

## News from the Neighborhood

### Pilgrims' Progress: When Work Becomes Transformational<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** An instructional designer's retirement provides the opportunity for reflection on 20 years working in faculty development in higher education. Using the narrative frame of a pilgrimage to describe the journey, the author uses "stops" along the way to explore important moments of personal and communal transformation, with specific examples in the biological sciences included. Readers are invited to explore and reflect upon their own unique journeys through the lens of this tale, identifying meaningful moments and opportunities for transformation in life, work, and play.

**Key Words:** teaching, learners, reflection, transformational work, holistic education, decoding teaching and learning

After 20 years teaching and working in faculty development in higher education, including biology, I have retired. My work was to provide resources and best practices to faculty members about their teaching. I spent the last few months of my career reflecting on the journey, seeking insights about what I learned and what it meant. This reflection is included in the News from the Neighborhood section that appears occasionally in *Life: The Excitement of Biology* because the editor, JSB, my dear husband, considered that it was a potentially valuable contribution for all readers, whether scientists or not, and because many of the insights were generated during our daily walks in our neighborhood and garden. It was during one of these walks that the organizational framework for the reflection emerged. This is a story about pilgrimage and all that implies - from the challenges and questions encountered on the journey, to the insights and transformations that happen along the way, to the companions who interacted and deepened the experience. It is hoped that this reflection might have a more universal appeal to anyone who has a quiet moment to consider the meaning and importance of one's own life – at work, home, or play.

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### **Pilgrimage as Metaphor for Reflection: Questions form the Path**

As in most pilgrimages, participants journey along a route, periodically stopping to take nourishment and rest. Often, travelers are looking for enlightenment or some sort of significant personal change. As I thought about my experiences with over 100 faculty members at my campus, I began to understand that the questions they asked me through the years formed the pathways we were to follow.

At the same time, I was surprised to discover that the same questions came up repeatedly: *How do I know that what I am doing is working? What do students need to be successful? How can I stay motivated in my teaching? Is my course rigorous enough and fair? How can I engage students in their learning? Who are my students now? What new approach can I use in my classroom?* I realized that these questions are not the kind that can be answered once and done. They come back to us repeatedly because times change, students change, content changes, and ultimately, we change, requiring fresh answers to those very same questions.

Changing circumstances alone do not totally account for this phenomenon, however. I have come to understand that the questions do not change because what lies beneath them does not change - the underlying values that we hold: pride in our work, care for ourselves and our students, responsible stewardship of time and resources, the desire to find meaning and purpose in our work, curiosity, and the love of intellectual pursuits, as well as the importance of relationships. Because the questions we ask tell us a lot about who we are, and what we think is important, namely, our values, then in this sense, they become *essential questions* for those seeking a deeper and more meaningful experience.

The essential questions that have had the largest impact on me over time are represented below as “Stops” on the pilgrimage - moments where I have been forced to stop – think – adjust – grow – or even simply wait for understanding. I invite you now to stop and join me as I recount this journey. Ask your own questions as they arise. What insights can they provide to you? What transformations have you seen in your own life? Finally, for scientists who also teach, I include a summary of the transformations to the general education biology course sequence that provides an example of this narrative in action - hopefully adding interest and usefulness to this journal’s audience.

#### **Stop Number One on the Journey: *How do I know it is working?***

This powerful question stopped me in my tracks when it was posed from a tenured faculty member very early on in my career. She asked, “I am going to do xyz activity in my course. How will I know if it is effective?” I gave the standard answer about best practice, alignment, and assessment, but I was unsatisfied. My answer felt incomplete and canned. As a result, I began to seriously study related topics like action research, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), and

statistical analysis – both qualitative and quantitative. I also started working through authentic questions (questions for which I really did not have an answer) in my own classroom – applying what I was learning to better answer that question in the future.

Over time, I became more confident with my answer because I had more knowledge, personal experience, and tools. Determining effectiveness was not nearly as simple as I had thought many years before. This insight into the complexity of the teaching act led me to a deeper appreciation of the scholarly nature of faculty work in the classroom and ultimately led to the desire to raise awareness of and appreciation for that fact. What began as a seemingly simple question, “How do I know this is effective?”, revealed itself to be a more complex series of questions, each with its tools for discovery or measurement. I was doing a disservice to faculty by oversimplifying it in my own mind.

Throughout this entire stage of my early career, I think my biggest transformation was an increased respect for the work that faculty do, which changed my relationships with them. I also learned that it is OK not to know something if you also seek understanding. This was an important step in my own development because it demonstrated that questions are just part of the process. No one could ever have all the answers, but we can seek them. It gave us all license to “not know”, and that created a much more comfortable working space to explore our teaching practice together.

**Stop Number Two: *How can we share what we have learned?*  
Springboarding and Letting Go**

Worthy scholarship should be shared, and we had a growing interest to share what we were learning, both internally for self-improvement, and externally with presentations and publications. But as interest in teaching scholarship grew, we had neither the resources nor the expertise to bring it to scale. This forced us to stop and devise a process to quickly build faculty capacity. We called it *springboarding* – connecting a faculty member new to classroom-based inquiry with a more advanced partner (Cruz et al. 2020, Muscanell and Shaffer 2020, Shaffer and Eshbach 2014). The new participant would observe what was happening in an existing SoTL project. This could include anything from development of an action-research question, to navigating Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals, to data collection and analysis, to presentation of results. Anytime during the process, the novice faculty member could springboard into their own project with assistance close at hand. They in-turn would help the next interested party. In this way we quadrupled our capacity in one academic year.

What did I learn at this stop on the pilgrimage? It became obvious to me that it was simply not sustainable for one person to drive and support these professional development efforts. I had to let go of this control if we were to move

into new territory. I felt anxious and worried by many things. Would people be alright? There are a lot of possible landmines in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process; I want people to avoid those. Would the additional demands of helping others eventually force many to quit? None of the bad things happened, and the participation grew, thanks also in part to new University-level initiatives that included the addition of expert personnel to support campus SoTL work and new promotion opportunities that encouraged faculty participation.

Springboarding has taught me that by letting go of my control over the entire process, I was able to grow with the group. As I encouraged faculty to enter the springboarding process as partners, they were quickly able to learn what they needed and then help others - building their own capacity and confidence along the way. With these wonderful partners, I never again felt like I was working alone, and I think they felt the same way. We now had a *community* of support.

As a result of our efforts, many faculty were able to present their work for the first time to colleagues on campus, at conferences, and as published articles in peer-reviewed journals. We ended up using this cohort model in future faculty professional development offerings, enhanced by the work of Cox (2004). These offerings were based on current interests such as: writing towards publication, faculty reading groups, self-care, using art and poetry to reflect on teaching, and e-games as active learning opportunities. In each case, I learned to let go even more. When I arrived on campus many years before this, I offered mostly one-shot workshops on specific techniques or tools. These have their place, but a more meaningful experience was waiting – the learning cohorts provided a depth of experience and connection that took us much farther. I needed to let go of the reins to allow this to happen. Because of this, we were taken to lands unknown, making us all the richer for it.

### **Stop Number Three: *Are we asking the right questions?* Decoding Teaching and Learning**

Our longest running cohort was a group who met to read teaching-related texts. Faculty members took turns facilitating the discussions. One memorable semester, we discussed the Middendorf and Shopkow (2018) text, *Overcoming Student Learning Bottlenecks: Decode the Critical Thinking of Your Discipline*. This text extends the work of Pace and Middendorf (2004) who describe their decoding the disciplines approach this way: faculty are experts in their fields, and as such, have long mastered the rudimentary elements. However, this fact can create a sort of blind spot in their teaching – they may skip steps or oversimplify topics that they, as masters, no longer need. The novices in their classes, however, need those additional steps, and without them, student learning bottlenecks may occur. “Interviews with a novice” and “creating metaphors for difficult concepts”

were two of the strategies we used to work through the bottlenecks from a teaching perspective (Middendorf and Shopkow 2018, Pace and Middendorf 2004).

As we applied this approach to the learning bottlenecks in our own courses, many of us were really surprised. It forced us to ask, “Are we asking the *right* question when we think about our teaching?” We may simply be asking, “Why are students not successful in my course?” Instead, we need to dig deeper to ask, “Where exactly are my students getting stuck and why?” “Am I leaving something out?” “Could I approach this differently?”

As I chewed on that question in the course I was teaching, I realized that I had been asking the wrong question. I was asking, “What are *students* not doing?” Instead, I should have been asking, “In the places where students are getting stuck, where have I potentially cut intellectual corners or oversimplified difficult concepts or processes?” The difference was immense. Instead of frustration at students for not mastering (what I perceived as) simple things, I put the focus back on my own practice and found I had fallen into the trap of the blind spot. As soon as I figured out what I was missing, I could see progress. It is exhilarating to discover something new about teaching, especially after so many years in the classroom. Learning to ask the “right” questions about my teaching transformed my work in the classroom and as an ID - giving me new tools at my disposal when asked, “What should I do? Students are not getting it.”

#### **Stop Number Four: *Are we taking care of ourselves?* Holistic Education and Transformative Conversations**

Since I began this journey, the focus for most educational development has been on student-centered teaching and learning. Students are important for obvious reasons, but it seemed to me that the important role of the faculty was getting lost in the shuffle. Over the years, I witnessed hard-working faculty managing with ever-decreasing support. As an instructional designer, I had a unique opportunity to speak candidly with faculty members across disciplines and appointment types. This access opened my mind and heart to a broader need. Many were tired and feeling disheartened. After some life-changing professional development for myself, which included mindfulness and self-care training, social and emotional learning, and resilience work, I realized that a more holistic approach to supporting faculty could be useful and welcome.

With some trepidation on my part, the first campus cohort exploring wellness topics began. I expected the few regulars who were always interested in something new to attend. To my surprise, the group was larger than usual and ended up meeting weekly for two *years* - exploring topics, reading books, attending presentations, taking field trips, and practicing wellness techniques. This link provides some details about the session topics for interested readers - <https://sites.psu.edu/selfcare/faculty-professional-development/> .

Almost immediately, we began integrating wellness practices in the classroom. For example, many started to include a brief mindful meditation at the start of class or before an exam to help students focus and relax. Clearly, if the things we were learning were good for us, they would also be beneficial for students. The most important insight from this time was the realization that faculty health and wellness are integral elements in the learning equation. Caring for ourselves and others and finding meaning and purpose in our work are the *sine qua non* of good educational practice, and as such, should be cultivated and fostered for all.

Felton et al.'s (2013) work on transformative conversations formed the framework for our practice each week and illustrates the wider impact that we were seeking: "The agenda would consist of reflecting on our work and life, remembering our callings, exploring meaning and purpose, clarifying personal values, and realigning our lives with them. The goal [of our group] would be to use meaningful conversations to reinvigorate ourselves, our work, and by extension, the academy." (Felton et al. 2013, pp. 5-6). I think we accomplished this. I also learned to have confidence in my own inner voice about what could be useful to people and to have the courage to try something new, even if it felt outside my comfort zone. Without a doubt, this period forms the most meaningful memories, experiences, and joys of my entire career on campus and feels like the place where good things happened for people.

### **Stop Number Five: *What would happen if we did...?* Working on a Biological Course Sequence**

In our daily walks through the neighborhood, my husband, a biology faculty member, and I, would often debate the pros and cons of various changes in the higher educational landscape. These conversations heightened my appreciation for and understanding of the faculty perspective. Sometimes heated, but always constructive, these passionate conversations sharpened the sword of my own intellect. Over time, confidence about the value of my ideas grew and our discussions shifted from the philosophical into practical applications.

Our first project together was a paired course for academically under-prepared students. The goal was to help first-year students be more successful academically. Students with low SAT reading scores enrolled in my husband's environmental science course for non-science majors, and at the same time, my college reading course. In the two-course sequence, students learned biology while at the same time how to effectively read textbooks and learn independently. We had excellent results and were encouraged to explore more strategies to improve outcomes (Shaffer et al. 2015). In this first project, a major insight gleaned was the understanding that there are academic as well as personal characteristics that can impact student success, and we can design courses to

account for these. Over time, we designed fully integrated courses that included scientific content as well as activities that supported student success including study skills, resilience-building, anxiety coping strategies, lifelong learning attributes and growth mindset development.

This was such a rewarding process in terms of learning for everyone involved and represents the deepest dive for me as a designer, working with a faculty member over many years to integrate new strategies and measure success. It also represents a very happy transformation working professionally with my husband – through many moments walking and talking through the neighborhood, we came to a deep appreciation of each other’s roles, values, and strengths to create a series of courses that are enjoyed by students and that hopefully provide lasting value.

### **Stop Number Six: The Last One**

#### ***What shall I place in my cajita? A Sacred Box Filled to Overflowing***

In the summer of 2018, I attended The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society’s Summer Institute on Contemplative Practices in Higher Education. What an amazing experience this was! During the week, I joined Dr. Alberto López Pulido’s group examining situated contemplation in which we examined ourselves, our work, and the elements that make our work contemplative. Dr. López Pulido assigned an activity from his research - using a *cajita* - a small box, to gather mementos of deep personal meaning to prompt reflection. *Cajitas*, as described in his research, are the small sacred boxes that migrating people from Mexico and South America often use to bring meaningful aspects of home with them on their journey (López Pulido 2002).

We were tasked with constructing our own *cajita* (mine was a large origami box of heavy poster paper, Figure 1) and then deciding what to put in them based on our work. We followed this with various writing prompts and sharing sessions. It was a powerful activity which has stayed with me (along with my *cajita*) since that time. What I realized during the session was that my *office* at work really was my *cajita*. Thinking about that space and the memories of people and conversations that took place over the course of my career was quite overwhelming.



Figure 1. Cajita I prepared containing profoundly meaningful memories that prompted reflection.

Taken collectively, these conversations represent not only the questions we asked and answered together over time, but they represent all the joys and challenges that formed us along the way. I used to tell my students each semester that the 15-week journey we were about to enter would change us all. That we would be different at the end because of everyone in the class. And no one could really predict what that magic would create by the end, but it always happened. I felt the same way now, thinking about my office as my *cajita*, as a space of ordinary and extraordinary moments that impacted and transformed us. It certainly evokes strong emotions thinking about it that way which tells me how important this work has been to me.

### Conclusion

Finally, the deepest meaning for me has come from journeying with the faculty on my campus – smart, intense, funny, quirky, creative, dedicated, curious, and hugely talented people. I am grateful to have had them as companions on my pilgrimage. Along the way, we built a sturdy and well-made path, forged by the value-laden questions we asked. Seeking answers through rapidly changing times, we relied on each other for support and community. We investigated and came to value what it means to teach as a whole person – mind, body, emotions, and spirit. With hearts filled with the best of intentions, hands ready for hard work, and with care for each other, we built a scholarly teaching community worthy of pride. What has meant the most to me personally, is that we accomplished all of this together, and I am gratified to know that even after I retired, their meaningful work has continued.

If I were to give any advice to a novice instructional designer entering into educational development, I would say to build relationships first. Learn to respect, understand, and appreciate the people who come to you for help – they have different goals and pressures on their time than you do. Once you walk in their shoes for a bit, you will begin to see the ways you can truly help them. Be a good listener, and ask essential questions like, “What is needed?” “What is important to you?” “What/Who am I missing?” “What are we building?” and mostly, “How are you doing?” If you start with care for them and yourself, you will build a pathway that you can be proud of; one that will both enrich and transform you and others if you open yourself to the experience.

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