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Creating a Community of Learners Among College Faculty Through the Use of Reflective Practice

Cheryl M. Jorgensen, Joseph J. Onosko & Cate Weir, New Hampshire

“I have a student in my class who came with a generic list of “accommodations” that I’m supposed to provide. It seems pretty sketchy. Are there some things I ought to know in order to best meet this student’s needs?”

“The students in my large intro class fall asleep, turn in poor work, and seem disinterested in the material. I know I should be doing something other than lecturing, but how can I make the class more engaging while still covering all the material I need to?”

“I have my students do a group project at the end of the semester. Would rubrics be a way to assess each student’s contribution to that project and have them evaluate one another’s work as well?”

These questions probably sound

familiar. You might think we heard them in the faculty lounge of our high school, but we didn’t. These are the kinds of questions that seven faculty members wrestled with during their first year as members of a “Reflective Practice Group” (RP) at the University of New Hampshire, one of four New Hampshire higher education institutions that participated in a project called “Equity and Excellence in Higher Education,” that supporting faculty efforts to restructure their teaching practices to improve post-secondary outcomes for diverse students.

Today’s college students represent greater diversity than ever before: some are just out of high school, some took a few years off to work, some represent linguistic and cultural diversity, and others are making mid-life

career changes. All of our students have ‘special needs’ and we’re determined to learn how to meet them. The structured and unstructured conversations that faculty had in their RP groups was one strategy used to meet these needs for the ultimate purpose of improving student learning and performance.

A member of an RP group may want suggestions and feedback about the design of a course syllabus, a teaching strategy, course materials, the best use of technology, a design for an experiment, ideas for an end-of-course final project, or strategies to support a student with particularly challenging learning needs. She may want to look at the work that students produce and ask the question “Did they learn what I think I taught?”

Dr. Meg Peterson, a faculty member in the English Department at

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NSRF and the First Amendment Schools

JoAnn Groh, Tucson, Arizona

Representatives from eleven schools used NSRF practices to collaboratively think about their action plans as part of the First Amendment School Initiative, a multiyear reform effort sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the First Amendment Center. Meeting in Washington D.C., this July, administrators, teachers, parents and students were asked to work towards creating schools in which students could learn and practice the civic habits necessary to sustain a free and democratic society. Participants welcomed the opportunity to use the Tuning Protocol as a tool to facilitate cross group conversations and learning. Many praised the mini-CFG training workshop and follow-up sessions as a high point in the three day meeting.

First Amendment Schools are schools which strive to enact the following four guiding principles:

- 1 - to create laboratories of democratic freedom in which students have ample opportunity to practice democracy;
- 2 - to commit to inalienable rights and civic responsibility especially those



- rights listed in the First Amendment;
- 3 - to include all stake holders to work towards the common good in schools and communities; and
- 4 - to translate civic education into community engagement encouraging students to become active participants in public life.

Harmony School was picked as one of the first eleven schools. The other chosen sites represent a diverse cross section of America including

elementary, middle and high schools; public, independent and charter schools and rural, urban and suburban schools.

A follow-up meeting is planned for next summer so participants will have a chance to learn from each others’ experiences. In the meantime, schools will be involved in electronic conversations and there may be some cross school visitations. As their facilitator, I was impressed with their ambitious action plans. The rumor is that they want to use the Consultancy Protocol next time. ❖

For more information about this exciting new project, go to <http://webserver2.ascd.org/web/firstamendment/FLASHINTRO.cfm>.

JoAnn Groh teaches at Catalina Foothills High School in Tucson and is a long-time CFG coach. Contact her at jo@fc.cfsd.k12.az.us

And Now a Few Words with the Author...

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have grown.

Our current principal, Ted Hall asks the question, “What happens to voice when you get big?” We are currently moving to a small learning community structure so that community meetings will be small enough to allow for the thinking, rethinking and messy thinking that ensures all voices are heard.

How are students grouped at your school?

Our classes are heterogeneous and inclusive. We believe that heterogeneity is both authentic and rigorous. Having said that, we mobilize the material and staff needed to support the training of a diverse group of learners. Our organization teaches students the art and craft of self-advocacy.

One clear example of our support for heterogeneity is our teacher to student ratio. None of us teaches more than eighty students. If I did teach more than eighty kids, we’d read less, write less, etc. In smaller classes I can encourage everyone’s voice, everyone’s potential to publish. In a large class I would encourage Jennifer, but I wouldn’t be able to give Kathleen the extra support she needed to experience success.

What assessments do you use at Souhegan?

All tenth graders take the state

tests and we’re required to meet all the state benchmarks, but New Hampshire doesn’t have a large state bureaucracy and the tests aren’t our only measure of student achievement. We honor testing as one form of data. We’ve been working with the University of Wisconsin on multiple forms of assessment. However, the best measure of our students is our ability to know them well and mobilize the structures and resources they need to meet the standards and experience success. The proof is in our students’ willingness to stick around and graduate. They decide to finish both their course work and their exit projects even though it sometimes means working through the summer and graduating in August.

About a half dozen of our students have needed extra time and taken it.

Describe your advisory program.

At Souhegan we are committed to holistic education and our advisory program plays a strong role in our personalized approach to our students. “We believe that the presence of caring adults in students’ lives leads to their greater success.” Our advisories meet every day and are made up of ten to twelve students and an advisor. The advisor acts as an advocate and primary contact person at the school for all four of the student’s years with us. Our mission states that we’re

going to “challenge and expand the comfortable limits of thought, tolerance and performance.” At Souhegan we want our students to use their “minds and hearts” well both in and out of school. Advisory provides one critical context for the implementation of our mission.

Tell us about your greatest hope and your greatest fear in this next period.

Actually, they’re the same thing. I’m concerned with our rapid growth and while I’m hopeful about our ability to grow and restructure, I’m afraid at the same time. We won’t have the luxury of a grace period for reflection and planning this time. This time, school is in session and we’ll be meeting at the end of the day. I wonder how we’ll take the time for storytelling, how we’ll make space for all our voices after teaching 1000 kids all day. I hope we haven’t exceeded our capacity to honor what we hold sacred.

Anything else you’d like to tell our readers?

I’d like everyone who reads the book to know that it’s really the product of sixty-five teachers and thirty-five students who all read drafts, weighed in, and added their voices to the finished product. ❖

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Creating a Community of Learners...

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Plymouth State College who is part of two RP groups at her college, praised the RP process. “The hour that I spend in my RP group is one of the most productive of my whole week. After 10 years here at Plymouth, I have learned to stay away from those activities that sap my energy...RP re-energizes me. Not only do I see tangible results in my students’ work, but participation in these groups has changed the way I think about my teaching.” Reflective practice has the potential to improve instruction, increase col-

laboration among faculty, and promote great success among the increasingly diverse students enrolled in college today.

Reflection and collaboration help unlock the mysteries of teaching and learning whether your students are in kindergarten or the first year of college. ❖

The authors coordinate the “Equity and Excellence in Higher Education Project”. For more information about the project, visit their website—

<http://iod.unh.edu/EE>.

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