

Critical Teachers and Critical Students:  
A Reflection on Two Years in the Faculty Teaching Certificate Program

Brian Baumgart  
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Three years of graduate school. Two years of the Faculty Teaching Certificate Program (FTCP). Perhaps once a month, an hour and a half to two hours at a time. Yes, we're all busy, whether it is taking, teaching, or arranging courses; whether it is conference presentations or organizing; whether it is research or publications or both. No matter what load we, as college teachers, have taken on or have been assigned, most, if not all, can make ready this small time commitment that is far more valuable than the hours it takes up.

I'm not going to say this program is revolutionary. I'm not going to say that it opened my eyes to a way of educating my students that revamped the way I teach or the way I see teaching.

But what I will say is that it has afforded the opportunity to get together with colleagues from other departments to discuss the goals behind why we do what we do (yes, helping our *students*). I will say that the people involved have prodded me to become more critical of my approaches to teaching and to education as a whole, and that the support system created within the two years in the program is invaluable for creating a broad-ranging discussion of the university system that stretches beyond departments and colleges. I will say that I have witnessed and experienced those wonderful "ah-ha!" moments when something becomes clear (and again, not that the world changes with these moments, but perhaps a minute dimension of the world—a realization, perhaps). I will say that *every* faculty member should be part of a program like this, that they should take it seriously (amidst jokes and laughing and good times, of course), that it should not be resigned for junior faculty seeking tenure or a line on his or her vitae, and that the benefits far outweigh the time it takes to meet and discuss.

Note: This is not an advertisement for the program in the traditional sense. I am not trying to present the FTCP as a god of faculty education programs. But, I digress...

Over the past two years, I've witnessed other faculty—teachers more experienced in teaching college than I—evolve into stronger and better and more observant teachers. I don't mean directly in the classroom, because I haven't observed more than one or two, but with the ways they discuss their students and their own teaching performance—particularly in relation to (beware of catch-phrase) active learning pedagogies. Of course

it makes sense to actively engage students in the classroom. Isn't that better for both teacher and student? I've always thought so. But even if we believe it, aren't we sometimes unsure or even afraid of how we might implement those active-learning strategies? And how will they have an effect on the class? What if I do it all wrong?

And one of the most important questions: Why am I doing it?

In essence, this last question is "What are the goals of the particular active-learning activity?"

As a teacher of English composition and creative writing, two writing-intensive courses, I can't imagine teaching without these strategies. It seems integral to the classes. But discovering what my goals have been and what, maybe, they should be has been at the heart of my own participation in the FTCP for these past two years. And isn't that a worthwhile goal? If you already teach in a certain way, and you're confident that it is a valid and successful way to teach, isn't it then important to understand why it is valid and how it works? This is not building a car's engine—because you've already done that—but it is an understanding of the mechanism and the ability to tweak it and fix problems should they arise. (Note number two: I have little to no understanding of how to fix a car's engine, but maybe that will be a future goal of my own.)

The ways that I have gone about understanding my own pedagogies include attending the meetings, reading the suggested readings, going out and doing my own research about teaching strategies, asking my students how they feel or what they think about these strategies and their effectiveness, and observing and listening to other teachers talk about their reactions to and attempts at different "teaching moments."

And all of this has made a difference. I tell my students that one of the most important aspects of my courses, one of my primary goals, is to get them to become critical thinkers. I don't think I'm alone here. I don't believe that many teachers are *really* under the delusion that their courses are simply information repositories. If they were, couldn't they just give the students some books and say, "Be on your way. This is all I have to offer"? So, with the idea that we ask our students to be critical thinkers—that is, critical students—shouldn't we, ourselves, be critical teachers? Not critical of our students' work, though that is a part of the job too, but critical of our own teaching and our own methods for educating. My simple answer: *absolutely*.

I have consistently revised my courses from semester to semester—major changes—but in these three years I have only taught one class (or two) per semester. I understand the challenges of this with three or four or five preps each semester. It would be nearly impossible to redesign all of these courses every semester, so what the FTCP has done is allow/force its participants to redesign one course and to think about the goals for the course. Now, one course isn't everything. This, too, is obvious. But it is a start. It's not as overwhelming as systematically recreating every course from scratch; in fact, it is better. Why? Because it allows the instructor to think critically about that single course redesign—and how the goals can be met through whichever strategies he or she chooses. So once this course—most likely a problematic course—is attempted, and the instructor sees how effective or ineffective the strategies are, he or she can implement the successful activities into other classes (with alterations for subject matter, etc.) and revise those that were unsuccessful after analyzing *why* they were unsuccessful.

Again, I'm not going to say that this has been a revolution for my teaching or in my knowledge base about education. But I will say that it has shaken me up to what I *could* be doing and how I (along with other teachers in the program) can help others, from students to other teachers, by sharing what I've gathered in the FTCP.

Two years of the FTCP. Three years of graduate school. Six years of teaching. As I move out of my student role and into full-time college teaching, I'm feeling quite indebted to the program for showing me more about higher education and academia, for allowing me to be a part of something big and something important, for letting me gripe and groan when no one else seemed to understand my frustrations, for showing me that my teaching has been on the right track for student success—my ultimate goal.

I haven't counted the hours I've spent in the FTCP meetings, preparing for them, and integrating the experiences into my classes and pedagogical lexicon, but I can say, right now, that it has been worth it. Even if I don't feel like it is a major influence on what I am doing now, I'm confident that the affirmation of the validity and significance of what I have been doing will influence the future of my teaching, and how successful I am at accomplishing that ultimate goal of education.