Promoting a Culture of Teaching: The Pedagogical Colloquium

Universities have always had a clear way of knowing whether the candidates they invite to join their faculty are outstanding scholars; their writings and presentations provide faculty with a chance to assess their research. Yet judging a candidate’s ability to work with and communicate knowledge to students is a bit more difficult. Two departments, history and religious studies, have added a new dimension to the hiring process at Stanford by asking candidates for faculty positions, as part of their on-campus interview, to present an overview of their teaching practice in an informal “pedagogical colloquium.” This presentation does not replace the traditional “job talk” based on the candidate’s research but complements it.

A simple enough concept on its own—a means to appraise a candidate’s teaching abilities during the hiring process—the pedagogical colloquium has come to play a significant role in raising the subject of teaching more generally in the departments. Not only do candidates, particularly at the entry level, prepare more carefully for the questions their potential colleagues will be asking about their teaching philosophy, successes, and changes, but graduate students and faculty of the host department find they are discussing their teaching more regularly with one another. Rather than something individual and personal that goes on between the instructor and his or her students, teaching becomes a collaborative enterprise—in the words of Lee Shulman, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education, it becomes “community property.”

Origins

No one can know for sure exactly how a new practice like the pedagogical colloquium gets started, but Pat Hutchings, Director of the American Association of Higher Education Teaching Initiative, traces the idea to Shulman’s talk at the 1993 AAHE Conference on Faculty Roles & Rewards. There Shulman called on institutions to send a message to candidates for faculty positions that they are interested in their preparation as teachers as well as in their research potential, and he suggested that departments communicate this by asking them to balance their talk about their scholarship with an equally serious presentation on teaching.

Shulman recalls hearing a challenge of sorts from a prestigious private university that emphasized undergraduate education; the professor had asked research universities to send them new Ph.D.s who “have some clue about teaching.” Shulman’s reaction was, “Well, we’d be much more likely to send such people to you if that’s what you asked for.”

Three Models

Shulman says he came up with the pedagogical colloquium as a way for departments to ask for good teachers, even to indicate what kinds of teachers they would like to hire. He regards it as a “new version of the old concept of the public defense of the dissertation,” in which the doctoral candidate had to demonstrate not only his knowledge but his ability to communicate it. In other words, it was a kind of examination of teaching. Translated to the setting of the campus interview, requesting a candidate to lead a colloquium on teaching says, in effect, “We want to see whether you are a scholar-teacher in your discipline.”

Shulman suggests three different models for the colloquium: the course narrative or course argument, the discussion centered on an essential idea or concept, and the “dilemma-centered” colloquium.

Course narrative In this form the candidate emphasizes the purpose and function of a particular course in the curriculum. By telling the story of the course through the syllabus, as students and teacher have experienced it (or would experience it in the case of a hypothetical or proposed syllabus), the candidate illuminates the reasoning behind the readings, assignments, activities, and experiences chosen and argues for this way of planning and teaching a particular course. Shulman says that when the host faculty and graduate students have a chance to ask detailed questions about a syllabus that has been duplicated and handed round, there is no chance to fall back on generalizations or abstractions.

Essential idea or concept In this model the would-be colleague takes up the challenge of teaching something
particularly hard to communicate because students find it difficult to understand; Shulman’s examples are the concept of “theme” in English and derivatives in math. A candidate who meets this challenge is likely to spur others to try that idea, or at least to spark discussion among those present.

**Dilemma-centered colloquium** Like the previous one, this model acknowledges that there are problems in the pedagogy of every discipline, or perhaps in pedagogy itself. Shulman mentions the dilemma of locating the balance between breadth and depth in an introductory course, and the problems in assessment when one alternates between group work and individual assignments, with their different bases for determining accountability. In this model the department gets the most information when the candidate stays within the discipline, offering particular examples of strategies that work, reporting on how evidence of success was ascertained (did students’ knowledge improve? did they evaluate the methods favorably?), and speculating about how others might devise similar techniques.

Shulman acknowledges that requiring a presentation on teaching gives an advantage to candidates from schools with pedagogical training programs. Such students will have thought about teaching, though they might not have had the opportunity to teach a course of their own. If new Ph.D.s from these departments do indeed fare better on the job market, other graduate schools are likely to improve their TA training and to make sure all their students who plan to teach equip themselves for that part of their career. One way to ensure that graduate students reflect on their teaching before becoming full-fledged members of the profession is to help them “prepare and rehearse their pedagogical presentations,” which, as Shulman points out, departments (or their placement committees) already do for their Ph.D. students’ research presentations. Reflection can also be emphasized by encouraging students to compile a teaching portfolio (see *Speaking of Teaching*, Spring 1996).

The History Department’s “Informal Discussion about Teaching”

According to Professor Richard Roberts, the history department came to use the format of a colloquium on teaching as a result of its participation in the AAHE project on the peer review of teaching. Seeking ways to raise the level of attention to teaching in the department, Roberts suggested the idea of having candidates in their upcoming searches talk about pedagogy. “The research presentation had served us well in giving a sense of the candidate’s intellectual reach, but it was not at all clear that it was a sufficient test of the capacity to teach in a variety of settings,” he explains.

The discussions of pedagogy were introduced for senior appointments as well as junior, for faculty realized they would be a good way to gauge how all candidates’ teaching interests would fit the department’s needs as well as how their research interests “might contribute to changes in undergraduate and graduate curriculum, teaching, and mentoring.” Over the last three years, history has had seven searches, adding three new faculty members in fall 1996, with one professor set to come next year and two offers pending. That has meant more than a dozen teaching colloquia.

The history department rejected the term “pedagogical colloquium” in favor of the less formal “discussion about teaching and curriculum” because, Roberts says, some members felt “that they themselves did not have a clearly defined theory of teaching or pedagogy, and that there was no way we could ask freshly minted Ph.D.s to lay out their philosophy of teaching in formal, theoretical terms.”

Even at the entry level, candidates’ teaching experience varies widely, and Roberts and his colleagues were concerned that those who had taught more courses might have an unfair advantage. The format chosen helped to level the playing field, for all were asked to look at the history curriculum and to suggest what courses they might teach and how. “We were especially interested in the candidate’s comments on how he or she would teach a particular book—or sequence of books, or methodological debate—which was very revealing,” adds Roberts.

Although Assistant Professor of History Brad Gregory had done hardly any teaching when he interviewed in 1995, he was able to compensate for his lack of experience by drawing up two syllabi for courses that would fit Stanford’s history offerings and explaining the reasoning behind his choice of readings, documents, and sequence of assignments. One syllabus he designed became the basis for the undergraduate introductory seminar he taught last fall, “Religion, Revolution and Reaction in the German Reformation.”

Gregory was one of the first candidates asked to participate in a “conversation about teaching,” and he has seen a number of them since joining the department last fall. He finds their informality useful, for “you see the personality in a way you don’t see it in any other part of the process. You get a chance to see how scholars think as teachers, their ability to interact, in short, to see the pedagogical mind at work.”

Professor Harold Kahn was at first hesitant to approve the addition of another event to the campus interview, but he is now an enthusiastic supporter of the conversations with candidates about teaching. What he feared would be, in his words, a “stiff and formal presentation of faux philosophy worked out to be a perfectly wonderful exchange among teachers and intellectuals about how we go about thinking about thinking.” As he describes the introduction of the novel format for discussing teaching, “None of us knew what would happen; we walked in cold. We were lucky to encounter candidates who were so engaging and interesting in the beginning that even the most reluctant of us were won over.”
Kahn is not sure how much change it will lead to: “I suspect it will be a long-term process; it’s too optimistic to believe that the exchange of ideas will lead directly to change in curriculum.” He does believe the new occasions for discussing teaching will have positive effects on the department, for they have “opened up for us the possibilities of talking about how we go about our lives as professional teachers, scholars, mentors—the things we are supposed to be doing. I have learned much more than I ever thought I would.”

The Pedagogical Colloquium in Religious Studies

The pedagogical colloquium in religious studies grew out of the department’s teaching colloquium, implemented in the fall of 1992 with the support of a Centennial TA Grant won by graduate student Mark Gonnerman. He and Mark Unno organized the two-quarter symposium to provide a forum for faculty to share their collective expertise about teaching with graduate students. Typically, the featured professor would share the story of one of the undergraduate courses he or she regularly teaches, how it evolved over time, and the pedagogical principles undergirding it. According to Gonnerman, who described the teaching colloquium for the department’s TA Guidebook (also funded by the Centennial TA award), the presenting faculty member had only to lead off with a brief opening statement to raise a number of pedagogical issues and perspectives that became the basis for lively exchange.

Gonnerman describes the pedagogical colloquia held during the job searches as similar; there, too, the syllabus often served as the springboard for discussion. Because religious studies faculty and graduate students had had experience with the give-and-take of the colloquia, they were practiced questioners of visitors, though they often asked different kinds of questions. For example, he says, grad students tend to ask about the candidate’s experience with certain situations that frequently arise in religious studies classes, such as when a student from inside the tradition that is the subject of the class has a different take on a ritual or text than someone outside that tradition. So the graduate students ask, “Have you met this issue? Have you encountered this or that problem—which sometimes affects other students’ motivation to participate—and how have you handled it?”

Whereas the graduate students, who are just starting out as TAs, are trying to get a perspective on their own experience and are very interested in solutions, Gonnerman says everyone gets a chance to learn something from the candidate’s answer. “It gives an indication of how mature the candidate is, how she or he handles these pedagogical issues, which are not unusual in religious studies. If they are not able to enter into helpful discussion about these problems, you can tell they either haven’t been very engaged or haven’t been very reflective about it.”

Similarly, department members fresh from the teaching colloquium would ask of an experienced teacher, “How has the course changed over time?” Or of an entry-level candidate, “When you have taught this course a few times, how do you expect it to change?” Gonnerman says that discussions around syllabi are extremely revealing. “You can gauge [teachers’] ability to learn from their experience and to come up with new ideas as they test things out.”

He likes the format because of the “room for spontaneity” it creates. “You get a sense of what they’re like in the classroom when there’s dialogue going on.” Gonnerman says it’s especially interesting when you realize the candidates are talking to “people who have more teaching experience than they do; how do they deal with that? Is there give and take? Are they comfortable in that exchange?” He claims that you can also get a sense of how candidates see their authority in the classroom.

Professor Arnie Eisen, chair of religious studies, contrasts the pedagogical colloquium favorably with the previous practice, which had been to invite candidates to guest lecture in undergraduate courses. “It was difficult for them because they had to fit themselves into a curriculum that really wasn’t a match. Neither do you get a favorable student reaction, so that doesn’t give the department a good sense of who the candidate is and what he or she can do.” Eisen believes the pedagogical colloquium is a better format, altogether, because “you get a good idea of how a candidate would be as an undergraduate teacher. You can ask candidates about the logic of their syllabus, what choices they made, why they chose the texts they assign, and so on. It shows the degree of thoughtfulness they bring to their teaching. It was a significant part of our hiring in the last couple of years. We chose the people we did at least in part because they made a good impression in that setting.”

One of those new assistant professors is Brent Sockness, who finds the pedagogical colloquium by far the best of three forums in which he has been asked to demonstrate his teaching abilities. One was teaching somebody else’s class (“because it’s not important to the students’ survival they just sit there”) and the other was to aim his “job talk” at undergraduates as well as potential colleagues. “You have to impress your peers but transmit your subject to students, an almost impossibly dual audience,” he says. Sockness was comfortable with the colloquium format, for he has taught for several years in a liberal arts college and has definite ideas about teaching students in a liberal arts setting.

Eisen thinks it’s a good thing for the department as well. As he says, typically, the only time the faculty talk about teaching with one another is during interviews with candidates—so it’s helpful to have these occasions when you get together three or four times during the year. He also views it, as others do, as a way of demonstrating his department’s commitment to good teaching.
Implications and Benefits

When as a candidate she was asked to send course materials and discuss her teaching philosophy, Associate Professor of History Paula Findlen took it as an indication that she would be “coming to a department that actually values undergraduate teaching.” She says, “It sounded a new note, because when I was interviewed in the late eighties, I was asked a few perfunctory questions about my courses, but only at so-called teaching institutions.”

Findlen finds the teaching colloquium useful for the candidate too, for it offers “a useful way to provide information in a collegial forum and the opportunity for honest discussion about the need to address enrollment in fields with few majors, such as Renaissance and Reformation.” Findlen says that the focus becomes less on the candidate’s teaching and turns “toward teaching in the field and the nature of the institution you are coming to,” which is particularly important for senior candidates.

Faculty with experience with the pedagogical colloquium conclude that by adding this dimension to campus interviews they are instituting an ongoing dialogue that extends beyond the search process. When the department meets to evaluate candidates and compare their different responses to similar questions, faculty find they must be attentive to the overall effect, not just the details. They naturally consider their own ways of running a course of the same type, or bring up their own solution to a dilemma the various candidates have suggested dealing with in different ways. They are likely to consider the candidates’ ideas in relation to their own teaching, such as what constitutes appropriate pedagogy to which students in what particular formats, from an undergraduate seminar to an introductory lecture course. This results in an on-going theoretically sophisticated and wide-ranging discussion. As Shulman says, “discussions around hiring can become the seedbed, the rehearsals, for comparable conversations among colleagues within a department, as we move toward the peer review of teaching as an aspect of departmental culture.”

The medium of the pedagogical colloquium may even lead to a department’s reassessing of the way it evaluates teaching effectiveness. “If a department is hiring a candidate because it sees a particular sort of promise in the person pedagogically, it might then want to track that promise over time,” Shulman says. He believes that, based on their experience of seeing what they can learn in a short time by seeing someone think about her teaching philosophy “on her feet,” as it were, some departments may want to collect “new kinds of data” in order to change the way they gather information on teaching. This may have application for other purposes for which we assess teaching, such as for awards and for tenure and promotion purposes.

To create a culture of teaching, Shulman says, you first have to change the way faculty regard their classroom practice. The goal is to move faculty from believing that good teaching is the result of mastering techniques, or “how to’s,” to the realization that it is intellectual work. As Russell Edgerton, formerly president of AAHE and currently president of the Pew Foundation, writes in the preface to Teaching as Community Property, “even faculty who care deeply about their own teaching rarely regard teaching as an intellectual endeavor worthy of reading, systematic inquiry, or even conversation.”

Those with the highest hopes for the pedagogical colloquium envision just such a transformation of our thinking about teaching, though it may come about slowly. Professor Richard Roberts believes that the interest and excitement aroused by a series of colloquia in conjunction with searches can be sustained only with “systematic follow-through,” including signs from upper-level administrators that this kind of evaluation of teaching will be encouraged. “Without such signals,” he says, “teaching will continue to be seen by many faculty in the department as a private, individual activity, not as a central aspect of the wider university culture.” The presence of provosts, deans, and chairs at the AAHE conferences that have led to teaching initiatives such as the peer review of teaching is a positive sign, according to Pat Hutchings, as is the number of departments participating in the peer review project that have adopted some version of the pedagogical colloquium. Once this practice becomes widespread, look for graduate programs to prepare their students much more thoroughly to become scholar-teachers, as they respond to departments clamoring for just that entity.

• FOR FURTHER READING •


Shulman, Lee. “Teaching as Community Property: Putting an End to Pedagogical Solitude.” Change 25.6 (Nov./Dec. 1993): 6-7. (Offprints of these essays are available in CTL.)