**Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration Encourages Conversations About Teaching**

October 26, 2017

**Talking Teaching with Colleagues**

About 10 years ago, the College of the Holy Cross started a program for freshmen that combined themed interdisciplinary learning with living-learning communities. Such programs have become increasingly common because they can engage students and foster relationships between them and faculty members. But at Holy Cross, the program, called [Montserrat](https://www.holycross.edu/holy-cross-approach/montserrat), also enabled something to happen that was unforeseen: It gave professors from different disciplines a way to talk with one another about teaching.

“It has really changed the way faculty on campus approach teaching, especially in regards to the collaboration across disciplines,” Stephanie Yuhl, director of Montserrat and a professor of history, said in an email to us. “Faculty have the freedom to experiment in these seminars, and it has also trickled into departmental teaching.”

This unforeseen dynamic can be fairly common. Discussions about teaching are often confined to the department level. But it’s only when there’s an effort to, say, reconsider [grading](http://www.chronicle.com/article/What-s-in-a-Grade-It/240768?cid=tn) practices across an institution that faculty members are put in conversation with one another. Similar things have happened when a college developed a portion of a new curriculum to emphasize the use of [evidence](http://www.chronicle.com/article/If-Skills-Are-the-New-Canon/235948?cid=tn) as seen from different disciplinary perspectives, or when a university made [millions of dollars](http://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Big-Money-Can-Encourage/150747?cid=tn) available to faculty members as an incentive to experiment with their teaching.

For faculty members, it is this dialogue about teaching that is often the most meaningful takeaway from these efforts. The "chance to sit with colleagues in a structured way every so often," an administrator once told me, is "something that faculty in general long for."

The experience of learning from colleagues often reminds faculty members what it’s like to be a student again, as they learn about one another’s areas of expertise and see their own through fresh eyes.

Scott Malia, an assistant professor of theater at Holy Cross, says that one reward of participating in Montserrat is not just that it put him in close collaboration with his colleagues. “I came back to my department teaching with different techniques to apply to familiar material,” he said, “and a desire to reassess the content itself."

Have you experienced something like this at your institution? What are some ways that you have found to foster dialogue about teaching across departments? Email me at dan.berrett@chronicle.com and it might be included in a future newsletter.

**Innovative Teachers**

Earlier this week, *The Chronicle* shared profiles of 10 [teaching innovators](http://www.chronicle.com/specialreport/Innovators-10-Classroom/156?cid=tn) whose work might inspire you to try new things in the classroom. Here are two of them:

* [Ariel Anbar](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Ariel-Anbar-Designs-Online/241480?cid=tn), a professor in the School of Earth and Space and Exploration at Arizona State University, has designed interactive online science courses aimed at students who aren’t majors. One sentiment Mr. Anbar expressed to our Beth McMurtrie stuck out: Although he had won a teaching award earlier in his career, he still felt like his general-chemistry course was a "dismal learning experience." This restlessness and desire to keep improving at teaching is something that very good professors often [talk](http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Making-of-a-Teaching/236706?cid=tn) about.
* [Dahpon Ho](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Dahpon-Ho-Brings-History-Alive/241491?cid=tn), an assistant professor of history at the U. of Rochester, uses role-playing and immersive techniques to bring history alive for his students. One course, on the Korean War, was so full of role-playing and props that his teaching assistant felt daunted about even teaching it with him. Immersive role-play has the potential to engage the mind and emotions at the same time, which is one reason why such [methods](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Mob-Rule-Political-Intrigue/132767?cid=tn), like [Reacting to the Past](https://reacting.barnard.edu/), have grown in popularity in recent years.

**Outside the Office**

Sure, the word “office” is right there in the name. But who says office hours have to be held in an office? Last week, we [asked](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Teaching-Newsletter-Making-It/241495) what you’ve done to make office hours more effective. A couple of the responses described meeting with students in alternative locations.

John Rasp, an associate professor of statistics at Stetson University, wrote that he holds office hours in the lobby of his building, which has tables and chairs and serves as a student lounge. That setup makes meetings with students less formal.

“It happens that my office is hard to find,” Mr. Rasp wrote. Just getting there, he added, “can be an intimidating gauntlet for a student to run.” Now that office hours are in the lobby, Mr. Rasp sees many more students.

Mr. Rasp wasn’t the only reader who worried that meeting students in his office could intimidate them. Dom Caristi, a professor of telecommunications at Ball State University, encountered the idea that a “neutral” location could be more welcoming for students at a workshop.

Mr. Caristi still holds some conventional office hours, “but one morning a week I take my laptop and sit outside the campus smoothie shop for a couple of hours,” he wrote. “I can’t say that the response is overwhelming, but I can say I’ve managed to see a few students who I never saw visit my office.”

These reflections reminded us of an [advice piece](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Office-Hours-in-the-Pool-Hall/135742?cid=tn) that ran in *The Chronicle* several years ago. The author, John Soares, found a silver lining in his experience as an office-less adjunct professor. Mr. Soares decided to make the whole campus his office, meeting students in a variety of locations.

The practice, he wrote, “helped me reach certain students, drive home points I had made in class, and get students to campus facilities they should know about.” That made us wonder: Has a habit you formed out of necessity ever brought surprising benefits for your students? Share your experience with me at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com and it may appear in a future newsletter.

Thanks for reading. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, or beckie.supiano@chronicle.com. If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up, you can do so [here](http://www.chronicle.com/page/Get-the-Teaching-Newsletter/709/).

— Dan and Beckie