



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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A New Renaissance of Teaching & Learning

I participated in a discussion about teaching at WCU where most of the participants were senior faculty, and comments were made about faculty morale and the role of teaching excellence. Still fairly new here, I would like to give my perspective, prompted by that discussion, upon the role of professional development at the present time.

My discipline is religious studies and I believe that spiritual traditions began from some sort of "white-hot" experience that became the heart of mythopoetic stories and their periodic ritual enactment. Then, those stories became the soul of the people and the impetus and goal of their vision quest. It has been said, "the cosmos is composed not primarily of atoms, but of stories." Stories talk deeply about a people's sense of itself as a community, often through paradox and a necessary ambiguity. Great wisdom exists in many of these stories and faculty have their own stories to tell.

Faculty know that good teaching is difficult and requires a kind of educational vision quest, a seeking and a struggle for what one knows is elusive and sometimes ambiguous. Faculty understand that good teaching is no accident, that it is hard but wonderful work ("*There is no joy in life without joy in work,*" Aquinas). Faculty know that teaching, while requiring competence in one's discipline, requires much, much more than that competence. Gandhi talked about "*experiments with truth.*" Could we re-interpret the present time to be *kairos*, the fertile moment, the opportune moment, to be THE new time for a teaching & learning renaissance, an experiment with the truths of teaching & learning? As Gandhi also said, "*Be the change you want to see in the world.*"

Dogen said, "*If you can't find the truth right where you are, where else do you think you will find it?*" What if faculty and whole departments were to articulate a vision for a teaching & learning renaissance, a convincing assertion that teaching & learning are the foundation, guts, and spirit of this university, that becoming an ever better teacher is and will be the most significant, appreciated and rewarded goal for any faculty member? Can faculty lead the whole university back to its origins, to help it have a "memory of its future"? Sometimes one can find what one seeks by going no-where, by contemplating the vision that already is but which may have become faded, jaded, or overlaid with too much other "stuff."

We have the story that we need to remember, conserve, preserve, transform and tell. We can risk being reborn to our original vision / story of why we teach, why we learn, why we want to help create a story of personal, cultural, and universal learning with students. "*We must receive new seeds from an old harvest, old truths out of a time newborn,*" (Thomas Merton). The Faculty Center's staff and resources shall fully support such a faculty-led renaissance, a new burst of teaching's spirit that can only originate from faculty feeding the fire from each other and with their students.

As a young Bob Dylan sang, "*he who isn't busy being born, is busy dyin'.*" By seeking a renewed focus upon teaching & learning, senior, junior, new and part-time faculty can begin to

create what they seek. Faculty may be busy but hopefully not too busy to participate in a collegial renewal of teaching at a university whose present and future spirit resides with excellence in teaching & learning because the heart of the university is its students and faculty.

During that same discussion with faculty, I thought back to my belated entrance into professional academic life after all my different jobs. Back in those days, the idea of being a busy faculty member working with students at a university (especially one in a region of rare, ancient, and nearly mystical beauty) would have seemed like a dream job (not a utopian illusion) for many reasons. And it is. . . or can be, if the dream is allowed to live and we remember the white-hot fire that was our Call-to-teaching story, a Call alive within us as we allow ourselves to be aware of and remember it and gather with colleagues doing the same. I have met many WCU faculty who are living blazes of passion for teaching and the time may be right for a renaissance with all the labor, birth pangs, and joy that are part of a new birth.

If teaching & learning excellence is to be genuinely considered the epitome of what being a faculty member at WCU means, faculty with strong administrative support can manifest that value individually and collegially in an authentic community of scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching & learning. But the faculty's great collective wisdom about teaching cannot continue to be kept so much in private enclaves, unavailable and lost to other faculty. In the future we plan on initiating the "Wisdom Project" to preserve through video and writings the teaching experience and wisdom of retiring faculty, the elders of our teaching tribe. Risk is needed for a breakthrough and for a new community to be born. As Virgil says to Dante in Dante's *Divine Comedy* as the arduous ascent through the rocks of Mount Purgatory begins, "Here we shall need some ingenuity." But if the vision quest were easy, it would be a trivial vision to seek. Captain Jean Luc Picard of the starship *Enterprise* might say about this possibility, even if arduous: "*Make it so!*"

Some active steps are to participate in the following CFC initiatives and resources that are explained on our new web site (<http://facctr.wcu.edu/>):

- Open Classroom Project
- Departmental Assistance and Department Head Development
- Faculty Learning Opportunities (workshops)
- Discussion List on Teaching and Learning
- Mentoring Program
- CFC Library on Teaching & Learning (HL 240)
- Faculty Sandbox
- Renaissance of Teaching and Learning Booklet Series*
- MountainRise* eJournal on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
- Faculty Teams (Aliteracy, Qualitative Research, Talk About Teaching, Untenured Faculty, Writing Across the Curriculum, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Web-enhanced Teaching and Learning, Diversity, Student Learning)
- Consultation on course development, teaching methods, active learning, etc.

Teaching is about transformation and ingenuity. "Be the change you want to see. . ." Thank you.

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The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.