Educational Development After Charlottesville

Late this summer, I was hiking in Glacier National Park – blissfully without internet. As I left the area, I returned to email for the first time in a few days. The first piece of mail in my inbox was from a former POD Network president, offering help for a response to a “horrible situation.” My heart sank, and as I got caught up on the national news to understand the reference, the gravity of the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, became clear. While I regained internet, I am grateful to President-Elect Cassandra Horii for taking the lead in drafting a statement, which was emailed to POD Network members in mid-August.

Through this message, the Executive and Core Committees signalled the organization’s support for communities in Virginia. However, the statement also was an expression of our care and concern for our own educational development communities, recognizing the work that was yet to come on our own campuses. Classrooms are key locations for students’ – and instructors’ – processing of difficult experiences, and educational developers play a significant role in supporting instructors and offering guidelines for these sometimes challenging, sometimes transformative, conversations.

In the statement, we suggested that one way in which the POD Network community could support each other would be through sharing of resources, drawing on a foundation of excellent tools available on the POD website and developed by 2016 POD Conference attendees at a post-U.S. election discussion (available here). Since that time, I have watched CTLs share, on Twitter or via their own blogs, many excellent resources, tailored to the needs of their own campus contexts.

Many centers are being responsive through programs -- such as Bergen Community College’s Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning’s workshop on “Deliberative Dialogue for Active Participation”-- and faculty learning communities, such as those at Portland Community College’s Teaching Learning Center on equity and inclusion. Written resources include:

- University of Virginia’s Center for Excellence on Teaching, “Responding to Critical Incidents”
- Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching, “Teaching After Charlottesville”
- The John J. College’s Teaching and Learning Center, “Teaching Resources for Difficult Times”
- The University of St. Thomas’s Center for Faculty Development, “Teaching After Charlottesville”
- The University of Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, “Starting a New Term in the Wake of Charlottesville Violence”

While many of these share common elements – the importance of acknowledging the violence that took place, the need to express care and concern for students, and the critical role of community agreements in productive discussions – each is slightly different, and they present a powerful reminder that context matters in our work.
As evidence of the care and concern that we have for our campus communities, it is also worth noting that these resources were generated in – what is for many of us – the busiest weeks of our professional year. For example, staff at the CTL where I work quickly mobilized to generate a newsletter post for our own campus, with examples tailored to our university, fitting in drafts between multiple new faculty, TA, and student orientation events.

As I write this letter, CTL colleagues in Texas and Louisiana are experiencing catastrophic weather events on their campuses. The full impact of the hurricane on the region and its population is yet to be known. Whatever the ultimate scale of the damage, staff at CTLs such as Rice University’s Center for Teaching Excellence, Houston Community College’s Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, and the Texas A&M (multiple locations) Centers for Teaching Excellence will surely play critical roles rebuilding their campuses. These roles will likely include developing plans to keep the academic mission of their colleges and universities going, creating new resources to help students and faculty process these difficult times, and serving as key agents to support faculty and student well-being.

Through watching this commitment, I am reminded of how much I like the definition of our field as “helping colleges and universities function effectively as teaching and learning communities” (Felten, Kalish, Pingree, & Plank, 2007, p. 93). I am proud to be part of an organization that stands ready to help its members and their institutions, whatever challenges they face in rebuilding their campus communities.

Take care,

-Mary

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