

Musings from the NECIT Seminar
Massasoit Community College
Spring 2005
by Kathleen Walsh

INTRODUCTION

I am a first-year faculty member in the Business Management Department. I have taught for twenty years, primarily at four-year institutions. When I was asked to join the NECIT seminar, my first thought was “Why me?” I was the ‘new’ person in the department. What did my department colleagues know that I did not know?

In my usual fashion, I wanted to know upfront what the requirements and expectations were. I do not like to commit to a project unless I am clear as to what the project entails and that my time will be well spent. I was still hazy after speaking with the facilitator but decided to take the plunge. I like new adventures and Massasoit Community College was the first community college to participate in a NECIT seminar.

THE PROCESS

As with many journeys, the starting and ending points were not as important as the process. The seminar’s focus was how to make teaching more inclusive. I have always been fascinated by how each individual’s learning process is unique. I decided to address inclusiveness from the perspectives of the differing level of skills and educational experiences that my students brought to class. Ken Bain in “What the Best College Teachers Do,” echoes the belief that “Every student is special. No single approach can work for everyone.”

My original goal was to research and to develop differentiated learning experiences that I could use in the Principles of Accounting II course. My first step was to look for external information. I met with the Academic Resources Director and the Learning Disabilities

Counselor to obtain a better sense of the learning needs of Massasoit students and to identify available support services. Next, I identified seven books that discussed learning styles, multiple intelligences, and differentiated learning, and began to read. After two weeks of researching, I re-evaluated my approach. I was looking to outside experts for my information. I decided a better approach was to look internally. Who were my students? What experiences did they bring to class? What did they need?

Massasoit Community College has an open enrollment policy. All individuals (i.e. with a high school diploma, a GED, or the demonstrated ability to benefit) are offered the opportunity to pursue higher education at the college. The mission statement states that the college “accepts all who desire to learn.” As a result, the range of students is huge. Each student arrives in my class with different barriers, life experiences, abilities, and motivations.

At this point, the enormity of what I did not know about my students overwhelmed me. If I did not have basic information about my student, how could I tailor a learning experience to meet his needs? Could I meet the learning needs of all students who arrive in my class? Other seminar participants raised similar concerns. Does the college have the resources and support services to ensure that each student who comes here to learn has the opportunity to succeed?

This question is an institutional one. My focus remained local. I spoke with Admissions about the admissions process and how a student comes to be in my class. At this point, my goal changed. It became to identify ways to know the student and his needs better.

At the beginning of each semester, I ask students to complete a data sheet. The data sheet asks for: contact information, the student’s class and major, the number of courses taken, the number of hours worked, a job description, the student’s computer experience, and any special

learning needs. The data is a starting point for me to discuss my and students' expectations, time management, a reasonable academic plan, a student's job, etc. It also provides talking points for when I meet informally with a student. I intend to expand the data sheet for fall 2005 classes but I needed more information for the current semester.

I decided to build on a feedback activity that I used at other colleges. After an exam, I have asked for informal feedback. I put three questions on the board and ask the students to respond anonymously. (The questions are: How many hours per week do you spend on the course outside of class? What do you like about the course? What do you dislike about the course?). I stress that the purpose of the feedback is to identify what is and is not working and to make timely adjustments.

This semester I expanded the feedback sheet to include: What % of time did the student complete specific learning tasks (e.g. read the chapter before class)? What is the most difficult part of the course? What do you like/dislike about the course? Have you used the resource center? Have you met with the instructor? Do you need help with . . . (e.g. note taking, reading word problems)? I summarized the feedback information and reported back to the class. We discussed what was necessary to succeed in the course, what was realistic to expect given an individual's time commitment, what changes would or would not be made, and areas where a student needed assistance.

Many students indicated that they needed assistance with reading the text, note taking, understanding word problems, creating problem solving strategies, and studying for tests. These responses I expected and had been trying to integrate into the class. However, the surprise for me was the number of students who did not want to participate or were not comfortable participating in class. Many indicated a preference for teaching where the instructor dumps the information on

the students, where the instructor is the expert, and where the student's main responsibilities are to listen and watch. I expect my classroom to be an interactive, hands-on environment. The students had a very different idea of what a learning environment should be. Upon reflection, I could understand my frustrations and theirs. The students were not taking an active role and as a result I was lecturing more, which made me very uncomfortable. I considered whether I was forcing my preferred teaching style on the class and whether my values that education is important were not shared by some of the students.

Many students may have spent twelve years listening, watching, and regurgitating. To ask them to move from that environment to one where I ask them to speak, to question, and to think independently is a huge step. Next semester, I plan to "teach" how to be an active learner through transition activities and numerous, incremental opportunities for the students to try on new learning behaviors.

WHAT IS NEXT?

My objectives for fall 2005 are:

1. Redesign the syllabi and data sheets for three courses.
2. To consider ways to obtain more information about students and their experiences at the start of the semester and throughout the semester.
3. To participate in conference to be held in November 2005.

BENEFITS

Participating in the NECIT seminar was an enriching and unsettling adventure. I benefited in many ways:

1. As a first year teacher, I quickly learned about the Massasoit Community College community and the resources available on campus.

2. I shared thoughts, struggles, and strategies with faculty members from a variety of disciplines and with many years of experience. I was amazed to see teachers with more than twenty-five years of teaching experience still questioning and brainstorming. Their enthusiasm was contagious! Frequently, I am a teacher who is alone with my thoughts, questions, and strategies. It is not time efficient or very challenging when you work only with yourself. I welcomed the interaction and enjoyed the spirited discussions.
3. I identified and researched topics that interested me especially in the areas of multiple intelligences, learning styles, universal design, and differentiated learning. The knowledge and research will help me to develop and to integrate new learning activities into the class.
4. I had time to reflect on my teaching beliefs, teaching style, and my students. Time is such a luxury. Too often, my teaching day is entirely focused on “producing.”
5. I had a “student” experience with WebCT. I am attending Webcamp in June so the experience using WebCT was a good introduction. It also gave me a taste of what a student experiences when a new way is required.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPRING 2006

For the Massasoit NECIT group for spring 2006, I recommend that:

1. The NECIT steering committee prepares a statement that details the nature of the seminar, the expectations, the deliverables/requirements, and the time frame. It was a leap of faith for me to join the group. I continued to be unclear and to worry about the requirements/deliverables throughout the seminar.
2. The NECIT steering committee select faculty from as many disciplines as possible. A diverse group will allow the word to get out to more disciplines and to foster discussions and collaboration across the disciplines. It seems that liberal arts faculty is more likely to participate. Faculty from business, math, and the sciences should be encouraged to join. Initially, I wondered if I was an alien from another planet (i.e. an accounting teacher in a group with mostly English teachers). I was not even sure we shared the same language.
3. The meeting time should be divided into two parts. One part would be to discuss classroom concerns, principles, and practices that relate to inclusiveness. The other part would be for each member to research a topic in depth and share the information with the group.

4. A list of available and current resources be prepared and updated frequently. Often, my time is spent reinventing the wheel or trying to identify or locate resources.
5. The participant should be open to all the opportunities that come with participating in the seminar and have a sense of humor.
6. The college investigates ways to provide more faculty development opportunities and a vehicle to begin and continue the discussion about inclusive learning across the campus.