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Building a Culture of Collegiality through Transformative Faculty Support

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Extended Abstract

Key Words: Faculty support, Critical reflection, Collegial communities, Care ethics, Disrupting academic boundaries

Portland State University's (PSU) motto *Let Knowledge Serve the City* identifies a key piece of the University's DNA as a community-engaged institution. As educators in PSU's signature general education program, University Studies, we work intentionally as colleagues to catalyze transformative teaching and learning to build--with our students--a just world.

In AY 2016-17, through an iterative process involving faculty, administrators, staff, and students, University Studies adopted vision and mission statements to reflect and ground our efforts:

Vision: Challenging us to think holistically, care deeply, and engage courageously in imagining and co-creating a just world.

Mission: University Studies' inclusive pedagogy

- provokes students to build self-efficacy through relational learning across difference;
- encourages a community of educators to practice engaged teaching for transformative learning; and
- advances civic engagement, reflective practice, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Following the development of this programmatic vision and mission, we co-created a teaching ethos in AY 2017-18 to identify UNST's pedagogical beliefs, commitments, and practices. This statement, which will be formally adopted for use next academic year and is undergoing final wordsmithing as of this writing, currently reads as follows:

Planting seeds, sharing power, and facilitating learning,
the instructor is the quietest student in the room,

How we teach is what we teach.

In community

we outlove and outlast discrimination and privilege
through inquiry, equity, empowerment, and respect.

We are co-creating
connecting
caring

collaborating
and building relationships.

Who the student IS
—their heart mind body experience identity culture—
matters.

With mentors, invited to participate, offered compassion
—being seen, known, and honored—
students experience belonging and inclusion in a learning community
in which their voice is present, skills are built, and emergent knowledge is produced.
We make classroom expectations clear and consistent
so that students have choice and control
and enough physical and emotional safety to deeply engage
race, class, gender, social identities and power.

So empowered, we become aware and,
through discomfort and by epiphany,
discover that we can do what we thought we couldn't.

We support each other.
We make consequential choices together.

Our worlds transform.

The values-driven programmatic stand that these statements point towards reflects the commitment and care with which UNST educators--faculty, administrators, and staff--conduct their work. As we practice enacting this commitment with our students, we may well feel overwhelmed, uncertain, and in need of support in navigating this terrain. Because our faculty is teaching around weighty, consequential issues, we've developed strategies for building community through faculty support offerings that allow us to do our own internal work. These offerings provide both a foundation for facilitating transformative experiences for students and a reward for doing so in both material and interpersonal ways.

UNST's faculty support processes, and the structures built to support and sustain them, follow directly from foundational principles in transformative learning theory, starting with Mezirow's (2000) insights about learning as elaborating existing frames of reference, providing context for the learning of new frames of reference, transforming perspectives, and transforming habits of mind. Additionally, Mezirow's theory of "disorienting dilemmas" as catalysts for transformation aligns with the experience of teaching and learning within UNST, in that faculty, socialized within the program to provide mutual support and collegial care, often turn to each other in times of breakdown--whether that's a challenge that arises from navigating difficult moments in the classroom or making sense and meaning, with students and in the larger institutional context, of disruptive social and political events. These particular types of disorienting dilemmas draw colleagues together in University Studies and become the ground upon which we engage in mutually-beneficial professional learning and growth.

Additionally, as revealed in the vision and mission statements above, UNST names “critical reflection” as a key component of effective faculty (and student) practice. As argued by a number of scholars of transformative learning and its relationship to faculty development [e.g., Cranton (1996), Kegan (2000), and Whitelaw, Sears & Campbell (2004)], critical reflection is necessary for an interrogation of one’s fundamental beliefs, organizing frames, affective responses, and behavioral choices such that new ways of thinking, feeling, and doing may result. UNST’s faculty support initiatives (such as, for example, “Engaging Whiteness for Racial Justice” and “Cultivating Your Professional Identity,” two programs from AY 2017-18) always include critical reflection, experienced both on the individual level and within collegial groups. University Studies is composed of individuals from a variety of ranks, including adjunct instructors, full-time non-tenure-track instructors, and tenure-related faculty. Additionally, faculty teaching in the program are often positioned both in University Studies and in other academic units. To disrupt the formal structure of rank hierarchy in higher education, our faculty support efforts invite educators of all ranks to build community in spaces that prioritize reflective practice and vulnerability over hard skills development.

In this experiential workshop, we share generative approaches from two faculty support programs hosted by University Studies and on offer to all faculty teaching courses within the program. Both activities will bring to life and model application strategies for theories of transformative teaching and learning rooted in collegiality and an ethic of care:

- A facilitated group reading and discussion of the poem “Cargo” by Greg Kimura, based on a method employed in the retreat “The Art of Teaching: Working from the Inside Out.” These “Circle of Trust” retreats, a four-part series for professional renewal rooted in the work of Parker Palmer, use a variety of reflective practices to nurture integrity, authenticity, and courage in our professional practice.
- An experiential activity based on techniques from the Theatre of the Oppressed model of popular education (Boal, 1992).

In and through these formal faculty support venues--as well as the uncountable informal interactions that we encourage between and among faculty--lies our bedrock belief that transformative learning and teaching is *always* relational. We know that faculty cannot successfully and sustainably teach in ways that catalyze students’ transformative learning without themselves experiencing the community connections that allow us to stay awake and alive, to be seen and be known, and to support and to receive support, in that work. We know how lonely it can be to teach and lead for personal, communal, and global resistance for change, and how necessary comrades are to keep us connected and energized in that struggle. Centering our program’s faculty support efforts in caring, relational encounters that reward vulnerability and risk-taking with learning, growth, and professional intimacy has led to the formation of a dynamic collection of practitioners making community--and making change--inside and outside the University’s walls. With this session, we aim to share our successes and our challenges, to invite participants to share their own, and to co-inspire each other going forward.

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