-to-face courses personally, I do not have individual conversations with them as I did with my online students, and I am not certain they receive the type of detailed, immediate, frequent written feedback about their progress that my online students did. Far from what I expected when I first set out to teach online, this collaboration with Kristina has challenged me to look for ways to more authentically engage my face-to-face students.

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"belonging" in the university setting, and developed a relationship neither of us would have benefited from had we not first communicated online. By presenting some of our conversation to the university at large, we hope to contribute to the existing dialogue regarding engagement at our school.

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class time in this way. This led me to think about the challenge of slowing things down for our students, and how we might try to demonstrate the value of getting lost in methods, rather than results.

In some small measure, the assignment that I developed for the Catalyst course that I taught this year, through a project sponsored by the Thompson Center for Learning and Teaching, reveals how rewarding this may be. First, the course was the History of Italian Renaissance Art, and it was a 300-level advanced art history class. Our goal for the project was to generate an exhibition of works that would be both created and curated by students in the class. In my thirteen years of full-time university education, and equal number of years as a teacher, I had never heard of a comparable project, so I was not sure what to expect. Still, I felt it might provide unique pedagogical opportunities to instruct students about the techniques used by the artists we were studying, as well as the historical context of the artists who originally produced the works. Just as important was the fact that students would be learning the history of teaching, as the re-making of masterworks was the manner in which students learned their craft in art academies of Europe and Great Britain over the centuries.

To undertake this project, the students selected works made between 1500 and 1600 in Italy, and which were part of the collection on display at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The students who opted to be featured artists would study the work in person on a bus trip to the Institute, and would generate information about how the original artist had used color, brush strokes, composition, and other techniques. Those who chose to be curators each selected several works that would be in the exhibition, and examined the originals in order to write historical critiques. Upon completion of the trip, the students were asked to submit the first installment of the project, which was to verbalize their concetto. In other words, they were asked to reflect upon how and why they wanted to recreate their work, and what ideas were most important to convey to the viewer or visitor to the intended exhibition. Curators were asked to do the same, by considering which general elements of the work or artist would be most central to viewers. Next, the students began their process, bringing in works in progress throughout the semester, and participating in a peer-review session for curatorial writings. Finally, we met as a class to install the exhibit, which offered students the opportunity to learn about curatorial practice, including the practicalities of deciding the aesthetic of an exhibition, as well as planning and designing the press materials.

Following the completion of the exhibition and our opening reception, students were asked to complete one final task, which was to reflect in a written assignment on how well they brought their concetto to fruition. To do this, students were asked to be self-critical, which delivered a unique solution to the problem of grading creative work. Of course the perennial challenge faced by art instructors in studio and digital-media classes is that the subjectivity of art-making, and appreciation for individual styles makes it difficult for students to accept the judgments of their instructors. Students often feel that their work is either being judged on personal prejudice, or on the personal taste of the instructor. In this Concetto Assignment, self-analysis generated a unique opportunity, whereby the onus of evaluation was shifted onto the student.

One might presume that students would automatically give themselves positive reviews, but here I relied on Michelangelo’s example in anticipating the students’ ability to be self-critical. Throughout the history of art it is quite easy to see a common theme amongst even the most accomplished artists, which is that they are harder on themselves than are their viewers. Simply put, the hubris of the artist makes achieving the perfect and ideal concetto, as one might see it in one’s mind’s eye, an elusive goal. This is one way in which the human artist was different from the artist’s conception of God, in Michelangelo’s day. Renaissance artists compared the process of bringing an idea from ephemera to the physical to the Judeo-Christian notion of God-like creation. Just as God made the idea visible, so too could the artist make something from nothing. But unlike God, his/her results were usually not perfect, and in failing to reach the perfection of the insubstantial concetto, the artist had to confront his/her own limitations. Working with this historic precedent, I felt that asking the students to evaluate their own work might actually prove more relevant than only grading it myself. Further, the big ‘deliverable’ was the
exhibition, for which each student took his/her job very seriously. Based merely on my own anecdotal evidence, they demonstrated a sense of pride and accomplishment in having put together an event dependent on individual contributions.

Most importantly, the process of self-reflection in the two-part concetto assignment required that the student be more self-conscious about going from an idea to a product. Returning to the issue of working to achieve a specific end, the concetto assignment seemed to develop in the students an appreciation for a graduated unveiling of the learning process. Especially important to the success of the concetto and exhibition assignment was a high degree of transparency between myself and the students. They too, as you have heard, listened to the story of Michelangelo and how he meditated upon his ideas. Further, they were apprised of the importance of self-reflection, and the value of what their exhibition would contribute to the campus community.

At this point I would like to share some of the things my students said in their concetto reports. Firstly, however, I think it is important to note that I have never been more excited to read student writing than for this assignment. As I began to review their self-reflections and self-evaluations, I was heartened by the fact that so many of them got it. Student A demonstrates this when writing about having to slow down and learn a new process:

*By copying methods that are unfamiliar to us, we are able to study great works to a very fine detail, and learn firsthand the methods and skills involved in creating that work of art, gaining the knowledge of new ideas. When recreating a work you must focus on every inch of detail, and on the manner and reason for each line until the canvas is complete. I have been able to go through each step of this process and learn the methods of the original artist.*

They really understood what the assignment was about, and it seemed to be effective for most. It is also the first time I have assigned a written project for which the students actually wrote extensively more than they were asked.

What is further remarkable is that the students shared such positive experiences, despite also acknowledging how much they were challenged. As Student B explains, “I never anticipated this recreation assignment to be as difficult as it was. I did not think it would require such deep research and many hours to complete a famous artwork... Overall, I had a fun time painting my piece and would love to try and recreate another one of [the original artist’s] works.” Student C adds the following:

*Overall I found this experience very educational and valuable to my art experience. I feel as though pushing my painting style to try to fit his style forced me to control my painting in a manner and on a conscious level that I have not had to deal with prior to this. I am happy I chose a piece that I not only will enjoy having a reproduction of, but also found a challenge to recreate.*

Another unintended factor of the assessment that students experienced was that although we had a comment book at the exhibition for guests to record their thoughts, the students were remarkably open with each other about how well their work turned out. As Student D informs us, although like Michelangelo her work was never as good as she herself wanted it to be, her confidence was boosted by the oral feedback that she received at the exhibition opening. She explains this saying:

*I am a perfectionist but modest... It is really a valuable process when student-artists copy so-called 'Masters' in the art schools of the past. We have to take the expertise and skill of what was originally created after years of experience, and practice and recreate something that we hope would not shame the original. I was very nervous of how my piece would turn out. I really thought that I would have to start over because I wanted the recreation to look accomplished... I received a nice outcome and good feedback at the exhibit opening. It felt really good when the exhibit was finished.*

Student E repeats the former student’s crisis of confidence, and confirms how well the concetto assignment fit the anticipated value of self-assessment for a creative work. He writes the following about his experience:

*The statement ‘every artist is his/her own worst critic’ is quite true. When I look at my work after it has been finished, I always find things I could have done better, changed, or things I think are very ugly. People always tell me, 'oh, wow that is so nice' and yeah maybe it is nice, to someone who has no artistic ability whatsoever, but usually I hate it, and I can't help but do so. For this assignment, if I had to rate myself on a one to ten on the recreation of the painting I would give myself a five... I think that it is valuable for artists to copy other artist’s work because it gives them a different look at art, they are able to see art from a different perspective and style rather than just working within the bubble they work in.*

Other less-anticipated insecurities were also revealed, as Student F expresses when she shares her fears:

*I will not hesitate to admit that I am horribly nervous and antisocial, and thus did not participate in the group activities as well as I should have. As much as I wish I could slip assignments and paintings under locked doors and avoid all human contact, this exhibition project reaffirms that the art world is a social one, and that hermit-like behavior will hinder an artist who is trying to promote her work.*

I do not know what the motivations were for my
colleague’s student to walk out of her class when asked to think through her idea a little longer, but I wonder if it was rooted in fear, and perhaps the same kinds of trepidations that plagued Michelangelo. Perhaps both asked these questions: how do you bring an idea into reality? Is the product going to match the goal? And why is the creative process so intimidating? Student G explains for us how process and concepts are linked:

I believe that this process of recreating the works of the ‘masters’ was, and still is, an extremely important process, because it forces the student to focus on the idea….As an artist I try my hardest to constantly explore new ideas or concepts within my work, but I always have to keep in mind that harkening back to the old is never a bad idea, because sometimes a new idea can come from looking at an old idea and seeing it in a new light.1

Such fears about turning ideas into tangible products are applicable to any discipline that we teach in academia, whether a biology lab or a humanities class. If we can make the creative or idea-generating process less intimidating, and use any existing fears to track the students’ progress, we might be able to forge, as Michelangelo did, our own ideal concetto as teachers, in the form of a student who is unafraid to meditate upon an idea, and upon the process of making it a reality, merely for the idea’s sake.

Endnotes


5 I actually extended the Catalyst Course project to two classes instead of one, so that the innovative assessment component could be applied to majors who were completing ARH 411: History of Global Contemporary Art, and were graduating in art education.

6Report from Student A, Concetto Assignment for ARH 311: History of Italian Renaissance Art, April 2012.

7Report from Student B, Concetto Assignment for ARH 311: History of Italian Renaissance Art, April 2012.

8Report from Student C, Concetto Assignment for ARH 411: History of Contemporary Global Art, April 2012

9Report from Student D, Concetto Assignment for ARH 311: History of Italian Renaissance Art, April 2012.

10 Report from Student E, Concetto Assignment for ARH 411: History of Global Contemporary Art, April 2012

11 Report from Student F, Concetto Assignment for ARH 311: History of Italian Renaissance Art, April 2012


Sarah Lippert is an art historian of 18th to 19th-century French and British art. She obtained her Ph.D. from Penn State in art history, and has earned Kress, SSHRC, and Research and Creative Activity Fellowships to support her research. Her publications include contributions to anthologies, such as with Peter Lang, and an article in Dix-Neuf (forthcoming). Her most recent publication “Mind over Matter,” appears in Gravity in Art: Essays on Weight and Weightlessness in Painting, Sculpture and Photography. Dr. Lippert has been teaching full-time since 2007, and joined UM-Flint in 2011.
Broadening My View of Engagement: Context Counts

by Laura McLeman, Assistant Professor
Department of Mathematics

Words of Introduction

Can a commitment to engagement apply even to a feared mathematics course? Here Assistant Professor Laura McLeman explores the whole concept of engagement, usefully concluding that “there is not one correct way to engage students” and calling for a broad view, shaped in its specifics by the context of the course. Professor McLeman’s journey to this understanding began during a lively and revealing semester during which she transformed a course students often dread: Calculus I, and led to a campus-wide fiber optic project.

If someone had asked me three years ago if I thought that I provided my students opportunities to meaningfully engage with the material I taught in my traditional mathematics classes (i.e., ones focused on mathematics content, not mathematics pedagogy), I would have responded “Absolutely.” Not only did I actively encourage classroom discussions, but I also provided in-class time to work on problems and ask questions. However, while these forms of engagement are certainly valuable, I began to realize that they are just small pieces of a much more comprehensive picture. The purpose of this article is to share some of my efforts in exploring different forms of engagement within my mathematics instruction. My hope is that by reading about my ongoing journey, you are challenged to contemplate the following questions: What does engagement look like in your instruction? Can and should your view of engagement be broadened, and if so, how?

What is engagement?

Within academia, the concept of engagement is such a broad one that it seems pointless and perhaps impossible to pinpoint a precise definition: the varied nature of our disciplines and circumstances ensures that it means many different things. One person may view it as an active classroom discussion. Another might see it as hands-on demonstrations of concepts and theories. Another still might liken it to experiential learning in which “students develop knowledge, skills, and values from direct experiences outside a traditional academic setting” [1]. Whatever the view, there is not one correct way to engage students. How engagement manifests in a classroom depends entirely on context, determined by things such as population, content, and setting. The mathematics classes I teach span lower-level ones (e.g., College Algebra) to upper-level ones (e.g., Senior TCP Math Capstone). Each of these courses is very different, even beyond the obvious range in populations. Some represent prerequisite courses serving a wide variety of majors; in these there is not much flexibility in what material can be presented. Other courses are so wide open that a textbook for the course has yet to be written. Even the type of content itself varies tremendously, from theoretical perspectives to practical understandings to foundational concepts. Given these differences in context, it is clear that a broad view of engagement is necessary.

In retrospect, three years ago I would not have considered context when answering someone regarding meaningful engagement in my mathematics instruction. In part, it would not have occurred to me to do so. Many believe mathematics to be context-free, and as a result, sometimes the opportunities for engagement within mathematics classes become static. My own self-examination revealed that while theoretically I understood the importance of context, this understanding did not fully translate into my instruction. As my understanding about my instructional practice grew, my goal became to embed different forms of engagement into my instruction while attempting to remain faithful to context.

What experiences did I provide?

The biggest and most daunting question I had to ask myself was “What opportunities could I provide my students so that they could meaningfully engage with the course material I wanted them to learn?” As I was grappling with this question, I was invited to participate in the Catalyst Course Design (CCD) program. I decided that being part of this program would be an excellent foray into exploring different sources of engagement since one of the goals of the program was to incorporate elements of experiential learning into a particular course. I chose to focus on Calculus I. However, since I was teaching this course for the first time while being a newcomer on campus, I was not sure exactly how to incorporate these types of elements. Since the students in the class represented a diverse set of disciplines, with many only taking the class because it was a required component for their program, I decided to help the students see that calculus was useful in many areas of life. Twice during the semester (once midway and once at the end), I had my
students complete a mini-project. These mini-projects required the students to choose and explore problems that related both to the calculus curriculum and a real-life phenomenon and further represented a topic that they were personally interested in exploring. The students then presented a thorough analysis of their work, specifically detailing their understandings verbally, symbolically, numerically, and pictorially.

I faced two big challenges that semester. The first involved the ambiguity [2] of the mini-projects. For better or worse, calculus like many mathematics courses are taught in an "I do, you do" manner. In other words, instructors discuss concepts and demonstrate examples, students take notes and complete practice problems, questions are answered, and understanding is assessed. Since there was not a precise and predictable way in which they could complete the mini-projects, the students were asked to step outside of a traditional structure. Understandably, then, the students (and I!) were anxious about the projects. Adding to my own uneasiness was the issue of time: Had I introduced the project in a reasonable amount of time? Did I provide enough time for questions and the projects to be completed? Had I covered enough material so that students could find a real-world-based problem that they were interested in and related to the Calculus curriculum? I tried to reassure all of our fears by providing detailed guidelines for the project and a rubric for assessment and by helping students brainstorm project ideas.

Were the mini-projects a success? The short answer is that it depends on how you define success. Not everyone earned a passing grade. However, the projects allowed my students to develop meaningful knowledge. As an example, one student found a problem in the textbook that asked questions about population decline in a fictional town. Instead of using the statistics provided, the student researched the needed information so that he could focus his project on the city of Flint. As a result of this project, which received the only perfect score, this student began to make sense of an issue that was important to him and arguably to everyone in the community. While I am sure that not everyone enjoyed working on the mini-projects, feedback at the end of the semester indicated that several students felt that they were one of the best parts of the course.

My work in the CCD project provided me the motivation (and courage) to incorporate a more substantial form of engagement in another course. With time over the summer to conceptualize what I wanted to accomplish, I approached University Outreach for help planning a project to use in Discrete Mathematical Structures, a required course for all Computer Science (CS) and Computer Information Systems (CIS) majors. I chose this course because of the uniformity of the course population and because there are several interesting applications related to CS and CIS in the course content, for example, networking and graph theory. Through the efforts of University Outreach, a partnership emerged between ITS and myself. We decided that in groups my students would research the fiber optic connections in individual university buildings (e.g., MSB, FH) that would all then be used to create a comprehensive map of the fiber optic network on campus.

As this was the first time either ITS or I had worked on a project in this vein, there were (expected) hiccups along the way. As was the case with the Calculus mini-projects, both time and ambiguity were challenges. There was also the added issue of expectations. In general, my students were excited about the project with ITS. Several students, though, wanted to elevate the project to greater heights, almost transforming the project into a course itself. While I was happy to see this ambition, I had to constantly remind these students that their vision was not the vision of the developers of the project. Some students struggled to understand this, which at times caused tension between group members that I then had to mediate.

Even with all the challenges noted, when I asked the students to provide feedback they almost universally responded that the project was a meaningful and valuable part of the course. For example, one student shared that he thought the project

...the project not only helped him see that the material he was learning in this mathematics course was useful in his field of study but also furthered his desire to expand his knowledge. The latter speaks to the development of life-long learning, a trait all of us hope to inspire in our students.

...helped cement in my mind several of the terms used in the class. The project also got me looking deeply [into these topics], and definitely reinforced the ideas of what these aspects are. Also it made the class much more interesting. I suffer greatly from ‘what is this for’ syndrome and seeing a no kidding, practical use for this subject matter as well as using it in a simulated but none the less realistic mission greatly increase (sic) my desire to learn more on the subject.

For this student, the project not only helped him see that the material he was learning in this mathematics course was useful in his field of study but also furthered his desire to expand his knowledge. The latter speaks to the development of life-long learning, a trait all of us hope to inspire in our students.

What have I learned?

I confess. At the beginning of the CCD project I thought that I would not be able to incorporate a broader view of engagement into my mathematics instruction
without possessing a lot more knowledge about the community and committing a huge amount of time. Through the efforts described in this paper, I have seen that this is not necessarily true. Broadening engagement within your instruction does not mean you have to change the world. Depending on the context, you can include smaller, yet sometimes just as meaningful, components of engagement within your class. For regardless of scope, students value the chance to see the relevance in what they are learning.

In short, my efforts have allowed me to build a foundation for meaningful classroom engagement within my mathematics instruction. The projects and relationships I have developed will continue to grow and evolve, as will I as an instructor. The most important thing, in my opinion, is to have the confidence and openness to challenge your notions about engagement and to enact change in your instruction when and where it is necessary.

References

Laura McLeman received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona and is starting her third year as an Assistant Professor of Mathematics Education within the Mathematics Department. She teaches a variety of mathematics courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level, including ones focused on mathematical concepts and ones focused on mathematical pedagogy. Her research interests include the mathematics education of underserved and underrepresented populations, as well as the preparation of mathematics teachers and mathematics teacher educators to integrate issues of equity within their instruction.

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Engagement and Active Learning: Sometimes the Teacher Learns the Most

by Marilyn Harvey, Lecturer
Department of Public Health and Health Sciences

**Words of Introduction**

*A physical fitness class would seem to be a natural incubator for student engagement – but even there, changing things up can yield significant insights for a thoughtful teacher.* Here Rec Center Assistant Director Marilyn Harvey, who also teaches as a lecturer, describes how adding a writing component to her class unearthed a poignant and significant narrative from one of her students – a former Marine and Afghanistan War veteran. In the process, she found herself propelled into a deeper search for knowledge and a renewed respect for our students' often-complicated histories.

I love to teach. I especially love teaching higher education. One course I teach at UM-Flint is HCR 101, Physical Fitness. Each semester as part of stimulating critical thinking skills, I assign the task of researching a current events article that discusses anything related to wellness. Students are asked to write a summary of the article, explain why they chose that article and answer the question, “will this information make a difference in my life?” Typically students choose topics such as obesity, heart disease, diet and exercise.

The assignment submitted by John, one of my students, was extraordinary. A quiet, reserved student, John attended every scheduled class. He completed each assignment, turning all in on time. It was obvious John cared about his education, conscientiously performing well throughout the semester.

What I didn’t know about John, until I received his completed current event assignment, was this: “I am a U.S. Marine Corps combat veteran that served in Afghanistan two years ago. When we first got back from combat, assimilating back into the general public was a task that many of my brothers-in-arms were not ready for. I had a few friends that were talking about suicidal thoughts after six to seven months of being back.”

The title of his submission was: “U.S. Soldiers Face Host of Mental Health Issues.” I was stunned as I read John’s deeply personal and honest writing about his friends who survived Afghanistan and yet lost the battle fought on American soil, the battlefield of the mind, “To date, I have had three of my close friends all commit suicide since returning home from Afghanistan, two of them within one week of each other.”

Reading John’s words compelled me to research this topic further. According to *Global Post, ABC News, Military*
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**References**


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Laura McLean received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona and is starting her third year as an Assistant Professor of Mathematics Education within the Mathematics Department. She teaches a variety of mathematics courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level, including ones focused on mathematical concepts and ones focused on mathematical pedagogy. Her research interests include the mathematics education of underserved and underrepresented populations, as well as the preparation of mathematics teachers and mathematics teacher educators to integrate issues of equity within their instruction.

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Scholarship of Teaching

Sometimes the Teacher Learns the Most

continued from page 17

Psychology, and numerous other sources, our young veterans still are very much at risk once they return home. Articles such as “Rising Suicides Stump Military Leaders,” “U.S. Military Suicides High Even as Wars Wind Down,” “Suicide Claims More U.S. Military Lives than Afghan War,” paint a bleak picture. In the Global Post I read “Statistics on Iraq and Afghanistan veterans...found that more than 2,200 soldiers died within two years of leaving the service...” I was astonished at what I found. I became emotional as I read about our young soldiers’ difficulty readjusting to the life they once knew. My heart ached as I thought of my own son, who aspires to be a military man following his final year of high school this year. No one wants to lose a son, whether on foreign land or homeland at the hand of an enemy or his own.

When looking across the faces of my HCR 101 students, there is no way to determine their life experiences, what they’ve endured, where they want to go, and where they’ll be following graduation. Assignments such as this provide a window for the important — into the kind of people seeking knowledge in our classrooms. Like John, other students use this assignment to share information that may be too personal to discuss during class. Though my students’ work, I’ve read about brain tumors, near-death experiences, eating disorders, and many other struggles. Our students are real people with real issues.

I wrote notes in the margin of John’s paper and praised his decision to keep in touch with his “comrades in arms” as he referred to them. I chose not to take the opportunity to have a private conversation with this very private student. John described in his writing how he speaks to his friends weekly, offering encouragement and an invitation to get together. The bond that is created by soldiers of war, it seems cannot simply be described in words.

I attempted to contact John at semester’s end, but was unsuccessful. I sent an email to him wishing him well and to keep in touch. Despite that, in my eyes, he is a true hero. He continues to save lives and protect his fellow man, right here at home. And, an engaged classroom in which students are invited to examine their real lives continues to be the stimulus for significant learning.

Marilyn Harvey fulfills two roles at the university. She is full time staff as the Assistant Director of Student Professional Development in the UM-Flint Recreation Center. There she hires, trains, & mentors student employees. Marilyn also teaches for the Public Health & Health Sciences Department as lecturer. With a background in teaching young children, Marilyn’s transition to teaching higher education has included tremendous growth mixed with great reward. Marilyn received her undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education from Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan and her graduate degree in Education from UM-Flint. She will be completing her second graduate degree in Health Education in 2014.

Dr. Lois Matz Rosen Junior Faculty Excellence in Teaching Award

Dr. Lois Matz Rosen taught at UM-Flint for over 20 years as a professor of English. She was the founding director of the Thompson Center for Learning and Teaching (TCLT). Upon her retirement in 2003, she established the Lois Matz Rosen Junior Faculty Excellence in Teaching Award, which carries a stipend of $1,000.

Eligible faculty include tenure-track UM-Flint faculty in their third year of appointment up to but not including the academic year of their initial review for promotion and tenure. Highly qualified candidates must possess the following characteristics:

- Consistent level of excellence in teaching diverse groups of students
- Demonstrated commitment to teaching through course development activities, attendance at campus teaching workshops, participation in conferences on pedagogy, publications related to pedagogy, etc.
- Recognize commitment to UM-Flint students both inside and outside of the classroom (through advising, mentoring, or research/performance activities).

The TCLT Advisory Board will issue formal call for nominations in January 2013.
Scholarship of Teaching

Dancing Toward Learning:
It’s All About the Tutu

by Elizabeth Kattner, Lecturer
Department of Theatre and Dance

Words of Introduction

In the 2012 winter semester, the Department of Theatre and Dance began the Dance in Schools project funded by the Catalyst Course Design Departmental Grant from the Thompson Center of Learning and Teaching. Dance faculty members Beth Freiman and Elizabeth Kattner, and costume design faculty Shelby Newport and Amanda Janke brought approximately 50 University of Michigan-Flint students together with 500 elementary school children from the Flint Community Schools for an enriching, effective active learning project.

All of the fine arts involve one-on-one learning and practical training, and for this reason they provide the ideal laboratory for engaged learning experiments. Dance, however, is more fleeting than the others and can only take place in the moment, providing a unique opportunity for students to experience active learning. Unlike visual art, it does not leave a product to be viewed by future generations, and unlike theatre and music, there are no scripts or scores left by the masters giving us their exact words or notes. Dance is a craft completely transmitted one-on-one, teacher to student, from one generation to the next. The process of learning the basic skills of performance dance is the same throughout the world: steps and phrases are demonstrated by the instructor and imitated by students. Personal and group corrections are given, and students try again, becoming experts after the process repeats daily for many years. Great works by Marius Petipa and George Balanchine are passed on solely by ballet masters directly teaching choreography, demonstrating steps and carefully counting phrases of music. Dancers cannot memorize their lines or practice their music before rehearsal. Preparation has occurred through the years of training, and each dancer comes to rehearsal with her mind and body trained and ready to learn what she is given on the spot. Together dancers and director create a cohesive work of art. Later, these same dancers take what they have learned and pass it on as instructors, choreographers and directors.

The Dance in Schools project focuses directly on this process and is designed to give our students an introduction to this experience. Some students in our program are very familiar with it; for others it is new. The goal of the project is twofold. In addition to providing an active learning experience, Dance in Schools is a community dance project designed to bring elementary school children from the Flint Community Schools together with the faculty and students from the Department of Theatre and Dance for lecture demonstrations and dance activities. As the project progressed throughout the winter 2012 semester, it was clear to all the participants that these goals were intertwined and that the exchange between our students and the elementary school students was enriching for all involved.

The project began in Ballet II and Dance Repertory class where our students had the opportunity to learn a masterpiece, the third act of Sleeping Beauty, choreography by Petipa, music by Tchaikovsky, libretto and design by Vsevolozhsky. We chose this ballet because it was particularly suitable for our goals. First of all, the fairy tale theme is appropriate for performances for children. The third act features the sleeping Princess Aurora marrying Prince Désiré, several guests from Perrault’s other tales attend the wedding: Cinderella and Prince Fortuné, Puss in Boots and the White Cat, Little Red Riding Hood and the Gray Wolf, Hop’o’my Thumb and the Ogre. Secondly, these dances are staples in classical character dance and pas de deux training; learning Petipa’s dances is part of every professional training program as they present students with unequalled experience in technique, strength and caricature. In rehearsals, I was assisted by guest teacher Dan Thompson, who taught classical partnering and the male character roles to our students. In addition to working with the soloists, I devoted many hours of rehearsal time to corps de ballet, or group, work, in which the twenty-two cast members strove to dance in perfect synchronization, while at the same time maintaining clean lines and formation. Surprising to many who are unfamiliar with dance, corps work require vastly more time and energy than the sometimes more technically difficult solos.

During rehearsals, I taught our students choreography,
but at the same time I focused on teaching our students to teach. Dance students Jaclyn Borrow and Robert Anderson, who both have broad professional training and performance experience, danced the lead roles of Aurora and Désiré. In addition to rehearsing their own dances, they were active in working out group choreography and teaching sections to the less experienced dancers. From my side, their participation enabled the rehearsal process to run more smoothly and helped me to find solutions to difficult questions such as, how can we stage a dance meant for sixty dancers when we only have twenty? Or, what do we do when the clearest recording of the music has an extra thirty-two counts in the middle of the dance and it cannot be edited? In turn, this scenario enabled me to teach them valuable skills for dance artists: learning to effectively stage choreography in a variety of venues and finding solutions with the pressure of a rehearsal time slot and a tight schedule before opening night. These students were actively engaged in the process, leading to a more powerful learning experience than if I had simply worked out these problems on my own and given instructions to them as dancers.

As a fairy tale ballet with a target audience of children, creating the wardrobe for this project gave our costuming and design students the opportunity to work on professional level ballet costumes, an experience that students are rarely given at the college level. Restaging classical works is a process requiring careful research to maintain the integrity of the original design, as well as thoughtful work in adjusting these costumes to our specific dancers and performance space. This delicate balance was superbly executed by the work our costume faculty did with their students.

In addition to the production aspects, Sleeping Beauty offers a host of academic projects for our students. The theme of the ballet itself celebrates the golden age of the French aristocracy, the reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King. In the 1890 premiere at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, classical ballet reached its high point, as many artists of all kinds saw Wagner's vision of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the work of total art in which all art forms are equally represented, finally realized. Paradoxically, the ballet representing the rapidly deteriorating old regimes at the same time came to embody one of the strongest forces that propelled 20th century art into the Modern. It opened the door for the art movements in Russia and Western Europe during the first three decades of the 20th century, often referred to as the historical avant-garde. During this period, ballet played a central role in all the arts through Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Many artists of this period, including Alexandre Benois, Léon Bakst, Anna Pavlova, Alexandra Danilova, George Balanchine, Igor Stravinsky and a host of others point to Sleeping Beauty as a pivotal point of inspiration in their careers.

Staging a ballet with a history such as this is not to be taken lightly. Maintaining authenticity and preserving the integrity of the original work, required detailed research on my part as ballet mistress and of Shelby Newport as costume designer. While staging the ballet as authentically as possible, we needed to do it in a way that was workable for our situation. We regularly asked ourselves and our students questions to move the process forward. The original production nearly bankrupted the yearly budget of the Mariinsky Theater of 1 million rubles, so how can costumes be created which maintain the integrity of the ballet with a fraction of that budget? The choreography was originally set to demonstrate the particular abilities of the best trained ballet dancers of that day and perhaps of all times; how can the choreography be taught to our students, and performed in a way that maintains the original choreography but also puts our dancers in their best light on stage?

Senior Lauren Chopski addressed some of these questions in her research project for Dance History, which was partially funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program. A Visual Arts major and Dance minor, Lauren has been trained in the Russian school of ballet. She danced the role of the White Cat in the Dance in Schools project. She and her dance partner, Jordan Pruett, another Visual Arts major who performed the role of Puss in Boots, worked tirelessly with me in working through the original choreography during rehearsals, similar to the process with Jaclyn and Robert.
Lauren then took her project from the studio and the stage to the academic realm by doing thorough research on the collaborative relationship between Petipa and Tchaikovsky. Incorporating her experience in both ballet and the visual arts, she extensively studied the original costume's design and the process of creating workable costumes for our production while maintaining the original intent of the work. Lauren's project, describing the balance of authenticity and workability was titled, *The Sleeping Beauty Controversies: A Fairy Tale and the 21st Century*. It was presented at the 2012 Meeting of Minds.

*Dance in Schools* also opened the door for a second research project funded by UROP. Stephanie Nummer is an Environmental Science major with a Dance minor. At the beginning of the winter semester, she began actively seeking career options for marrying her two passions of dance and sustainability. Through the *Dance in Schools* project, in which she performed as a member of the court, Stephanie discovered the growing field of producing green theatre productions. Like Lauren, she used our work in the studio as a starting point, but expanded it to measuring the carbon footprint left by this project. She addressed issues such as, how much electricity did we use in our studio during rehearsals? Which costume and set materials were reused, which were purchased new? What would our department need to do to make up for the footprint this project created? How do these results apply to future projects and productions? While this project is long term in its nature, Stephanie presented the first results in her poster *Applying Sustainable Practices in Dance and Theatre* at the 2012 Flint Undergraduate Research Conference.

The second goal of the *Dance in Schools* project was to create a community outreach component in our dance program. The calendar year 2012 presents this project in its pilot phase. Between February and April approximately 500 elementary school children from Durant-Tuuri-Mott Elementary, Pierce Elementary and Eisenhower Elementary participated in the program. These schools as well as others have expressed interest in continued or new participation in the next academic year, beginning in September. In addition, we have begun to collaborate with the *Kids Need Art* program to effectively reach more young people.

While the opportunity for these children to experience classical dance and music is a clear benefit of the program, it was our hope to do more than just entertain them. Many school districts, Flint Community Schools among them, no longer have the resources to include all the arts in their programs. Providing an opportunity to experience dance is particularly relevant in our day. It offers children a physical means of expression, an alternative for young people who find verbal and written communication difficult. In addition to the creative and emotional benefits, dance offers a viable solution to one of the largest crisis in American society: childhood obesity. First Lady Michelle Obama has created an initiative to battle this epidemic, the *Let's Move* program, and access to dance has been included in this initiative as one of the things vital to enable children to increase physical activity.

Children need access to sports leagues and dance or fitness programs that are exciting and challenging to keep them engaged. *Let's Move* to increase opportunities for kids to be physically active, both in school and in communities, and to create new opportunities for families to be physically active together: (*Let's Move* website).

*Dance in Schools* answers the call of this initiative, to provide access to dance to young people during regular school hours. It is the only program in Flint that brings dance to the local schools in this way. The concept is simple: college students give a short performance at the elementary schools, providing inspiration for the children to engage in this form of physical activity. Directly following the demonstration, they do activities with the children. These performances consist of contemporary and classical dances, including the fairy tale dances from *Sleeping Beauty* in full classical costumes. Many of the young people are experiencing concert music and dance for the first time.

Each of the college students and faculty members were pleasantly surprised by the reaction of the students and the elementary school faculty. The teachers accompanying the third graders from Durant-Tuuri-Mott who attended a program in the University Theatre were thrilled to give their students the chance to experience music and dance on this level. A visit to the costume shop proved particularly interesting. Costume Shop Manager Amanda Janke initially planned to show the children a few costumes and then have them make their own design with paper and colored pencils. However, each group was fascinated by that paradigm of classical ballet: the tutu. They kept her talking with their many questions until they were out of time. Tutus became the unexpected hit of the program. When the White Cat first walked onto stage in her red and white tutu, the children audibly gasped. Who would have thought that children from Flint with little to no exposure to the classical arts would be so impressed? In each school the reaction to the tutu was the same. Fifth and sixth graders from Pierce Elementary were equally impressed and the same audible reaction could be heard in the recital hall at the Flint Institute of Music when Princess Aurora entered stage in her gold and royal blue tutu. Would the students at Eisenhower Elementary have

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*Scholarship of Teaching*
the same response? We were not disappointed. Costuming faculty, dance faculty and dance students learned a very important principal: in classical fairy tale ballets, it is all about the tutu.

Immediately following the performances, UM-Flint students did a variety of creative movement and dance activities with the children. The character dancers taught the meaning of the classical ballet pantomime and had the young people join our students in doing some of the pantomime themselves. Next, the children learned and danced a children’s dance from Sleeping Beauty, Hop-o’-My-Thumb, his brothers, and the Ogre. Dance student Jennifer Bryson and Music major Colton Sayre, co-presidents of the Student Dance Organization, made an arrangement of the original choreography that could be taught to grade school children in a theater setting. The elementary school children have not only had the chance to see classical ballet, but each student danced it as well, with several children from each school joining our dancers on stage. Finally, Pre-Med major Megan Cooper created and taught a hip-hop dance combination showing the children the diversity of dance in the hopes of reaching a variety of tastes.

Of course, the one question remains: did it work? How did the children respond? Our students were pleasantly surprised during the presentations and activities. The children were a responsive and involved audience. After every performance several children came to give our students spontaneous hugs, something a college performer is not likely to forget. Nor will the children—what other chance may they every have to give Cinderella a hug? A teacher from Pierce Elementary sent an email the day after the performance: “Thank you thank you thank you! From my students to yours, the presentation yesterday was terrific!” she wrote, and included some responses from the children. One said he was “Surprised” because he “didn’t expect to have fun!” A third grade boy from Durant-Tuuri-Mott had a similar response; he told his own teacher as well as several of our faculty and students, that he “thought today was going to be really boring,” but he actually had a great time. In a day and age where educators are looking for solutions to keep children interested in learning, can we hope for a better response to active and engaged learning than that?

References:


Elizabeth Kattner completed her PhD at the Free University Berlin where the focus of her research was the early life and work of George Balanchine. Academic work includes presentations at the Society of Dance History Scholars and publication in various journals, including The Journal of Dance and Drama in Higher Education. She lived and worked in Berlin for ten years and performed all over Germany. Her teaching focus at UM Flint’s Department of Theatre and Dance is ballet, dance history and dance education.

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What Do the Best College Teachers Do?

What makes a great teacher great? Who are the professors students remember long after graduation? The short answer, according to Ken Bain, author of What the Best College Teachers Do, is it’s not what teachers do, it’s what they understand. Lessons plans and lecture notes matter less than the special way teachers comprehend the subject and value human learning. Dr. Bain’s work encompasses a fifteen-year study of nearly one hundred college teachers in a wide variety of fields and universities and offers valuable answers for all educators.

Together with Baker College of Flint, Mott Community College and Kettering University, the TCLT is pleased to host Ken Bain on our campus this fall. Mark your calendar and plan to attend!

Thursday, October 4, 2012
6:00-8:00 pm
Michigan Rooms, UCEN
Registration begins at 5:30 pm
Includes complimentary buffet dinner

Friday, October 5, 2012
1:30-3:30 pm
Michigan Rooms, UCEN
Light refreshments provided

For more information, please visit www.umflint.edu/tclt/upcomingevents
Engagement and "Competing Goods": Must the Crown Always Bow Before the Altar?

by Brian J. Boggs, Lecturer
Department of English

Words of Introduction

We conclude with this analysis by English Lecturer Brian Boggs which summarizes some of the confounding conflicts and contradictions we face as we attempt to remake higher education. Drawing on the work of Lee Shulman, Boggs asks, for instance, how – in our concern for student learning – do we mesh the need to cover content with the methods that we use to deliver it? In attempting to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, how do we balance the needs of the individual with the needs of the group? Any teacher committed to engaged learning strategies knows well what he means. And here, Boggs concludes that student engagement must be rooted not just in our individual practice, but "nested with and affected by the larger complex organization that is the educational system." Thus we end with an operatic flourish: a lusty call, beyond the individual teacher, for institutional commitment.

In the opera Don Carlos, the King laments, after meeting with the Grand Inquisitor, that the crown must always bow before the altar. It makes me ask the question, well, why not? The crown must yield to something – a power greater than it, unless it wishes to be guilty of hubris. Religion and governmental authority have long been in conflict with one another throughout history, especially when dealing with an absolute monarchy of kings and queens who see themselves as gods on earth by divine birthright as the Church carries out its mission to worship one God and not a crown.

These goods are inherently incompatible with each other because one item must yield to another with few, if any, absolutes. Given the push and pull nature of these elements, as one rises, the other diminishes. This is not by intentional design, but because these goods' mere existence has an inverse relationship. As a result, many have died over the concept of religion and secular, state authority.

While the stakes are not always that high, these conflicts exist in every realm of society, especially in education. Education has a plethora of confounding ideologies and goods, which makes teaching impossible, as Shulman would say, and casts a shadow on the adequacies and accomplishments of our educational system (1983, p. 497).

These incompatibilities are not the result of kings and bishops arguing over hierarchical powers, but of complex and competing demands placed on teachers relative to their position in the system and organization they reside as they attempt to engage students.

Competing Values and Complexity within the Classroom

When thinking of the competing goods and values that construct education as we know it, it is helpful to place them into two broad categories. The first of these categories are those conflicts, many of them internal to the teacher, which directly impact the instruction and methods of instruction employed in the classroom to achieve student engagement. For the purposes of maximizing conflict effect, let us begin with the value that one of the teacher's goals is fostering student learning. The main concern is not so much reliant on the subject specific material that is taught, but rather how it is taught – how the teacher is going to, "stimulate, motivate, assess, and so forth" (Kennedy, 2005, 45). At the heart of this area of concern is the egalitarian idea that education is for all and should be "equally" provided to everyone, which means "universal access" to knowledge. This idea also is generally held by reformers (Kennedy, 2005, p. 10). Inherent in the contention is, "The assumption that all children can benefit from schooling" (Lortie, 2002, p. 115). This idea generally relates to a collective group, which does not focus so much on individual needs, but everyone's, across various levels of aggregation. At the classroom level, it means that everyone will have access to the same opportunities to learn.

However, students learn in various ways and with various methods, which brings in a second conflict, the good of the individual. If education is for all and everyone learns based on their needs, then how do we engage everyone at the same time through various methods? Well, the simple answer is that we do not. Part of the answer lies in the question of how we view education: what is its role? For individuals in the classroom, it is about their own advancement because society feels they must learn a basic set of skills, both social and intellectual, to function in society and the market place. This makes education for individuals a private good from which they benefit. However, society has not requested this of only a select few and because it is required of so many, the
individual (in most cases) must learn with the collective group because that is how society packages education. So, within this collective group that should have universal access exists the individual competing with the group for their educational needs. The teacher must be aware of this individual quest and, as Buchmann suggests, the teacher must realize that their, “obligations do not depend on any particular individuals (teachers or students)” (1986, p. 531).

Another pedagogical concern is maintaining teacher momentum, as Kennedy termed it, which is really teacher-student engagement in the most literal sense. How is the teacher avoiding distractions, keeping everything moving, and minimizing distractions (Kennedy, 2005)? The assumption for teachers is that maintaining attention fosters learning, but also maintains an environment in which teachers are in control of what happens. This good also has to do more with learning than content. However, unlike the good of fostering student learning, this good deals in negatives, assuming control is there and assuming that distractions compromise control, resulting in chaos, which the teacher generally want to avoid at all costs (Kennedy, 2005). This not only allows teachers to maintain control, but prompts learning, allows them to follow their lesson plans, and avoid distress for both themselves and the students. This requires vigilance, careful student observations, and preemptive strikes at potential distractions to keep the lesson moving forward in an orderly manner, or a least an order that matters to the teacher. If momentum is lost, for whatever reasons, teachers feel the lesson is ineffective, material has to be recovered, and time is lost – time that could be spent on other materials. This is to say nothing about other aspects outside of student interruption and fielding student discussion that could be unrelated to the lesson.

Shulman offers one prime example of this conflict between everyone learning, the individual learning, and maintaining momentum. Dolores is an elementary student, who while reading aloud, “Makes a reading error, and it is not immediately clear to the teacher whether the error stems primarily from ignorance of a basic phonic rule, from failure to apply a phonic rule that Dolores already knows, or from a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of the story being read” (Shulman, 1988, p. 498). The problem presented is not one of addressing all areas of learning because that can be done to some degree. The problem is addressing all competing interests simultaneously, while not diminishing from the others. Here’s the predicament: If we stop the lesson to help Dolores, we help the individual, but we break the momentum and the collective group, of which Dolores is a member, is placed on hold. This may not have a negative impact, but it is a non-impact – a non-advancement of everyone’s learning. However, it can also be argued that helping one member of the group further advances the group. But that depends on the level from which the classroom is viewed. Looking at it from the classroom level, which is made up of individuals, the group halts for one individual. From the school level, the class may benefit from her corrected understanding compared to another cohort. However, another conflict would occur in not helping Dolores.

If the teacher just ignores the misstep, then the group marches on toward their learning objective and the momentum of the lesson is not lost but the group may not arrive at the finish line in totality. They may have left Dolores behind in her comprehension on the individual level. Moreover, by the teacher not intervening, we still are not sure what caused Dolores to stumble. All of this is not really apparent to anyone but the teacher in the moment it happens. The teacher must make the call on how to balance these three competing demands among other goods not even considered here that are in conflict with these three and maximize each one without diminishing any – at least on the level of which the teacher is cognizant.

It is not just in elementary school that these issues apply. In a college classroom, for example, the stakes are higher and the complexity may even be greater. We do not routinely have students demonstrate such direct proficiencies by reading aloud or doing a math problem on the board (those skills are assumed). Instead, the proficiency demonstrations often come in the form of exams, papers, or projects that are more cumulative in nature and revolve around total concept mastery. There are also issues of time because college classes generally only meet two or three times a week, which means that instructional time must be maximized. All of this adds additional layers of complexity to an already difficult process.

Given these constraints, it is even more important to periodically stop and check for understanding while teaching (formative assessment to adjust teaching and learning in the heat of the moment, which are not necessarily formal tests) instead of waiting for summative assessments. Students can sit passively and not understand just as easily as they can be deeply engaged without saying a word. If we wait to check understandings until we are ready to move on to the next concept, then we will have missed valuable opportunities to supplement, correct, or reinforce the learning.

In particular, I remember one student from the first semester that I started teaching at the University of Michigan – Flint whom we shall call Max. Max came to class every day, was always on time, and sat towards the front of the class. When I talked about writing concepts such as thesis statements (an entertaining topic for all), he took notes and continually showed non-verbal cues, such as nodding his head, that showed he was engaged and, in theory, understood the concepts. However, when it came time to demonstrate this understanding in a paper, Max repeatedly throughout the draft process did not construct
a sound argument in his thesis statement. As we moved forward, I began teaching a concept with many audience participation opportunities and then a brief exercise to reinforce the concept, while at the same time allowing me to check for understanding. As the semester neared a close, I could make necessary adjustments in my teaching style and note where students were struggling.

One item that is very important to consider at the college level and even the high school level is that there is a difference between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. Many secondary teachers and college instructors go into their field because of love of the subject area; and I am one of them. There are few things I find more captivating than theory and the study of the human condition. As a result, it can be easy when we are all subject specialists to focus in on our work and the subject area knowledge that goes with that. However, that alone is not enough to effectively engage students. According to Shulman (as quoted in Stein and Nelson), “Teachers need a different kind of subject matter knowledge than that possessed by mathematicians, scientists, or linguists. Rather than needing more (and more advanced) knowledge of subjects, teachers need a qualitatively different kind of knowledge—one that would enable them to help others to learn it” (2003, p. 429). I would argue that he was right, with one additional caveat: this includes those mathematicians, scientists and linguists, etc. who teach. Not only must we know the subject material and have a passion for it, but we must be able to communicate it to foster engagement.

Thinking about these two classroom situations in order to equalize the, “classroom marketplace to function fairly,” among these competing interests, Shulman suggests that, “The potential for each individual’s personal development must be maximized, yet not at the expense of the fellow members of the class, at least not over the long haul” (1983, p. 498). This suggests promoting the student until it interferes with the whole, but does not address the issue of maintaining lesson momentum, which is the teacher’s primary tool to engage the group. No matter what direction is taken and which good is promoted, one always becomes subservient to another on some level of engagement.

All of this leads me to ask, given the level of classroom complexity, how do we engage students? Kristy Cooper argues that a teacher needs to be aware of three critical items. The first of these three items is what Cooper calls lively teaching, which occurs when instruction occurs that “represent a teacher’s efforts to put students in active learning roles” (2012, p. 31). At the college level, we are all subject level specialists, which means that we have taken years to invest in our chosen disciplines and have a passion for it. Think back to those that sparked your passion and think about how to inspire that divine spark in others. It does not have to be games or activities, but some activities would be a welcome change of pace, as much as fostering a sense of meaning and purpose. The second critical item in teaching for classroom engagement is academically rigorous practices. Cooper defines this as, “providing challenging work, pushing students through academic press, and demonstrating passion for content—represent a teacher’s sense that what she has to teach is important and that students must work hard to learn the material” (2012, p. 31). It instills a sense of value into the knowledge being taught, that there is purpose greater than the work simply being an academic exercise in learning.

Finally, Cooper suggests we think of connective instruction, which does not mean subject matter relevance (which is really an issue of teacher presentation), but rather instruction about relationships. She writes, “Connective instruction, integrates connective elements of student-teacher relationships through care, understanding, affirmation, and humor with connective elements of instruction through relevance and opportunities for self-expression” (2012, p. 30). The result is the formation of instruction where, “There is a connection between students and their classes that bridges interpersonal connection and connection to the learning experience into one construct that represents personal meaning for students” (Cooper 2012, p. 30). Much of this is really the building of what Bryk and Schneider call relational trust (2002). They define relational trust as interpersonal social exchanges that take place within schools as each person engages in, “A complex cognitive activity of discerning the intentions of others,” that revolve around respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity (Bryk and Schneider 2002, p. 22). These social exchanges create relationships around, in this case, the work of instruction – giving the student a sense of belonging and making them feel part of the educational process, which fosters student engagement.

Competing Values and Complexity beyond the Classroom

The second broad competing value category can be thought of as items that impact, or attempt to impact, the teacher and the classroom at the school and classroom level through various policies, controls, theories, and formalism. They could almost be viewed as an outside force that acts upon the teacher making the act of teaching impossible outside of the actual value conflicts of instruction. By outside forces, I do not imply that this category exists outside of the realm of education, but outside the actual instruction of the classroom, which has a profound effect on how teachers view their role in the context of the larger organization. Much of this has to do with what educational philosopher Thomas Green calls levels of aggregation. Two values that are in conflict
at various levels are autonomy and control—a battle between loosely coupled systems of an organization. However, these have broader implications than just the classroom and can span over various levels of space and time. At high levels of aggregation from the classroom, autonomy can be very closely related to the concept of decentralization and control begins to take the shape of centralization reforms because policy mostly comes from the top down. Much of this depends on point of view and from what level the educational system is being accessed (classroom, administration, state, federal, or even some intermediary).

One of the great ironies of autonomy at the classroom level is that it is both the “resolution and problem,” because, “Autonomy intrinsic to teaching is achieved as a function of its multiple competing and conflicting obligations, not in spite of them” (Shulman, 1983, p. 497). This means these conflicts and competing values make autonomy necessary so that the teacher can successfully navigate the classroom environment. That is why, “teachers understandably and justifiably resist the remote control of ‘teaching by distant bureaucrats’” (Shulman, 1983, p. 488). Without autonomy, teachers cannot balance conflicts, but policymakers view autonomy as a way teachers slight some populations (policymakers would like equality), consciously or unconsciously, from equal access because those students’ needs are minimized.

Being that the teacher exists “in a loosely coupled bureaucracy, the local-level practitioner can act autonomously without facing inevitable sanctions for insubordination,” at least not directly from policymakers. There is freedom to interact with the competing values without a risk of paralysis from a rational system, “in which no variability of response could be tolerated” (Shulman, 1983, p. 500). The teacher is a street-level bureaucrat. This is because, as Green argues, equality is pushed at the state and federal level where aggregation is high and it is hard to impact excellence which occurs at low aggregation where the teacher is—and this gives the teacher relative freedom in working with competing values (1988). Autonomy and control at any level really is about conflicting goods managing other conflicting goods through interest.

At the university level, classroom autonomy is not usually a major concern, but there are elements of bureaucratic control that come to affect the disposition of staff members. For example, this past year, there were a variety of discussions at the state legislative level about how to classify university employees as public employees to be able to control the price of healthcare. While the bureaucracy’s adjustment of healthcare does not seem to directly impact classroom instruction, there is an impact on the student. This is in part because teachers and other university employees were forced to focus some of their time to consider issues of health and welfare, which made their job more complex and not entirely centered on the job at hand. Other such examples surface at the more local level of the university, in the interactions between committees or the communication between different departments or even the communication between different colleges. Sometimes the most difficult can even be within departments, which can take away from the focus on the student.

If we consider the primary role of the university, or any other institution of instruction, then its purpose is about learning. This means that beyond the classroom, all other systems that are in place are to support instruction and those systems function most efficiently when they have seeming invisibility. It is not that these systems are unimportant by any means—because the classroom could not exist without them—or that they should go unnoticed. However, when all of these systems function at their highest level, there is reduced complexity and students would never know these other systems are even there, which prevents them from impacting the student. For example, rarely do we think of the class scheduling system and the hours of hard work that goes into it, until it does not function properly and a student continues to try to register for classes during your class—and, as a result, is disengaged.

Closing Thoughts

The opera Don Carlos ends in tragedy and nothingness, as one competing good overtakes another in this case, the Church overtakes the Crown similarly, we must be careful in education not to completely sacrifice one tenet for the sake of another because of their inverse and incompatible relationship. Instead, we should work towards an equilibrium, which, while near impossible to achieve, will help us to conceptualize the various components of education that are in conflict with one another. Good intentions simply just are not enough to guide policy. If the goal of policy is as Green suggests to not maximize good, but to minimize evil, then what does this mean for policy (Green, 1983)? Well, it is not about “good” policies, but about balanced policies; policies that do not have diminishing returns on various goods that reside in conflict, which are all connected around student learning through engagement.

One element of arriving at a policy decision is to do a political analysis of the situation. While these goods are in conflict, humans are the ones who seek to use these goods and, therefore, play a vital role in managing the incompatibility of goods (Green, 1994). While policy analysis is concerned with “marginal gain,” political analysis is concerned with “political weight” and “political behavior,” in essence, “who will vote for it” (Green, 1994).
So, in order to arrive at a policy decision, there would need to be an evaluation to see, "Whether the best thing to do [the policy] is the same as the best thing that can be done [political judgment]" which is not always the case and may even be contradictory (Green, 1994).

This means examining the stakeholders' interests. However, who are the stakeholders? In general, if we refer to Shulman, he would argue three main groups, they include policymakers (politicians of various levels, but not exclusively), educators, and scholars (educators and scholars not always being the same group depending on the level of aggregation and role of the individuals) (1988). While this does cover many key players, it also leaves several others out, like those of particular social/family background (Coleman, 1966), students, special interest groups (unions, textbook companies, etc), various other intermediary school positions (administration, support staff, etc), and many more - some of which exist in conflict with another. In addition to this, these actors can assume multiple roles, given them several different stakes in education decisions.

This is in part because the classroom is where every actor is competing to express his or her interest in the educational arena (Cusick, 1991). The stakeholders who have the most success expressing their views will be those who have the most access. For example, policymakers have far reaching effects, while those who may have a personal history with the teacher (as a parent, student, friend etc.) influence the classroom directly. In part, the level of successful influences depends on connections and the level of aggregation that one wants to effect around student engagement. All of this makes the water of stakeholder involvement murky when looking at the competing and conflicting interests of education.

So, what does this mean for student engagement? Well, there are two major, categorical groups that affect student engagement. The first is what directly occurs in the classroom, based on social exchanges and contextual cues often occurring in simultaneous complexity as the instructor engages with students and the students engage or disengage with the instructor around the content knowledge. The second, as Cusick would term it (1991), are external classroom factors, that are the result of compromises between the formal system and the organizational structure (the bureaucracy at work that maintains the operations of schooling). While these are indirect to the actual classroom, they are what makes the classroom possible and are deeply embedded in all practices that occur within and around the classroom setting, including the interactions teachers have with students. As a result, they take time and resources in maintaining the operations of the classroom as well as the other systems that keep schooling in motion.

This conflicts result in issues where student engagement is not just part of instruction, but nested with and affected by the larger complex organization that is the educational system. In other words, each interaction with students is not only an effort to engage them, but also a result of multiple and competing forces within social exchanges between people in the classroom, social-psychological actions of the teachers, and environmental complexity.

References

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