

- UC-B, Winter, '17, Academic Futures (non-)"White Paper" (make that color "UC-B-sky")
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## The Classroom Theorist Meets Future Star Practitioners – and Peers?

As kindly invited during a pre-Thanksgiving Academic Futures conversation (this one focusing on RAPs, wherein I teach as program faulty in Sewall Hall), I am happy to articulate what I hurriedly offered aloud there in the University Club, regarding an underappreciated but potentially critical function of a “teaching faculty” toward mission – that is, toward the part of our university mission that seeks to not only *develop* knowledge, but to also *promote* our findings, ultimately into everyday practice.

Could a teaching faculty, at a Research-One institution, not just relay, but *produce*, knowledge – an expressly practical knowledge, at that? I do it all the time, and I know I’m not alone. The question arises thusly, how to promote this practical knowledge beyond the classroom walls wherein it blossoms?

In other words, I would like to validate (and celebrate, maybe even elevate) the role of our university’s *teaching faculty* toward both goals: producing knowledge and influencing practice. (Please note, sensing the irony of the name “white paper” for a genre markedly inclusive of myriad diversity issues, not to mention environmental concerns, I have underlain, beneath this text, a watermark of a favorite color and hopeful photo I took myself, of the blue sky over UC-B).

Indeed, I orient, in this essay, toward our institutional goal of positively impacting the spheres of business, technology, education, and social institutions by cultivating an ever-developing techné, an informed mode of *practice*, such that “what we *know*” (in academe) reflects favorably in “what we *do*” (in the world). Holding to these goals and sensitivities, as are well articulated by the university in many places (and other “white” papers in this gathering), I propose that we are overlooking a potent resource: our undergraduates, engaged.

Engaged in what? I do not answer “engaged in their learning.” That idealized process receives plenty of attention, already. Instead, I propose that we aim, especially when seeking to inform practice, even higher than that. Let’s not settle for a planned and otherwise courted “*transference* of knowledge,” instead aiming for a richer classroom collaboration, with sights set on the *production* of knowledge (just as, for easy comparison, we might court and expect in our graduate classrooms).

Please understand that my present line of thinking and contribution to this ongoing Futures discussion arises from a scholarly/doctoral focus on communication-meets-pedagogy-in-a-process-called-dialogue (my doctoral work, here at UC-B, class of ’11) and also upon a massive corpus of classroom teaching and experimentation, well exceeding, over the past three decades, some 350+ university course sections taught. That’s a lot of groups led. Of course, if not a lot *develops* in one’s classroom, then such numbers mean little. So I focus there: on the development within these groups, not just their sheer numbers, but you will have to look pretty far to find a “practical theorist” with so much practice in the rear-view mirror.

I refer to expressly “dialogic” (everybody’s voice matters) processes of *furthering* what we know and – in the case of the undergraduate classroom – of fortifying *how* we *use* what we know, in practice enriched by university-approved values of difference, sustainability, and excellence. I buy into those core values, and, more than that, I love to produce *outcomes* that show them in living color.

When it works, in my classroom, students participate (engage) in this exploration; they do not simply drink from the fountain. They co-create the new, maybe chancing, themselves, upon “Eureka!” but surely participating in the amalgamation of teaching-learning that aids the “principal investigator” (me) at hand. We push on the practice, but we likewise push on the theory. Our arena, in classes taught by an invigorated “teaching faculty,” centers inescapably upon the practical, but many of us strive, also, for theoretical breakthroughs; as our researching colleagues inspire us, we seek to repay the favor.

We do not “dumb down” to the practical; we smarten up to it. Trained, right here, in not just theory but in meta-theory (theory about theory), I, personally, love to push theory beyond the known, and I have a lot of help (brilliant colleagues and some not-too-shabby students), all around me, to do so. I do like the name “classroom theorist,” and I’m sure that many other “teaching faculty” among us are likewise inclined and proud of our dual focus.

As we all seem to know and appreciate, many excellent “teaching faculty” focus on pedagogical innovation, seeking to refine teaching methods and practices therein. But the main thrust of this essay seeks to promote the value – and to open possibilities for better utilization – of the kind of teaching faculty who *also* feel a joyous pull toward *furthering the knowledge* in our “cognate” disciplines.

As some notable contributors to this Futures conversation have asserted, we must (if wanting to impact not just theory, but also real-world practice) strive to reach outward from academe. So, when we consider various “non-researchers” (e.g., executives we could train, “boot camp” style, as outreach) whom the academy might entreat into our lair of *practical* knowledge, let us not overlook that massive group of same who are *already here*: our undergrads. A handful, some with our help and encouragement, will seek specialized graduate study, but most won’t. They come here to gain abilities and credentials to aid their progress through the practical world.

They seek the practical; in a deeper way of thinking, they *are* the practical. And when they, in our classes, the cost of which they (or someone, possibly us, through tax dollars) dearly paid, help to *invent* improved practice, they move into the world a different actor, namely, the one we wanted: an informed do-er and lifelong learner/contributor.

Allow me to clarify something. When we work out thorny puzzles not *for* our students, but *with* them, we treat the classroom much like a laboratory. Indeed, we might encounter a breakthrough. In the classroom, just as in the lab, not all experiments produce breakthroughs. But they all teach us *something* – perhaps of interest pedagogically (informing instructors and administrators ever seeking improved teaching), or perhaps of interest to our disciplinary scholarship, itself – pushing course “knowledge” beyond the pale, past anything to be found in any textbook – especially regarding knowledge “contextualized” to the *present* group!

We, of this “teaching faculty” stripe, function as dedicated instructors and advocates, yes – but we also love to develop fresh disciplinary insights and theory. That is, we seek, just like our formal “researcher” department-mates, to further what is known in our field. We, in fact, often collaborate (formally or informally) with our tenured peers to spark and inspire each other; we and they both appreciate (at least as I have encountered, grateful to say) that *we are all in this together*.

I propose that, especially in an R-1 institution as UC-B, a “teaching faculty” seeks to use the classroom as a lab, not just to “instruct” but to further the known and, especially, its usefulness, day by day. We, who accept my premise, are the university’s “classroom theorists.” In the words of John Lennon, as recently

analyzed by a freshman of mine (Fall, '17!) in her rhetorical analysis of the song, "Imagine," "You may say I'm a dreamer / but I'm not the only one."

But here's the rub: how to more widely *share* what we classroom theorists (at a place like this, there are bound to be lots of us; that's my premise) develop and push what we know and work to know better, to get it even further out there in the *world of practice*, especially since what we do derives from exactly there: the world of practice?

It's hard to teach eight to ten sections a year (or maybe fifteen a year, in places where the rules are more lax, as I personally did for almost twenty years straight) and also "research and write for the journals" (articles that others in this series of white papers have opined that maybe fifteen people across the planet will actually read)? How can we work together to energize, and also tap the extant resources of, the potent "classroom/lab of teaching and learning," toward informing societal practice? I would love to add this question to the ongoing rethinking of the "Future" of this university – and of all universities.

Perhaps an insight into the answer sits right in front of our noses, in such openly inviting (and openly divergent in form) "meeting places" as availed by this series of all-comers-welcome white (or whatever color) papers. Thank you, Emily C., for the invitation, at our RAP forum, to write this essay. Without your encouragement, these words were never spliced together into the present form – or in any form. It does help if someone asks, as you did. I find a lot of hope there.

But I think that answering this question will take an added and clearly delineated initiative: some kind of upgraded meeting place for ideas, maybe online, maybe face to face, probably both. Where can I, if so inclined, share the knowledge – both in pedagogy and in course content – that I am working, with a lot of eager help (from my students), to develop in my classroom?

You might find amazing, for example, my recently congealed theory of "active voice," which concretized right before my eyes – an overnight sensation 30 years in the making – just this past term. Eureka, indeed! Where to put it, here among peers, even if informally, and then, hopefully, beyond? Teaching ten classes a year, I may need a little support as to the publicity/publication. Where to find such help? Shall we have a teaching-faculty-idea blog, as a springboard?

I do not know the answer, but I hope my peers, reading this, find it a worthwhile question to pursue. I'd be glad to help, if I can, in any way. A lot of other teachers here at UC-B and I are not just teaching, but also developing, knowledge. We are doing it right now with our future-practitioner undergrads, not just for the 15 or so researchers who might care. Where else to put it, for like-minded colleagues and theorists of the scholarly, but also practical, sort? That's the question, if not the answer, that I would like to contribute to this discussion. Thanks – Mike Zizzi, Sewall RAP and Program for Writing and Rhetoric.