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How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching, Story 1

Susan E. Hill
University of Northern Iowa

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How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching, Story 1

Part of the journal section “Forum: Cornerstone” [Contribution to An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community]

Susan E. Hill, “How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching”

In summer 2011, ten UNI faculty from different departments met for a month to develop the first iteration of UNI’s Cornerstone course. This experience was, by far, the best faculty development experience I have had in over twenty years of teaching. In reflecting on the group effort of the faculty, and on teaching Cornerstone during 2011-2012, I have come to realize that this collaborative approach to faculty development and teaching has changed (dare I say, improved?) my teaching, because it offered me a more expansive and holistic model of what teaching and learning can be. Here are three things that I have incorporated into my thinking and practice of teaching because of the Cornerstone experience:

1) Collaborating with peers can be messy, frustrating, joyful, creative, and transformative, just like teaching. We came together as faculty from very different disciplinary perspectives and teaching approaches. In our conversations about course design, goals and outcomes for student learning, possible assignments, and numerous other topics, our differences (and discovered similarities) led to frustration, insight, compromise, collaboration, and, ultimately, a lot of learning. Those conversations helped me clarify and reshape my own teaching goals and style, taught me new approaches to teaching, offered me numerous suggestions for course activities and ways to do assignments, and gave me confidence to teach oral communication and writing skills more effectively, all in the context of a generous and supportive group of people. What we did as a group has become for me a model of teaching as a collaborative process that takes place in a community of learners.

2) Focusing on student learning makes me a better teacher. That seems too obvious, and, frankly, too embarrassing, to admit. But, Cornerstone was the first course in all of my years of teaching that was consciously designed from the bottom up, beginning with clear, assessable, learning goals and outcomes, creating assignments that would fulfill those goals and outcomes, and ending with assessment to see if students met those goals and outcomes. Sure, I’d had goals for courses before, and sure, I believed that my students met them most of the time. But, since I’ve taught Cornerstone, my courses are designed more carefully, with focused attention paid to how all of the parts work together to make sure that my students are learning what I want them to learn.

3) Paying attention to what first-year students need helps all students. Before Cornerstone, I had not been paying enough attention to the idea that knowing who my students are should shape what I/we do in the classroom. One of our invited guests to Cornerstone faculty development was Catherine Andersen, an expert on first-year students. Her presentations on the characteristics of first-year students and transition issues from high school to college helped me think more carefully about what might be helpful for students to know and be able to do, in addition to the specific course content that I'm teaching. For instance, I had no idea that first-year students are so scared of professors, but they are. I had no idea that so many students come to college with such minimal study skills or strategies to manage their time. I had no idea that it would be helpful to students to offer suggestions for how to read a textbook effectively, or to study for a test, or point out that the skills they are learning are likely applicable to every course they take. I had no idea that being attentive to such matters could create a classroom context where I could have higher expectations of my students. Paying attention to these issues has made my teaching more meaningful and more enjoyable. It's expanded my idea of what it means to be a college professor, and what I can do to create an open, welcoming, collaborative, challenging—read: educational—classroom.

Being a part of developing and teaching Cornerstone has made me a more reflective, thoughtful, humane teacher. It has shifted the way that I think about and practice teaching, by making me more attentive to the frameworks my students and I create for learning course content and for being in community. I think that I was a good teacher before Cornerstone; I think I'm a better teacher now.

[Go to the narrative [Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community](#) article.]



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