"Relevance," the Agora, and Directing a Center for Teaching and Learning

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The role of a director of a Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is complex, requiring multidimensional skills in a context unencumbered by the governance of any one academic unit but in service to all. This narrative essay delineates how one director navigated the role guided by the concept of relevance and the goal of fostering a collective agora to build community. Toward this agora, the director expanded the CTL's patronage to include events relevant to senior faculty and administrators, enacted new models of teaching support, engaged in research on teaching with junior faculty, and established a publication for scholarly debate. Reflection reveals that the directorship had relevance to the author's later roles as teacher and administrator through the interpersonal skills, relationships, and collaborative leadership skills cultivated.

Introduction

Serving as director of a Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) can appear to be nothing more than a glorified event planner, marketer, and provider of tutorial services for faculty who struggle with their teaching. In reality, directing a CTL requires a fierce entrepreneurial spirit and an analytic approach to identifying needs, designing services, and delivering programming relevant to faculty across diverse disciplines. Charged with creating and enacting faculty development for highly specialized scholars—some of whom are not seeking what the CTL has to offer and others who may not see themselves as needing "development" even when their chair or dean sees

otherwise—the role requires venturing outside one's area of expertise to study faculty of varied disciplines and to unearth themes of interest and areas of advancement. A CTL director must remain fervent about the need for the Center's existence despite sometimes wavering attendance at events and a potential cut in the budget of the CTL as a non-essential unit. In short, directing a CTL requires being prepared for academic work like no other.

Directing our university's CTL was one of the most gratifying and difficult of all the professional positions I have undertaken. It was a career move without an obvious career track and one I accepted at a point in my professional life where I was interested in stepping away from teaching to experience another aspect of the university system. While fulfilling my responsibility to uphold the CTL's reputation and advance its relevance, I felt vulnerable, invisible, venerated, and invigorated. At the time, none of what I did felt relevant to what I had done before or would do again. As I look back over my time as director, though, evidence of its impact in my subsequent roles as dean, department chair, and teacher is clearly evident. More importantly, I now appreciate the often unrecognized influence of the CTL in shaping the culture of a university. From the defining first moments as director through the services and events I shaped and learned from, I write this retrospective essay as a renewed call to consider the significance and imagine the power of the CTL as a place where both personal relevance and institutional impact may be found.

Defining First Moments

Shortly after my being named director, two colleagues invited me for dinner to celebrate and listen to my vision for the Center. Sue and Chuck had a combined total of over sixty years at the university, and at just nine years in, I was a relative newcomer to the academy ready to launch new initiatives for excellence in teaching that I believed would energize and re-vitalize faculty of all stages in their careers to teach like never before. Sue and I were both in literacy education and shared similar views about the value of modeling the pedagogy we expected our pre-service and practicing teachers to utilize in their teaching. Chuck, though not steeped in pedagogical matters, had received numerous teaching awards during his career. A professor of philosophy, he was a deeply attentive and contemplative individual. I treasured them both as colleagues and friends.

Over the course of the evening, we spoke about the university being in the midst of general education reform and how the CTL might play a role in

supporting the new plan that had just won faculty support by the slightest of margins. We marveled at the high degree of faculty engagement in the reform process and faculty's fierce protection of their disciplinary territory. My vision for the CTL in this post-general-education-reform climate was as a forum for faculty to collaborate in a manner that would not only implement the new program but also would infuse pedagogical upgrades. I underscored the many opportunities I saw to embed relevance throughout course design and passionately asserted that we, as professors, must lead our students to recognize the relevance of the new general education courses to their lives. That was it. Chuck looked at me with searing intensity and remarked, "Relevance is over-rated."

I was thrown back on my heels wondering how—and why—my colleague might teach subject matter without his students knowing its relevance. How—and when—would they discover its pertinence to their lives? If faculty did not help students understand the relevance of their content, how might students situate their learning? Would they learn at all?

Chuck was adamant in his position and eloquent in his argument that relevance was not often found in the moment nor was it even in the domain of the teacher. In his view, any attempts to contemporize courses ran the risk of cheating our students out of knowledge they might not otherwise have at any other time in their lives. I counter-argued that, without seeing a link between new content and their existing world view, students would not only miss what it was we were attempting to teach, but they might also select courses based instead upon a preferred time of day, what their friends were taking, or some other less-than-academically-driven criteria.

We continued talking long past dinner, and in the end, I asked Chuck if he would be willing to write an essay espousing his intriguing and firmly held position about the very nature of what it is we teach in higher education. So moving was this collegial debate I felt compelled to somehow find a way to replicate this experience for faculty. Whether I agreed with him or not, my role was one of finding platforms for faculty to espouse their views and his was at the heart of what was on the minds of faculty. My thinking was perhaps a written venue could serve as the platform for engaged exchange around matters of contemporary relevance to faculty. Chuck agreed.

Long after our conversation, the overall concept of relevance weighed on my mind as I began my directorship. Would my decisions about CTL offerings be driven by what *I*, as director, determined to be relevant to faculty? Was relevance a prerequisite to the faculty's utilization of the CTL? How would faculty's sense of the relevance of CTL activity to their professional

lives affect its overall livelihood? While I did not know it then, those first impassioned remarks from my colleague forged a new purpose for the CTL that, in retrospect, would define not only its path but mine, as well. Relevance resonated with me while writing this essay as I considered its influence in my decision-making as director. What follows are the many paths forged in creating a CTL of relevance to the faculty.

Finding the Center

What struck me that first day I walked into the Center was that, despite its being *called* a Center, it was a small office with two desks and a set of book shelves. Naturally, I had been in the CTL many times before, but when entering the space as director I saw it from a different vantage point. The undertaking was big and the space was small.

Renovations were underway to relocate the CTL but the plans called only for a slight upgrade. The new space was slated to include two private offices and a small gathering area with a sofa, chairs, and coffee table in the back of a much larger suite of offices dedicated to the Office of Extended Learning.

I grappled with this paradox of being called a Center without being a Center. I envisioned the CTL located in the heart of our campus since it served what I believe is a university's most precious commodity for teaching—its faculty. Without any square footage to speak of and accessible only through the department that worked with online and off-campus program faculty, I worried about whether anyone would find their way to the CTL and whether those who did would be solely those who taught online. I spoke with the associate provost about creating an entryway directly from the hallway into the CTL with a sign posted prominently above announcing to faculty that behind this door was an actual Center (albeit small). It was not to be. Architectural plans had already been drawn; in fact, the space was nearly complete and the budget spent. Instead of a new entranceway, I was afforded only nominal additional funds to purchase furniture that my assistant and I thought might attract faculty.

Altany (2011) attends to this concept of physical space for faculty development by comparing it to the banyan tree. His rich description of the tree's deep roots formed from branches creates a powerful image of how it is that the work of faculty engaged with one another, rather than the place where they engage, matters. Just as the banyan tree expands outward through its branches which, in turn, form deep roots, faculty hallway conversations

serve for Altany as yet another opportunity for faculty to engage with one another in a public venue apart from their often private professional work. Attention to the physical space for faculty represented my efforts to create a sense of connectedness. Given the current disciplinary silos within our university, I saw the potential for the CTL as a gathering place for interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary thinking, testing of inspirations, vehement debate, and a coming to reasoned resolve. Even without the actual space to do so, in retrospect, I realize I was attempting to position the CTL as an agora of faculty development.

The CTL as Agora

I first learned of the agora in an undergraduate course at a time when ancient Greek civilization did not seem relevant to anything I would ever need to know. Twenty years later, in my doctoral program, I read Rheingold's (1993) critical exploration of the opposing roles of a virtual community where he framed it as having the potential to be a panopticon or an "electronic agora." Rheingold described the agora as more than a marketplace. In the first Greek democracy, "the agora was where citizens met to talk, gossip, argue, size each other up, find the weak spots in political ideas by debating about them" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 14).

Looking back I see how the agora aptly fits what I worked to replicate. Convening faculty in various venues around topics of campus-wide importance was not a new idea. New faculty orientation, mentoring workshops, technology roundtable meetings, brown bag luncheon series, Teaching Circles, teaching grants, course design or redesign fellowships, and individual consulting reflected the range of offerings in place when I came on board. Yet, I wanted to expand upon these services by leading faculty to engage in more robust, spontaneous discussion with one another.

Just as the agora served as an open marketplace where ideas could be voiced and heard, so were my expectations for finding ways to foster open and civil exchange of ideas faculty found relevant to discuss. The CTL's need to enhance a sense of community, generate cross-disciplinary conversations and scholarly articulation, and provide space for faculty to challenge ideas began to inform every decision I made about program offerings and new program development.

Building the Agora: Beyond the Numbers

Establishing an agora was not an explicit goal of the CTL when I started as director. Nowhere in its mission was fostering connectedness among faculty articulated; rather, it was "to promote, support, and celebrate excellence in teaching throughout campus." The signature CTL function I inherited were large-scale events featuring a guest expert addressing a topic of current relevance to teaching. I respected this type of outreach effort, but I envisioned achieving more in the way of building a sense of community and a culture of mutual respect at a time when general education reform efforts had created rifts among departments. I believed that fostering collegial connectivity aligned with the university mission of student centeredness and could only enhance the CTL's core focus on teaching excellence while, hopefully, making strides in repairing and advancing the overall culture and climate of the university.

Another reality I inherited as director involved the use of output-based evaluation metrics of reporting attendance and numbers of events hosted. This widely accepted evidence and rationale for CTL funding decisions (Chen, Kelley, & Haggar, 2013) exerted a powerful influence over the type of events hosted and motivated the need to identify topics that would yield high attendance rates. I felt hampered by this approach and sought ways to work with these metrics such that attendance was not the only outcome achieved.

Clearly, a low turn-out at a highly publicized event was worrisome, but I wondered if there might be a way to re-frame this short-sighted view equating attendance with value. Having attended sparsely populated events that I found highly impactful and standing room only events that were disappointingly irrelevant, I remained unconvinced of a causal link between attendance and value. There was something to be said for drawing a crowd but the increasing number of scheduling obligations faculty faced outside their teaching led me to explore other measures of impact. Rather than relying upon headcount, I wanted to create an agora for those faculty present regardless of how many. I trusted that each individual who walked away having had a personally relevant experience would slowly contribute to the felt value of the CTL.

Our system for eliciting RSVPs to CTL-sponsored events was user-friendly, but it was not a reliable indicator of actual attendance. My assistant had a great track record with regard to anticipating crowd size and arranging for ample seating in response to these RSVPs; and that, it turns out, was

the problem. Over the years, CTL events were held in the largest venues on campus with an abundance of seating for too few actual attendees. The rooms looked cavernous where empty seats contributed to a perception that the event was not a success.

Though not able to control attendance, I considered how I might address it. A shift to more tailored offerings targeted at a smaller group of faculty was one approach I took; but for the inevitable large events, I sought to create a feeling of physical proximity. Chuck would have been proud that, with little effort, I recalled my work as a hotel reservationist in college as having relevance to this problem. There I had been taught the art and science of how to reach 100% nightly occupancy by overbooking rooms 13-15% in anticipation of cancellations and no-shows. With remarkably few exceptions, it worked every time. It seemed a simple adjustment to our logistics and, much to my assistant's reluctance, I asked her to reserve smaller rooms for our events.

By closing both the literal and figurative distance between faculty at our larger events, my assistant and I observed attendees were more inclined to turn to one another, introduce themselves, and begin a dialogue. At times, more faculty would show than planned for, but standing room only signaled something entirely different than a room with empty chairs. For over-booked rooms, we brought in more chairs that tightened gaps and sparked conversations that would likely not have otherwise taken place. While faculty might have come to an event with a key purpose in mind, they often left having serendipitously engaged with colleagues.

Extending the Relevance of the CTL

Intent on the CTL serving as an agora for all faculty, I was curious about the patterns in the Center's patronage. New faculty were introduced to the CTL during their orientation and through mentoring, practices which, given this group's need to acclimatize to the university, kept their interest piqued for the first few years. The largest faction of faculty patronizing the Center were those in their early and mid-careers. Those close to their tenure deadline were regular attendees as the letters acknowledging their event attendance provided valuable evidence of professional development and attention to their teaching. Mid-career faculty were called upon to serve as panelists or speakers and often hosted Teaching Circles as they had the experience and were no longer driven by the tenure clock. Noticeably absent were late-career faculty and administrators.

I viewed both these groups as foundational to the university with their institutional knowledge, career wisdom, and overall earned respect. The senior faculty and administration, though not always seeing eye to eye, held the greatest power in our shared governance system; and if the CTL was to gain in status, I believed it needed to directly serve this particular population. Despite many differences among them, the senior faculty and administration shared something quite unique. They had an expansive past and a rich view of academia and their own place in it that could offer the rest of the faculty a glimpse into their future. I was not yet sure how to showcase senior faculty and administrators to highlight their profound value to the university community until I experienced an inspired moment with the provost.

I reported directly to our provost, and during one of our regular meetings after his return from a conference, he recounted an experience that he felt might resonate with faculty. Jeffrey Zaslow had been the keynote speaker addressing the publication of "The Last Lecture" (Pausch, 2008). Randy Pausch, a computer science professor, was dying of cancer and, with just a few months to live, delivered a lecture to his students about the important matters of life. His book, written with the help of Zaslow, brought the lectures to life intending to immortalize Pausch for his children, wife, and the students he would never meet. The provost was visibly moved by Zaslow's talk and suggested I invite Zaslow to campus for the student academic success summit we were planning.

Though not opposed to spending a large portion of the CTL's budget on this highly sought-after speaker, it gave me pause as to how I might ensure robust attendance when faculty might not connect with the idea of memorializing their lectures. The CTL had been aggressively advocating active student engagement while discouraging the sage-on-the-stage pedagogy of lecturing for years. Would the mere idea of lecturing turn them away? How might the thought of facing terminal illness, contemplating life, and defining its personal lessons have relevance to faculty in their prime of life?

As I listened to the provost's enthusiasm, what occurred to me was how the event might have campus-wide relevance by featuring the provost and our deans delivering their own last lectures. Allowing faculty insight into the souls of our administrators may soften the hardline many took toward them while affording administrators an experience relevant to their own mortality. My idea struck a chord with the provost. He not only offered his full endorsement but also agreed to speak.

Invitations to current and former deans met with various reactions. The first dean heartily agreed while the next gave his regrets indicating he was going to be out of town. Others needed coaxing but eventually agreed to participate. The last dean I approached flatly refused. She was not comfortable with the format and questioned why an audience would be interested. I assured her that faculty and staff would be enthralled and, after nearly a week, she reluctantly agreed. In the end, each of the administrators composed and delivered a lecture written as though it were their last.

With stunning poignancy and grace, the provost's and deans' words conveyed far more than content. One dean shared her regrets as a teacher, her failure to help students get out of their comfort zones, and her realization that, of all she has done in her career, teaching has been the hardest (Velthouse, 2009). Another admitted, "I've been a jerk often, but it's exceptionally bad when you do it to a student. A snide remark or a disparaging comment—they hit students harder than you think…I handwrote a sincere unconditional apology to that student and was most pleasantly surprised to be forgiven" (Kugler, 2009, p. 26). Many administrators were visibly moved to tears, pausing to regain composure as they delivered remarks they hoped others would find relevant to their own lives.

The audience response was palpable as their silence and tears spoke volumes about the personal candor expressed in their administrators' lectures. A senior faculty member with nearly thirty years of service at the university emailed me later that afternoon:

> Congratulations, Mary Jo. Today was, perhaps, the finest "all-campus" event I've attended since I've been teaching here. You touched a lot of hearts. Mine certainly. I was a basket case the rest of the afternoon and promptly tried to share some of what occurred with my class. I hope you were pleased at the turnout and the response. Blessings. (C. Gillespie, personal communication, October 17, 2008)

This singular event demonstrated that there were ways the CTL might bridge those who were sunsetting their careers and those just beginning in mutually relevant ways. After all, the ancient agora knew no rank. It drew together the masses who mingled and, I imagined, sought camaraderie and experienced the benefits of having done so.

Leading from the Center

With relevance and the agora in mind, no one could have prepared me for the type of leader I was becoming. I was the third faculty member to serve in the position after the founding director brought the Center to life and a second director instituted several strategies to enhance teaching on our campus, elevating the role of the CTL as essential to the university's mission of student-centeredness. My predecessors were professors of English and psychology, respectively, and I was the first from an education department. My Ph.D. in reading and language arts centers on reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing as psycholinguistic processes, and I specialize in the theory and practice of these thinking language processes. I felt well positioned as an educator of educators. Though confident of the connections between my academic roots and the teaching of content, however, I was not prepared for what I would learn about the variations of teaching methods I would encounter.

Despite the interdisciplinary relevance of my knowledge, I lacked familiarity with the content of physical therapy, economics, accounting, nursing, engineering, and anthropology, among other disciplines. In observing this wide range of teaching in action, I found the nature of student engagement varied substantially by discipline. For example, a physical therapy course addressing therapeutic technique in moving post-surgical patients involved students in tactile demonstration whereas a class in tax accounting actually made effective use of PowerPoint slides appropriate for whole class focus on a case study.

My previous methods of teaching and learning, which prioritized the use of receptive and productive language, now needed to broaden in ways that allowed me to assume a position of neutrality. In other words, I needed to serve faculty in a manner meaningful to *them* and *their* particular fields; and it was by observing numerous faculty in a wide range of disciplines that I would discover that the success of the Center required leadership that was neither out front nor from behind. CTL leadership, as referred to by Rutt (1979) within his consultant approaches, required a collaborative model.

Leading the CTL in its most important role as supporting teaching efficacy necessitated positioning myself amongst faculty so I could listen for and facilitate a response to what *they* might need, as it was not what I deemed as relevant teaching practices that mattered. Over time, I would see my role not so much as one of finding contemporary teaching strategies and techniques

to educate faculty *en masse*; rather, it would be one of identifying and building upon a faculty member's individual teaching passion and skill. Being amongst the faculty would provide a compass to guide my path in defining how I might support them individually and then collectively. We would lead one another.

Faculty are adult learners and, as such, I followed the principles of andragogy (Henschke, 2008; Knowles, 1978), embedding their learning within their current experience of teaching. The philosophical underpinnings of andragogy further aligned with my disciplinary roots and specialization in schema theory (Anderson, 1978, 1994; Bartlett, 1932; Bransford & Johnson, 1972; Minsky, 1975; Schank & Abelson, 1977), the transactional theory of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), and the sociopsycholinguistic view of reading (Goodman, 1994). Collectively, this was an approach different from my predecessors who kept tabs on trends in teaching to guide their choice of CTL offerings. Instead, I became increasingly focused on designing services tailored to individual needs emanating from their current teaching that would lead to upgraded teaching practices, a method that, I was confident, would reveal the universals of teaching and nurture a robust agora.

Teaching Support as an Act of Individual Relevance

The one-on-one consultation with faculty behind closed doors comprised a great majority of my time and effort. Contrary to some misconceptions that faculty were inclined to endlessly lecture or click through countless PowerPoint slides, I found a range of styles that suggested there was often far more going on in classrooms than one might imagine. It was a privilege to observe the many teachers who cultivated collaborative group work, employed the Socratic method, and managed a room full of adults ranging in attitude, interest, attention, and motivation.

Some faculty, however, were not convinced of their teaching talent and were restless to improve. Others, presumably not aware of a need for improvement, were referred to me by their chair or dean for consultation. Too much lecturing, too little student engagement, not enough rigor, or inadequate scores on course evaluations were cited as signs of needed intervention. Dilemmas were common, but the solutions were not one-size-fits-all. Whether faculty initiated the consultation or, in more complicated cases, were referred to the CTL for intervention, it was my task to provide teaching support of individualized relevance.

Observation not Evaluation

Prior CTL teaching consultation protocol was based upon a checklist that marked use of think-pair-share, jigsaw, turn-and-talk, technology tools, and other strategies for facilitating active student engagement. The protocol was used across all disciplines with the underlying premise that student engagement could be fostered via these strategies and that learning would occur as a result. While I could not argue that student engagement was unimportant, I was interested in advancing the faculty's experience of teaching in a way that involved more than incorporating a toolkit of techniques. It was important to me that they consider the dynamic between their students, themselves, and their content (Palmer, 2007).

I positioned myself as a student of their teaching in order to facilitate our mutual study. I structured the observation as occurring from a non-evaluative stance to ease the inevitable and necessary position of vulnerability in which instructors would be placed while being observed. The stakes could not be higher in cases where tenure was on the line, but in all cases, teaching feedback could deal a crushing blow to confidence or lead to defensive retreat if not artfully handled. Confidentiality was essential, and to say faculty were nervous, even suspicious about maintaining privacy around their teaching consultations, is an understatement. For these reasons, I situated my role as observer/learner not evaluator.

I made it clear at the start of every teaching consultation session that I did not view teaching as "good" or "bad," explaining that teaching is far more complex and nuanced. I held that improving one's teaching practice was necessarily a journey of becoming more self-aware (Palmer, 2007) so as to consciously choose, use, and control techniques at the appropriate time during a given class. It may be, for example, that lecture works in one setting and small groups not in another depending upon the content, the students, and the teacher. With this in mind, I departed from the "good teaching"/"bad teaching" paradigm and instead studied each instructor's teaching in order to identify the patterns and themes that could emerge for sharing in a post-teaching conversation.

While our CTL would come to conduct various permutations of this individualized model of teaching support, all situated individual relevance at their nexus. The Center established peer observation teams, for example, who were trained in this model of teaching support and who engaged in mutual observation and feedback sessions. In addition, a Reflective Video

Series documented several faculty members' teaching along with post-teaching interviews questioning their teaching decisions as they related to an outsider's observation of their teaching. These two models articulated existing teaching behaviors so that the faculty could be helped to determine which were relevant for analysis as strengths or as impediments to their teaching success. Of all the models of teaching support I initiated, it was the co-researching model that proved to be the most compelling. It all began with a faculty member seeking help with an issue he felt relevant only to him.

Peer Observation as Research

Quamrul walked into my office one day with a problem. He explained that while his students were performing well academically they did not seem to be impassioned about engineering. As a former engineer, Quamrul knew that sustaining a career meant maintaining a sense of gratification from the work day in and day out. He worried about retention in the field and lamented his students' attitude toward the content. With excitement and passion himself, Quamrul asked how I might help him infuse passion for engineering into his students.

Considering he was not yet tenured and given the competing pressure he was under to both teach well and publish, I suggested we design and conduct a study of his teaching to better understand what strategies might work to foster passion. We could seek IRB approval and begin a study of his students, his teaching, and their learning with the goal of publishing the results. Though I had studied my own teaching and published results, this was a new undertaking for me as director. I knew firsthand that our project would be labor intensive, but my determination to help faculty resolve their teaching dilemmas drove my decision to pursue this particular approach to addressing Quamrul's circumstance.

Listening to Quamrul's frustration with his students' lackluster responses in class, I introduced him to the use of anticipation guides as a technique for inducing disequilibrium prior to reading and group discussion. Unlike common use of the guides as true/false pretests, I structured them in such a way that they were no longer a pretest of existing knowledge but ambiguous statements students responded to prior to reading. They were designed to lead students to make predictions resulting in a heightened, personal motivation for reading to find out whether their predictions were accurate.

Quamrul systematically incorporated the anticipation guides into two introductory engineering courses while I collected and analyzed the data

measuring change in passion for the content over time. The study was accepted for presentation (Mazumder & Finney, 2010a) and later published (Mazumder & Finney, 2010b), accomplishing what we had both set out to do. The personal need that motivated Quamrul's visit to the CTL ultimately sustained his attention to this study. What sustained my energy in completing the data analysis and co-authoring the article was the connection I saw between Quamrul's desire to instill passion in his students and Chuck's position that relevance need not be a factor in our students' education. If Quamrul hadn't attended to what he perceived as a lack of passion, would his students have ever seen introductory engineering as relevant to their lives? Considering Chuck's point, if relevance is not paramount, how then do we lead the disinterested to expand their horizons?

The Scholarship of Teaching: A Written Agora

As I reconsider one of the first steps I took as director, I see it as one of the most significant risks I took. It was in direct response to the conversation Chuck and I had about relevance when I invited him to commit to writing his views on general education and to write about them at a time when our campus was still finding its footing after having been surprised at the many conflicting notions we had about undergraduate learning. I still felt the enduring benefit of having asserted my views in a structured, civil manner with a trusted colleague I admired. Workshops, brown bag meetings, and teaching circles were already underway and had their place, but our debate had been scholarly and invigorating and I wanted to offer the same experience to the faculty. I was convinced that hosting face-to-face debates during the tense post-general-education-reform climate was unwise, but exchanging views in a written venue held great promise. Writing was rehearsed, measured, and lasting, offering a safe arena for discourse while being inviting to those less inclined to venture into the public space of university events.

After Chuck sent me a draft of his essay, I decided to establish an internal publication for faculty, staff, and administrators to share their views and assert their positions about matters relevant to life at the university. *The Scholarship of Teaching* invited articles and essays in an open written forum where writers were free to submit original work or, with permission, their previously published work. They were invited to respond to one another's articles in a point/counterpoint manner providing an opportunity for all to witness scholarly debate.

The inaugural issue featured Chuck's essay (Dunlop, 2007) and my introduction to this new venue of exchange. He began with this quote from a former student:

> Don't talk to me about how philosophy is *relevant*. I work in the shop all day long, and I get enough "relevance" there. I came to college because I wanted to be exposed to something that *wasn't* "relevant." (Philosophy 101 student)

Chuck went on to make a case for a general education program that would introduce students to that which they would not otherwise choose, arguing that the push for an education that leads directly and obviously to a particular a career dissuades a student from taking courses that may unexpectedly inform one's future life. As Chuck concludes:

> The central point, of course, is that (1) knowledge that extends beyond one's line of work can dramatically and positively enhance the work that one does; (2) no one really knows what s/he is *ultimately* going to become (most of today's college graduates will switch career directions several times during their working lives), and (3) what you don't deem relevant today may prove to be indispensable tomorrow. (Dunlop, 2007, p.5)

Subsequent issues of *The Scholarship of Teaching* featured a wide range of topics, disciplines, and positions. The publication continued for nine years after my directorship and was discontinued just this past year. I cannot help but wonder if faculty no longer found it relevant to their work and, if that is the case, what changed?

Continuing Thoughts

My time as CTL director felt too brief as I was promoted to higher administration just two years after taking the position. Being immersed in CTL work was extraordinarily fulfilling, to be sure, but its direct relevance to my career was not obvious at the time. Had I considered the relevance of directing the CTL to my future rather than just wanting a change in my day-to-day responsibilities, I likely would have not sought out the position. Becoming a CTL director was a leap of faith not knowing what I might gain from the experience. For all my ruminating now about its relevance, I have found

that the deepest relevance comes after the fact, years later, when lived-through moments are filtered through subsequent-life experience.

Upon reflection, for example, I realized campus-wide relevance was not a requisite feature I looked to provide through the CTL. I did not search for the speaker or workshop topic that would garner mass appeal as much as I focused on creating an agora for faculty to come to learn about—and from—one another. The neutrality of the CTL provided safe ground for faculty in all stages of their careers to co-mingle, share interests, find commonalities, and explore differences. Even without direct reference to teaching, events that brought faculty together had teaching in the air; thus, I was confident the core mission of the CTL was being addressed. By creating an agora, our Center freed faculty to discover what was relevant to their teaching and professional lives.

In retrospect, the agora I was seeking to create had similarities to the learning community approach Beane-Katner (2013) reports and to the faculty learning communities Cox (2004) advocates, but it was more a feeling than an event I wanted faculty to associate with the CTL. The metrics of its efficacy at the time did not measure these indicators, and I am not sure that a causal link could be established between campus culture, climate, and the functioning of the CTL. Through this introspective essay, however, I am able to realize how being a CTL director has informed my own current roles and, therefore, suggest it might have the same benefit for others.

The CTL, with its centralized mission, affords a unique view of the campus system. By seeing the individualized functions of each unit and their interdependence I came to appreciate the multi-dimensional nature of the organization and it deepened my respect for its complexity. For example, I learned that what happened in the Registrar's office was more than timely posting of grades to a transcript; and I became more aware of the fact that the number of credits a student took was as much a function of financial aid as it was program requirements. Additionally, the interpersonal skill acquired as director through working with a range of faculty across a range of disciplines was invaluable later in my work as dean and chair. Listening, helping others discover what was on their minds, sharing what I heard in a non-judgmental way, offering insight to problems based upon who the faculty member was now instead of who they were expected to be: these were just a few of the skills I learned that have been invaluable. Establishing relationships and trust with colleagues across campus built my confidence as I learned to navigate the unique cultures that exist at departmental, school,

and college levels. In turn, these relationships contribute to my skills as a leader serving the faculty.

I have come to believe a CTL, in myriad ways, can help faculty rethink their role in answering students' queries such as "Do I really need to know this? Why do I need to know this? When will I ever use this again?" with answers such as "Yes. You will discover that for yourself someday. I don't know precisely when but I do know you will find use for it when you least expect it." As a teacher, I still ponder the question Chuck and I collegially battled ten years ago. I constantly navigate my role in helping students appreciate the relevance of what they are learning to their lives, yet I question whether it is my duty to establish the relevance or theirs to discover. If it is only in the here and now where relevance is sought, much will be missed. I now believe that with patience and trust relevance will come to light as it is almost certain the mind will do its inherent work of making meaningful connections. As Chuck would remind me, relevance is over-rated. It was my determination, tolerance for ambiguity, and trust in the value of what the CTL had to offer that sustained me, and I continue to discover its relevance to my professional life each day.

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