

Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge

Volume 9

Issue 3 *Teaching Transformations 2011: Contributions from the May 2011 Joint Annual Conference of the Center for Innovative Teaching (CIT) and Educational Technology (EdTech) at UMass Boston*

Article 1

2011

Editors' Note: Becoming Innovative, Technologically Savvy Teachers

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Recommended Citation

Tamdgidi, Mohammad H. (2011) "Editors' Note: Becoming Innovative, Technologically Savvy Teachers," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol9/iss3/1>

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Editors' Note: Becoming Innovative, Technologically Savvy Teachers

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Abstract: This editors' note presents a synopsis of the articles published in the Summer 2011 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*—a fourth of its annual “Teaching Transformations” series. The issue brings together selected proceedings of the joint CIT (Center for Innovative Teaching)/EdTech (Educational Technology) conference held on May 12, 2011, at UMass Boston. The editors' note describes the reasons for the bringing together of the two separately organized conferences in the past. It also reports on the new name adopted by CIT (from its former name, the Center for the Improvement of Teaching). The papers include a variety of contributions on topics such as: innovative techniques to enrich the dynamics of classroom discussions; “addressing plagiarism in a digital age”; cross-cultural/national, cross-institutional teaching of a course using online educational tools; “Islamicizing” a Euro/American curriculum”; modernizing classical language education using the communicative language teaching (CLT) technique in conjunction with new educational technologies; teaching about race, caste and gender in light of the findings of anthropological and genetic sciences; and suggestions for online student collaborations based on the experience of teaching a Critical Thinking course.

The present, Summer 2011 issue of *Human Architecture*—a fourth of its annual “Teaching Transformations” series—brings together selected proceedings of the joint CIT/EdTech conference held on May 12, 2011, at UMass Boston. How the two, separately held conferences in the past came to be brought together is a story worth telling

before elaborating on the selected contributions from their joint meeting published in this journal issue.

As many of our readers know, Boston's culture of valuing teaching and learning has been supported by two annual conferences, one that is usually offered in January by UMass Boston's Center for Innovative

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Teaching (CIT, formerly the “Center for the Improvement of Teaching”) and a second, in May, which is sponsored by IT/Educational Technology (EdTech) and the University Library, which focuses specifically on the uses of educational technology in teaching and research.

CIT had organized, as in the past, its Annual Conference on Teaching for Transformation and scheduled it for January 2011. However, because of severe snow conditions on the day of the conference, the university was forced to close. As a result, and in order to not cancel the conference altogether, the CIT Advisory Board explored alternative plans and dates for the conference. With IT Liaison and CIT Advisory Board member Ellie Kutz, CIT Director Vivian Zamel met regularly with representatives from Educational Technology, which holds its annual conference at the end of the spring semester, and the co-organizers collaborated together to hold a joint CIT/EdTech Conference on May 12, 2011, for the first time.

The resulting conference was a vibrant, dynamic, and successful event, energized by the contributions of CIT’s and EdTech’s constituencies. The conference offered 30 concurrent sessions throughout the day, with presenters from many institutions of higher education in the New England area. The sessions included presenters from a large number of disciplines and colleges—from English and Art to Biology and Management—who addressed a wide range and broad spectrum of ideas, such as: addressing issues of identity; engaging learners in large lectures; promoting student collaboration online; exploring new technologies to enhance learning; new resources for teaching and scholarship available through the Healey Library; teaching writing and providing student support in writing centers; addressing issues of race, culture and religion in the classroom; and to the use of particular technology tools such as Webworks mathemat-

ics software and Camtasia for capturing classroom lectures. Several sessions of the joint conference included students on their panels, giving these students the opportunity to present alongside faculty at a professional conference. And several consisted of panelists from different academic disciplines, thus modeling the importance of these kinds of collaborations. In addition, the Composition Program, which often holds its own conference in May, joined the conference, where many of its faculty members were already scheduled to present.

The innovative meeting of pedagogical conversations and technological know-how in the combined conference could not have been more timely symbolically, for this also coincided with the thoughtful steps the CIT Advisory Board members took last year in fine-tuning its name (from the “Center for the Improvement of Teaching” to the “Center for Innovative Teaching”) in line with its long-standing substantive attention to and appreciation of the significance of creativity and innovation for the improvement of teaching.

The contributions included in this issue of *Human Architecture* reflect the combined developments as described above regarding the joint conference and CIT’s new name. Thanks to EdTech’s innovative resources and skills, many of the actual sessions of the conference may be viewed and/or listened to directly by visiting UMass Boston’s IT webpage, <http://umb-media.wordpress.com/2011-citeducational-technology-conference/>. This adds significant new venues to bringing CIT conference proceedings online, in addition to the efforts begun four years ago to publish in hard copy and freely online, and in major academic databases, selected contributions from the annual CIT conferences in a dedicated issue of this journal. In recognition of evolving expectations within this newly combined conference, the co-editors of this issue have chosen to include a range of contribution formats for conference pro-

ceedings, from more fully developed journal articles on a topic to exploratory inquiries to accounts of teaching practices.

Being innovative often requires consciously problematizing and disrupting existing and taken-for-granted patterns of doing things, and this also applies when advancing innovative practices of teaching. In "Breaking the Rules of Discussion: Examples of Rethinking the Student-Centered Classroom," co-authors LaMont Egle, Evelyn Navarre and Cheryl Nixon explore new models of classroom discussion—some of which may seem to go against taken-for-granted patterns of discussion-based pedagogy as usually perceived—in order to enrich this vital teaching practice. Starting with the assumption that most teachers value classroom discussion, the authors point to the reality that often open-ended discussion strategies may result in patterns of discourse with some students dominating the conversations at the cost of silencing of others, going off topic, expressing predictable and repeated opinions and arguments, and, in short, failing to meet the goals of fostering "multiplicity, diversity, complexity, opportunity, and democratic process" (p. 3) in classroom discussion. To rectify this, teachers often resort to techniques such as small group discussions, calling on specific students, and other strategies that the authors report on by reviewing some literature in the field. It is interesting to see how the authors as teachers disrupt the existing rules and expectations of classroom discussion to innovatively save and deepen this vital aspect of classroom teaching and learning experience. Navarre taps into the Native American storytelling tradition to "people" the classroom by sharing (seemingly at the cost of students' time for discussion) "storytelling riffs" from the lives of the authors of the readings so that the conversations grow deeper, become historically more informed, and intellectually more tangible for an increasing number of students join-

ing the conversation; now they find it more accessible to actively relate to readings as ideas of real people with multiplicities of selves and voices than dry and abstract words monotonously etched on and read from paper. Egle, standing by the blackboard and "mapping" students' conversations in real-time, finds it, again as paradoxically "limiting" as it appears, to "craftily" "limit" the discussions by purposely taking convenient and habitual topics and discussions "off the table" so students now have to think creatively and with forethought in classroom discussions about new themes and ideas, such that by the end, even their "typical" arguments are revisited and reinterpreted in new light. And Nixon unexpectedly finds the value of quizzing discussions, and pre-fabricated discussion reports in small section TA-run sessions, to help students "idea-invent" amid new, lively and spontaneously joined discussions in large classes.

In their "Addressing Plagiarism in A Digital Age," Eleanor Kutz, Wayne Rhodes, Stephen Sutherland, and Vivian Zamel introduce new perspectives, insights, and tools for understanding and preventing plagiarism in a digital age. Rhodes demonstrates how influencing, borrowing, and remixing of sources are not only predominating practices in musical and artistic creations, but also more generally prevalent and at the heart of all intellectual and academic activity. In doing so, he makes a good case for laying aside misunderstandings that throw away the baby of creative use of existing sources with the bath water of combating plagiarism in an increasingly digital age. Zamel further problematizes the presumptive notion that students are consciously and purposely engaging in plagiaristic behavior, by contextualizing why students from different cultural, pedagogical, or even personal backgrounds may resort to styles of writing that may be regarded by others as involving plagiarism. Turning the initial instances of such behav-

ior by some students into learning experiences for them (by, for instance, assigning readings about teachers' and students' experiences with plagiarism), Zamel practices a pedagogy centered on challenging conventional assumptions about student plagiarism in order to explore new opportunities to teach students about culture, education, and their own lives. Sutherland provides a series of helpful preventative strategies involving course design that can reduce the possibility of plagiarism in student assignments, and Kutz critically examines prevalent anti-plagiarism software tools such as Turnitin and SafeAssign to point to their value more as self-educational tools for students, requiring faculty guidance in their creative use and careful interpretation of their results, rather than as automatic and easy plagiarism-catching tools.

“Two Markets, Two Universities’: An Experimental, Cross-Cultural, Cross-Institutional Course Using Online Educational Technologies” by Edward J. Romar, Annamaria Sas, Irene Yukhananov, Alan Girelli, and Teddy Hristov, reports on and discusses the “development and implementation of a technology-based, cross-cultural and cross-institutional undergraduate marketing course” offered by the University of Massachusetts Boston and the University of Pannonia in Veszprem, Hungary. This study of an experiment in cross-cultural learning and collaboration is well-grounded in the literature in business education, presents a clear picture of course goals and of the teaching context, and addresses the use of specific tools within that larger pedagogical context (vs. isolating the tools themselves). The study begins to make important inroads into the challenges of using new technologies in education in a cross-cultural, cross-university setting, addressing issues related to the cultural obstacles encountered, the nature of student accomplishments, and the role of instructors in contributing to the collabora-

tion. As noted by co-editor Eleanor Kutz, “Looking at the literature on cross-cultural collaboration and the effects of cultural context on collaborative endeavors, and then refining this or similar surveys of student participants to gain information that would contribute to our understanding of these issues, would be a great follow-up perhaps in the next iteration of this work.”

In her “‘Islamicizing’ A Euro/American Curriculum,” author Mary Ball Howkins challenges the prevailing assumptions regarding the extent to which the Euro/American Curriculum, particularly in the area of the visual arts, must take account of the strong roots of the Western culture in the Islamic tradition. In her own words, “Standard art history survey texts include historical sections on Islamic visual traditions but decline to integrate new information on the ways in which medieval Islamic scholars contributed to the foundation of the 15th and 16th century Renaissances in Europe, or the ways in which global trade and cultural contact influenced the appearance of visual art of that time and region, and in later centuries.” (p. 49). In Tamdgidi’s view, Howkins’ sharing the insight of how the apparent “conflation” of religion and science in Islam made the pursuit of science by religious thinkers plausible and acceptable speaks volumes to the traditional and stereotyped view of the origins of the separation of the disciplines and the rise of the science vs. religion dichotomy in the West. As Howkins puts it, “Early Islamic scholars’ claim that faith and reason could co-exist without undue tension, a claim taken up by liberal medieval scholars in Europe, laid a foundation of Renaissance secularization and Humanism” (ibid.). It is this innovative quality of the author’s insights and willingness to let it permeate her teaching practice that is especially instructive. Considering the insights from the earlier essay on “Addressing Plagiarism in a Digital Age,” it is interesting to note how some of the influence and bor-

rowing received from Islam's golden age have permeated modern Western intellectual tradition but often without due credit. According to co-editor Eleanor Kutz, "the paper offers an insightful discussion of the ways in which the contributions of Islam to modern thought has been essentially neglected or misrepresented in the curriculum and some wonderful examples of the ways in which Howkins countered that in her own art history courses. There is much evidence of powerful 'borrowings' in medieval literature as well [Kutz's original field], but Howkins' larger enterprise goes beyond identifying examples to rethinking the larger understanding of the role of Islam in Western cultural history. The author's own pedagogical narrative re. her approaches to 'Islamicizing' her own courses offers a great example for others." Similarly, co-editor Vivian Zamel considered this "a splendid essay, recounting in rich and detailed ways the way the author introduces students to the multiplicity and inventiveness of Islamic art (and science), and importantly, her compelling reasons for doing so. A wonderful piece that underlines the problematic nature of traditional tendencies to create dichotomies."

Apostolos Koutropoulos, in his "Modernizing Classical Language Education: Communicative Language Teaching & Educational Technology Integration in Classical Greek," challenges classical language teaching and curriculum to revisit the traditional grammar translation methods that have been pursued for the past three decades, advocating instead, based on relevant literature and the experience of auditing an introductory course in Ancient Greek, methodological modifications in favor of a "communicative language teaching" (CLT) model. As Koutropoulos argues, "The current approach to teaching classical languages is the Grammar Translation approach, an approach which is hit-or-miss because it is not founded on any particular theoretical underpinnings and it views lan-

guage in a technocratic, grammar centric, approach. Switching to the Communicative Language Teaching approach for the teaching of classical languages affords us the ability to use language in its totality, not just for reading classical works, but also interacting with those works and using all four dimensions of language (reading, writing, speaking and listening) to improve the acquisition of the language. In addition, there is a focus shift, from a teacher-centric focus in the Grammar Translation method, to a learner centric focus with CLT" (p. 66).

In her "Why Is It Important to Teach about Race, Caste and Gender? An Anthropologist's Viewpoint," Tara Devi S. Ashok, a specialist in Human Genetics, argues that findings of science have failed to find any solid grounds for use of "race" as a category, and advocates the term "ethnicity" instead to cherish both cultural differences as well as commonalities among peoples. In her own words, "I knew that I must teach about these topics in all my classes as no student should go without knowing all about the biology of these issues. I highlight biology in particular, as that would make it clear in scientific terms as to what scientific understandings underlie these concepts. All should be able to understand that no ethnicity is inferior or superior, and no one should have gender bias, and today we need to address this latter issue even more urgently than before because gender today can be much more than just being a girl or a boy" (p. 72).

Finally, Bob Schoenberg draws on his experience of teaching an online course on Critical Thinking at UMass Boston, to identify the benefits of student online collaboration while describing various collaborative online tools that can be used for the purpose. As part of his conclusions, and having asked why some faculty members resist teaching online, Schoenberg recommends that, "For faculty wanting to ease into online education, a good choice might be teaching a hybrid class. With this type of

arrangement, part of the class takes place in a face-to-face classroom, while some activities take place online. A good online activity might make use of a Discussion Board or Blog, where the instructor could post a question generating a discussion that couldn't take place in class due to time constraints. Such an activity would complement a regular face-to-face class and give both the students and instructor some exposure to online education" (p. 89).

The 2010-2011 academic year was in many pleasant ways 'new' and innovative for CIT and Educational Technology, expressing not only the mutual rediscovery of the value of their different, substantive and formal/technological endeavors in favor of teaching excellence, but also, as symbolized by the change in CIT's name, a self-conscious recognition of the significance of innovation itself as an important ingredient for meaningful improvements in teaching. Co-editors of this issue sincerely hope that readers will find that this appreciation of joint and innovative collaborations is reflected in the contributions published in this "Teaching Transformations 2011" issue of *Human Architecture*.