

*Center for Teaching and Learning at Brandeis University*  
Learning to Teach: Isolation, Communication, and Pedagogy  
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I began my career as a university instructor well over a decade ago while still in graduate school, and learned the job on the go. My fellow students and I were given no formal teaching instruction over the course of our doctoral program, but instead learned by emulating our professors. Many of them were excellent teachers, some markedly less so, and yet they were all guides to my development as an instructor. We learned to teach by watching and doing. And, problematically, we rarely discussed our teaching experiences and challenges with our mentors or our friends. We learned to teach in isolation, a habit we took with us upon graduation, when we became professors ourselves.

There have been more than a few moments in the classroom over the years that have made me realize the need for changes in course content or pedagogical style. I could sense the stress points. My students were not as engaged with the readings or lab materials as I had hoped, my explanations and directions were evidently opaque to my audience, or feedback from course reviews would drive home other issues. I take my teaching seriously, though, and chiseled away at making improvements as a solo endeavor. As I made such changes I rarely discussed the challenges or potential solutions with my colleagues. Too often, the results were little more than small adjustments, intellectual Band-Aids that masked the need for deeper pedagogical transformations.

Participating in a year-long faculty learning community – the Davis Teaching and Learning Fellows program at Brandeis – was in many ways a revelation. For the first time in my teaching career I had the opportunity to engage with colleagues from across the university – the humanities, social sciences, sciences and professional schools were all represented in the conversations. Despite the diversity of our training and teaching environments my peers and I found that we were all wrestling with similar issues. Many had realized solutions to the sorts of classroom engagement with students that I sought. Others were, in turn, struggling with different concerns for which I could offer some insights. What was drawn in stark contrast for me was that while teaching in isolation had not caused our issues in the classroom, it had long prevented many of us from finding effective solutions.

From the beginning of the year I began to learn from my colleagues' insights and criticisms. I sought to adapt my courses, to fundamentally restructure the ways in which I used pedagogical resources like online teaching environments, to reconsider the function of my lectures as a form of engagement and response, rather than as an academic bully pulpit. Lectures in particular have long been a teaching conundrum for me. I strongly believe that they can be an important and potentially effective piece of the teaching and learning toolkit. Yet, too many blank stares, empty seats and missed opportunities for connecting with student interests can be frustrating to even the most engaging lecturer. Using online engagements with students before lectures to prime their interests, guide their reading and elicit open-ended questions allowed me to react to students immediately and change my lectures on the fly. In seminars, I was able to encourage students to engage directly with one another even before class began. Although the changes I was making based on our discussions sometimes seemed small and subtle, I began to feel as though I was mending some of the fundamental issues in my classroom.

Periodic discussions with my faculty colleagues from across the university were part of the equation. Classroom visits with fellow teachers was another, and critical, piece of the puzzle. There is perhaps no great revelation here, but as an academic whose basic job it is to stand in front of a class and be observed I admit it is

rather disconcerting to have a fellow faculty member in the classroom with me. This is particularly so having already sat in on their courses and seen what excellent teachers they are.

Yet, sharing the experience of teaching visits with my colleagues was exciting. On the one hand, I was fascinated to get their impressions of the dynamics in my classroom. On the flip side, in observing their classes, relieved of the pressure to perform myself, I was reminded how exciting college can be. I was thrown back into the moment of being a student drawn in by a professor, and I was energized to get back in front of my own courses.

I came away from my year as a Davis Fellow with a fundamental (and in retrospect obvious) insight that will guide my teaching in the years to come: if we are to improve as teachers we must stop teaching in isolation and instead treat pedagogy as a collaborative effort. As students we are too often presented with teaching as a solitary endeavor, and we continue on through much of our career as though it were the work of a lone instructor. We must instead recognize that pedagogy improves when there is a collaborative effort in which we are able, and unafraid, to gain insights and to take criticism from our peers.

Visits to our colleagues' classrooms, lunch conversations with our peers, a few minutes over coffee – even these simplest forms of outreach within and across our departments and disciplines can be profoundly inspiring. Indeed, in this it is little different than our research in which we are constantly engaged in peer-review and constructive give and take with our colleagues in discussion. Nurturing research takes time, and providing faculty with the time and support to develop their teaching is something in which universities must also invest.

Finally, my experience as a Davis Fellow has emphasized the need to break the cycle in which many of us were trained. We are good at teaching our own undergrad and graduate students to conduct research, to write and calculate and create scholarship – yet we too often neglect teaching them about pedagogy. We must also train them as teachers to work collaboratively, to understand pedagogy as a social process in which they are not academic isolates but can function as part of a team. Not only will this improve their teaching, it will also undoubtedly be more fun for them and enliven their experience as they move on to become the next generation of college professors.

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