

Creating a Reflective Space: The Teaching and Learning Academy at Western Washington University

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The Teaching-Learning Academy (TLA) at Western Washington University is a campus-wide forum for faculty, student affairs personnel, classified staff, administrators, and students. The TLA meets informally, and regularly, to *study* issues related to teaching and learning. This year, the object of study has been general education, in broad terms, and our General Education Task Force’s draft recommendations, in particular. Currently, the TLA has about 95 active members, fifty of whom are faculty and twenty are students. The total membership represents thirty-five academic departments and units from across the University. In addition to meeting biweekly in four study groups at various times, the TLA also sponsors other campus-wide events, such as a recent all-faculty forum on general education reform.

Students in the TLA participate as part of course expectations for University 397, “Learning Reconsidered,” a 3-credit elective seminar in which participants read, write, and talk about their own education and its relationship to the learning environment at Western. Class and TLA study group discussions are informed by an anthology of readings on higher education, entitled *You Are Here*, edited by Russel Durst. In addition to discussing and writing about these readings and participating in biweekly TLA

study groups, students in the course also conduct individual interviews, write reflective essays, and discuss case stories from the *Critical Moments* casebook.

Scholarship of teaching and learning

In the language of current educational jargon, TLA participants work at “the scholarship of teaching and learning” which assumes that teaching and learning are complex processes that are not easily observed, measured, or improved and are ones that require scholarly study. In other words, the nexus between teaching and learning is viewed as a legitimate site of inquiry that needs a scholarly community and infrastructure to support its investigation of teaching-learning problems – along with occasions for a public exchange of ideas, habits of peer review, and professional rewards. From this perspective, teaching is viewed as an expansive enterprise (not confined to the classroom or only to regular faculty) that involves not merely methods or techniques, but also research into the lived experiences of our students. The scholarship of teaching and learning is distinguished from scholarship in the discipline of education because it is approached as an aspect of individual practice. Instead of third-party researchers studying the practice of others, this is work undertaken by individuals studying and *theorizing* their own practices. This kind of

investigation also alters the role of students “making them more active agents in shaping and examining the processes of teaching and learning...as co-investigators and agents, rather than as objects” (qtd. in Hutchings 8).

In the language of ideology, the TLA is about *praxis*: practice informed by theory and theory refined by practice. In order to shape and change our world, we need to *understand* what we are doing. In this way, the TLA embodies the notion of *praxis*, for it seeks to promote an ongoing venue for theorizing practice in an effort to liberate individual and collective change.

Student voice

Here’s what PJ Redmond (senior, Political Science), who serves as a TLA and learning class co-facilitator, has to say about the power dynamics from a student perspective: “TLA engages participants across differences by offering an outlet to those with little or no voice. As a student, I find it difficult to express myself to a professor or administrator, regardless of topic, if there is little to promote our dialogue. As a Black male, it’s even harder for me to voice concerns. TLA breaks down our institutional hierarchies by providing all participants with an intimate atmosphere and equal ground. By participating regularly, we recognize that each member has a voice, and it is our

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responsibility to accept and respect that voice. Without this kind of talk, a healthy and meaningful relationship between these groups is almost impossible to achieve. TLA conversations acknowledge that the university is not only a place of scholarly education, but also an institution where growth, maturation, and development are essential. If social development is a prerequisite for an effective learning community, multiple venues of dialogue need to be implemented to promote this development. The TLA is a means to this end by creating a collective conscious out of individuals - allowing all voices to converge as one. A barrier to programs similar to the TLA is the administrative hierarchy prevalent in all institutions of higher education. The TLA helps to breakdown these hierarchies and address problems communally instead of individually.”

A reflective space, a shared language

So why does Western have a TLA? In a time of limited resources, how can we justify creating and developing such a structure? Perhaps the TLA exists because never has it been so challenging to create spaces in our busy lives for reflecting on our practices. Many faculty members (especially in lower division general education courses) talk about the increasing number of students in their classes, along with increasing workload issues outside of teaching. Many students talk about the challenges they face in working two or three jobs (often not to pay for ski trips but for rising tuition) at the same time that they struggle to find time and energy to engage with their courses. And in an age of technological access, we all are able to move more quickly and do more than

ever before. But the accelerated pace does not seem to enable us to open up more places for reflecting on where we're going so quickly.

Perhaps the impulse behind the TLA is the need to have some kind of shared language in order to communicate. As Kegan and Lahey (2001) acknowledge in their study, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way we Work*, “work settings are language communities,” so we need to ask if there is a mother tongue. In order to understand each other across differences, we need to talk together. Otherwise, we end up developing specialized dialects that preclude us from communicating effectively when we need to. In higher education, where the structural and intellectual boundaries of our disciplines and departments tend to isolate us from each other, it seems particularly critical that we have some kind of institutional commons where we can come together to establish a shared language.

Jeff Purdue, Library faculty and an active TLA member, describes the kind of critical talk that he needs to sustain his teaching: “When I was in graduate school and teaching for the first time (freshman composition classes), my fellow graduate students and I would gather every week or so at 5:00 Friday afternoons to talk about teaching. We'd take turns choosing an article that addressed something we were dealing with in our classrooms. These articles served as springboards for discussion about our own classroom practices. These discussions helped us to think about our own teaching in a critical way and to learn something of what others had thought about the issues that mattered to us. Since most of us were first-

generation college students, and since we were teaching in a highly diverse university, our discussions were often focused on the myriad ways in which class, race, and gender impacted our lives both as teachers and students. I always expected that there would be a lot of opportunities for similar kinds of discussions once I became a member of the faculty. For whatever reason, this level of collegiality has been difficult to achieve. The TLA has played the role of enabling the kinds of discussions I describe above. It allows faculty to come together informally to explore the scholarship of teaching and learning in a way that is rejuvenating. And best of all, it goes beyond simply being a forum for faculty to have discussions, since students play such an important role in the TLA. We are able to explore our commonalities across institutional (and other) divisions; and for me, some of this exploration has included considerations of class, race, and gender and their impact on our lives as scholars, teachers, and learners. The TLA reminds me of why I entered academe in the first place.”

Kathy Patrick, a course and TLA co-facilitator, describes how both individual and collective interests can be served by this kind of institutional learning community IF each voice is heard and honored: “Participating in a learning community is really an exploration of self although the goal is ultimately to speak with one voice or sing the same tune. That's what I have found in my learning community experience as a facilitator for a TLA study group. The group met every other week to discuss changes to the University's general education requirements. To be truly representative of the University community, the group counted

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among its members faculty, students, staff, and administrators. The key to any learning community and to this group in particular was that despite different levels of understanding and experience, the people who participated in this group met as peers. Each opinion was heard, treated with respect and recognized as valuable.”

A culture of peace and justice, a space for hope

While our focus the past two years has been on general education, perhaps the real motive for the TLA is not really any particular reform effort, but rather the revitalization of our whole institutional learning culture. As Robert Holyer (2002) contends, “the renewal of faculty culture may be more central to the vitality and success of general education than the current and long-standing focus on the curriculum.” TLA participants say that the

dialogue nourishes them and gives them energy to keep on keeping on.

Or perhaps the real imperative for having a TLA responds to our global context where whole nations have learned *not* to talk through differences, but rather to strike out and eradicate those differences. As conversations at the 2003 Washington Center Conference suggested (especially those inspired by Marjorie Agosin’s poetry), more and more of us in higher education are hoping to create cultures of peace and justice. The TLA represents one kind of learning community that is working to enact such a desire. Maybe we’re desperate for a place simply to *believe* in the power of reasoned discourse. Could it be that we simply need to carve out what David Harvey (2002) calls a “space for hope”? Maybe the whole point of the TLA talk is *just* that: the talk.

References

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Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL)

CASTL represents a major initiative of The Carnegie Foundation. Launched in 1998, the program builds on a conception of teaching as scholarly work proposed in the 1990 report, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, by former Carnegie Foundation President Ernest Boyer, and on the 1997 follow-up publication, *Scholarship Assessed*, by Charles Glassick, Mary Taylor Huber, and Gene Maeroff.

www.carnegiefoundation.org/CASTL/index.htm