

# Faculty *focus*

*Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint*

## *Beyond Campus Walls:* Innovation Through Place-Based Education

by David Linden

On a fall Monday morning Education majors from the University of Michigan-Flint gather for EDE 340, Creative Learning. Equipping future elementary and middle school teachers to integrate art, music, and drama into everyday activities, the course offers techniques for planning, presenting, and evaluating creative learning experiences in the classroom. This week's "experiment" focuses on incorporating music into the teaching of math, attached to an opportunity to test its effectiveness in an elementary classroom. The university's Education-Block course serves as a dual example of not only how innovation is being instilled in future generations of teachers, but also how innovation itself is actively on display at UM-Flint—because this isn't UM-Flint. It's Beecher's Middle/High School. Welcome to the Neff Center.

Born from a partnership established between UM-Flint and the Beecher Community School District in summer 2012, the Neff Center officially launched in January of 2013. The center operates as an extension of University Outreach, which renovated and furnished the Neff facilities through grants and other UM-Flint monies, but Beecher leases the space to the university for free. Drawing its name from Beecher High School's address on Neff St. in Mount Morris Township, the 3500 sq. ft. center is situated in the northwest wing of the recently combined middle/high school. The center has its own entrance into the school and boasts two classrooms, a lounge area, storage and computer



*Elizabeth Collardey, Assistant Professor of Social Work, conducts class in the Neff Center's classroom #1.*

areas, and offices for UM-Flint faculty. Office computers are connected to the UM-Flint systems, affording professors on-site desktop access to university information, while classrooms are outfitted with UM-Flint smart carts, providing the same digital and video capacities utilized in on-campus classrooms. There is also an outdoor "classroom" and garden where UM-Flint and Beecher students can gather for outdoor projects and activities. Maria Salinas, a graduate of both Beecher High School and UM-Flint, serves as on-site Coordinator, acting as liaison between the two schools and greater community while overseeing day-to-day activity.

Since its inception, the Neff Center, its courses, proposed projects, and other extensions into the schools have received 100% support from Beecher faculty, administration, and the community at

large. A school tour alongside Salinas quickly brings this to light. Warm greetings and conversations with students and staff confirm the appreciation for the presence and work of Salinas and the center. A stop into the on-site Beecher Parent Center produces further unsolicited endorsements from Beecher parents and Parent Facilitator Ernest Williams: “We don’t know what we’d do without the active and supportive work of Maria, Neff and UM-Flint as parents and the Beecher Community. And you can quote me on that.”

This endorsement extends beyond Beecher and UM-Flint. Affirming the established momentum of the facility, the university recently secured a grant for Neff to be considered an outpost for Americorps. The grant was designated to hire a second full-time employee, Nicole Hall—another Beecher alum and current UM-Flint graduate student—to work alongside Salinas. Salinas and Hall will partner to maintain and develop further initiatives to serve Beecher and university alike. Two of the more successful collaborative efforts have been the Tutoring and Alternative Spring Break programs. The tutoring program offers UM-Flint students opportunity to engage with Beecher students through after-school tutoring. These positions are work study employment through the university and function as they would through the campus Tutoring Center. Alternative Spring Break affords local community service opportunities to UM-Flint students who prefer investing in the surrounding community over departing for tropical climates. Partnering with Beecher’s Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), Beecher students are assigned a UM-Flint “mentor” as the groups spend a week tackling service projects in the Beecher area.

Hands-on opportunities for UM-Flint

students expand directly into the Beecher classroom. A unique benefit of the Neff Center is its being housed in a laboratory, of sorts, to experiment with the theories and methods introduced in the college classroom. Following their lessons and discussion about incorporating music and movement in learning (kinesthetic learning) the Creative Learning class is granted opportunity to try it out. An added benefit of Neff’s Beecher Middle/High School locale is that Daly Elementary is situated directly across the street. The Daly volunteers for this particular experimentation are Ms. Haynes’ “split” 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade class, consisting of *all boys* (you read that right). Armed with a math lesson attached to the 2007 pop-music hit, “Cupid Shuffle,” the teachers-to-be converge on Hayne’s class to give it the “spaghetti test.” The results prove successful. Days later, a visit to Haynes’ classroom finds her leading the boys into new tasks of attaching music to challenging math principles of their own.

University Outreach Interim Director Dr. Jacob Blumner describes the Neff Center as place-based education, designed for university students and staff to collaborate with local school districts to address learning and community needs. With local community groups invited to lease the space from the university for civic activities, the center creates a direct



*The Neff Center’s lounge area*

connection between UM-Flint and Beecher, Mt. Morris, and northern Flint. While Neff serves as a model for partnership opportunities with other districts and can increase university visibility, unlike “early college” and dual-enrollment locations, Blumner believes the center exists for purposes beyond prospective future enrollees. “It’s about being a good community member and building responsible and involved relationships,” he elaborates. “The Neff Center bridges a perceived disconnect between UM-Flint and Genesee County.”

Beyond the good-neighbor status, and as the Creative Learning class demonstrates, Blumner is convinced the Neff Center provides UM-Flint faculty and students with opportunities for innovative teaching and learning that may not happen, or are more difficult to come by, without a similar dedicated space. The TCLT is committed to remaining at the fore of, and providing resources toward, pedagogical advancements at the university level, and the Neff Center matches that mission. TCLT Director Tracy Wacker draws attention to place-based education’s multi-dimensional effects on learning for student and instructor alike. From the student perspective Wacker submits, “not only are students benefiting from high impact practices like community



*The Neff Center’s classroom #2*

-based learning, collaborative assignments, and common intellectual experiences, but also from higher order learning skills—analysis, synthesis, evaluation, creative thinking.” From the teaching perspective, the 24-year college-teaching veteran asserts, “place-based education benefits the instructor too—it can be rejuvenating to develop a course with community-based learning outcomes that promote the development of intrinsic motivation in students as well as a curriculum that involves students in their own learning.”

Dr. Elizabeth Collardey, the first UM-Flint instructor to conduct a semester-long course at Neff, agrees. The Social Work professor, whose area of practice is Community Change, asserts that “social work is done best in community,” and the Neff Center is an “an opportunity *to teach* in community.” After visiting Neff and finding it more conducive to her teaching style and goals than some campus classrooms, she willingly volunteered to use the facility. “Learning is enhanced by real-world projects and the Neff Center presented that,” Collardey continues. She chose Social Work 441, Macro Social Work Practice, as her inaugural offering, redesigning the course and content to suit the Neff space. Pleased with the results, Collardey has since taught the course on-site a second time.

The space is not without its challenges. Logistically, the Beecher school is over five miles from the UM-Flint campus, creating a potential transportation quandary, especially for campus residents. Accordingly, class carpooling became the agreed upon solution to the distance problem. Apart from logistics, Collardey concedes a greater initial concern: gaining trust of UM-Flint students relating to the purpose and benefits of the off-campus experience. Since the course she offered at Neff is required for all Social

Work majors, Collardey had a ready-made audience in students nearing graduation. Rather than hosting a band of students begrudging the Neff Center for the duration of a semester, Collardey remained optimistic her social workers-in-training would envision Neff's potential: "Being in the neighborhood and serving kids in the neighborhood makes the environment of the clients real to students." Challenge became opportunity as Collardey's students quickly caught her theory-into-immediate-practice vision.

The rewards proved worth the risk. Embracing the ideal that social work functions best with a client-centered focus, class projects were born directly from dialogue with the Beecher community. UM-Flint students assessed the requests and resources required, and then developed plans and strategies to meet the needs. While Collardey cites a handful of successful projects at Neff, she highlights one in particular from that first semester. Over a span of six weeks the UM-Flint collegians gathered with Beecher 9<sup>th</sup> graders to facilitate weekly discussions regarding race. The goal was to foster a safe environment for ideas and emotions to be expressed in a respectful and serious manner. At the end of the six weeks the group went out for a pizza dinner to punctuate the work they accomplished together. Collardey is quick to mention the bonds that were evident among the group. "Relationships had formed," she notes, "it was difficult for them to see their time draw to an end."

Reflecting on her experiences at the Neff Center, Collardey identifies two major pedagogical outcomes—one expected, one unexpected. Years of experience have taught Collardey that concepts and theories can be trumpeted and romanticized in the classroom, but this optimism doesn't necessarily translate to success in the field.

Social work is difficult, she explains, and, despite best laid plans and intentions, outcomes don't always meet expectation. For Collardey, the Neff Center introduced prospective social workers to this reality. "There are real-world setbacks in this field," she emphasizes, "[the Neff Center] gives students occasion, and *permission*, to experience disappointment." The second outcome was born directly from the freshmen dialogues on race. Collardey proudly declares her class became agents for student empowerment in action. "In our field, the word 'empower' is a buzzword," she said, "but our college students experienced the impact of social work through the empowerment of grade school children." This unexpected discovery from her Neff Center commitment brings a fresh smile to Collardey's face.

The Neff Center stretches both the capacities and imaginations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century university. Apart from the promise of an equitable return on their investment, namely future students, post-secondary institutions may have difficulty expending the resources required for such an endeavor. The TCLT believes that facilities like the Neff Center generate expanded opportunities for teaching and learning through flexibilities and environments the on-campus classroom may not provide. Similar ventures in different locales are worth exploration. As Blumner puts it: "Place-based education is hard and unstable, but it doesn't mean that we shouldn't be doing the work."

Written by **David Linden**

*Dave is the TCLT's current Graduate Student Research Assistant. He is working toward an MA in English with a concentration in Composition and Rhetoric. He aspires to teach writing and/or serve as a staff writer at the university level.*