

TEACHING CORNER

Committee on Sociology in Community and Small Colleges

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Letter from Committee Chair, DeAnna Gore (DeannaG@usca.edu):

The Committee on Sociology in Community and Small Colleges has been working hard organizing sessions for the 2017 meeting in Greenville, South Carolina. The theme for this year is “Diversities: Inclusion, Equality, Resistance.” As I mentioned in the last newsletter, this theme is timely to the current social issues in today’s society, but also to one of the goals of the Committee as we seek to be more inclusive of faculty from small and community colleges. Last year in Atlanta, the Committee was very successful in having faculty from local small and community colleges attend the conference and present in a variety of sessions. We hope to continue this in Greenville.

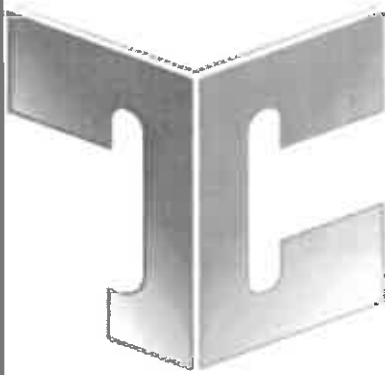
The CSCSC will also organize a few sessions that are teaching and student centered. In keeping with the conference theme, there will be a session (co-sponsored with SWS-South) focused on creating inclusivity in the classroom and how to be more intentional about inclusion in different settings. Another session will explore how to involve undergraduates in faculty research. Other teaching-related sessions are in the works as well, so stay tuned!

For graduate students interested in applying to teaching-focused institutions, there will be a session

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for individuals to learn about what small and community colleges are looking for, tips for writing the CV and cover letter, and expectations during the interview process. This has always been a popular session and we are happy to bring it back next year!

We are always very interested in knowing what types of sessions and panels you are interested in seeing in Greenville, particularly those related to teaching. If you have a suggestion for a panel or session, please email me at deannag@usca.edu. Have a great semester and we hope to see you in Greenville, South Carolina!

DeAnna Gore
University of South Carolina Aiken

Teaching Note

Praxis and Learning Assistance Experience: What Can We Learn?

by Jack Trammell

Recent conversations with colleagues who transitioned from roles in postsecondary learning assistance (administering tutoring and mentoring programs, developmental education, FYE, disability support) into or back into social science and other teaching roles clearly suggest a significant pedagogical benefit from the learning assistance experience that manifests in better teaching. To follow up on this possibility, a short online interview survey was circulated through various learning assistance listservs specifically asking the question with related follow ups: how has your experience in postsecondary learning assistance informed your pedagogy and experience now as a classroom instructor/faculty member? In addition, I conducted three in-depth face to face interviews with colleagues to develop narrative threads.

With dozens of responses already in (and more coming, culminating in a planned full-length article), the preliminary results suggest several very concrete trends that should spark discussion about the value of learning assistance in faculty experience. They also suggest ideas about how we prepare new faculty in graduate programs and later plan faculty development consistent with the challenges and realities of the 21st century college/university classroom.

From Learning Assistant to Instructor

Every respondent at the time of publication (n = 27) answered the first question in the strong affirmative, stating that their experience as a learning assistance professional significantly impacted the way they later thought about classroom instruction and course design. Many elaborated with specific examples of how this evolved for them personally, so although accounts varied in details, they all were consistent with the initial theme: the experience was invaluable and changed the way they approached classroom instruction and design.

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For example, Melissa T. (College of Charleston) suggested her undergraduate experience influenced her pedagogical approach today: “I know that what I learned as a Supplemental Instruction leader in undergrad has had a profound impact on how I run my class... Once you understand how students learn then how could you ever go back to the ‘sage on the stage?’” Thus, for Melissa, the experience as a learning assistant transformed how she thinks about teaching today.

Similarly, Lisa J. (Nebraska Methodist College) stated that her work as a learning assistant shifted her approach to classroom and curricular design. Lisa stated, “I feel as though my prior experiences impact the work I do today because I am a firm believer in the value of differentiated instruction and intentional curricular design that includes culturally relevant pedagogical practices and an emphasis on social justice.” These sentiments were echoed in very similar terms by the majority of respondents.

Overall, the respondents reported shifts in pedagogy and curricular design toward experiences that were: student-centered; utilized more active learning; included more individual instruction; designed more external supports outside the classroom; and emphasized not only concrete knowledge but more generous opportunities for student reflection. In addition, respondents reported that as a result of their learning assistance experiences they were much more likely to adopt a social justice model for understanding their teaching.

Better Equip All Faculty

In addition to considering how their experiences as learning assistance guided their own pedagogical approach, many respondents indicated a need for all faculty to be better equipped with some of the skills their learning assistance experience developed for them personally (and somewhat serendipitously). These skills included: communicating more effectively with diverse student populations, adapting curricular materials for divergent learners (many used the lexicon of Universal Design in Instruction, or UDI, in describing such techniques), paying closer attention to individual student performance, placing a greater emphasis on meeting students outside of the scheduled classroom meeting times, and perhaps predictably, building learning assistance directly into their course structures (e.g., required tutoring in the subject area as part of the syllabus requirements).

For example, Alice M. (University of Mississippi) stated, “Working as a tutor taught me first and foremost the value of being an active listener, guiding students to develop their own lines of inquiry, and learning how to help students understand the relationship between audience, purpose, and medium of communication.”

Train Graduate Students and Faculty for 21st Century Challenges

Many respondents indicated that their graduate programs and initial faculty experiences had not equipped them effectively for the challenges of the 21st century classroom (greater diversity of learners, English second language students, students with disabilities, etc.), and these responses were similar across all types of institutions (4-year or 2-year, public or private, etc.). Their overall tone seemed to suggest that the learning assistance experience trained them to “adapt on the fly” and that this overall ability—hard to quantify or measure, but a kind of “keep cool and carry on”—was perhaps the biggest skill that all postsecondary faculty need, or will need in the 21st century classroom. Wendy S. (Brigham Young University) stated, “I think prior to learning assistance I pretty much assumed that if you were in a college class you were prepared for college. Understanding that actually

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the majority of my students are probably lacking in preparedness to some extent or another allows me build some of those basic skills into the... ..curriculum.”

One should not overgeneralize from this limited initial inquiry, of course, as learning assistance like other areas in higher education has as much diversity of experience and mission as any other area of praxis, and the respondents were obviously a self-selected group. None-the-less, the uniformity of the responses and clearly emerging themes at a minimum suggest the need for further dialogue and inquiry, and also seem to be a clear indicator that there are deficits in how new faculty are prepared to enter the postsecondary classroom.

Kurt S (James Madison University) states, “Most of my colleagues [learning assistance faculty] would agree that tutoring and tutor training have substantially enhanced our ability to communicate to students, to bridge differences in expertise, to individualize instruction, and to develop multiple frameworks for explaining course content and learning processes. I like to think that our centers create and kind of ‘expertise of explanation’ that we export to our classrooms – and sometimes to our colleagues who haven’t been tutors...”

Similarly, Nancy F. (Northwest College) shared, “In English, I model the writing of different types of papers by writing one in front of the class... They [later] turn in impressive results, but then they’ve seen an expert at work (take out any boasting tone you hear there) and had some practice.”

Some Quick Takeaways

The data also suggests that institutionally we should increase the degree to which we value faculty with learning assistance experiences. Perhaps schools may generate intentional faculty experiences and collaborations if they are convinced of the pedagogical benefits.

For those interested in pursuing this deep well of experience, here are a few quick tips and suggestions:

When students with diverse learning needs are struggling in your class, use the opportunity to examine more closely both their individual challenges and the elements of your course design that may impact their learning (sociologists can think of this as a kind of pedagogical reflexivity).

Visit some of the learning resources and centers on campus and examine what they do (briefly since we all have heavy workloads) and consider this in light of your course objectives.

Consider organizing informal conversations about pedagogy with learning assistance colleagues.

Try a new strategy in a class yourself—for example, use Bloom’s taxonomy (hierarchy of learning) to make explicit to students in the syllabus how you develop their skills during the course—learning assistance professionals use these types of strategies very frequently.

Teaching Corner Author Spotlight

Jack Trammell, Ph.D., is associate professor of sociology at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He was also Director of Disability Support in the academic learning center for 15 years. He welcomes further respondents, as well as potential co-authors, and can be reached at jtrammel@rmc.edu.