This is the Weekly Reflection podcast from Saint Louis University’s Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning. Each week, we focus on a topic that fits with our theme for the 2012-2013 academic year, Engaging All Learners. Each reflection loosely follows the five-part Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation). The goal of this podcast is to provide an avenue into a space for thoughtful reflection on complex issues, rather than to provide answers to these issues.

Week 9: Learning through Risk Taking

Context:
Much of what we think of as authentic learning happens as a result of taking risks, but our students are generally quite risk averse. They have experienced everything from participating in the classroom to final projects, as summative assessments of their learning, where they perceive one misstep can mean a large drop in their grade. They have learned from a very young age that when they complete a task successfully, each similar task should be completed in the same way in order to receive the same reward. Despite how disappointing it might seem to teachers, in a culture where grades mean everything, many students would rather earn a good grade without learning, than earn a mediocre grade and learn a great deal.

Experience:
We know from many years of psychological research on risk-taking behaviors, most people’s aversion to risk-taking rises as the stakes become higher. The same is true when thinking about learning. Students are much more willing to take risks for the sake of learning in low-stakes, formative activities and projects than they are in high-stakes exams or culminating projects. Of course, each student also defines what the “stakes” are for her or himself; to one student the only thing to risk is a grade, to another student, the risk might be embarrassment in front of peers. Thus, when presented with an ungraded, small group, in-class project, for example, students show much more willingness to ask questions and to try out untested methods because neither are they being graded on the results, nor is there a large group to judge them. Learning about our students as whole persons contributes to our being able to hone in on which activities seem too risky to which students.

Reflection:
(Take some time to consider the following prompts. You may find it helpful to write or sketch your thoughts.)

In which ways do students need to take risks in your classes in order to have an authentic learning experience? How do you support risk-taking in your classes? Do you rely mostly on summative evaluation of student learning or do you incorporate formative assessment as well? Why do you rely on the specific evaluation and assessment methods you use? What are ways students show you they are risk averse or risk ready?

Action:
Examine one of your classes for low-stakes and high-stakes activities and projects. Look for ways to incorporate low stakes activities and assignments to further and deepen the authentic learning of the class while also taking away some of the risk for students. This could be in-class writing, exploring a case study, or even offering to drop the lowest exam score, whatever makes the most sense considering the learning objectives of your course.
Evaluation:
(The following questions are meant to be used at a later time after you have completed the Action, but may be used as a way to shape the action as well. It may be helpful to write or sketch your responses.)

With what intentions did you redesign or create the learning experience? How did those intentions present in the learning experience? Did the experience change the ways you see teaching, learning or the course?

How do you know if the change made a difference in student learning? For which students did the change make the most difference? Are there negatives for any students associated with the change you made?

What will you do next?

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Thank you for participating in this week’s reflection.

The next reflection will be posted on Friday, November 2nd. All reflections are archived for future use. For more information on this week’s topic, CTTL services, programs, or events please consult the website at http://slu.edu/cttl.