



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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TEACHING IN COMMUNITY: PARTNERING FOR REFLECTION AND RENEWAL

"We become teachers for reasons of the heart. But many of us lose heart as time goes by. How can we take heart together, so we can give heart to our students, and the world—which is what good teachers do."

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

The Teaching and Learning Center took this message to heart this past year when it launched a new project entitled Teaching in Community: Partnering for Reflection and Renewal. Northern Essex Community College has made the student's learning experience the major priority of the institution. We know that the "learning community" of the classroom requires a merging of teachers, students, and subject. We know, too, that teaching can be an isolating profession with the demands on teachers' time for nonteaching activities. Often teachers encounter students who are under-prepared and distracted—working, raising families, and balancing all this with their academic work. Teachers are challenged and often experience a disconnection from colleagues. They deserve an opportunity to talk about what they do—their joys, their frustrations, their teaching, and their students.

Recognizing the importance of providing a forum for teachers to connect with colleagues, the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC), with the help of a grant from Verizon and funding from the Office of Faculty and Staff Development, became the place to house the new project. Building on the work of Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, and Steven Brookfield, *Becoming A Critically Reflective Teacher*, and adding a component of partnering in the classroom, the project began fall 1999. We wanted to provide a way to bring teachers together to participate in a critically reflective process that would include (topics Brookfield suggests) "the lens of autobiographical reflection"; "understanding how students

perceive us"; "conversations with colleagues"; and "theoretical frameworks." Drawing on Palmer's work, we integrated "the inner journey of teaching self" throughout the project.

We began our program with 11 faculty participants, representing full-time and part-time faculty from all academic areas. The project was planned and facilitated by the director of faculty and staff development, and a professor in computer information sciences. In September 1999, we held a daylong retreat to set the framework, establish ground rules, and get to know each other. We began to explore what Palmer describes as "the inner ground from which good teaching comes and the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft." During this first session, we also discussed the structure of the "partnering experience."

Group Meetings

The group met on Friday evenings once a month, and the evening always began with dinner by candlelight. The meetings were planned to address "reflective practices," to discuss the partnering experiences, and to talk about readings from the assigned books. One participant wrote of the meetings: "One of the ground rules of the meeting was to listen without making judgments, offering advice or immediately relating the speaker's experience to one of our own. What? To listen and not comfort and console, debate and emphatically agree? Could 11 teachers really do that? They did. It felt like a sanctuary to me."

Chat Line

We developed a participant chat page so that members of the group (not all on the same campus) could talk to each other regularly about their classroom experiences, pose questions, support each other, and share some good humor. The chat page was a wonderful resource for keeping the group connected in between meetings. Often a faculty member would leave a class with a question, concern, or triumph and post it immediately to the group.



Partnering in the Classroom

Faculty learn a great deal about teaching from colleagues who can provide a new and different way to think about "learning." Learning through collaboration and communication with colleagues offers faculty support and an opportunity to develop a different view of the classroom dynamic.

Faculty selected a partner (often from a different discipline). They were coached to work together in a non-evaluative manner. Partners visited each other's classrooms three times each semester. Each visit included a pre-meeting (to discuss expectations, etc.) and a post-meeting (to discuss observations and responses). The partnerships fostered a new excitement as faculty invited each other into their classrooms. Many of the faculty began to run student focus groups for their partners and reported that this was one of the most eye-opening experiences in the project. We encouraged faculty members to partner with different individuals during the year to maximize the experience. One participant wrote, "The greatest lessons have come from my teaching partners. Just having a teaching partner made me grateful. Being able to share my experiences, both good and bad, created connections I value. The project has had a greater impact on me as a teacher and as a person than I had imagined."

Final Retreat

In May 2000, the group traveled to a lake in New Hampshire for a weekend retreat to bring closure to the year's project, evaluate the program, make recommendations for next year's project, say good-bye, and compose a personal teaching mission statement. The following is the mission statement written by an English professor and chair of the department. "I teach because I love to learn and I know that learning provides physical, intellectual and spiritual pleasure. I share my best self and my best ideas with students because I believe that education can and should make us all kinder, more tolerant and nobler. Education enabled me to seek answers to the questions: 'Who am I?' and 'What is my purpose in the universe?' I feel duty bound (in the best sense) to help others formulate their own questions and begin to search for their own answers."

Judith Kamber, *Director, Faculty and Staff Development*

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AN INVITATION

For more than two decades, weekly issues of *Innovation Abstracts* have disseminated successful practices for improving college teaching and learning. College practitioners—faculty, staff, and administrators—share descriptions of their most successful techniques, strategies, initiatives, and programs in concise, quick-read articles.

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- *Style*—ideas expressed in clear, jargon-free language
- *Applicability*—potential for application in a number of areas and, preferably, easily and inexpensively implemented
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