

Cultivating the Teaching Culture of the School: Admissions and Faculty

Willie James Jennings and Paul O. Myhre

The goal of this first session is to reflect together on how the ecology of faculty life might be drawn more directly into cultivating a practice of reflective teaching.

In the cycle of a graduate student, moving from admissions through graduation and alumni life, our focus in this session will be on two moments, (1) the admission process, and (2) major aspects of their life within the ecology of the institution. Our goal with both these moments is to heighten your reflexivity (your reflective thinking) about teacher formation.

1) The Admission Process

This is first place where we bring evaluative judgments about potential doctoral students, but it is rarely a place where we bring an evaluative process about their potential as teachers. One of the assumptions I was introduced to was the one about the “natural” connection of a strong student becoming a strong teacher. That assumption also said that a weak teacher was inevitably a weak scholar and a weak doctoral student. Of course, “weak” and “strong” are rarely defined in ways that are clear with this assumption.

So the first question we want to ask ourselves is what evaluative process is in place during the work of admission and how might we draw it toward the work of teacher formation?

Let’s take this in three aspects:

What do the admission artifacts tell us (and what do we want to know)?

Exercise: Think of two artifacts that might be used to gauge a potential student aptitude or capacity for teaching?

Think up an instrument that would allow you to tease out from potential students or newly admitted students their aptitude or interest in teaching.

What do your faculty and administrators know make for a successful graduate student?

Exercise: Name two skills necessary to successfully navigate your doctoral program and the realities of your particular institution and connect them to being an effective teacher.

What are the expectations graduate students bring to your doctoral program?

Exercise: Think of specific statements that could be added to the website (or other sites where you communicate the character) of the doctoral program that indicate expectations about teacher formation. Do some actual wordsmithing.

2) The Ecology of the Institution (Refer to Chart)

I find faculty members to be endlessly interesting creatures. Had I not been a theologian I think I would have been a sociologist who studies faculty behavior in terms of their intellectual work and its relationship to their everyday practices and in relation to the dynamics of institutional life. In fact, I suggest we think about those three elements (1) the intellectual work of a faculty, (2)

their every practices (social, political, and curricular), and (3) the dynamics of institutional life as the crucial sites for weaving together an effective practice of reflective teaching, more precisely working at the intersection of those sites for weaving together reflective practice.

It would probably be better not to think of cultivating a practice of reflective teaching in doctoral students as the creation of a teacher training program, because that language seems to conjure up imagines of extraction (taking students out and putting them in some program) and doesn't seem to reach into the imaginative capacities of a faculty.

I think the best outcome of anything we do with faculty comes only when we tap into their collective wisdom and imagination. And I think the best practices forming doctoral students into effective teachers comes when we create a dance drawing on the collective wisdom and imagination of the faculty and the collective resourceful and wisdom of graduate students.

Yes, graduate students - please note something about the position of the graduate students. They are located in a very powerful position from which to live and learn. One quick observation is that all the places we visited - very resourceful students who know a lot about the faculty.

(1) How do we put that position and that knowledge to helpful use? (2) How do we tap into the collective wisdom and imaginative power of a faculty? Timing is everything. When and where might reflection on teaching and the teaching life enter into the ecology of a faculty?

I want to highlight three sites of connectivity between these three elements that present us with some great possibilities to cultivate a reflective teaching practice. With all of these sites we want a greater level of transparency between faculty processes of reflection, the complexities of their lives, and the complexities of graduate student life. They need to be able to see more clearly what the other can see. Now in order to do this as administrators you have to think synthetically and not simply mechanically.

First, course preparation and construction: The Site of Composition

This is an obvious place to think about teacher formation, but we rarely imagine deeper levels of transparency here. So a few questions we might bring to this site situated between the everyday practices of faculty members and their intellectual work.

What are the specifics (when, where, how) of course composition for your faculty? Who would you need in the room to help you figure that out? How might we bring doctoral students into the *compositional logics* faculty members deploy as they create their syllabi? How might *course composition* be elevated as a fundamental part of *introducing* graduate students to a discipline? How might we *frame* teaching goals/outcomes within the disciplinary interests of faculty members?

Exercise: Think of three ways to involve graduate students in the process of course composition.

Here we want to think about the everyday practices of our faculty colleagues and search to discern ways to open up this compositional work.

For example, what is the "how, when and why" of text selection for your colleagues? How might we draw this regular practice of faculty life into a moment of transparency for the doctoral students? What work does each text do in the framing of learning experiences for the student? What if professors had space and context to walk students through their thinking behind the syllabus? Or what if faculty members had space to highlight one crucial compositional move their making in their courses?

What are some of the *challenges* that direct faculty energy in unproductive ways at this point? The politics of selection – of course, (who teaches what course); of teaching assistant or student teacher, (faculty pick their favorites); and of texts (intellectual wars being carried out through texts); Mind numbing repetition of basic courses

Second, course management: The Site of Performance (Classroom/Syllabus)

Course management brings us into the heart of the everyday for most faculty members and here we want to think about how to tap into the energy of teaching. At this point, I think we have to face the real question of surrogacy.

Does your institution imagine that the work of training the doctoral students (to be teachers) is the work of the whole faculty or just the few (elites)? If it is the work of the whole faculty then the site of performance should draw from the teaching performances of the whole faculty. If it is not the work of the whole faculty, what does that mean for the kind of formation you are actually offering your doctoral students?

How then does one draw from the teaching performances of the whole faculty? Here there must be an administrative intentionality that I think all doctoral programs are capable of deploying but few tap into the full energy of the faculty. Again: Who in your institutions knows the teaching performance of the faculty (academic dean, DGS, graduate students, recent alums, even colleagues).

Exercise: Think of three events that could be created to highlight an aspect of teaching performance.

So some questions at this point might be: (Here two levels)

How might the syllabi that are collected by the institution give places to stage reflection on the learning process?

How might classroom performance become a matter of "safe" reflection?

(I say safe because not every faculty member is in the political or emotional position to imagine a safe space for this kind of self-reflexivity.) This need not however be structured so that a faculty member is made completely vulnerable. Here we can make use of best practices strategies that highlight someone who has worked their art to a high level. Important matters to consider would be:

*How to read a class

*communication/responding to the unanticipated

*embodiment

*How to see teachable moments for the professor

What are some of the *challenges* that direct faculty energy in unproductive ways at this point?

The uneven distribution of power and cultural capital (disciplinary differences)

*We know the distribution of cultural capital differs for every institution which affects the communicative power of classroom performances

*We also know that at many institutions the hierarchies of the faculty shape classroom performance

*some faculty place themselves in the position of being the grand judges of the teaching of other faculty members.

Customs of being unreflective about teaching

The body is missing

Third, course evaluation (within a process of assessment) The Backstage

This third site is one of the most under-utilized places to think about a reflective practice. It is really important to debrief from the semester. This is not simply a matter of course evaluation but of pulling yourself back together at the end of the semester. And at this point we have some marvelous opportunities to think with graduate students about teaching. So here some of the crucial questions might be: (Again at two levels)

How might we draw end of semester grading activity into a wider reflection on assessment of learning goals?

How do we move the question from “how did they do” to “what do we think they learned? and what specific things do you think we did to help them learn?”

But at a second level: How might we create opportunities to bring the whole person into the process of assessment?

Exercise: Think of three “end-of-semester” moments that might be used to reflect on teaching or the teaching life.

*What parts of the semester were really difficult for you and why?

*What strategies did you deploy to get through it?

What are some of the *challenges* that direct faculty energy in unproductive ways at this point?

No institutional space for this – the rhythms of teaching leave no space to reflect on practice

Moving into survival mode as we come to the end of the semester with deadlines approaching

The learning goals/outcomes never matched with the course assignments or its evaluative artifacts, so conversation cannot really get at an assessment of learning

Difficult students or cases become the focus of concern and drain the last of the end of semester energy away from assessment conversations

Finally, as a part of assessment is there a way to build into the regular rhythms of institutional life conversations about the teaching efforts of graduate students?

The challenge here is that most institutions have nothing in place to actually mark the entrance of faculty into the important work of training doctoral students to be teachers. When you think about the actual task that a (graduate) faculty has taken onto itself, training women and men to teach, you would think that something ought to happen in the actual rhythm of institutional life to mark this entrance.

Recently, I had two doctoral students come to tell me that they have given their first lectures and how thankful they were for my help. But what I realized is that institutions should have ways to mark these moments not only for the graduate student but for the reflective practice of teaching.