Learning & Teaching Update

Advancing Student Learning Through Communities of Practice

In recent weeks, SCD lecturers have asked about the non-assessed hours component of the course unit handout template. How do we take account of these non-assessed hours? How do we help students move beyond simply acquiring knowledge, passing exams, and meeting the minimum requirements? How do we help students integrate their knowledge with their everyday life? How do we assist students to connect classroom learning with their ministry?

The Social View of Learning

we participate therefore we are

understanding is socially constructed

There are many ways to do this but one way is to capitalise on social learning. One of the strongest determinants of students' success in higher education—more important than lecturers' teaching styles—is their ability to form or participate in small study groups. Students who study in groups, even only once a week, are more engaged in their studies, better prepared for class, and learn significantly more than students who work alone. Social learning contrasts with the traditional Cartesian view of knowledge and learning: knowledge is a kind of substance; teaching involves finding the best way to transfer knowledge from teachers to students. Instead of "*I think, therefore I am*" social learning says, "*We participate, therefore we are.*"

Study groups work. Students ask each other to clarify areas of uncertainty or confusion, improve their grasp of lectures and set reading by hearing fellow students' answers. At times, and perhaps most powerfully, students become teachers helping others deepen their understanding and in the process deepen their own knowledge –

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May 17 Monday 11-4 Booth College: Professional Devel Day – Research & Scholarship : all welcome.
June Student Feedback on Units and Teaching to be administered by Insync
Jul 7-9 ANZATS 2010 Conference Melb The Future of God-Eschatology and the global challenges of future
August? Institutional Moderation of Broken Bay Institute
September? Discipline Moderation — Christian Practice
Sep 10 Friday 10-4 Booth College: Professional Devel Day – Learning & Teaching : all faculty welcome.
Oct 1-3 Biennial Conference in Philosophy, Religion & Culture CIS Creation, Nature & Built Environment

after all in teaching someone else we learn even more ourselves.
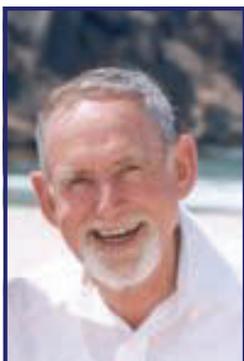
In the old way, students may spend their college years learning **about** a subject before they have opportunity to practice as an active practitioner of their art in the everyday world of work. However, if we understand learning as the process of joining a community of practice, we re-order the process by creating social settings in which students interact with each other and explore the personal, social and practical implications of the content they are acquiring in class. They help each other to see the relationship between lectures and life.

In communities of practice students engage in a process of collective learning in their shared domain of Christian ministry. They learn how to survive in college and in their future ministry; they learn new forms of expression; help each other solve knotty problems of doctrine and dogma; and deepen their identity as potential pastors and Christian workers. In communities of practice students who share a common concern or a passion for Christian ministry learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

But communities of practice are more than just the blind leading the blind. Apprenticeship is a form of community of practice – neophytes gather in a community around the master to learn the tradition. Communities of practice may be characterised by collaboration between newcomers and experienced practitioners.

And this is where the tension of creating a community of practice occurs. In describing a community of practice of PhD scholars, Janson, Howard and Schoenberger-Orgad (p. 174) assert that communities of practice form of their own volition and initiative and they are self-directing. They contrast communities of practice with other groups (perhaps work groups formed by managers) that have external regulation and governing mechanisms. They point to research that suggests that "bottom-up" movements are more successful in terms of knowledge sharing and ideas generation than "top-down" processes.

At the professional Development Day on 17 May we will modify a process of community formation to develop a model for faculty to assist each other in learning and practising the skills of research and publication.

Lecturers seeking to develop communities of practice with students must tread

carefully. Students must have a choice in the formation of the community and in the choice of the master practitioners. At the Professional Development Day on 17 May we will explore a process of community formation that may need modification to serve us well in creating communities of practice in which faculty assist each other in learning and practising the skills of research and publication. All faculty are welcome to join this exploration. See the professional development wiki for copies of papers that explore the issue of communities of practice in faculty research and in other areas of educational life.

Communities of practice in college settings may function as follows. In one community of practice, three (at most, four) members met every two weeks to share three pages of their current academic writing, research and conference papers, or grant proposals. Members began to realize and embody ideals of an interdisciplinary community of scholars. They encouraged each other to hone their personal practices of writing, sharpen their abilities to listen to others' and their own voices, and to take risks in their writing.

Community discipline ensured that they gave priority to attending and preparing for meetings. All responded positively to the challenge of writing for the group each meeting. They developed a regular, almost daily practice of writing learning that you can only write on paper or on a computer and writing does not happen until you sit down and do it.

All members brought and shared writing at each meeting. The group devoted 30 min to each participant's writing, about three double-spaced pages. In the 30 minutes allotted, each writer discussed the larger context of the three pages, told the group what kind of feedback he or she needed, read the pages slowly so that listeners could make notes, and received reader-response feedback. Individuals committed to meeting with the community about every two weeks. They were trained in descriptive reader-response feedback.

Further Reading
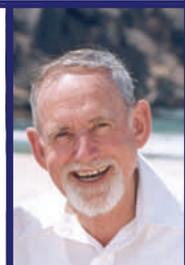***The material presented in this newsletter was adapted from the following:***

John Seely Brown and Richard P. Adler, Minds on Fire: Open Education, the Long Tail, and Learning 2.0*, EDUCAUSE Review, vol. 43, no. 1 January/February 2008, 1-19*

Diane Gillespie, Nives Dolˇsak, Bruce Kochis, Ron Krabill, Kari Lerum, Anne Peterson, and Elizabeth Thomas, Research Circles: Supporting the Scholarship of Junior Faculty*, Innovative Higher Education, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2005, 149-162*

Annick Janson, Laurie Howard, Michèle Schoenberger-Orgad The Odyssey of PhD Students Becoming a Community*, Business Communication Quarterly, Volume 67, Number 2, June 2004 168-181*

M K Smith, Communities of practice*, the encyclopedia of informal education, www.infed.org/biblio/ communities_of_practice.htm, 2003, 2009*

VIDEO

See if you agree with the viewpoint put here. If you disagree how would you modify the steps presented in order to create a community of practice?

This issue of *Learning and Teaching Update* was prepared by Neil Holm, Director (Coursework).