

12-2023

Connecting Introduction - Reciprocal Engagement and Imperfect Pedagogy

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Recommended Citation

Wenger, Christy I. (2023) "Connecting Introduction - Reciprocal Engagement and Imperfect Pedagogy," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 28 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol28/iss1/15>

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CONNECTING

Reciprocal Engagement and Imperfect Pedagogy

Christy I. Wenger

It's almost blasé to say that the Covid-19 pandemic drastically transformed higher education. But while we might be long past diatribes on emergency remote teaching, we are all still grappling with the new reality and heightened challenges the pandemic catalyzed. Many of us are facing budget restrictions and shrinking departments with fewer faculty and office staff. Most of us are troubleshooting the pedagogical challenges of teaching in and training teachers for Hyflex classrooms. And almost all of us are grappling with persistent concerns regarding student engagement.

As we emerge from the pandemic, the importance of student engagement in higher education has become more evident than ever before. Student engagement is more than getting students to our classes every day and more than getting them to do their homework on time. It's bigger work than retention, though, of course, engagement is predicated on our retention efforts. Student retention has been well-studied over the years to attempt to figure out why students sometimes persist and why they sometimes stop out. Vincent Tinto's research on retention introduces a student integration model, which focuses on how well students integrate fully into the university community and bases that integration on their likelihood of being retained. Tinto's work helps us understand that students need to feel like they belong at their universities, that they can identify and integrate within the academic communities of their chosen fields, and that they are invited to engage within those communities in meaningful and resonant ways.

In the work I've been doing with faculty since the pandemic began to find new pedagogical methods to improve engagement, one thing has become increasingly clear to the faculty with whom I work: engagement is a reciprocal process. We cannot define engagement as only what students give to us, but also how we as educators and mentors and guides enrich and support them. That's a mind shift akin to creating student-ready programs instead of asking for college-ready students. Too often, the narratives surrounding engagement aren't transactional and reciprocal but are instead based on what students aren't giving to us. Those meaningful and resonant ways Tinto identified as key to student integration and, in turn, retention? Those are cultivated by all of us working together and not only dependent on what students bring to us.

The pair of reflective articles in this issue of "Connecting" approaches this question of reciprocal engagement in a manner that helps us ask new questions not only of pedagogical methods that might capture our students' attention to promote engagement but also how the rhetorical context of bridging specific discourse communities and communities in practice are central to unlocking student engagement. Here, integration isn't just what the student does to immerse themselves into the university community but also what we do as academics to connect the various academic and professional communities to which our students affiliate and identify as part of their belonging process. Our academic silos don't just stand in the way of faculty collaboration but can also challenge meaningful student engagement. Focused on the rhetorical context of science studies,

this article pair helps to unpack what it would mean to engage student-scientists as writers who need and want to communicate to audiences both within and outside of specific academic scientific communities. Certainly, there are lessons for all of us to apply to our own disciplines as well.

As Julia Kiernan remarks in her introduction to this special issue, not engaging students in transdisciplinary work that prepares them to dialogue with many audiences is a “disservice to science students who will leave our classrooms and enter professions where they are required, but often ill-equipped, to engage with myriad public audiences.” Not to mention that siloed instruction limits the ways students will engage with our courses and academic content. Melissa L. Carrion and Ed Nagelhout in “Part 1: Creating Science-Citizens through a Writing Minor” detail how our efforts as educators should be in creating students that understand how to communicate effectively across disciplines, not just in the discipline of their major. Our authors are particularly interested in creating scientist-citizens who practice citizen-science to help expand the application of science to public matters and to generate a greater understanding of science and the scientific process among a general, public audience. Not surprisingly, getting students to practice citizen science entails supporting the development of their writing and communication skills beyond a first-year writing course and throughout a vertical writing curriculum embedded within disciplinary studies of science, a practice detailed by David Gerstle, Sarah Seeley, and Marc Laflamme in “Part 2: Learning to Communicate About Science: Writing About (Science) Writing and the First-Year Writing Requirement.”

Naomi Gades in her “English 101” picks up the same themes in her poem to remind readers of the importance of teaching students meaningful communication strategies that go beyond simply the “rules” of writing. If what “matters in the end are ideas,” as Gades contends, then we need to devote our time to engaging students in them, teaching them how to write their way to them, and modeling how to get their audiences engaged in what engages them. Amber Moore offers us a phrase that pulls together the discussion threads in “Connecting” with her nod to “manicured pedagogy.” Like freshly painted nails, manicured pedagogy cannot last. What can persist—and make students persist—is the raw, chipped, and often imperfect methods we use to engage students in more than participation in our classes—in the work of interdisciplinary learning and writing to foster strong connections between students’ academic pursuits and career aspirations after graduation. By doing so, we not only engage our students, but we identify meaningful work for ourselves.

Works Cited

Tinto, Vincent. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 1993.