CASE STUDY 2

Resilient Students, Resilient Communities

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In 1991, Donna received an International Award for Teaching Excellence presented by the International Conference on Teaching Excellence at Austin, Texas. Since 1995 she has worked on two grants from the Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges, "The Faculty Role: From the Margin to the Mainstream" and "2 + 4 = Service on Common Ground." The focus of the grants is to expand and strengthen service-learning initiatives in community colleges across the nation. Donna received the Thomas Ehrlich Faculty Award for Service Learning in 1999 for her work in connecting service in the community to student learning in classrooms. The interview for this case study took place in February 2000.

Using resilience as a theme I ask the students in my abnormal psychology course to complete either service-learning projects in the community or more traditional assignments. Throughout the semester, they collaborate in teams to analyze the authentic dilemmas that grow out of these assignments, using multiple perspectives. Team members integrate course material, propose specific solutions, and identify community resources that support resilience. With this exchange of information, reinforced and informed by my written impressions of the class, assignments crafted specifically to assess student understanding of resilience, and classroom observations performed by an anthropologist-colleague, I am trying to foster a dynamic learning environment that results in deep, long-lasting learning.

Framing the Question

Several issues and questions weave through my inquiry. The first is the dilemma of getting students in an abnormal psychology course to appreciate the complexity and the human aspects of the problems they read about in their textbooks. This dilemma,

in turn, prompted me to begin using service learning, in other words, trying to provide students with a better sense of the realities behind what they were reading by asking them to learn in community settings. This strategy brought with it another issue, which is that it's not feasible to require the service-learning component for all my students; some have this "real-world" learning experience and some do not. So I'm interested in how I can get the learning from different settings to complement each other, making differences among students' learning a source of strength and further learning.

Another strand of issues involves the fact that students in the course are easily overwhelmed by the problems they read about, or see in the community, or experience in their own lives. Abnormal psychology is mostly about the *problems* that people face, and to counter that I tried organizing the course around the more positive concept of resiliency. I'm now teaching this version of the course for the third time. It's a more hopeful and hope-giving version of the course, and it engages students effectively in the course content. For example, an older student hesitant to join the class stated that she changed her mind immediately when the topic of resilience was introduced. She said, "It was a sense of moving right to the goal [that] made me want to stay in class and learn more."

Another issue—and this is an issue in the field of psychology in general—is public policy. Many of the topics we study in abnormal psychology have policy implications, but in most courses those implications are never addressed. I aimed to change this. The focus on resilience starts to generate questions students wouldn't have posed otherwise. Students begin to ask, "Why aren't we doing more to develop resilience in our communities and ourselves? What works best?" As students address these questions they begin to develop what Altman (1996) calls "socially responsive knowledge," an understanding of social issues in communities and the experience and skills to act on social problems.

Finally, all of these issues are shaped by my own work in the community, as a therapist dealing with problems in the schools and with people. I'm very aware of the difference between the textbook presentation of disorders and the actual experience of individuals with disorders in the community. The need to bring students to deeper, more authentic forms of understanding—as we discussed a good deal in the Carnegie Scholars Program—is something I'm strongly committed to. I see students go out to work in the community and they say, "Gee, I didn't really understand this when we read about it in class; it's much different, not at all what I expected." For example, a student commented that the "textbook presents disorders in organized categories but when I deal with people in the community, it's much more confusing. People belong in many categories and a lot of them overlap." In class students learn labels for things (a client has generalized anxiety disorder or bipolar disorder), but those of us who work in community settings know that the labels are not always useful because there are multiple ways of describing things, and labels are shorthand for a much more complicated reality. In my final Carnegie essay, "Swamps and Scholarship," I traced a student's struggles with explaining complicated realities; these struggles provide a window into the student's understanding of course material as it unfolded over the semester.

Behind all of these issues is a central dilemma I'm grappling with—which is that when teachers expose students to authentic learning they also lose control. And that makes assessment much more difficult. My scholarship of teaching project is an attempt to understand more about what this process of authentic learning entails.

The Context: A Course in Abnormal Psychology

The foundation for my scholarship of teaching project was the redesign of my abnormal psychology course. As I mentioned, a central element in this redesign was the introduction of resiliency as an organizing theme and a new lens for students to view the field. I began experimenting with this idea several semesters ago and have made refinements since then in an attempt to integrate the theme a little more tightly into some of the rest of the subject matter. These changes have resulted in a new course guide.

I've also introduced a three-part critical incident group project. Students work in teams of two or three throughout the semester. A student working in the community describes a critical incident from a service-learning site, other students relate the incident to material from the course, and then all students reflect on new understanding as a result of the process. The critical incident examples have been complex and multifaceted (for example, a seven-year-old with behavioral problems who had already been in five foster homes, a seventh grader reading at a second-grade level, and a middle-aged man with schizophrenia who did not take his medication). Students recorded their discussions and then worked to create a final paper. The majority of students were able to link the incident to course material effectively; the explanations of "new understanding" showed more variation and depth among student groups than they had in past classes with students working individually. For example, students working at community sites often make assumptions about an experience based on the facial expressions and vocal tones of people involved. In the group project, partners challenge these assumptions, using a more critical analysis to work toward alternative explanations. Out of their community work, these students would in turn present authentic problems to classroom partners, motivating them to find workable solutions. The classroom partners often used articles or Internet sites to suggest a solution to a specific community dilemma. This exchange of information into and out of the classroom created a dynamic learning environment that required all students to consider multiple perspectives while reflecting on course material. Because groups discussed the critical incident project throughout the semester, they were able to work through ideas gradually, to test out theories, and to appreciate that most complex human problems do not have easy answers.

I've also added a new form of assessment this semester, based largely on the discussions Carnegie Scholars have had about teaching for understanding, and what constitutes "deep" understanding. For the students who are not working in a community setting, I designed a final project that asks them to create a program that will engender resilience on a particular problem in some identified age group. For example, some of the students are interested in creating a drop-out prevention program for

middle-school children. How would they go about doing that? It just happens that some of the other students who *are* working in the community are working in such a program. It is called GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) and is funded by the United States Department of Education. My hope is that the first group (not in the community setting) will visit the GEAR UP group, exchange ideas, and build a conceptual scaffolding on which they can walk back and forth and exchange ideas. In asking students to design something, I hope to prompt "performances of understanding," as defined by Perkins (1998), that is, activities that go beyond the rote and the routine, and always involving something of a stretch.

Gathering the Evidence

The course, as you see, has several new elements, and my project entails seeing how those elements work, how they play out, what happens. For instance, I am interested in moments like the one that occurred just recently in class. We were having a discussion about attention deficit disorder and one of the students began to explain the topic in terms of the concept of resiliency. That's the kind of connection I'm very interested in. I want to somehow track those moments, which means paying closer attention. I have been recording impressions after each class in a journal, raising questions and reflecting on ways to link concepts throughout the course. These journal entries have helped me to learn more about the gradual ways in which students connect or fail to connect ideas.

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One of my efforts in this regard was accomplished through collaboration with a colleague, Susan Thomson, a cultural anthropologist, who visited my class as an observer, bringing along techniques from her field for coming into a new culture and seeking to understand it. She and I are writing about this collaboration, which I think has potential in the scholarship of teaching.

I also used a survey to find out more about my students: how much work their jobs require, how many courses they take, and what other kinds of commitments they hold. The answers are pretty discouraging because the majority are working thirty or forty hours, and are single parents or have other serious commitments on their time. On top of all this they're taking multiple courses.

I had used a version of the survey in earlier semesters but as part of my Carnegie work I created a more detailed version. Following some of the Carnegie Scholars' discussions about student understanding, I felt a need to get a better picture of the diversity, and the conditions, of learners. If students can't put in the time, they won't reach deep understanding. Our Carnegie Teaching Academy group at Middlesex Community College had a similar conversation: We as faculty may create "perfect" materials, but if the students don't devote enough time, their learning will be limited.

This presents an assessment dilemma in which faculty are continually frustrated by students' unrealistic appraisal of how much time course work requires.

To learn more about this, and to help students learn about themselves, I gave each student a sheet to map out their use of time for the twenty-four hours of each day over a full week. I explained the task in terms of the need to create a context for success in the course. I was pretty tough about this, pointing out to students that if their life left little time for study, they would be better off dropping the course than staying and failing. And a good number did leave. I'm sure that was not such positive news from the registrar's point of view, but from mine it's the right thing. Students set themselves up for failure, and then they fail, and then they feel badly about themselves. And this keeps happening. I'm sure I'll still have some in the class who will have this problem, but I see my approach as one step toward helping to build resiliency in my own students. The focus on resiliency as a course theme allows me to talk to them about this quite directly, which I do from the beginning of the semester.

Emergent Findings and Broader Significance

One thing that came up through the collaboration with my colleague in anthropology is that for a lot of students in a community college setting there's a lack of fit between what they will verbalize and what they will write. Maybe this is true of all students, but it's particularly marked in community colleges. It's one of the things my colleague identified through her observations and work with my students, and it's a very interesting problem for assessment. These students often have good ideas, but their motivation to write about them is not high because they've not been successful as writers. So the question is how to celebrate their good ideas and then move them to write about those ideas.

A few years ago I saw a clear example of this issue while assessing the final projects of two students who had worked at the local horseback-riding program for individuals with disabilities in our community. One student wrote a well-organized paper but received mediocre-to-poor evaluations from the supervisor at the site, with comments such as "does not relate to individuals," "difficult to work with," and "has a negative attitude toward clients." Another student wrote a marginal paper yet received stunning comments from the supervisor, including "incredible in connecting to clients," "anticipates potential problems in the setting," and "would hire him tomorrow." If I had not included the supervisor's comments in assessing the project I would never have obtained an accurate picture of what went on. Still, the question is how best to incorporate all aspects of work in arriving at a final grade.

Which brings me back to what I have learned about my students. In a class of twenty-eight, for instance, several are recovering from addiction, many have learning disabilities, four or five are single parents, some are immigrants, and, as I said earlier, most of them are working thirty to forty hours a week. They're needy on a lot of levels. But what's also true is that the community college learning experience can transform the lives of these students. When I talk to other community college faculty,

I hear stories about this, about making a real difference. Mark Katz (1997) in his book *On Playing a Poor Hand Well* presents the concepts of turning points and second-chance opportunities. The community college often creates a second-chance opportunity for students who have had negative experiences of education.

My point is that this circumstance, this vision of education, makes assessment a delicate task. I have to be fair in measuring levels of understanding but I also have to recognize the tremendous variety of circumstances represented in the class, shaping assessment to support and foster transformation rather than snuffing it out. Often, community college students have had debilitating experiences with teachers who did not value them. They haven't fit the model. We need to extend the range of what we value by opening up assessment to different forms of intelligence, different ways of knowing. Of course it's important for students to become proficient writers, but we have such a focus on the written word that we can't appreciate that people can know something in other ways. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) state that the basic purpose of assessment should be to engender competence. My goal is to create a diverse set of measures that will provide complete and fair assessment while also building competence as students progress through the different phases of the semester.

I should also mention a quite different kind of result from this work—one I couldn't have anticipated—which is that I'm now working with local sixth-grade classes through the GEAR UP project described earlier. Because the topic of resilience fits in well with the goals of the project, I am developing—together with other participants—ways to include resilience in activities at the schools. I'm also collaborating with a high school class through the American Psychological Association's Psychology Partnerships Project. Both of these opportunities have evolved from my work this past year, and I'm excited about how this idea of resiliency has begun to take hold in other contexts.

Conditions for Doing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

My colleagues in the Carnegie Scholars Program have provided much support. Indeed, our discussions shaped many of the things I'm doing. The dilemma of sharing what we do is that everyone is busy doing his or her own project. We need to develop more mentoring relationships that can support and sustain ideas over time.

On my own campus, it was a bit easier. Talking about teaching is positive and collaborative. No one suggested that I was wasting my time. Our dilemma at Middlesex has more to do with figuring out what we mean by scholarship, and where the scholarship of teaching fits at an institution that values teaching highly but does not have many of the habits and traditions of scholarly exchange and peer review.

The other thing that was very helpful to me is a sense among those of us working on the scholarship of teaching that we're trailblazers, that we're creating new genres, new forms of inquiry. We need to be comfortable exploring alternative paths and also with the realization that some of those paths may not work out—an easy com-

ment to make but less easy to deal with when things really don't work. Working with like-minded colleagues means having an oasis—a refuge in which to regroup and refocus as the journey progresses.

Benefits of the Work

What is the value of this work? I was at a meeting with people I work with in a clinical setting. Someone was talking about a seven-year-old with many problems and how "he was just never going to make it." And I was thinking if we don't start to address this, then this is the seven-year-old we're going to see moving through the educational system and through our lives. What drives me in all my work is my sense that we just have to find ways to keep from writing people off, giving up on them. And my hope for the scholarship of teaching is that it will help open up our appreciation for the variety of learners and the need to make the most of many different kinds of talents.

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I think of a recent essay by Alexander Astin (1998, 22) about underprepared students and about the absolutely crucial mission of higher education in helping these students succeed—and what the world will be like if we fail in this. He states that the problem in higher education is that "we value *being* smart much more than we do *developing* smartness." So my view of the scholarship of teaching is a long-term transformative one. I hope not just to do some discrete project but to change the way we think about educating diverse learners and developing "smartness."

Lessons Learned

One of the most useful frameworks for the scholarship of teaching and learning is the chapter by Lee Shulman (1998) on course anatomy in the AAHE volume *The Course Portfolio.* It sets out a framework within which scholars of teaching can work. In a workshop I recently did with several other Carnegie Scholars, we used that five-part framework of vision, design, enactment, outcomes, and analysis as a way of thinking not only about a course but also about a project in the scholarship of teaching.

Something else I have found useful in helping people get started is to ask them to talk about an experience from their teaching that had been particularly positive or challenging, and then to highlight some part of that. In the workshop, I gave them marking pens to do the highlighting literally. This activity makes the point that when you're doing the scholarship of teaching, you're highlighting an experience and then looking at it more closely. People seem to like this image. It puts the emphasis on something immediate and concrete; it starts with what they are already doing. This

is important for most faculty because we are all so crunched for time. It's critical to start small and to set time limits for the inquiry. Initially I wanted to change too many things at once—this was unrealistic and overwhelming. The process worked better when I focused only on the "highlighted" parts of my course and established realistic time limits for completing the work. It was helpful to keep reminding myself that investigating learning, like learning itself, is a gradual process that unfolds over time.

I think that community college faculty are often very innovative but we need help in presenting our innovations to a larger academic community. The good news is that there are lots of currents moving in this direction. Community colleges have long faced the student diversity that many four-year institutions have begun to encounter only recently. In the Carnegie Teaching Academy on our campus we have spent considerable time trying to deal with the issues resulting from this diversity and have been studying ways to create learning environments that will engender more intrinsic motivation in students. Our initial attempts at translating theory into practice have been mixed, but it is encouraging to have groups of faculty discussing ways to improve learning in a particularly challenging environment.

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