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THE POWER OF PRACTICAL MAGIC: PERSPECTIVES FROM TEACHING EXCELLENCE AWARD RECIPIENTS

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To work magic is to weave the unseen forces into form.
—Starhawk (1979)

For the last five years, we've delved into the magical world of teaching and learning in the community college (Roueche, Milliron, & Roueche, 2003). Through focus groups, questionnaires, and interviews, we explored this often mysterious realm from the vantage point of what one participant called the "practical magician" – the community college teacher. And as this research concludes, we have come to understand the magic of teaching in a deeper way. We share the perspective that in this time of great economic, educational, and societal change (AACU, 2002; Milliron & de los Santos, 2003; Roueche, Roueche, & Johnson, 2002), profiling the power of practical magic in community colleges affirms and inspires the necessary good work of the thousands of educators who daily engage their noble profession. Moreover, this profile may help pass the torch to another generation of teachers, researchers, and leaders in the community college movement.

However, at a time when the dominant academic and educational transformation dialogue surrounds learning-centered education (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Boggs, 1996; O'Banion, 1997; O'Banion & Milliron, 2001; Wilson, 2002), why would we invest effort and expense in an arcane exercise such as conducting research on teaching? Wouldn't we be better served to bypass faculty and move on to ex-

plore new technology, interactive learning communities, and other innovations that are radically transforming the educational enterprise?

While this passionate perspective is compelling, most learning-centered advocates have labeled this teaching vs. learning debate a red herring. Many argue, and our study supports the notion, that often it is specifically the involvement of quality teachers that enables new technologies to touch students, keep learning communities going, and inspire the innovations of which we are so enamored. Indeed, great teachers have always been learning centered. We echo those who argue that we shouldn't smear these dedicated professionals with antics-with-semantics-based, teaching-centered vs. learning-centered debate. These are not the boring yellowed-note readers. These are not the people who fight change at all cost for their own self-interest. The groups that block thoughtful and useful change in education are made up not only of teachers, and their challenges have a lot more to do with a self-interest paradigm than a teaching paradigm. Great teachers are the best of allies to those who crave learning-centered reform. Great teachers are tough-minded professionals who constantly challenge themselves and their institutions to abandon and avoid programs, practice, and policy that thwart learning. In short, we have a lot to learn from the best of teachers.

With this simple truth in mind, we designed our study as a follow-up to the 1990 study of faculty, *Teaching as Leading: Profiles of Excellence in the Open-Door College* (Baker, Roueche, & Gillett-Karam, 1990). We wanted to extend this research by exploring the insights, ideas, and issues that excellence-award-recipient teachers bring forward

for the new wave of faculty slated to flood through the open doors of community colleges (Roueche, Roueche, & Johnson, 2002). To these ends, we engaged more than 230 teaching-award-recipient faculty in interactive focus

groups, used the cluster analysis results of these events to design and distribute 7,000 questionnaires nationally to teaching award recipients, and built on this qualitative and quantitative work to conduct a round of final interviews and capstone focus groups as part of the 2002 National Institute of Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) *International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence*. The complete results of this study are captured in our book *Practical Magic: On the Front Lines of Teaching Excellence*. However, here we draw on this work to begin a brief dialogue on the powers wielded by these magical teachers.

Seven Powers

Power is a tricky thing. It's drawn from all sorts of sources and can be applied in sundry ways. Of course, it is less social-scientific of us and more artistic to label the forces that drive and enable these inspiring teachers "powers." Nevertheless, the art of wielding the following seven powers seems to have a lot to do with teaching excellence.

The Power of Why

Several years ago, just a few months before the annual NISOD conference in May, the NISOD director received a letter written by an excellence award recipient. While hundreds of these letters are submitted by these dynamic teachers each year, this one stopped us in our tracks. In brief, this teacher had been informed by his doctor to get his affairs in order because, in all likelihood, he would not be alive to receive his teaching award in the coming months. He wrote to share with us how delighted he was to have received such recognition for work he felt privileged to do. Furthermore, he wrote, "Two things I know for sure at this time in my life: I would marry the same woman again, and I WOULD BE A TEACHER!"

Clarity of purpose surrounding our vocation in life is powerful and often at the heart of great teaching (Palmer, 1993; 1997; 1999; Richland, 2000). What came through

loud and clear in our study is that faculty brought a host of whys to their purpose for teaching. There was not one best why, just a power that seemed to come from a why owned by the articulator. Our faculty talked about powerful reasons for being in the teaching profession. The most commonly mentioned motivator was the deep desire to make a difference. Others talked about the many loves of their lives: love of subject, love of learning, love of people, and love of teaching. Some noted the distinct personal benefits that come with the lifestyle of a teacher, particularly for those drawn to connections with people. Others noted positive role models, family members, friends, and significant others who encouraged, enabled, and engaged them on their journeys. And still others noted negative role models who to this day drive them to create a different experience for their students. And finally, several noted a sweet sense of serendipity in finding teaching as a calling. They never expected to choose it as vocation, but life conspired to help them find their purpose!

The Power of Why is reflected in statements like these from faculty:

I'm an addicted "door opener." So many students can only see the walls; others find the door but are afraid to knock or even touch the knob. I know I can oil the locks and coach students to open the doors. Not all will walk through, but the joy of following students as they launch themselves into new worlds is addictive, indeed.

—Barbara Clinton, Highline Community College, WA

Striving for excellence in teaching is like running a race . . . The prize is knowing you made a difference in the life of a student.

—Judy Colwell, Northern Oklahoma College

I was born with chalk dust in my blood!

I have a desire to give to others that which I had never received from my teachers.

I was lured into teaching by a mentor who saw what I did not see.

Somebody needed a teacher fast – and then I found my soul!

The Power of Who

The faculty we studied were laser-focused on whom they were teaching. We heard again and again the importance of understanding the community college student popula-

tion and preparing to teach well in this context. Several faculty noted that embracing the role of community college teacher was a major transition for them, especially coming from the K-12 or university environments. Some noted that it was only through years of experience that they finally let go and learned to accept, love, and connect with students as they are – not as they might wish them to be.

Faculty discussing the Power of Who noted the importance of being student-centered, showing respect, and being enthusiastic in support of student efforts. Indeed, several noted the value of praising, celebrating, and rewarding students. Others remarked on the importance of demonstrating care and empathy by making direct contact with students, learning about their backgrounds, and understanding their worlds. Often this connection is best evidenced by engaging teaching strategies that are directly relevant, useful, and applicable to students. Others emphasized humor for making contact – particularly when the humor is directed at themselves. Most of all, they noted, we should open ourselves to our students, admit when we don't know everything, take our work seriously but ourselves lightly, let go of our ego needs, and welcome a stronger connection with the learners in our world. A number observed how arrogance of any kind is absolutely misplaced in the community college context.

Then there was one of the most difficult but powerful strategies of all: listening. The best of teachers in our study argued that often they do the most good when they're quietly listening to students. Some faculty noted the temptation to be wowed by a technique or technology in lieu of students, and therein lies the ultimate trap with these levers. Without the power of who, technique and technology often get in the way of, rather than foster, learning. Finally, in thinking about what suggestions they would give to new community college instructors, these teachers emphasized the importance of focusing first on students, embracing their contributions to the teaching and learning process, and investing the time necessary to become oriented to the community college context, in general, and their college, in particular.

The Power of Who is reflected in statements like these:

Learn about community college students right away!

Care about students, even (or especially) when they don't seem to care.

Talk with students wherever you see them; take time to let

students know how interested you are in them; actively listen to what they are saying.

Find out who your students are, then go to meet them intellectually, and lead them to the knowledge you have to share.

The Power of Belief

One of the most compelling and consistent findings across all of our focus groups involved the issue of belief: the belief that all students and teachers perform better when held to higher expectations. Without fail, the dialogue in each focus group would turn to the almost universal and fiercely held belief that community college faculty members should not lower their standards, dumb down their curricula, or alter their strategies to allow students to get by with substandard work. Moreover, they took it upon themselves not to simply teach content, but to foster better and hardier learners.

Counter to the prevailing stereotype of teaching-award recipients as popularity contest winners, these faculty were tough. One remarked that she told her classes at the beginning of each term, "In this class, you will work harder, but you will be supported more than you ever have. If you apply yourself, you can and will succeed!" Another noted that teaching to the end of mastering content is the lowest bar to which faculty should reach; the best of faculty strive to light a fire of insight and interest in students, challenging them to become better thinkers, learners, and leaders than they thought they ever could be. Others simply stated, "I don't teach a subject; I teach students!"

Our faculty argued that we should hold students to high expectations, give challenging work, strive to foster higher-level learning, foster student motivation and success skills, embrace the notion of teaching life, and set high standards for ourselves and our students. Indeed, a number of participants turned the issue of belief in high expectations inward and argued that before faculty can expect the best of students, they have to authentically give their best. Some said it directly: put forth the effort necessary to succeed, walk your talk, and model success strategies for students—or your high expectations will backfire. In short, nothing speaks as loudly about your beliefs toward yourself and students as what you *do* in the teaching and learning process.

Finally, these educators had an overriding positive outlook on their teaching roles. They had a deep belief that they could make a difference. For the most part, they were an incredibly inspiring bunch and wanted to pass

that positive outlook along to students. Some emphasized personal strategies they employed to keep this fire lit, including avoiding cynical and caustic colleagues like the plague. If attitudes are catching, these overwhelmingly positive and inspiring faculty members with their core beliefs in the importance and efficacy of their work are the folks we want to be around.

The Power of Belief is reflected in statements like these from faculty:

When I was a beginner, I thought excellence meant knowing my subject. Twenty years and 240 sections of writing later, I know that excellence is initiating unawakened minds into the joys of thinking independently. My students don't always realize my part in that, but I do.

—Sue Tomlinson, Del Mar College, TX

Recognize that with proper motivation, modeling, and coaching, any student can be successful.

You don't just teach curriculum – you teach life.

Hold your students to high standards, but encourage them along the way by building in opportunities for small successes.

Expect excellence, and encourage students to expect it of themselves.

Avoid negative and cynical faculty like the plague; their sickness can destroy your work and life.

Remain positive and focused on why you are here. It's easy to blame the school system (K-12) for your students' shortcomings. Remember, the past is the past. You are there to help them ALL succeed.

The Power of How

First-time teachers want to jump to how. Yes, the how of teaching is vital to making it work, but what is clear is that effectiveness in teaching is wrapped up in a host of other powers that enable these strategies to reach their full potential. Applying the Power of How without some clarity regarding your whys, inspection of who you're teaching, and introspection about your beliefs can lead to tragic misapplications of theory and practice. Even with this caveat, however, there are some strategies that are essential for great teachers to explore and employ.

The faculty in this study echoed and expounded on the key learning theories and teaching practices that have

been outlined in other contexts (Angelo, 1993; APA 1997; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Feldman, 1988; Roueche & Baker, 1987; Svinicki et al., 1996). They noted the importance of mastering subject matter, being organized, giving challenging work, fostering higher-level learning, communicating clearly, engaging collaborative learning, and leveraging learning resources. However, one strategy came through most forcefully from this group: actively involving students. Even in the uses of technology, the top two ranked responses on the use of technology to improve learning involved targeting student use of these tools to produce knowledge and drive their own learning experience.

And as we engage these hows, our faculty members asserted that we must constantly assess whether or not learning is happening. Faculty talked about formal testing, applications of knowledge, verbal and written feedback, nonverbal feedback, group work, and outside-of-class interactions and connections with third parties. Classroom assessment techniques (Cross & Angelo, 1988; Cross, 1998) are actively used by these faculty members as well, as are a host of other tools. Regardless of the assessment tool, another key factor in the Power of How is the corollary question: How do you know learning is going on?

The Power of How is reflected in statements like these from faculty:

Keep your intellect stimulated by reading, writing, and changing the content of the syllabus so that you stay fresh and current.

Embed the course content in rich, meaningful activities that allow students to discover their own meaning; apply the constructivist learning theory.

I adapt my methods to the objectives of each course – e.g., some courses are very project-oriented, others geared toward research, others rely on group discussion, and others use problem-solving activities. There should be no preconceived notions here.

Sometimes during the class, I ask students to stop taking notes or working in their groups and explain, in writing, exactly what they were learning, how they were learning it, and how certain they were the learning strategy was working.

The Power of Tools

The metaphor of the toolkit came up in every focus group we conducted. Great teachers love the idea of assembling an array of tools and techniques they can apply to dif-

ferent situations, based on the outcomes desired and the students in play. Arguably, the power tools of the day are found in the exciting communication and information technology arena. With this in mind, we spent a good deal of time asking these award-recipient faculty members how they use these tools and what they saw as the key issues in their application in the community college context. Hoping to get a somewhat different perspective than what is commonly offered by hyperbolic true-believers in or vendors of technology tools in education, we were not disappointed in the thoughtful and innovative perspectives they brought to bear.

Study participants used technology tools in some of the more common ways. Technology was used to enhance presentation of material, facilitate communication in and out of the classroom, enable research and reference, and reduce the burdens of course management and assessment. However, as previously noted, the most common use of technology tools was in the area of student application and production of knowledge—e.g., students creating web resources, developing PowerPoint presentations, and producing more professional-level work, in general. The second most common use of technology tools involved facilitating student-driven learning—e.g., creating tools to displace didactic instruction or to enable offline self tutoring. True to their nature, these faculty members expressed the conviction that the use of technology tools is first and foremost about student learning and involvement.

Asked about the key issues surrounding these tools, faculty opened the floodgates. They were crystal clear that technology had to be used in some ways because the use of communication and information technology had become a basic skill that students needed. Moreover, used well, it could make teaching and learning more engaging, facilitate different kinds of learning, and give students more control of their learning. However, they cautioned, technology still requires a good deal of time and training to use well, can rob needed dollars from other educational interventions, and is often an unstable partner, as hardware and software fail far too often. In addition, technology use is complicated by those who are tempted to use it for the novelty, not the utility; unequal faculty and student access to technology resources; and the general fear, resistance, and true believerisms that often keep thoughtful technology dialogues off target. Most importantly, however, these faculty members

wanted to impart the desperate need to keep the human touch, to maintain the focus on students as people, not as transactions or web customers.

As reported in an earlier monograph based on these study

findings (Milliron & Miles, 1998), the data surrounding technology use formed a sort of TLC framework: Use the Technology tools available to best facilitate Learning, while maintaining the needed focus on Community. Moreover, a core admonition that came from discussions on tools and techniques surrounded the term “when used well.” Several faculty noted the false comparisons of collaborative learning vs. lecture methods, online learning vs. in-class methods, and so on. The hard truth is that in each comparison, the mix of variables is often so complex that coming to some conclusion about the best method is almost impossible. The simple fact is that teaching and learning excellence is a matter of using tools and techniques well, applying them properly to each learning context.

The Power of Tools is reflected in statements like these from faculty:

The future is upon us. Every house will be connected in the next five to ten years. Students, for employment in the future, will need to be technologically competent.

Technology opens up opportunities to bring real-time examples into the classroom.

Too many instructors try to use technology for the sake of using technology. If it will not enhance learning, don't use it. Students can be dazzled by the method and ignore the content.

Students excited about technology may have frustrations because instructors are behind the times.

The Power of And

Beware the tyranny of the one best way. This statement builds on the final point of the last section and summarizes well a common faculty refrain throughout this study. To be certain, faculty had strong feelings about how they engaged the teaching and learning process. However, the more veteran faculty, in particular, were quick to note the need for flexibility because of diversity

of student populations, faculty characteristics, and desired learning outcomes.

Our faculty made such recommendations as: use a variety of methods, be flexible, take risks, be creative, facilitate different kinds of learning, and explore and use a range of teaching techniques. Moreover, they noted the need for balance: balance in high tech/high touch strategies, high standards/strong support beliefs, and high personal expectations/quality of personal life issues. One put it very simply: “In community college teaching, flexibility is a must!”

While lists abound with teaching tips and strategies, these faculty members reminded us to avoid being too much of a true believer or caustic cynic; they modeled the value of the reasoned center of the debate. They were willing to try new things *and* were tough-minded in their approaches to assessing effectiveness. They were willing to flexibly meet students where they are *and* were unrelenting in their belief that all students can and should learn. *And* is a powerful word for the practical magician.

The Power of And is reflected in statements like these from faculty:

*Teaching isn't rocket science — it's much **harder** than that!*

Be creative; take chances with your approaches to teaching and encourage students to be creative in their approaches to their assignments.

Convey information in a variety of ways to maximize “hitting” the learning styles of all students.

Steal — yes, steal, if you must — good materials and styles.

Trust your own instincts in the classroom; use instructional techniques that work for YOU, but be willing to experiment when students don't respond.

The Power of Passing It On

The Power of Passing It On relates to the issues of lifelong learning, legacies, and honoring the past as you move to the future. Faculty members in our study spent time talking about advice they would give to a new community college instructor. Moreover, they reflected on how

they reached out to more seasoned faculty to learn the ropes. From either perspective, there is power in being committed to Passing It On.

Faculty recommended that new teachers embrace many of the admonitions from the previous sections—in particular, the focus on the community college student. In addition, they implored new teachers to find mentors or peers who challenged them to grow and develop as teaching professionals. Many recounted stories revealing how proficient they were in their discipline, but that it was only in the last few years they had come to understand the art of instruction. They also talked about valuing the intrinsic rewards of the job, the special times along the many learning journeys.

Several faculty members noted their concern that a new generation of faculty might not share their embrace of the community college context; their commitment to the values of open-access, high-quality education; and their dogged determination to try whatever works, whenever, wherever. They were passionate about this topic and, at times, quite emotional. Many of these folks have dedicated three, four, or five decades to teaching and reaching students. Passing It On is a big deal to them. It's a big deal to us. It's one of the key reasons we conducted the *Practical Magic* study in the first place.

This point was brought home at the close of one our first focus groups. After the group's lively dialogue about teaching excellence and the larger purposes of our study, a community college teacher came to the front of the room and captured our attention. He held a stare long enough to quiet the post-session buzz at the front of the room. He then offered *his* closing thought:

Get this right. Teaching our students is a noble profession, and we need to pass that feeling on.

That moment stays with us: it captured the spirit of common purpose, the unique styles, and the sense of higher calling as described and demonstrated by the faculty we studied.

The Power of Passing It On is reflected in statements like these from faculty:

Select a mentor who will actively help you understand how to grow as a teacher and thrive in a department and college — one

who will encourage and challenge you to do your best.

Get to know the doers in the college; you don't need the talkers.

There will always be days, even after years of experience, where it just doesn't go right. Think of the less-than-wonderful as a humbling experience, then believe in yourself again, and get ready for the next cloud.

Don't expect to get RICH in the material way, but DO expect a GREAT and exciting life.

Fall in love with your job; you have chosen the best profession in the world.

Wielding the Power of a Practical Magician

As we take on the challenges of the coming years and wrestle with ever-shrinking funding, quickly changing technology, radically different social issues, and an increasingly complex and connected world, we need all the power we can muster. But those who take on the special challenge of teaching in a community college deserve honor for the challenges they embrace with great effort and good spirit.

From the perspective of those honored for their work in teaching and reaching community college students, there is power to be had for those willing to wield it. There is power in understanding why we teach; focusing on who our students are; believing that all students *and teachers* can learn; leveraging different techniques to bring learning to life; thoughtfully using the latest and greatest tools; maintaining the flexibility necessary to deftly apply what's needed at the right time and to continue our own professional growth; and playing a part in passing the teaching torch from generation to generation as the community college movement continues. We couldn't agree more.

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