

## ***A Reinvestment in Campus Culture and Professional Learning***

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### **VEXTATION**

Inspiration for this work stems from two different aspects of my experiences as a science educator. I've found adolescent students typically to be disconnected from a largely irrelevant (to them) science curriculum driven by high stakes testing. Myriad and predictable influences add up to student underachievement and basic lack of respect for science. This is confusing to me as a person who has bought into science and enjoys finding out new ideas about the natural world. Also, I've come to realize a student's religious outlook plays a fundamentally significant role in disengagement with scientific ideas. Adolescents main task is developing a strong sense of meaning, for which they will readily discard discreet truths.

Co-hosting Science Education at the Crossroads for the past 5 years has been a fascinating road to travel. I've found a new level of bravery not only from working on the meeting itself, but through the works of others at Crossroads. You, individually and collectively, have become my models and mentors as I see your bold projects, consider your detailed feedback in an incubator session, and witness a headfirst jump into a new endeavor, a new focus, or even a new career. My best analogy for the process is watching someone study the detailed contour lines of a topographic map before they jump from a cliff with a hang glider. Sure, they may have received adequate advice and information, but there's still a level of gumption that no amount of education can account for. I suppose we could call it "inspiration," but an empirical explanation of what exactly this is eludes me.

The other fascination I've had with this Crossroads journey is the witnessing of what it has become and how quickly and clearly this has all taken shape. The origination of Crossroads was our relatively simple frustration regarding the lack of venues to discuss new work. Yet, even as soon as the first iteration of the meeting in Storrs the gathering turned a corner. It's still about new work and new ways of initiating those, but the group has pushed for efforts that are both bold and meaningful. Participants at Crossroads are quick to show others deeper contexts and meanings for their efforts. We quickly see members in the community making action happen in substantial ways in specific venues. It's as though we get to watch one another take that first leap off the peak; and then the group chants for us to take the first step off the cliff in our initial, trembling and tentative, hang gliding efforts. I'm stirring two things together: being surrounded by people who model ambitious work and being at the center of an effort to support and sustain these efforts. This is the milieu that's inspired me to take a specific step in a fresh direction, helmet on tight and goggles secured as I plunge, on a wing and a prayer.

I've recently taken a new assignment at my university in which half of my teaching load is bought out so that I can lead our "Teaching and Learning Forum," a center for professional development and support of instructors across campus. In this manner, the university has invested in me as a piece of the infrastructure of the institution, but this is short of an investment in the social capital of the institution. That, I realize, has become my own responsibility. I'd been interested in the position for some time and actually was on the committee to hire my own predecessor. But at that time I chose to wait for things like tenure and a little more understanding of the university overall before I pursued it myself. Now that I've reached that comfortable professional plateau, I've made the move to try on this new pair of pants.

Like most university offices, this one's history has a political context. The office was created by faculty as a means to create conversation about teaching, a kind of grass roots movement to help support reflective practice. Since then it has become a unique office that is partly directed (and funded) by the provost's office; yet at the same time it heads a committee that is created and charged by the faculty senate. So now I have two bosses: one that controls the funding, and the other representing those who are actually being served by the office. I fully appreciate (I think) the dynamics of the multiple forces influencing the office. From one side there is a pull to assist the university in accreditation evaluation demands and other "top down" needs (e.g., when our most recent accreditation visit called for more training of adjunct faculty, it was made a new priority for my predecessor). Pulling from the other side is a call to support faculty initiatives and help to integrate multiple projects (e.g., the Forum hosts an annual research symposium on campus to share and celebrate work of a variety of faculty). My vision of the result of all these pulls is some kind of whirlpool centered about my new position. The tradition of the Forum has been to sustain a line of workshops, book groups, and a couple of retreats (one for new faculty and another for adjunct faculty). I think that this is all fine, but based on what I've learned from Crossroads (and my own disposition to make learning research more central to practice) I know that there are large strides that could be made.

Why is this a conversation relevant to Crossroads? First, as I described above, this is the kind of work that matches the ambition of others at our meeting. The implicit mentorship from the community gives me a sense of confidence that I can do this. Second, it's the experience that I've had co-coordinating the conference that really generated my interest in this position, and it's likely the kind of experience that got me the job. The problem is that now I'm in this position and I need to do something with it. I could choose to tread lightly, following the footsteps of those before me. Or I could reinvent the position in my own way. The vexation I'm dealing with is simply how to do this.

### **VENTURE**

My venture is to first understand and then reinvent my new position, and subsequently reinvent faculty development at my institution. I want to make a move towards a new culture of teaching and learning. However, I'm not especially skilled at rallying troops and leading new missions and programs. I have ideas, though, for how I'd like to direct the forum. From Crossroads, I've learned a great deal about the need for and usefulness in personal interactions, and I've imagined the creation of peer groups on campus to sustain pursuits and discussions. I've been thinking hard about how to take an extant set of undersubscribed workshops and unite them under more cohesive themes, moving away from tips-and-tricks to more substantive, foundational thinking about teaching, learning, and even the presumed role of the university. I've even toyed with the notion of creating Crossroads-like incubator sessions and hosting a regional conference on undergraduate learning. I also see the need for reeducating faculty about the very existence of this office and their professional development needs. A part of me wants to send out fliers to all mailboxes stating, "You're a bad teacher," a throwback to conceptual change work and the need to make learners (and teachers) realize dissatisfaction with a current state of knowing.

When I think of these and so many other possible bits and pieces of a cohesive program, I realize that it would be useful to establish a foundational philosophy or theoretical framework for my new work. Again, Crossroads itself and Crossroads participants have helped me to realize this, and participation in Crossroads has been instrumental in helping me to think even this far. I want to re-create the culture on campus as it pertains to teaching and learning. It's easy to isolate teachers from one another and see our courses as islands unto themselves. However, a university priding itself on dedicated undergraduate education should find a way to create an ongoing discussion and support structure for scholars to engage with one another in issues that are deeper and more enduring than how to create an online chat room. To make this happen, I need to invest in the social capital within my own institution in order to push culture in a new direction, but I'm unsure about where to make the deposit. We have human capital and we have an existing infrastructure, but I need to create the mechanism for these to interact. Moreover, I want this to be an endemic mechanism, rather than one that is periodic, starting and stopping with each workshop on student learning styles or how to use an overhead projector.

When people ask if I'm excited to get started, I tell them I'm nervous and excited because I could really screw up things. They reply trying to reassure me, thinking that I'm questioning my own abilities. Rather, I'm excited for the possibility of making a mess of things, because I think that it's only in this possibility that something great could be accomplished. I'd like to be so bold as to make people wonder what on earth I'm doing, but also to create enough intrigue and substance that there is something worth personally investing in. Ideas about how to start is really where I need advice; but because "how do I start?" is such a vague, open, and potentially useless question (especially since I started on July 1!), I'll offer a few guiding questions. These all intertwine with one another, and one likely leads to another:

- There are great examples of campus programs for professional development, such as the Outreach Scholars Academy program at the University of New Hampshire (see <http://www.unh.edu/outreach-scholars/>), previously under the direction of Eleanor Abrams. What other models, either in academe or elsewhere, could I be looking to? What can I learn from these?
- I want to reorient a campus towards continual professional learning, rather than periodic professional development (Webster-Wright, 2009). How do I give this meaning in a context where professional inertia and disciplinary segregation may be a normal part of the culture? In the context of analyzing Crossroads, we've played with ideas such as "communities of practice," guilds of crafts(wo)men, and even imagery of superheroes wearing well ironed capes. These theoretical stances each have limited success for describing this conference, but these or similar ideas might help me to push forward in my new campus endeavor.
- The overarching question here may be how to create a conduit between my office and the community at large. We have invested in scholars to teach in our university and we have an investment into programs and personnel that I direct. But how do I take the programs I may want to develop, along with a reconception of how to portray professional learning, and communicate this to the campus? This is not simply a question about the best way to distribute advertising materials, but a question of how to foster a culture in which my office is an integral, rather than ancillary, part of what instructors incorporate into their professional lives.

Another connection to social capital I am attempting to strive for in this work I could best term as "deep literacy" (to play on "deep time"). For those deeply literate in science, there is no separation from experiences with nature and the ability of those experiences to generate an authentically spiritual connection. It is the divinity that surrounds us that moves us to inquiry. A scientifically informed person swims through miracles every second of their life. Science education can and must afford students, of all ages, opportunities to engage their spiritual selves in the pursuit of a deep and meaningful understanding about their place in the cosmos.