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Susan Murgo Hall

NECIT summary/response paper

Last semester, I was approached about participating in the **NECIT (New England Center for Inclusive Teaching)** seminar for the spring 2006 semester. I am glad that I did, because the seminar gave me the chance to get to know some people that I did not really have much occasion to talk to before. It was a very comfortable and non-threatening atmosphere, and it was reassuring to know that what I said would be held in confidence by the other participants of the seminar.

The first day we were asked to think if our students have to overcome feeling threatened by us and/or by college/university culture. We asked what do students see when they see us? NECIT is devoted to issues of diversity and inclusive teaching. How can students trust us and bridge the cultural gap? What kind of goals do students set for themselves? One participant in our seminar stated that he felt that he must “walk the line” between being too rigorous and/or too lenient with students. When do students feel included or excluded, and why?

We were given texts to read over the course of the semester: **Achieving Against the Odds: How Academics Become Teachers of Diverse Students** (eds. Esther Kingston-Mann and Tim Sieber; Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), and Ken Bain’s **What the Best College Teachers Do** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). In Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich’s forward to **Achieving the Odds**, she states that the “schisms that most painfully divide and differentiate our still radically and unjust world also enter the classroom (x).” A few participants in our seminar referred to their own upbringings, and how it is sometimes still difficult for them

to make the transition from “academia” back to their roots and/or families. That was a recurring theme in some of the readings in this compilation, and in this same text, Sieber and Mann refer to the “assault on our values, cultures and identities” that school sometimes can be. The other readings from this text included those by Sieber and Kingston-Mann’s fellow faculty members from UMass/Boston, including a gay professor who was unsure if she should “out” herself. From a few readings, it appeared that even being a white male can be difficult for an academic if he is from a working-class or poor background, and has to straddle both worlds. One African-American English professor left UMass Boston ten years ago, and now teaches at Reed College in Oregon. Pancho Savery entitled his article “Odd Man Out,” and refers to the cultural differences between the East and West, and between the two institutions.

Achieving the Odds referred to some professors who were perhaps brilliant scholars, but were not so good with people. Sieber and Kingston-Mann reiterate that there are no absolute guarantees against misunderstandings, and that there are still those students who are unreachable. Many of these faculty members profiled in this text reinvented their courses, and did not worry so much about coverage. Many turned to more non-traditional forms of evaluation, such as journals. Sieber states that “old models of teaching die hard.” These faculty members all appeared to agree that their students may not have the same motivations or interests that inspired their own learning, and tried to adapt to that sentiment. For example, Castellano B. Turner says that “taking a receptive stance rather than professing too much has, I believe, made me (him) a better teacher (98).” Ironically, Lois Rudnick found that some students do their best and most engaged work in non-graded and extra-credit assignments (154). Pancho Savery tries to

choose readings that he is also unfamiliar with, so that he is on equal footing with students. I was particularly interested in the articles by Reyes Coll-Tellechea and Vivian Zamel, which dealt with issues faced in a very diverse advanced Spanish grammar and composition course and a “regular” English composition course that had many ESL students, respectively.

It was interesting to me to learn how Ken Bain and his staff defined “the best” college teachers. It had always appeared to me that they were those who had national or international reputations, but usually taught large lecture hall-type courses. Ken Bain states that the best college teachers show strong evidence of helping and encouraging students to learn; these same teachers have high expectations of their students and they don’t blame students; they encourage cooperation and collaboration and don’t pit students against each other. Most interestingly, these best college teachers do not want students to be just “received knowers,” and want their students to operate on the highest plane of thinking. The best teachers believe that most students can learn, and look for ways to help them. One of these great teachers even made this distinction: “You teach a student, not a class.” Also, the best college teachers plan their classes backwards, starting with what they want their students to know by the END of the semester. These teachers also have an investment in students, instead of just their own agenda. Bain also makes the distinction between what the professor does versus what students learn. In other words, a professor could do everything well, namely the criteria on which his/her evaluation is based. But what good is that if students are not learning? Bain even suggests that professors keep a teaching portfolio. A recurring theme was that the best college teachers demonstrated constant self-evaluation, reflection, and a willingness to

change. We always have something new to learn, and yes, we may still occasionally fail. The “great” college teachers who teach the large lecture-style classes and have the national reputations do not necessarily have the one-to-one contact with their students that make them the best college teachers.

Many people in our seminar agreed that we had more in common with the subjects of Kingston-Mann and Sieber’s text than we did with those people profiled in Bain’s book. Students at Massasoit and at UMass/Boston share more commonalities, and Bain’s subjects probably did not have as high a teaching load as MCC/UMB faculty do. With respect to specifics versus generalities, our own group discussed the issue of “social promotion.” Do students really think that if they just show up for class, they will be able to continue to the next course, even if they don’t complete the work? One participant member was involved in rewriting the prompts for the English placement essay for new students at orientation. Another participant is interested in starting a Writing Across the Curriculum/ESL project. We all agreed that being welcoming of students does not mean not having standards. For the May 25 Professional Development Day, a few members of the spring 2006 NECIT seminar participated in a session called “Ways to Welcome.” Faculty members of many other departments participated, and feedback was positive. One member of our NECIT seminar has gathered material that would be helpful for future reference, including excerpts from Stephen D. Brookfield’s **Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher** (Jossey Bass, 1995), and publications from the National Council for Staff, Program and Organizational Development. These include forms we can use in our own courses, such as “Class Feedback Forms” and “Key Points in the Reading” sheets.

I am a little sad now that the seminar has ended. I understand now how easy it is

to simply be on “auto-pilot” (as one of my fellow participants referred to it), and not really think of our students’ perceptions of us and the struggles that they face daily. I would recommend a NECIT seminar to anyone who is considering it.