

Reflections on the Massasoit, Spring 2005 NECIT Seminar  
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Fragments/Mosaic

How do I answer the questions, “What did I get from this seminar?” and “What should be channeled into or done differently in the next Massasoit NECIT seminar”? And “What are the institutional implications of these seminars?” in two pages? My answers to these questions are still evolving, and I feel as if I am caught in a blizzard of information and impressions. Acknowledging this, I will try to summarize tentative, time-sensitive, answers to the questions. The two-page requirement is a joke. I laughed appropriately and then conceptualized it as yet another box I will encourage myself to think outside of. Moreover I am considering this a ‘draft’, with revisions and rewriting warranted following feedback from my fellow seminarians and after I am able to look back upon the semester rather than being still caught up in the thrill of it.

What did I get from this seminar?

My major focus for the Seminar was to look at my course, Practice with Women, Minorities and the Poor, and address a number of issues that related to its curriculum and process. In the ten weeks that have elapsed I have experimented some in that course, and am beginning to imagine a number of other more radical changes I will explore for the future. However, the NECIT seminar’s impact has been broader than that course alone.

The most important thing that I have received thus far from the NECIT seminar is a renewed sense of my mission in teaching. I have a sense of personal, and even though it pains me to say it, spiritual/vocational connection to my students. It feels like teaching these students is spiritual work. Of course, it is. Spirit, according to the American Heritage Dictionary involves “The animating or life giving principle within a human being,” or “The part of the human being associated with the mind and feelings as distinguished from the physical body”, and “the real sense or significance of something.” My connections to my students have been vitalized this semester by a deep sense of their presence, and an appreciation for each one’s ‘one-of-a-kindness.’ My involvement with my fellow seminarians has also seemed spiritual. There is a way in which we have connected with one another, and with our zeal for teaching, that transcends the ordinary. I have greatly prized this aspect of the seminar.

I had not originally planned to be in the seminar. As a member of the Massasoit NECIT Steering Committee, looking at it from the vantage point of June 2004, I was fairly attracted to becoming a member, and toyed with the idea of submitting an application. But, as Department Chair of a small department (Human Services), it is hard for me to take two course reductions. I would have to surrender control of sequenced, skill-building, required courses to adjunct faculty. This is not an easy choice to make. Then, my older sister declined and died of cancer in November of 2004. I was crumpled with grief. I submitted no proposal. Past the proposal deadline, synchronicity arrived. One of my scheduled courses had a very low enrollment, and I was approached and asked to reconsider applying for inclusion in the seminar. I had the course cancelled, cobbled together a hurried application, and was accepted. There I was. I wasn’t at all sure that I should be in the seminar. Now I believe that I was ‘meant to be here.’

I relate all of that in order to go back to the issue of spirituality. Perhaps it is because I am in my mid-fifties, with a sister who died at 64, and lots of other recent death shadows framing my life. It feels like something like grace is moving through me. This is not an entirely comforting presence, but after a life lived with little care for the traditional spiritual world, I find myself longing for a sense of connection to MORE. Having spent the bulk of my adult life as an agnostic or atheist, I returned to the religious practice of my childhood a decade ago after an adoption counselor convinced me that my new daughter needed the kind of social support, connection, community, and identity development support that church affords. I had been wanting MORE, to little avail, for almost two decades, since the day my father died, with such peace, and I read to him in his AA Daily Affirmations about the ‘awe that precedes worship’. Now, though I do not understand it, cannot seem to contain it, find it often absent, and am reluctant to speak of it, it seems

like something more than just human kindness connects me to others. I am grateful, though it makes me grin and chuckle to find that I perceive teaching as a 'faith-based initiative.'

When I began the NECIT seminar, I voiced the desire to return to a more person-centered classroom environment. That has occurred within all of my classes, but the number of students in my courses has been uncharacteristically low this semester. This, more than the NECIT seminar, may explain my sense that I have encountered students more individually and been more able to discern and respond to their unique identities and needs.

As mentioned above, I have made some changes in my two sections of Women, Minorities and the Poor this semester. At the beginning of the semester I told students that I was in the NECIT seminar and that the syllabus which I was distributing would have some changes, perhaps minor, perhaps more major. I told them our class would be more experimental than usual and that I would need their help to maximize our learning. They were very receptive and seemed to enjoy the relative sense of balance or equality that my admission of my 'studentivity' introduced. I have changed some readings, and altered the relative weight of various topics. I have used contract learning to allow students to determine what proportion of their final grades will result from journal/scrapbook, research/oral report, and quizzes. I have allowed the class process and student interests to guide more of what we give time to in the class. A tune, "Experiment," sung by Kevin Kline in the recent film *Bio of Cole Porter* played through my mind throughout much of the last ten weeks.

On several occasions, the class has responded with research and then discussion to a question that has come up in class. For example, after we had watched a video on the Underground Railroad, a student, from the Southern United States, opined, "What about slavery in the North"? It was clear, that as a Southerner, she felt singled out, by our society in general, and perhaps, she worried, by her classmates, for special blame for slavery. Her comment came near the end of class. We briefly discussed the issue, but more needed to be done, later.

Luckily, she took the initiative, did some research, and sent me a web site that had detailed and valuable information about slavery in the North. I copied some of these articles, assigned them to students at the next class, and at a later class we had a discussion on slavery and emancipation in the North. It was very valuable. It more honestly dealt with the reality of slavery as a national problem, not just a regional one. Moreover, it made it clear to students, and reinforced it for me, that I do not control knowledge.

I have always been aware of the challenge of helping students locate or develop a context within which to understand information or concepts that may seem foreign to them. This semester, I have been more keenly aware of how important their questions are. For example, just this week, after a long and detailed account of how bias had been built-into knowledge in the social sciences (when research was primarily constructed by white, middle-class males), a white male student asked, "Where did you get that information"?

Previously that evening I had instructed students on avoiding plagiarism in preparation for a take-home quiz I had given them. Did his question have to do with that? Or was his question in some way a defensive rejection of the bias-related information? Or did he want to know more, and simply want suggestions for sources? Or was some other factor in play? I had constructed that lecture over years. I threaded the Hawthorne Effect, research on achievement by Atkinson and McClelland and Matina Horner, research on moral development by Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, and theory/research on female orgasm by Freud and Master's and Johnson into it.

I responded to his question by telling him that there were many sources, but that the only one I could cite for him at that moment was Gilligan's "In a Different Voice". I had referred to it during my presentation. I said that it would contain references to many of the others' work. I then went home and pulled out the Gilligan book and another more recent one on women's psychological development to bring to class to offer him. I still am not sure what his question was about, but I want to revisit it, and have decided to ask him about it privately. Then, with his permission, if it seems useful, I would like to discuss the issue of 'questioning the question' in an effort to illustrate how complex teaching and learning can be. I got an e-mail message from another student (a female) in the class this morning, asking for more information regarding female orgasm. As a modestly techno-phobic professor, I am only just beginning to encourage

students to use their computers to help me help them learn. The use of WebCt in the NECIT seminar has introduced me to another tool that I hope to become proficient enough with to utilize with students.

A number of other concepts, ideas, and personal sharings of seminararians have been useful. We have read "Achieving Against the Odds", pieces on identity development, stereotype threat, and a book about 'What the Best College Teachers Do'. A conversation about how 'bringing our personal selves into the classroom may enhance or inhibit student learning' was very useful.

I have noticed that certain students might be operating from stereotype threat, one a disabled student, and another a student who has a number of learning disabilities. The concept of stereotype threat has caused me to pause and be more personally honoring of these students' particular needs. Ultimately, I believe, my awareness of stereotype threat has promoted better teaching and learning in my classrooms. I have been more keenly aware of how race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, and other 'minority statuses' (and their intersection), inform a student's identity, and affect my perceptions, our interactions, and their performance.

I hope to do more focused work on identity development and socialization in future Women, Minorities and the Poor classes.

#### What should be channeled into or done differently in the next Massasoit NECIT seminar?

In looking ahead to what we need to preserve or create for the next NECIT seminar, I have a number of ideas; I will discuss some and merely suggest others.

First, I believe that faculty BEING HEARD is central to an effective NECIT seminar. I would recommend that the 2006 NECIT seminar participants make sure that they leave ample time to listen to one another, and make time for the vulnerable display of inadequacy which all of us have inside. Participants should be encouraged to just listen to each other's problems and not be too quick to try and solve them. Listen for the affective message. Listen for the personal meaning. Give people the time to really feel that others want to know and connect to them.

In one early seminar session, I mentioned that I had a student in my class who I thought might not be appropriate because he was chronically irresponsible. I wondered if he had some fairly pronounced learning disabilities. I was so irritated with him. I wanted him gone. I went on quite a bit about it. The seminar participants listened. We broadened the conversation to think about what we can or do or could do institutionally for inappropriate students. I left the seminar feeling validated. That gave me the grace to look at my particular situation with my particular student again. Maybe he did have some special needs and fears that were operating. I was moved by our seminars' discussion of "welcoming students" and I knew that if I was feeling so negatively about him, that I was by no means welcoming to him in my demeanor anymore. Maybe I had even become part of his problem! So I decided to change my demeanor. I smiled at him. I took him seriously even when he was not taking himself seriously. I created opportunities to fashion positive exchanges between us. I tried to welcome his comments in class, and when they were somewhat incoherent or unclear to me, I worked harder to unearth them and HEAR HIM.

We are doing a lot better. He is doing a lot better. I see him more clearly, as a human with lots of debris accumulated from years of being 'schooled' painfully, as someone who is working to find a place for himself that includes schooling but who often shoots himself in the foot in order to get the pain over with, fail again, and be able to quit struggling. He has become an interesting, complex, worthwhile person to me. I suspect I have also become more approachably human to him.

Much of my movement with this student is due to my being able to complain about this situation in our seminar. I got it off my chest. No one pointed a finger at me and said, "Rebecca do this, do that, do more, do differently." I was heard out, and left to sort of stew in my problem and decide how to be with it. That is the greatest benefit the NECIT seminar can provide for its participants. The participants need to create an environment that genuinely **welcomes** each other, so that they can later create an environment that, as genuinely, **welcomes** students. I would suggest that we develop some kind of survey to distribute to the 2006 participants, ask them to answer the survey in preparation for the seminar, and then let them decide

how to use it. It could function somewhat like the Teaching Biography we did, but might be more focused in what it addresses.

Some kind of silly icebreakers should be used early on in the seminar to get the participants more comfortable with one another, so that trust can be developed more readily.

I recommend that they be given all the readings we used. I think that "Achieving Against the Odds" was very useful. I suggest that it be used somewhat differently. In addition to reading/presenting one or more articles, participants could choose several that they find most useful and discuss it in greater depth, perhaps devising some questions which are distributed ahead of time to use for discussion. The Bain book is also usable. I hope others won't hold it at such arm's length as I did because of its title. That title just makes me mad. "So, you expect me to be able to handle every type of diversity, often virtually unsupported, teach five classes, AND ASPIRE TO BEING A BEST TEACHER? I don't think so, 'still standing' is high enough an aspiration for me!!!!"

WebCt should be used and, I hope, expanded. I would like participants to share their 'journals' through it. There was never enough time on Tuesdays from 2-4. As teachers, we give our students feedback all the time in order to improve their 'performances.' Seminar participants should be encouraged to find a non-threatening way to do this for one another. Perhaps that would have resulted had we accomplished classroom visitation.

#### "What are the institutional implications of these seminars?"

**True welcoming** is painfully hard to do sometimes. It requires time, energy, kindness, compassion, empathy, self-knowledge, knowledge of the other, and often, hard to acquire knowledge and skill about the unique needs of the other and how to meet them. It drains us. Which reminds me of another old song, by Chris Williamson, entitled, "Waterfall". The lyric goes, "filling up and spilling over, it's an endless waterfall, filling up and spilling over, over all." It is an image of vitalizing, plenitude. But all too often, I have noticed in my life in academia, there is too much spilling over and not enough filling up. What fills us up so that we are plentiful enough to engage in the waterfall connection of welcoming students? This seminar has done that for me. Massasoit has invested in my development this semester by granting me a workload reduction so that I can take object on myself and what I do and improve. Typically, a full-time faculty member here at Massasoit teaches five courses. **It is not possible to continue to provide a true welcome to students with this kind of a course load.**

Inclusive teaching today requires that a professor be engaged in continual professional development. Massasoit will have to find a way to support regular faculty development. It is encouraging that Massasoit has agreed to finance another NECIT seminar for Spring 2006. Beyond this, the college must find a way to permanently institutionalize significant investment in faculty development, or it will have to eliminate the excellence part of its' "access and excellence" Mission.

Here are some suggestions for institutionalizing parts or functions of the NECIT seminar. It is hard to imagine most of them being of much use until Work to Rule ends.

- An electronic discussion board. Should it be just for faculty or should students also be invited? Maybe we would need one for each? I would like to have us throw out a Question for the Week (or whatever time period makes sense) such as "What do you do the first day of class in order to create a welcoming atmosphere for students?" OR "What do you do to accommodate a variety of learning styles in your class?" OR "How have you been able to incorporate issues of diversity into the content of your class?"
- We should have a journal. We can use some of the 'products of the NECIT seminars in it. We can use some of the products of the electronic conversation in the journal. We can solicit

“something more” based on the contributions of faculty and students to the electronic conversation.

- We should have Faculty Forums again. We can use the electronic conversation to help us see what issues garner the most excitement, challenge, etc. in order to plan face-to-face forums or even workshops to address the salient issues.
- We should collect a ‘bookshelf’ of useful websites that are easily available (on a link) for faculty.
- A permanent series of NECIT-like seminars should be developed. They should be on a variety of topics, supported by workload reduction for full-time faculty and professional staff, and by stipends for adjunct faculty.