Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Editorial

Personal Essays of Teaching Innovation: Good stories that take a deal of telling

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In this special issue of the *Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching*, the style of these narratives is the "personal essay." It is distinct from the formal academic essay in that it is frank with the reader that the essay is not neutral, objective, or speaking for a group. In the introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Lopate writes,

> The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue – a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship…At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience. (1995, p. xiii)

In the academy, we often write in a less personal voice about what we learn when we do research in our classrooms, but teaching is more personal and often more intuitively guided. A teaching strategy that works in my teaching style may require particular adaptations for someone else to use. This special issue of the *Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching* embraces this personal experience of innovating teaching. As these are personal narratives, it is likely that one may disagree with some of the approaches or not even see some as innovative, in

comparison with one's own experiences. This is the nature of the individual experience of

teaching; these essays are each a window on one point of view. Perhaps one might read them

with the perspective of an ethnographer learning about what innovation looks like to people in

different countries, institutions, and disciplines.

Tolkien (1937) notes, "Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and

days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are

uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a deal of telling

anyway" (p. 60). In this spirit of good story telling, these personal narratives deal with what

researchers in organizational development agree is uncomfortable and sometimes gruesome:

changing how we teach. These are not research reports with clear endings. These are narratives

of the messiness of success and the dogged mindset of sustaining innovation. In "The Ten

Barriers to Innovation in Higher Education," Morriss-Olson writes, "…at the end of the day,

institutional resiliency may depend more on mindset than skill set." The instructors in this

collection demonstrate what this mindset is. It is such a value on student learning, that instructors

are willing to change how they teach to improve student learning even if it feels uncomfortable.

In this mindset, instructors' willingness to try something new benefits students not only

in creating more effective learning environments, but also in teaching this mindset of embracing

innovation. In this collection, Kramer writes, "Being an example in the safe space you are

creating, showing it is okay to make mistakes and take risks, is highly effective, and worth the

time and effort." Of course making mistakes and taking risks is easier when there is community

support. The majority of the contributors to this special issue on innovation discuss how their

innovations were not conceived of and implemented in a vacuum; they read research, they talked

with colleagues, and consulted with students about how to implement and refine their innovations.

In the discipline of Organizational Management, there is a great deal of research on institutional change. The models discussed often deal with business environments, but some of the observations can be useful to understand innovation in an academic context. Amarantou, Kazakopoulou, Chatzoudes, and Chatzoglou (2018) analyzed the attitudes of resistance to change for the *Journal of Organizational Change Management.* These researchers summarize the consensus that attempts at change often fail due to participants resisting change. In the context of organizational change, teaching is interesting to consider because the change, organizational or not, is ultimately personal. In changing how one teaches, one is also changing the student/teacher relationship. The contributors to this issue are all, clearly, predisposed to value change, and they express optimism, flexibility, and a desire to be well informed about the changes they are implementing. Because this process is so personal, these innovators often cite better student engagement and better learning as the intrinsic reward for innovation in teaching. The difficulty of many of the changes these instructors present is that they often involve sharing control of the learning process, or even stepping completely back from personal control and trusting that the design of the activity will help the students learn without the instructor's firm, guiding hand.

Nevertheless, student resistance to these changes can be a strong inhibiting force, which some of the contributors discuss. Active learning is hard; a flipped classroom requires more student engagement, and more effective learning often means more work for the student. In this issue, in their discussion of introducing student videos to a course, Macauly and Speed explicitly tackle the problem of students resisting a change that clearly demonstrated better learning.

Amarantou et al. (2018) note that a strong barrier to change is when "individuals perceive change as being contrary to their interests" (p. 433). Usually the issue that is contrary to a person's interest is being asked to do more work.

Instructors can also feel that change is contrary to their interest. In this issue, Wood notes, "Implementing any new innovative teaching strategy takes time to reflect on the process and revise with each iteration." Innovating the way one teaches is not a single innovation, it is an iterative process of changing and then refining the change. For instructors with a mindset that values student learning, the intrinsic reward of better student engagement is motivating. In this issue, Friberg writes, "I cannot lie; the design and implementation of [the new design] was very labor intensive for me. That said, I was so dissatisfied with my previous approach to teaching this class, the time and effort were more than worth it." Often, when the students are engaged, the instructor is also more engaged and the work of teaching is easier when the students want to learn. Also in this issue, Showalter agrees, "But with happier, more knowledgeable students, deciding to keep the innovation has been a no brainer – even if it would have required substantial time and energy…"

As we see, in the personal narrative of teaching innovation in this issue, change in the classroom is not just a personal choice on the part of the instructor, but also a social negotiation between the students and the instructor. Shimoni (2017) discusses how this interaction between the personal and the social is important in considering change and resistance to change. The social context of the classroom is important in cultivating a positive orientation to change as well as the social context of the unit or program. Social support for innovation among colleagues and within the institution can help the innovations of early adopters become more available to others as well.

The profile of the instructors who contributed to this issue is instructive for understanding change in the social context of academia. As a group, they outline their teaching innovations as being individually implemented, in consultation with colleagues, not requiring much (if any) funding, and focusing on technique with technology often secondary to technique. In the majority of these narratives, student learning may have improved, but these instructors frequently cite an improved attitude towards learning and improved engagement in their learning as their motivation to sustain the innovations. What is striking in these narratives is the instructors' deep appreciation for the experience of their students in their classrooms and programs.

As teachers, we can learn from each other's experiences, and as professionals, we can adapt principles to our personal contexts. We hope that these personal essays of negotiating innovation in teaching can help our readers create changes in their own teaching, or at least readers might feel some support by reading about the struggles of others. And if you don't learn something new, then at least you will be entertained.

References

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