



Seven Shifts and Seven Levers: Developing More Productive Learning Communities

*Thomas A. Angelo, Coordinator
Higher Education Program
University of Miami*

During the past decade, higher education has been shaken and sometimes knocked off balance by powerful, largely external forces.

Perhaps because I'm a native Californian, I imagine these macro-forces as vast tectonic plates—slipping, grinding and colliding far below us. Normally, these forces cause gradual changes, but once in awhile we're surprised by a sudden quake that seems to change everything in an instant. Inflation is a good example of slow-motion slippage, but recent court decisions on affirmative action rate high on the Richter scale.

Current changes are surely the most profound since the "GI Bill" hastened the transformation of what was still largely an elite system into a system of mass education 50 years ago.

What's different this time, however, is that the focus of change efforts is less on building new institutional structures, redefining the curriculum, or expanding access, and more on the heart of higher education—the teaching-learning process.

One possible outcome of this important shift is the transformation of our colleges and universities from "teaching factories" into "learning communities."

What are *learning communities*? Most definitions center on a vision of faculty and students (and sometimes administrators, staff and the larger community) working collaboratively toward shared, significant academic goals in environments in which competition, if not absent, is at least de-emphasized. In learning communities, everyone has both the opportunity and the responsibility to learn from and help teach everyone else. Faculty become less purveyors of information and more designers of learning environments and experiences, expert guides, and practicing master learners themselves.

Learning communities already exist at LaGuardia Community College, the University of Washington, Seattle Central Community College and a few other institutions—and new initiatives are being launched across the country.

In practice, learning communities typically feature purposive groupings of students, shared scheduling, significant use of cooperative/collaborative learning approaches, and an emphasis on connecting learning across course and disciplinary boundaries. For example, a group of 30-40 students would enroll as a cohort in a handful of conceptu-

ally-linked courses organized around a theme, such as “Body and Mind,” “The Environment and Community Health,” or “Schools and Families.” Faculty design and teach these linked courses to foster coherence and connections. Through them, students learn not only the academic content, but also the learning and group-process skills needed to shift successfully from an individualistic to a cooperative academic culture.

Imagine extending this model beyond two or three courses to transform an entire department, program, or school into a learning community. Next, try being radically utopian for a moment: Imagine not just students, but also faculty working together as members of learning communities, collaborating on and connecting their teaching, scholarship and service in meaningful ways. Imagine transforming the faculty itself into a learning community.

For some faculty, creating learning communities may be the fulfillment of their long-held aspirations. Many of us in higher education hunger for that community of scholars we were promised upon entering academic life. The recent explosion of conferences, books, listservers, web sites and newsletters (like this one) focused on teaching and learning is one indication of the breadth and depth of this longing.

But that’s not reason enough to change. In truth, developing a more cooperative campus culture may simply be necessary for our survival. The Lone Ranger is history. Just as employers consistently advise us that our graduates will need well-developed *teamwork* skills to succeed in the future workforce, faculty need the same skills to prepare those students. In the bigger picture, to cope with our planet’s increasingly complex problems, we’ll need highly effective collaborators capable of making connections across boundaries. Even within higher education’s small world, strengthening our institutions to survive future financial and political shocks will require more collaboration than we can presently muster. And we need to do all the above more efficiently at a lower cost—or sacrifice access.

To improve both instructional productivity and learning quality, to

move academic culture toward a more productive learning community model, will require several fundamental shifts. The good news is that all these shifts are already underway to varying degrees, and— even better—several powerful levers are already available to hasten the transformation. Let me answer the picture I’ve drawn by offering a short list of seven promising shifts and seven powerful, related levers we can use to help create productive learning communities and richly fill in the blanks of our future.

1 Shift 1. From a culture of largely unexamined assumptions to a culture of inquiry and evidence.

Much of our standard practice depends on implicit and often highly questionable assumptions. For example, our system of courses and credits assumes that students learn at the same rate. Typical general education survey courses assume a “vaccination” model of learning: Three units of freshman composition will make you a better writer. And many proponents of diversity seem to assume that simply placing very different students together in the same environment will lead to greater tolerance and appreciation of diversity.

Lever 1. Assessment

The assessment “movement” prods us to examine our assumptions by turning them into empirical, “assessable” questions. Could more students learn calculus well if we gave them more time? Do students who succeed in freshman writing courses write demonstrably better in their other courses? Does simple coexistence with diverse students lead to more open attitudes?

After more than a decade of effort, a wide range of assessment tools exist to help us determine what’s broke, what’s not, and just how well our well-intentioned innovations work.

2 Shift 2. From a culture of implicitly held individual hopes, preferences, and beliefs to a culture of explicit, broadly shared goals, criteria and standards.

The notion of community implies shared goals and values that direct

THE NATIONAL TEACHING & LEARNING FORUM

Executive Editor:

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213 Potter St.
Madison, WI 53715-2050

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Editorial correspondence:

James Rhem
213 Potter St.
Madison, WI 53715-2050

Subscription information:

The Oryx Press
4041 North Central #700
Phoenix, Arizona 85012
Phone: 1-800-279-6799

The National Teaching & Learning Forum is published six times during the academic year by The Oryx Press in conjunction with James Rhem & Associates, Inc. – October, December, February, March, May, September. One-year individual subscription: \$39.

Second class postage paid at Phoenix, AZ.

Postmaster: Send change of address to:

The National Teaching & Learning Forum
4041 North Central #700
Phoenix, Arizona 85012

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Bulk discount subscription rates available.
(Phone: 1-800-279-6799)

<http://www.ntlf.com>
December

Editor's Note:

Diane Gillespie doesn't especially see the cases she and her colleagues create as being about teaching, but I do. They're created out of student experiences and aimed at helping students come to grips with their identities on campus (with all the peculiar challenges of color and class and gender). When I read them, I see teaching and learning situations, contexts faculty have a role in shaping. In "Misunderstood," a faculty member comes face to face with a student's real and troubled life, and with the connections the student is making to class material in sorting out his problems. It's a "teachable moment" demanding skills well beyond those needed to give a good lecture or run a lively discussion. That's the way with stories: they often teach more than we intend and have a pesky and wonderful way of slipping beyond our control. In their rich and varied responses, **Ed Neal** and **Elizabeth Asner** show how much we can learn about our teaching by looking quietly at a student's story.

Tom Angelo gives a cogent and optimistic overview of the lay of the land in higher education as we move to the end of the century. Despite great challenges, Angelo sees the tools of transformation already remaking a new and better day for teaching and learning. As he sees it, we're building "learning communities," places we've wanted to be for a long, long time.

Finally, though it's the middle of the school year, a new semester will be starting soon, and **Chuck Bonwell** offers a synoptic review of how the best research says we should begin those classes. A full bibliography to Bonwell's article is posted on the *Forum's* web site (<http://www.ntlf.com>).

References for Tom Angelo's article are also posted there, and if you're interested in specific "levers," you'll want to log on and download them. (Those without internet access may call **800-279-6799** and have the material sent by mail.)

I hope you'll also start a thread or join an ongoing chat in the web site's discussion forum. It's there for you—to interact with material you find in the *Forum* or to bring up new questions for discussion.

— James Rhem

decisions and actions. To get anywhere, we first have to agree on the destination. To create meaningful learning communities, we'll need to develop shared goals for student learning outcomes, shared criteria for assessment and evaluation, and shared standards for measuring student and faculty success. Very few departments or campuses have even begun this process.

Lever 2.

Goals, criteria and standards-setting methods.

Several practical methods for building broad agreement on goals, criteria and standards have been developed in the corporate world and in K-12 education. Some of the most promising are Total Quality Management/CQI approaches such as "open-space technology" and "future search," and a method used in Writing-Across-the-Curriculum known as "primary trait analysis."

3 Shift 3. From a teaching culture that ignores what is known about human learning to one that applies relevant knowledge to improve practice.

For far too long, most college faculty have been uninformed about applicable research on learning and teaching and too many dismissive of its potential value.

Lever 3.

The research and practice literature on teaching and learning.

After more than 50 years of research in psychology, cognitive science, and education, there are some general, well-supported principles of teaching and learning that can inform our professional practice. (See citations at the *Forum's* web site, <http://www.ntlf.com>.)

4 Shift 4. From a narrow, exclusive definition of scholarship to a broader, inclusive vision of scholarship.

In his 1990 book, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, the late Ernest Boyer made a persuasive argument for broadening our vision of scholarly work from traditional research only to include the scholarships of integration, application, and teaching.

Lever 4.

The faculty evaluation system.

Like most everyone, faculty tend to do what they are evaluated on

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE [®] Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation (Required by 39 USC 3685)			
1. Publication Title The National Teaching & Learning Forum		2. Publication Number 1 0 5 7 7 - 2 8 8 0	
3. Filing Date October 1, 1996		4. Issue Frequency Oct., Dec., Feb., Mar., May, Sept	
5. Number of Issues Published Annually 6		6. Annual Subscription Price \$39.00	
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Not printer) (Street, city, county, state, and ZIP+4) Oryx Press, 4041 N. Central Ave. #700, Phoenix, Maricopa, AZ 85012-3397		Contact Person Karen Heuman Parry Telephone 602-265-2651	
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (Not printer) Oryx Press, PO Box 33889, Phoenix, AZ 85067-3889			
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor (Do not leave blank) Publisher (Name and complete mailing address) Oryx Press, PO Box 33889, Phoenix, AZ 85067-3889 Editor (Name and complete mailing address) James Rhem, James Rhem & Assoc. Inc., 213 Potter St., Madison, WI 53715-2050 Managing Editor (Name and complete mailing address) James Rhem, James Rhem & Assoc. Inc., 213 Potter St., Madison, WI 53715-2050			
10. Owner (Do not leave blank. If the publication is owned by a corporation, give the name and address of the corporation immediately followed by the names and addresses of all stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of the total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, give the names and addresses of the individual owners. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, give its name and address as well as those of each individual owner. If the publication is published by a nonprofit organization, give its name and address.)			
Full Name		Complete Mailing Address	
James Rhem, James Rhem & Assoc. Inc.		213 Potter St., Madison WI 53715-2050	
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities. If none, check box. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None			
Full Name		Complete Mailing Address	
N/A			
12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at special rates) (Check one) The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes: <input type="checkbox"/> Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months <input type="checkbox"/> Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)			
PS Form 3526, September 1995 (See instructions on Reverse)			
13. Publication Title The National Teaching & Learning Forum		14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below September 1996	
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation		Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	Actual No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)		2,983	3,000
b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation (1) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, and Counter Sales (Not mailed)		0	0
(2) Paid or Requested Mail Subscriptions (Include advertiser's proof copies and exchange copies)		2,550	2,666
c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation (Sum of 15b(1) and 15b(2))		2,550	2,666
d. Free Distribution by Mail (Carriers, complimentary, and other free)		53	53
e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means)		81	100
f. Total Free Distribution (Sum of 15d and 15e)		134	153
g. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15f)		2,684	2,819
h. Copies not Distributed (1) Office Use, Leftovers, Spoiled		299	181
(2) Returns from News Agents		0	0
i. Total (Sum of 15g, 15h(1), and 15h(2))		2,983	3,000
Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation (15c / 15g x 100)		95	89
16. Publication of Statement of Ownership <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Publication required. Will be printed in the December 1996 issue of this publication. <input type="checkbox"/> Publication not required.			
17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner Karen Heuman Parry, Director of Customer Service		Date October 1, 1996	
I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including multiple damages and civil penalties).			

and rewarded for. Therefore, changing the faculty evaluation system used for retention, tenure, and promotion decisions is a pivotal shift. Inspired by Boyer's challenge, campuses throughout the country are working to develop ways to assess and value a broader range of scholarship. AAHE's *Peer Review of Teaching Project* and *Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards* are two efforts to move this agenda "from ideas to prototypes."

5 Shift5. From an academic culture that tends to ignore costs to one that attempts to account realistically for direct, deferred, and opportunity costs.

The "cost disease" threatens the health of higher education generally, and the existence of many particular institutions. Yet, for the most part, we lack accurate information on the real costs and benefits of our programs and activities. Without better accounting, in the broadest sense, we can't determine our productivity, much less improve it.

Lever5.

New accounting methods.

Innovations in accounting, such as activity-based accounting and full-costing, are beginning to be adapted and applied to academic units, informing our assessment and decision making.

6 Shift6. From a culture that emphasizes and privileges individual struggle for private advantage to one which encourages collaboration for the common good and individual advancement.

While it's critical to change the evaluation and reward systems for faculty and for students, if we wish to develop learning communities, it's also necessary to teach all involved how to work together effectively.

Lever6.

Cooperative and collaborative education methods.

A rapidly growing body of research on and practical expertise in these approaches can guide and inform our efforts.

7 Shift7. From a model of higher education as primarily a quantitative, additive process to one that is fundamentally qualitative and transformative.

In the U.S., higher education is often equated with course-taking

and credit-collecting, as if the simple adding up of experiences necessarily leads to any significant learning. Too often, students are awarded degrees for persisting.

Lever7.

Competency-based education.

When we define the competencies (what learners must demonstrably know and be able to do) that we most value, the criteria for evaluating them, and the standards for how well students must perform, and we develop adequate means to assess them, we will take a giant step toward learning communities.

The necessary connection between competency-based learning and assessment brings us full circle, a transit that underlines the necessary connectedness of all these shifts. Progress toward a more productive, more authentic form of academic community will require movement on many fronts at once – many small shifts propelled by many small levers. ■■■

Contact:

Thomas A. Angelo
Associate Professor & Coordinator
Higher Education Program
University of Miami — MB 311H
P.O. Box 248065
Coral Gables, FL 33124-2040

Phone: 305/284-2968
FAX: 305/284-3003
E-mail: tangelo@umiami.ir.miami.edu

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