

THE TEACHING
INITIATIVE

Making Teaching Community Property

A Menu for Peer Collaboration
and Peer Review



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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A Menu for Peer Collaboration and Peer Review

BY PAT HUTCHINGS
Director, AAHE Teaching Initiative

AAHE TEACHING INITIATIVE
American Association for Higher Education

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—PH

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Making Teaching Community Property: A Menu for Peer Collaboration and Peer Review

by Pat Hutchings

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For more about the AAHE Teaching Initiative, see pp. 107-109. For more about AAHE's project "From Idea to Prototype: The Peer Review of Teaching," see pp. 111-115. Additional copies of this publication are available from AAHE Publications. For ordering information, contact:

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P R E F A C E

This book began, for me, at a meeting in January 1994 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in New Orleans. Pat Hutchings and I looked at each other with a mixture of elation and apprehension as the participants gathered for a special meeting during AAHE's Conference on Faculty Roles & Rewards. Seated around the table were provosts and other representatives from twelve universities, senior program officers from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, and Lee Shulman, Charles Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University. Before each of us was a sixty-three-page grant proposal Pat and I had written titled "From Idea to Prototype: The Peer Review of Teaching."

Pat's and my elation came from having assembled the key ingredients for change: some exciting ideas about an approach to educational improvement, top administrators strongly committed to the ideas, and foundation partners who had not only promised support but had themselves made important contributions to project design. The scary part was that, as authors of the proposal, we weren't sure what the promised "prototypes" of the project's title might look like. We were making a leap of faith that "out there," on the campuses represented around the room, were faculty who not only would volunteer to engage the work of the project but would actually invent new ways that teaching could be peer reviewed. As one of those faculty later said, that task was like "trying to write a short story before the genre had been invented." Though there are established conventions for sharing the fruits of research, academe has not developed parallel vehicles for making teaching (as Lee Shulman puts it) "community property."

It is, in fact, largely Lee's research and thinking about teaching that provides the intellectual foundation for the project that resulted from that proposal. In studies of outstanding K-12 teachers, Lee had found that high-quality teaching was a subtle and complex process — a process requiring both a deep understanding of a particular field of knowledge and a capacity to transform this knowledge (with analogies, demonstrations, and the like) in ways that connect with students' diverse mental worlds.

These findings were not themselves surprising. But as Lee pointed out, they *contradicted* the conception of teaching that is pervasive throughout schools, colleges, and universities — the conception of teaching as technique, as learning the "how to's" of lecturing and managing discussion groups, etc.

For us at AAHE, Lee's message was like a star shell bursting in the night, suddenly illuminating a new way of thinking about how to improve the quality of higher education. It explained the curious phenomenon we had observed so often: that even faculty who care deeply about their own teaching rarely regard teaching as an intellectual endeavor worthy of reading, systematic inquiry, or even conversation. Lee helped us see that the neglect of teaching as an intellectual topic might be rooted not in anything intrinsic to the nature of teaching but in the *conception* of teaching that had come to dominate our thinking. The problem, as Pogo would say, was us!

This implied an exciting line of work for AAHE's Teaching Initiative. If we could introduce faculty to a conception of teaching that honored faculty's intuitive appreciation for the subtle processes of "knowledge transformation" entailed in quality teaching, then perhaps teaching *could* become a subject of ongoing professional, collegial discourse. A culture of interest in teaching could develop that would contain its own dynamic for continual improvement.

Indeed, as we came to appreciate what Lee had articulated about the kind of knowing that goes into quality teaching, we realized that he was also guiding us through and beyond the sterile debates about teaching versus research, and what curriculum was essential. If teaching entailed the transformation of knowledge, then teaching and research were two sides of the same coin — the coin of scholarship. If teaching entailed the transformation of knowledge, then the question of what subjects should be taught couldn't be settled without reference to considering *how* these subjects were taught. Content and process, curriculum and pedagogy, had, like Humpty Dumpty, to be put back together again.

Moreover, if teaching were to be seen as scholarly, intellectual work, it would not be enough to evaluate teaching simply by looking at student ratings. Teaching, like research, should be peer reviewed. Indeed, *until* teaching is peer reviewed, it will never be truly valued.

This, then, was the premise around which the group was gathered on that January afternoon in New Orleans . . . and, after the introductions had been made, the critical issue quickly surfaced. Many of the provosts around the table had signed on for one clear reason — to improve the quality of evidence about teaching that appears in promotion/tenure files. But others around the table, and many faculty who later joined the project, argued that the endeavor should not be tied too closely to formal evaluation. For some, the concept of "peer review" put the cart before the horse. The real point, they argued, and what was needed before taking on the formal evaluation of teaching, was to develop habits and practices of faculty collaboration that would lead to genuine improvement in teaching and learning.

Fortunately, the latter view won the day. The provosts listened and agreed that the place to *start* was to initiate ways to rebuild a culture of interest in teaching. I say "fortunately" for two reasons. First, it's clear that some of the faculty who became engaged would never have done so had we started off with an agenda of improving documentation for formal review. Second, as Pat Hutchings points out in her conclusion to this book, the process of experimenting with colleagues in the name of improvement has yielded ideas that are relevant and useful for formal evaluation.

Each of the provosts agreed that January afternoon to sponsor faculty from three pilot departments to work on the project. The faculty (typically two per department) spent an intensive week at Stanford University in June of 1994, developing plans for pilot projects that they then pursued over the course of the following year. In June 1995, they all met again at Georgetown University to share their work.

The enthusiasm those faculty brought to the Georgetown event, and the early fruits of their work, was something we all thought just had to be shared. So we persuaded Pat Hutchings to take on the task of representing the work

of the project to a broader audience. Pat brought to the task not only her “project central” understandings and her connections to all the faculty who were working as part of the project, but her special gifts as an English professor and writer, who loves teaching and finds delight in sharing good news about what works.

Pat would be the first to say that the real authors of this book are the faculty who first did the work and then took the time to collaborate with her in telling their stories to others. As the book took shape, her search for examples led beyond the project campuses to other campus settings. We are grateful to all the faculty who contributed.

In the course of this project, our foundation partners — Ray Bacchetti, Robert Schwartz, and Ellen Wert — have become not just program officers but colleagues and coparticipants. Lee Shulman has become not just our intellectual guide but a marvelous colleague and friend. Many of the faculty we’ve worked with will remain colleagues and friends long after the project is over. Collaboration about teaching is good for teaching. It’s also good for the soul.

Russell Edgerton
President, American Association for Higher Education
March 1996

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

"I NOW BELIEVE THAT THE REASON TEACHING IS NOT MORE VALUED IN THE ACADEMY IS BECAUSE THE WAY WE TREAT TEACHING REMOVES IT FROM THE COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS."

— Lee Shulman (1993), p. 6

AAHE's Teaching Initiative is a program dedicated to the idea of creating a "culture of teaching and learning," and *Making Teaching Community Property* is about ways to do that. As Russ Edgerton's preface suggests, this volume comes out of a particular context of work — a twelve-university project, entitled *From Idea to Prototype: The Peer Review of Teaching* — and it was the experience of faculty participating in that project that led us to publish it. But the vision behind the chapters that follow here is relevant, we believe, on all campuses: that teaching, like other forms of scholarly activity, is substantive, intellectual work. That is, teaching is a matter not simply of method and technique (though these are the aspects of teaching that have received the most attention) but of selecting, organizing, and transforming one's field so that it can be engaged and understood at a deep level by students. Like scholarly research, our courses are acts of intellectual invention, and our teaching of those courses enacts the ways we think about and pursue our fields of study. Seen in this way, the work of teaching — as Lee Shulman says — rightly belongs to and requires the attention of the community of scholars.

Such is the vision of the AAHE project on peer review, and of this volume, and my purpose in this introduction is to make explicit three corollaries to this central vision that run as themes through the chapters that follow. I'll also say a bit about what you'll find in those chapters, how they're organized, and how to take advantage of the resources they offer.

TEACHING AS SCHOLARLY WORK: THREE COROLLARIES

First, to call teaching scholarly work is to see it as **a process of ongoing inquiry and reflection**. It is to assert that teaching is a matter not simply of standing and delivering (no matter how skillfully or with what eloquence) but also of examining and advancing one's knowledge and practice. Pointing to the need for "teachers as scholars," K. Patricia Cross (1990) notes, "the intellectual challenge of teaching lies in the opportunity for individual teachers to observe the impact of their teaching on their students' learning. And yet, most of us don't use our classrooms as laboratories for the study of learning" (p. 3).

Cross's point is echoed by William Cutler, whose report appears in Chapter 2. Recounting his experience of reciprocal classroom visits undertaken with a colleague in the history department at Temple University, Cutler notes, "Teaching tends to get turned into a routine. . . . So it's a good idea no matter how experienced you are, and how well things seem to be working in the classroom, to step back and examine your teaching and your students'

learning.”

In fact, it is this need to “step back and examine” that stands behind many of the strategies featured in this volume — be they reciprocal classroom visits, protocols for interviewing each other’s students, or course portfolios; they are antidotes to the daily grind, windows into new pedagogical ideas and insights. They are, as the Faculty Reports in subsequent chapters suggest, badly needed occasions for a kind of reflection and inquiry that is essential to what it means to see and undertake teaching as scholarly work.

A second corollary to a view of teaching as scholarly work is **the need for collegial exchange and publicness**. In a wonderful essay entitled “Teaching Alone, Learning Together,” Lee Shulman (1988) points up just how hard it is, in the booming, buzzing confusion of the classroom, for faculty to *see* themselves as teachers, and therefore to know what and how to improve; what’s needed, Shulman contends, is assistance from colleagues who can help them do so. Faculty Reports in this volume constitute a running reprise on Shulman’s point, showing over and over, in various contexts, that working together around issues of teaching and learning is just plain helpful; that there are aspects of teaching that faculty peers are best (or particularly well) equipped to assist with.

One obvious example relates to course content: Is the material current with the field? Is it the most important material for the students in the course? Are examples apt and telling? Is the course pitched at the right level of difficulty? Is student work evaluated appropriately, given the standards of the field? . . . These are aspects of teaching where collegial exchange with peers in one’s own field is highly beneficial. I think here, for instance, of a comment by one of the mathematicians in the AAHE peer review of teaching project, who told me, “Peers from the field are even more crucial than I first thought.” And I think of the experience of two faculty from a pilot department in the project who interviewed each other’s students (see Chapter 4). “There really is something to this peer stuff,” one of them said afterward. “You learn things together you can’t learn alone.”

Moreover, the benefits of and rationale for these kinds of peer collaboration are more than just immediately practical ones. When Joy Ritchie and her Department of English colleague at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln undertake a collaborative study of their theory and practice as teachers of composition, they do so not only to learn something useful for the next semester but to fulfill a responsibility to their scholarly community and to enact that community’s emerging conception of teaching: “Good teaching and good theory, as bell hooks reminds us in *Teaching to Transgress*, are always collaborative,” they argue in Chapter 7. “Thus, we want to emphasize that this collaboration is not something we’ve undertaken because it’s currently fashionable; nor was it undertaken merely in the service of institutional or professional goals. Our collaboration emerges directly and intrinsically from our philosophies about teaching and research as fundamentally dialogical activities.”

The third corollary of teaching as scholarly work is that faculty take **professional responsibility for the quality of their work as teachers**. In the context of research, faculty belong to scholarly communities that serve to set standards for the field — not in rigid exclusionary fashion, but as a constant

process of defining and redefining the field, identifying and addressing its major issues, determining what's important, making judgments about work that is (and is not) seminal.

In the context of teaching, however, there is no such process of collective standard setting yet. On most campuses, the evaluation of teaching is something that happens *to* faculty; they are objects, not agents, of the process. Some faculty no doubt prefer it this way; one I met at a recent conference told me, with some anger, that the evaluation of teaching was “an administrator’s job” and should not be “laid on faculty.”

But if, as is assumed in the chapters that follow here, teaching is a scholarly activity, with all that implies, then faculty must play a central role in ensuring and improving its quality. Doing so is a professional responsibility, quaint as it may sound to say so, and it’s also a practical necessity. For if faculty do not take charge of ensuring (and setting the standards for) the quality of teaching, bureaucratic forms of accountability from outside academe will surely rule the day.

To put all of this a different way, the “problem” this volume attempts to address is not that the state of teaching is bad and needs to be fixed, not that there aren’t plenty of good and dedicated teachers out there. The problem is the lack of a campus culture in which the quality and improvement of teaching are subjects of ongoing collective faculty attention and responsibility.

A MENU OF STRATEGIES FOR MAKING TEACHING COMMUNITY PROPERTY

The good news is that many faculty would and do welcome ways to be more public and collegial about their teaching and their students’ learning — and the purpose of this volume is to set forth, in practical, useful terms, strategies that move us toward Lee Shulman’s vision of teaching as “community property.”

The book is organized into nine chapters, each focused on a particular strategy (or category of strategies) for peer collaboration. It is, if you will, a kind of menu.

And like a menu, which conveniently separates the appetizers from entrees, the salads from desserts, this volume, too, does some sorting for you. It begins with strategies that are — relatively speaking, at least — more modest, more immediately doable: things such as “teaching circles” (Chapter 1) and reciprocal classroom visits (Chapter 2) that can be done in small doses, once or twice a semester, for a few hours. As the Faculty Reports of those strategies indicate, real benefits can result from their use, but they’re fairly simple in the sense that a small group of interested individuals can, without trying to bring whole departments on board or getting tangled up in issues of institutional policy, “just do it” . . . and of course we hope the examples and suggestions included here will make that doing even easier and more appealing.

Later chapters, by contrast, focus on more elaborate, and by some measure more ambitious, forms of collaboration. Chapter 6, for instance, looks beyond the episodic exchanges featured earlier to the more sustained collaboration required in team teaching and teaching teams, such as the “coordi-

nated studies” model described by Jean MacGregor, in which two or three faculty design and teach as a team an interdisciplinary course that constitutes full-time enrollment for students for that semester. Similarly, Chapter 7 features examples of collaborative inquiry and pedagogical scholarship — complex, theory-based projects on which faculty work together over a semester or more, and about which they write together. Chapter 8, in contrast to virtually all the examples in previous chapters, explores the possibilities for collaboration through formal departmental occasions and processes — collaborations that therefore require (and this is a source of their strength) consensus making and attention to matters of departmental policy.

Finally, Chapter 9 moves from collaboration that is for the most part local, to intercampus (and therefore, these days, often electronic, online) collaboration, looking as well at the possibilities for external peer review of teaching that a number of faculty in AAHE’s project have told us must be a goal if teaching is ever to be valued on a par with research.

It is important to say that there is no hierarchy of value implied in the arrangement of chapters; the strategies featured in Chapter 1 — as the Faculty Reports there testify — are equally as powerful as those in Chapter 9; the issue is not finding the best strategy but finding what best meets the need at hand and most closely matches local circumstances. It should also perhaps be said that the nine chapters are not so neat as the previous paragraphs may suggest; the categories overlap in all kinds of ways: Several of the programs featured in Chapter 2 on reciprocal visits and classroom observations also entail aspects of mentoring and coaching that are featured in Chapter 3; Chapter 4 points to collaborations focused on the investigation of student learning — but you’ll find instances of this focus in virtually all of the other chapters, as well. And as indicated in the conclusion, some of the strategies described in the context of collaboration may also be relevant to more formal peer review of teaching.

Finally, it’s important to say that the strategies featured here are not intended as an exhaustive listing of everything possible. Many useful things are left out, and only a small sampling of examples is included. Our intent has been to put forward possibilities that are interesting, varied, complementary (doing several is more powerful than any single one), useful, and — to return to the menu metaphor — even, we hope, tasty.

HOW TO USE THIS VOLUME

As *Making Teaching Community Property* evolved, I often thought of it as a kind of handbook, and the term, while not quite apt, suggests something about how to use it, for the chapters that follow here are meant more as resources — places to go for assistance as the need arises, possibilities to browse through — than as cover-to-cover reading. And we’ve tried to build into each chapter a set of elements that will make your browsing profitable.

As indicated above, each chapter focuses on a particular strategy for peer collaboration around teaching and learning. Each begins with a brief set of introductory, context-setting remarks, and each concludes with a listing of resources for further work. Many of the chapters also contain tips and suggestions for successfully implementing the strategy in question. But the heart

of each chapter is **reports by faculty** who have actually used (and in some cases invented) the strategies, and who recount exactly what they did, why, how it worked, and what they learned that might assist others. Several points of explanation about these Faculty Reports may be useful.

First, the Faculty Reports are drawn from a range of institutions, from community colleges to large research institutions, from private liberal arts colleges to state colleges and universities. A range of disciplines is represented, as well. But it is no accident that about half of the reports are from faculty who have been active in the AAHE project on the peer review of teaching; tipping the volume in this direction is our way of attempting to meet the many requests we receive for information on the project's developments and findings.

Second, many of the Faculty Reports (particularly those coming out of the AAHE project) are department- or program-based. This is not to suggest that crossdisciplinary collaborations are not highly powerful (you'll find examples of these, too), but it *is* to suggest that content — the “stuff” of teaching — is a powerful context for collaboration. It's significant in this regard that Jean MacGregor, in her account of interdisciplinary learning communities in Chapter 6, says “What we have found is that it is around content that faculty may feel most excited about collaborating. The best conversations begin not around a teaching method (‘let's try using student groups’) but around ideas that people care about . . . around the invention of the experience they want to give students in terms of content and ideas.” This emphasis on content rather than method, on substance rather than only the technique of teaching, follows from the vision of teaching as scholarly work.

Finally, the faculty whose reports appear in this volume would, I'm sure, be the first to insist that they do not have all the answers; that their collaboration is a work in progress. Many talk not only about successes but very candidly about what did not work well and about issues they are still struggling with. The candor and generosity with which they share their work is in fact a further enactment of their commitment to making teaching community property . . . and a contribution for which they deserve our real gratitude. A special thanks to them all.

AN EVOLVING CONVERSATION

As this volume goes to press, the AAHE project on the peer review of teaching moves into a next stage of work. As in the work to date, we will be seeking ways to disseminate results “in process” (rather than waiting until the end to issue a final report), and we're eager to hear from campuses of all types, and faculty in all fields, about how the ideas of peer collaboration and review “play” in their settings. (For more about AAHE's peer review project, see pp. 111-115.)

In particular, we invite you to be part of what we hope will be an evolving conversation about the strategies for making teaching community property that are featured in the chapters that follow. So let us hear from you about what's useful, what's not, what other good ideas should be “on the menu,” and what next challenges and opportunities you see. You'll find dis-

cussion about this last point in the conclusion, which looks at how the experience of peer collaboration can help shape more useful ways of reviewing and evaluating teaching.

RESOURCES

Cross, K. Patricia. "Teachers as Scholars." *AAHE Bulletin* 43 (4): 3-5 (December 1990).

Shulman, Lee S. "Teaching as Community Property: Putting an End to Pedagogical Solitude." *Change* 25 (6): 6-7 (November/December 1993).

———. "Teaching Alone, Learning Together: An Agenda for Reform." In *Schooling for Tomorrow: Directing Reform to Issues That Count*, edited by T.J. Sergiovanni and J.H. Moore, pp. 166-187. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1988.

TEACHING CIRCLES: STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Even on campuses where good teaching is a top priority, faculty I talk with report an experience that Lee Shulman calls “pedagogical solitude” — a state of affairs in which that aspect of faculty work that would *seem* to be the most social, the most public, turns out in fact to be the most unrelievedly private. Maybe there’s occasional, desultory chat about teaching in the elevator or faculty dining room, but when it comes to planned, purposeful conversation — occasions *set aside* for good talk about good teaching (and meaningful student learning) — the situation is pretty bleak. In such circumstances, teaching circles are a wonderful way to get the conversation started.

This chapter provides a quick overview of teaching circles, followed by reports from several faculty who have found them useful in starting a conversation about teaching and learning that would not otherwise take place. You’ll also find suggestions for using teaching circles, and for adapting the model to different disciplines. Additional brief examples and a list of resources round out the chapter.

WHAT IS A TEACHING CIRCLE?

The term “teaching circles” originated at the University of Nebraska, where psychology professor Daniel Bernstein coined the phrase (“I was intrigued with Japanese quality circles at the time,” he explains) and pioneered their use (see Resources). Today, and in this chapter, the term is used to describe a variety of arrangements through which (1) a small group of faculty members (typically four to ten, though one example included below is larger than this) (2) makes a commitment to work together over a period of at least a semester (3) to address questions and concerns about the particulars of their teaching and their students’ learning.

Structured along these general lines, teaching circles can serve individual faculty needs or advance more explicitly shared agendas — for instance, the teaching of first-year students (the topic of a long-standing teaching-circle-like group at Alverno College) or the teaching of large classes (the focus of a group at the University of Georgia). (See boxes.)

Beyond good, practical conversation, teaching-circle members might set themselves additional tasks. They might, for instance, help one another develop portfolios for use in promotion and tenure decisions; they might work together to preserve and document their conversations for a larger audience by developing a “*collective* course portfolio” (see Steve Dunbar’s report in Chapter 6), or by developing a departmental teaching library (see Chapter 8). Teaching circles might also conduct cooperative assessment of student learning, as in the example below from Rio Hondo College.

The specific activities and arrangements, as well as the names of these collaborative, practice-centered groups (several of the examples below do not use the term “teaching circle”), vary with context and purpose. Indeed, a

“WE CLOSE THE CLASSROOM DOOR AND EXPERIENCE PEDAGOGICAL SOLITUDE, WHEREAS IN OUR LIFE AS SCHOLARS, WE ARE MEMBERS OF ACTIVE COMMUNITIES: COMMUNITIES OF CONVERSATION, COMMUNITIES OF EVALUATION, COMMUNITIES IN WHICH WE GATHER WITH OTHERS IN OUR INVISIBLE COLLEGES TO EXCHANGE OUR FINDINGS, OUR METHODS, AND OUR EXCUSES. I NOW BELIEVE THAT THE REASON TEACHING IS NOT MORE VALUED IN THE ACADEMY IS BECAUSE THE WAY WE TREAT TEACHING REMOVES IT FROM THE COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS.”

— Lee Shulman, p. 6

primary virtue of the strategy is its flexibility. As indicated by the three Faculty Reports that follow here, teaching circles can serve a range of needs and purposes while advancing a larger, more general sense that teaching is an important scholarly activity, worth talking about.

FACULTY REPORT

In June of 1994, John Jameson and Ann Heiss attended an Institute on the Peer Review of Teaching, at Stanford University — the kick-off event for AAHE's project on the same topic. As the two-person faculty team from the history department at Kent State University, John and Ann took one very clear message back home with them: the need, as they put it, "to change the culture of the department, to make teaching a more collegial, collaborative venture." Teaching circles have proven a good way to get started with that goal, as John's report indicates.

SETTING A SCHOLARLY TONE: TEACHING CIRCLES IN THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT AT KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

by John Jameson, Faculty Member, Department of History, Kent State University

When we invited colleagues to attend our first departmental teaching circle, Ann and I emphasized that teaching was serious, intellectual work, and not something we can take for granted. We wanted to set a scholarly tone.

At our opening session we talked a bit about our experience at the Stanford Institute on the Peer Review of Teaching, and about our sense, resulting from that meeting, that we need to have more and better conversation about teaching, and to talk as colleagues about what good teaching is, and how we might document it. Out of this broad purpose, the group members identified topics they were interested in, and we used their suggestions in setting the agenda for subsequent teaching circle discussions.

Getting organized: schedules and attendance

We scheduled our meetings for late afternoon, alternating between slots that worked for MWF and for TTh teaching schedules. Each session lasts for an hour and a half. Importantly, we make sure there are always nice refreshments, thanks to support from the provost's office.

Not only faculty but graduate students are invited, and they've made wonderful contributions. Initially I was concerned that the presence of students would inhibit faculty discussion, but it hasn't. If anything, students have helped to raise useful controversies, and to keep us honest.

Finding a focus for our conversations

Our first real session featured two faculty well known in the department: one a wonderful lecturer and the other a wonderful discussion leader. We asked each to give a brief presentation on "what worked," and then opened things up to discussion.

In general, we have been careful to be sure that each session has an identified focus. These have included teaching portfolios, discussion-method teaching, and mentoring of new faculty — the last of which was the catalyst for plans actually to establish a mentoring program for new faculty this year.

So our talk has led to action.

We also had one session on “the changing classroom,” based on the idea that a lot of history teaching is lecture based. We wanted to put new possibilities in the air related to visual and technological resources: slide libraries, laser disks, and so forth, things many of us knew very little about, and that younger faculty and graduate students teaching their own sections are now, as a consequence, beginning to adopt.

We don’t simply chat; we have an agenda, a topic. It’s not that we have the next two years all mapped out, but we usually have the next two or three meetings clearly in mind.

The impact and success of our teaching circles

About two-thirds of department faculty participated in our first session, and the numbers have gone up from there, to about three-quarters, including history faculty from some of Kent’s regional campuses. Discussion often gets so lively we have to close the door.

Graduate student participation has been gratifying, as well. The director of the graduate program put out a strong memo to graduate students to solicit their participation, and we now have about half and half, faculty and graduate students. In fact, graduate students have now put in a request for their *own* teaching circle, which began meeting in Fall 1995. (They even invited faculty!)

The teaching circles have also brought benefit for me, personally: I’m now working on a major format change in my teaching, moving away from class “bluebook” exams, because I realized that students don’t write well under those circumstances. I now have them submit drafts and revise their papers. There were a few glitches, but overall this change has worked well — even in the large survey class that has more than 150 students. Our teaching circle discussions have moved me in this direction.

Changing the departmental culture

This hasn’t been a department where people throw chairs at each other or anything, but our teaching circles have certainly fostered greater collegiality. They’ve put important teaching topics on the table and changed the way people relate to one another. The dialogue about teaching has really started.

Of course it didn’t hurt that our provost, Myron Henry, was supportive of our effort; but other, larger changes across the university have bolstered our progress in the department, as well. For instance, there is now a University Teaching Council, where previously we had only a Research Council. Also, the latest AAUP contract specified that merit for faculty excellence should take into account the Boyer model and treat teaching as schol-

Good Talk About Teaching Large Classes

At the University of Georgia, faculty, graduate students, and staff from a variety of disciplines have come together to establish the Large Class Interest Group. Since 1992, members of the group have met regularly — they meet over the noon hour the first Monday of each month — to discuss techniques and strategies they’ve found useful when teaching large classes. The Interest Group (they don’t use the term “teaching circle”) has also tried to capture the “wisdom of practice” from those discussions by producing a brochure (see Gillespie in the Resources) that has been broadly distributed on campus and beyond. Recently, an electronic listserv has extended their conversation even more broadly. (See Chapter 9 for further examples of collaboration made possible through technology.)