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Taking College Teaching Seriously: Pedagogy Matters!

By Gail O. Mellow, Diana D. Woolis, Marisa Klages-Bombich, and Susan G. Restler

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In *Taking College Teaching Seriously: Pedagogy Matters!*, Gail O. Mellow, Diana D. Woolis, Marisa Klages-Bombich, and Susan G. Restler (2015) describe a research project that ultimately resulted in what they call *the pedagogy matters practice improvement model*. The project was a response to what the authors felt was an urgent need to react to the crises in community colleges in the United States. According to Mellow et al., community colleges are the least funded entity in higher education and educate the most low-income and at-risk students, often students of color (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). Consequently, the authors believe there are two critical issues: 1) students who are poor oftentimes have had an insufficient high school educational experience and are then placed in developmental [remedial] courses, and 2) lack of funding has resulted in community colleges hiring adjuncts to teach these developmental courses without “sufficient professional support to craft effective teaching strategies for this very complex student population” (p. 12). These realities have resulted in poor educational experiences and outcomes for students. Based on these dire issues, the authors argue, “We believe the time is right and the need is compelling to increase our return on the human capital assets of systems of higher education in the United States by focusing intensely on supporting faculty in improving their personal pedagogical skills” (p. 13).

Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the original project, initially called Global Skills for College Completion (GSCC), sought to have the leaders of GSCC work with highly competent community college instructors from across the United States. Using specific tools of technology, the aim was to “document and analyze the pedagogical practices of these exceptional faculty and at the same time help them reach two more students in their classes” (Mellow, et al., p. 14).

The result of this work came to be known as the *pedagogy matters practice improvement model*, described as a set of “tools and routines that focus on supporting faculty in improving their teaching” (Mellow et al., p. 14). Two cohorts were involved in the project. The first cohort brought 12 English instructors and 12 math instructors from 18 different community colleges from across the country together. The primary investigators were Gail Mellow, president of LaGuardia Community College (LaGCC) and Diana Woolis, one of the founding members of Knowledge in the Public Interest and currently Director of the Center for Learning in Practice. Mellow and her team were the content experts and managed the project. Woolis and her team developed the strategy of the online program. They also offered any needed technological support and managed online faculty communication.

The participating faculty chose one of their developmental (remedial) classes for the project and documented their teaching through an online journal, a videography of their teaching, selected student artifacts, written reflections on good and poor educational encounters, and regular

interactions with other participating faculty online about pedagogical practices. The faculty in Cohort 1 were nominated by their community college presidents; they were considered in large part because of the high passing grades of their students. The project became a prototype for a second cohort comprised of another 24 faculty members, this time, however, a quarter of these participants were adjuncts and had a record of average pass rates of their students. Four faculty members from Cohort 1 served as online coaches, taking over the responsibilities of the previous team leaders.

The authors concluded after the cohorts ended that, "Changes in student achievement in both cohorts [were] promising, affecting retention (keeping a student through an entire semester) and [there were] pass rates with differences ranging from 4% to 8% improvement" (Mellow, et al., p. 17). Although it was a small sample, they were particularly encouraged by the improvement, albeit slight, of students who were taught by adjunct professors in Cohort 2.

The Pedagogy Matters Practice Improvement Model

In their introduction, the authors claim that higher education has not invested time in examining or improving the practice of post-secondary teaching. One reason for this has been the pervasive belief in faculty independence. As the authors note, "Faculty independence and autonomy sustain a closed-door orientation in classroom teaching, with faculty possessing a keen sense of ownership over their teaching methods and materials" (Mellow, et al., p. 3). For example, Tagg (2012) argued that in general, college faculty tended to avoid participating in university-sponsored projects, especially those that focus on teaching.

This is not to say that Mellow et al. (2015) claim that effective college teaching has been ignored in the literature. Indeed, they mention the seminal work of Chickering and Gamson's (1991) "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," which they argue still influences current research on college teaching. These principles include the importance of regular communication between students and professors, lessons that emphasize collaboration, problem-solving, and demonstrations.

Chapter 1, "The Contours of Practice Improvement," begins the book with contextual information, as the authors recount their realization of the challenges that existed as faculty participated in collaborative work requiring reflective practice and the possibility of acquiring new pedagogical approaches. Since these were adult learners, the authors drew upon the concept of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where learning "takes place in the same context in which it is applied" (p. 21). They also included the work of Donald Schon from his book, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983) in order to assist faculty members in reflecting on their teaching in real-time, after the educational encounters with their students. Carol Rodgers' (2002) work on reflection was another organizing theory. The reflective process and the communal dialogue among faculty members involved with the pedagogy project aligned well with Rodger's thinking, since her belief was that reflection is a communal activity that promotes personal and intellectual growth among all involved in the process.

The authors then describe the role computational social science had on the project. This science allows researchers to gather data on the interactions between faculty members and students. The

authors term it an "instrument-based science," where the instruments "take the form of computer systems that interrogate large data sets using algorithms to detect patterns and represent them visually" (Mellow et al., 2015, p. 23). This technology offers a way to quantify teaching practice by providing graphic patterns that could offer insight to instructors about instructional practice and student learning.

Lastly, the research project was guided by the goal of fostering communities of practice. This type of community "is designed to provide interaction, problem-solving, and resource sharing, thereby enabling the participants to advance their understanding of a topic and incorporate the new knowledge into their work" (Mellow, et al., p. 24). It also provided the opportunity for professors to share ideas and experiences about teaching through their online communication. Indeed, the authors made the point that essentially the communities of practice model was really considered a model of "online communities of practice." These created a communal identity, developed procedures for participation, and retained an accessible way to have an exchange of ideas concerning pedagogy. The authors' faith in the positive uses of technology for professional growth and valuable learning encounters is supported by Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (2005) who, as adult learning theorists, write that "Technology presents bold new opportunities for providing adults with rich learning experiences in the andragogical [adult learning] tradition" (p. 237).

In Chapter 2, the authors discuss essential features that are necessary for the pedagogy practice improvement model to be successful, and, to some extent, for improving teaching in higher education in general. These features include a faculty committed to professional improvement and a focus on improving one's teaching during the actual work. For the model, other essential features include aggregating data on any improvement and presenting this data visually, as well as leveraging social interaction among participating professionals that consists of adapting and sharing ideas and collaborative problem solving (Mellow et al., 2015, p. 37).

Mellow et al. then describe the step-by-step process (or routines) of the pedagogy model in Chapter 3. The first routine consists of individual professors using an electronic platform called Classroom Notebooks to post their profiles, document lessons, and share their teaching experiences. All reflections and comments from faculty and work examples from students who agreed to participate were collected digitally, providing data to the professors and the researchers that could aid in achieving insights about pedagogy and student achievement. The authors included informative illustrations of professors offering their experiences in the classroom. The following is an example from a mathematics professor at St. Charles Community College in Missouri who adopted the flipped classroom model of instruction. She wrote:

> After my frustration last semester of trying to do in two hours what other classes had four to do, I feel like I have found a way to make it work—have the students put in the other two hours at home. While I have explained that expectation before, I had not given the students a specific way to invest those two hours. (p. 42)

The second routine was an instructor's use of "highlighting" and "tagging." The instructors used a technological tool that operated like a highlighter to identify and document noteworthy information concerning his or her teaching. Mellow et al. found that instructors became more intentional and reflective in their teaching when they used highlighting. Other instructors would

then tag or annotate the highlighted text. These tags were seen as "knowledge labels," which created an organized system for analyzing teaching. The following is an example offered of both highlighting and tagging.

> *Text highlighted*: I noted all his classmates that would be willing to help him. I also conveyed my expectation that he finish what he started! The other students were fantastic. Several worked together to help Stephan finish perfectly. Tagged as *Community Building*. (p. 52)

The third routine addressed the social interaction of the model. Two other instructors in the same discipline would read and analyze the original instructor's artifacts, offering comments and opportunities for discussion in a specific domain of Classroom Notebooks. As the authors noted, discussing one's teaching with peers addressed instructional practice and kindled "reflection and action by the reviewers and those reviewed" (p. 55). Every three weeks all participants came together online to discuss various topics related to college teaching. Specific questions were asked about the fruitfulness of peers' comments and teaching practices, and anything else that was perceived as new or innovative.

In Chapter 4, the authors describe how peer coaches (faculty from Cohort 1) were available to assist the professors in using the program effectively and helped engender risk-taking and high standards in teaching throughout the dialogic cycle. The coaches would often initiate what was called a "Jam session": an asynchronous, structured online dialogue that was of particular interest to faculty. In addition, the authors and participants worked with a "community manager," the head administrator for this project, who created relationships with faculty, helped with technical issues, monitored the digital dialogue, and managed the peer coaches and the time line for the assigned activities.

Mellow et al. note that using digital tools in the pedagogy model project was received positively by the participating instructors, and the authors documented several examples of feedback. Here is one example posted in Classroom Notebooks from a mathematics professor at Hudson Community College in New Jersey:

> I think the continual self-evaluation and reflection allowed us to work together to brainstorm improvements and positive tweaks to be more purposeful in our classrooms as opposed to just randomly teaching in the dark for ideas and techniques in hope of success (p. 95).

Based on this anecdotal data, the authors concluded they were indeed developing new ways to use technology to assist faculty in enhancing their pedagogy. Moreover, they came away with some key understandings concerning the attitudes of faculty after fully experiencing and analyzing the model. For instance, in Chapter 5, the authors maintain faculty must appreciate collaborating with colleagues about pedagogy. They must also "be open to and value the guidance and support of peers as they experiment with improving their practice" (p. 79). However, valuing support from peers did not mean positioning each other as "experts" in teaching, or mean that participants could tell their peers how to teach; that would likely conflict with the highly individualistic nature of teaching and minimize the expertise each instructor

possessed. In other words, taking what the authors call a "critical stance" or explaining the "correct" way to teach was not an accepted activity. Participants also had a positive view of "tags" as a way to create dialogue about pedagogy; it seemed that the tagging would "ground the collaborative analysis in sufficient detail to provoke deep thinking about what is working and why" (p. 88). If patterns were discovered based on a given instructor's set of tags, he or she could then develop and refine goals and objectives that could enhance personal teaching and learning.

The reader will find in Chapter 6, the last chapter, a "call to action" for those in higher education to realize that in a digital, interconnected world, there needs to be "thinkers, creators and high-functioning doers" (p. 89). Consequently, according to the Mellow et al., it is an obligation on the part of college instructors to continue to improve their craft and participate in professional development that tracks success through metrics and aggregated data that can be observed and understood. While the authors do not directly discuss how their specific model can be duplicated, they do discuss the need for teaching improvement in higher education by ending the chapter with a *Pedagogy Matters!* manifesto, which champions student achievement and faculty voices that encourage creativity and innovation. It also calls for instructors to "investigate through evidentiary means the success of our activities in the classroom and share the results of this assessment" (p. 101).

Critique

This book also dealt successfully with the current state of college instruction. The authors rightly assert that the exacerbation of a culture of faculty independence and autonomy has stymied concerted efforts to reflect on and improve instructional practice. In apprising readers of their research project's foundation of adult learning and reflection, the authors do well to cite the theoretical works of Rodgers (2002) and Schon (1987), key thinkers on reflective practice. There is a thorough explanation of the progressions of this model with the presentation of a clear, step-by-step process for the use of Classroom Notebooks for collecting artifacts and documenting lessons. Readers will also find many revealing figures that, for example, describe the process of the model, illustrate an instructor's profile in Classroom Notebooks, provide examples of the tagging created by the participating faculty, and present the contributing factors that led to student achievement through Jam sessions. Additionally, there are examples of instructors' observations, reflections, and personal evaluations, which focus on topics such as the challenges many community college students are facing, the content of classroom lessons, great teaching moments, and fruitful discussions between faculty members about pedagogy, highlighted throughout the book. Faculty who are interested in learning more about how they can successfully use an online community to teach their students will benefit from the specific descriptions of the model's procedures found in Chapter 3.

In this publication, the authors present a rich literature review; the information is easily understandable and straightforward. While a great deal of the book is expository, readers will sense in the authors a willingness to entertain further questions and ideas about pedagogy in higher education, implying that this research project is the beginning of a journey to investigate the essential qualities of college teaching that can ultimately improve student achievement. Indeed, readers will find the sincerity of the authors' ideas on education well-articulated in the

last chapter. For instance, the authors advance their advocacy regarding college teaching by asking:

> What if we did take college teaching seriously? What if we aligned processes, support systems, and the affordances of technology to help college faculty improve their practice as we do with medical doctors or architects? What if we acknowledge that good college teaching is not innately or exclusively tied to deep content knowledge but, rather, wedded as well to a fluency in the dynamics of who is taught and how the teaching is done? What if we had a clear system of practice competency that delineated a path from apprentice to journeyman to master, as we do for intern to resident to attending physician? (p. 91)

The authors do well to ask these open-ended questions in their mission to challenge conventional ideas on college teaching and learning that focus on autonomy and subject-matter expertise. Indeed, open-ended questions provide opportunities for limitless responses and thoughtful answers (Knight, 2016). In particular, the exploration of not just the content, but the nexus of teaching based on who the students are and how the teaching is done, reflects a 21st century view of education (Doyle, 2008; Wright, 2011; Zhao, 2009). For instance, the authors recognize both that the knowledge college instructors must convey today is “greater in volume and complexity” (Mellow et al., 2015, p. 92) than ever before, and that the skills their students must have must be more analytical in nature. Hence, today’s challenge will be ensuring that college instructors possess both content and teaching skills.

Readers will also learn that the pedagogy model harnessed technology, particularly through Jam sessions, tagging and highlighting, and Classroom Notebooks. Earlier in the book, the authors comment that online communities allow for people in various places to regularly communicate over a length of time, asserting, “Technology applications, such as the one integrated into the pedagogy matters practice improvement model, are harbingers of a capability that can ignite a true revolution in the art and science of college teaching” (Mellow, et al., p. 91).

In the final analysis, participating community college teachers learned how communicating online about teaching successes and failures assists in improving instruction and student achievement. As Mellow et al. reflect:

> The pedagogy matters practice improvement model is a first iteration of a system that defines and can generate pedagogic data and, thus, makes possible analyses that can inform practice. The design of the model rests on three critical elements to meet this analytic ambition: combining social media with social learning, using patterns derived from data to reveal insights, and structuring learning experiences in an online community (p. 95).

This book would primarily be helpful to faculty who are specifically involved in an online network and have experience with educational technology and research. It should be noted, however, that the book, especially in Chapter 1, reinforces the need for reflection as an essential practice, and there is nothing preventing readers from implementing such professional development at their institution, provided this institution is willing to fund it. Moreover, the various comments about the positive and negative experiences of teaching and student achievement from faculty members can always be helpful.

It is clear that the authors have great passion for researching and improving community college teaching and helping struggling community college students in developmental courses. Their advocacy concerning the importance of technology in education and its capacity to foster and inform the work of teachers and consequently student achievement is to be admired. Overall, *Taking College Teaching Seriously: Pedagogy Matters!* is an insightful, data-driven publication offering real-world advice on the college teaching experience. The book rightly reminds those in higher education of the importance of pedagogy and its impact on today's community college students.

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