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What “Is” Is: CTLs as Verbs— A Message From the Coeditor-in-Chief

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Like most journal editors, I attend to submissions at the sentence-level as well as at levels of argument and significance. Part of my attention to sentences, as one might guess, involves scrutiny of verb choice, particularly in those cases where an author employs a be-verb (“am,” “are,” “is,” “was,” “were”) rather than something active (“negotiate,” “assess,” “fought,” “created,” “flee”). Probably more than any type of manuscripts I have edited, *Journal on Centers for Teaching and Learning (JCTL)* submissions draw me into new relationships with forms of the verb “to be.”

The empirical nature of many of the works submitted to the *Journal* lends itself to objectivist rhetoric as a way to foreground the data culled from studies designed to assess and improve the centers’ efficacy as well as to document that efficacy for internal and external reviewers. Because such studies do not intend to narrate the labor involved in CTL work, it is not surprising to read in them that “a survey was administered” or that “this graph is presented,” frequently without any indication as to what agent might be responsible. I have come to wonder how much is won and how much is lost in such a posture, especially for a journal geared to unpack for CTL staff and other readers the nuances and extent, as well as the effectiveness, of CTL work; and I also wonder about the degree to which be-verbs in these essays might signal, more or less, the positioning of CTLs within their respective institutions.

In this regard, the persistence of be-verbs might mark the ubiquity of CTL interests, a kind of hedging on (or even an overemphasizing of) the difficulties that come with identifying the parameters of a CTL’s functions. Where does the responsibility for teaching and learning begin or end at any site in any institution? Perhaps the imprecise phrasing “it was the aim” is appropriate because a CTL or other campus entity determined

that aim through extended university-wide dialogues, so that “we aimed” would hypostatize agency: Was it the article’s authors who aimed, the CTL staff, or the university community, and to what extent does it matter to the article’s main points? A be-verb in this passive construction might best speak to / reflect the intersections of agencies that shape the cognitive economy of learning institutions, speak to / reflect the degree to which CTLs operate as sensitive nodal points in the broader totality. “It was the aim” works, possibly, because CTL workers want to leave the invitation open, want others around campus to explore roles they do and might play in improving the environment for teaching and learning. “It was the aim,” in short, casts a wider net than “our director drafted a mission statement” because the image of that director drafting represents a particular person in a specific situation who might not exactly serve the point of an essay at that particular place and time.

Nevertheless, such particulars do have their place and time in *JCTL*, because at any given place at any given time individuals and teams of CTL staff members do *negotiate*, *assess*, and *create* elements of their institutional terrains, and CTL staff might even sometimes *fight* or *flee* some elements given certain circumstances. These moments of creation, negotiation, assessment, flight, and fight do identify the intellectual, rigorous, emotional, and highly contextualized work that CTLs undertake. Among other things, the editorial process for *JCTL* teaches me always to reflect upon, as former President Bill Clinton might put it, what the meaning of “is” is. I’ve learned to look more closely at be-verbs, not just to see if a sentence might be recast into active voice, but to question whether “to be” obscures / constrains elements of narrative that authors can unpack to display better for readers the labor that produces, sustains, challenges, and renovates the educational environments in which they work. Anyone who arrives at the office early enough to chat with the custodian sweeping a corridor’s floors or meets regularly with upper administrators knows that an institution’s everyday just doesn’t *be*: The everyday (not just anything that disrupts it for better or worse) comprises persistent, dynamic forces in which CTLs play significant roles.

As with our previous volumes, each of the articles collected in this issue of *JCTL* represents verbs writ large—writ large so as to identify and explore the roles, responsibilities, activities, and possibilities associated with CTL work. For **Nadler, Shore, Taylor, and Bakker**, in “Making Waves: Demonstrating a CTL’s Impact on Teaching and Learning,” “is” represents the ways a CTL assesses the impact of its work on teaching and learning at a university and how those assessments can become part of the very intervention their center was assigned to assess. In **Linder’s** “Creating

Space for Adjunct Faculty: The Multiple Roles of Centers for Teaching and Learning," "is" means the efforts a CTL undertakes to include adjunct faculty in the CTL's community and the ways these efforts can "create a community of teaching excellence that reaches all classrooms regardless of instructor status" (p. 51). "Is" for **Yee** and **Hargis**, in "Indirect Faculty Development and the Role of Sociability," is the web of relationships, the personal ecology of each faculty member, into which CTL workers can insert themselves at opportune moments to enrich teaching and learning. In "An Iterative Improvement Process: Lessons Learned From Professional Development at an Online University," "is" translates into the ways **Bonura**, **Bissell**, and **Liljegren's** online university compels their center's continual improvement of the meetings through which their university community coordinates its pedagogical practices and institutional mission; and in "Academic Challenge: Its Meaning for College Students and Faculty," "is" for **St. Clair** and **Hackett** marks ways to discern the different meanings of "academic challenge" that might curtail or facilitate communication between teachers and students. Finally, for **Marbach-Ad**, **Schaefer**, and **Thompson**, in "Faculty Teaching Philosophies, Reported Practices, and Concerns Inform the Design of Professional Development Activities of a Disciplinary Teaching and Learning Center," "is" embodies a center focused on the interests and concerns of biology and chemistry faculty members and ways to "build" that center's "activities around the special requirements for teaching [these] particular discipline[s]" (p. 120).

To be sure, each article in this issue uses its fair share of both be-verbs and action verbs. Collectively, their verbs point to the multiple terrains CTLs have already entered, to the dynamics that shape CTLs and that they in turn shape. The authors each speak to us about how they negotiate, assess, and create; and collectively, they ask us to look more deeply into what is and what might be.