Reflection on Teaching in the Community College Setting

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1 Workshop Description

I attended the two hour workshop, "Teaching in the Community College Setting", on Friday, March 25th from 2:00 PM - 4:00 PM in Research Building III, Room 230. This FIT workshop was presented by Kristin Harkins, an English Instructor at Nash Community College. Approximately 15 people attended the workshop. A few of these attendees, like myself, had taught or are currently teaching at various community colleges.

The presentation centered around a lecture with slides provided by Ms. Harkins, and included a few breaks for discussion. The discussion was motivated with a paper that attendees were required to read before class, "Principles for Effective Teaching" by Patricia Smittle.[1]

The goal of the presentation was to leave with an understanding of how community colleges differ from traditional Universities, in student demographics, administrative policies, and instruction responsibilities.

2 Workshop Details and Analysis

I teach Information Technology distance courses at Wayne Community College. I attended this workshop because I was curious about whether my experiences in this setting were similar to those of instructors at other community colleges. For the most part, they are. This knowledge is useful to me for several reasons. First, it indicates that the I am not alone in the issues that I face daily with my students. Second, it is useful to compare factors like student retention and administrative policy across different colleges for comparison purposes to determine if such issues are present across colleges, or if they are unique to my particular college.

As we learned, teaching in the community college is a different experience entirely from the traditional university environment that most of us have graduated from. One difference between myself and the presenter is that I teach technical (rather than general or core)

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[1]http://www.ncde.appstate.edu/resources/reports/documents/V26-3smittle.htm

courses, and therefore most of the students who do poorly in a college environment have not made it to my courses in the first place due to failing to complete the prerequisites.

Despite this difference, I still found many common elements between our experiences. Many students are quite intelligent, but simply do not know how to learn effectively. They do not know how to study for exams, how to read material critically, or how to manage time properly. I find that the last point accounts for a large percentage of my drops. In fact, my second semester of teaching I was able to drastically improve course performance by introducing the concept of "milestones". For a major project, students were required to submit incremental deliverables to show that they were progressing on the material. I did not expect correct answers, and these milestones were graded solely on effort. This policy change solved the significant number of student issues related to time management by forcing them to work on the material at regular intervals instead of waiting until the day before a deadline.

I also found it important to provide an open and responsive learning environment. Very early on, I discovered that students had already been primed to memorize knowledge and regurgitate it on exams. But because I teach technical classes, this is not sufficient. Students in my classes will eventually work alongside four-year students and master's students in industry. To be competitive, they will need to have a higher level of thinking, and be able to analyze and evaluate problems as they arise. To students, this is the biggest adjustment that they must make. This is also the greatest source of student complains – many students coming into my class have the expectation that the material should come directly from the book, and that they should be able to make a good grade in the course simply by dumping these facts on a test.

To attempt to address this issue, I have had some success in mixing assignment content. Some assignments are rote; read the book and you will have the answer nearly word for word. The second category of assignments require you to apply concepts to solve problems that are simple variations of what is in the text. The last type of assignment requires the student to solve a problem they have never seen, but could be accomplished if they understand the material and the underlying concepts. This last category is of course the most difficult for students. Determining the weight of these assignments is quite challenging as an instructor, but it allows me to give advanced concepts in a community college setting, while still allowing the student to feel confident in their abilities.

Unlike Ms. Harkins, I did not have an issue with technology and digital literacy. Part of this is likely attributable to the fact that my students are distance, and therefore have some exposure to technology in order to take an Internet course in the first place. There are some other key differences in this setting as well, which I have explicitly identified in the next section.

3   Challenges in Distance Education

While some of the issues, such as digital literacy, are less pronounced in a distance setting, others become magnified when compared to a traditional classroom. In this section, I

highlight the issues that I continue to struggle with today.

The first of these issues is related to attendance, and having an open and responsive learning environment. In a traditional classroom, an instructor can simply gage attendance by seeing which students are present in class. This is not easy in an online class. Even if a student logs into class every day, there is no way to know whether or not they are actually looking over the required content. For example, I may see that the student has downloaded the video lecture for the day, but I have no idea whether or not they have actually watched it.

Consequently, in every video lecture, I now give the solution to one or two of the homework problems, sometimes verbatim. If a student misses this question on an assignment, it is immediately clear that they did not watch the lecture.

The second issue that is of providing a responsive learning environment. Numerous studies have presented strong evidence that active engagement and quick feedback is important to student learning, yet the nature of an electronic barrier makes this difficult. Even e-mailing back and forth introduces a delay in assisting the student. Further, because the students are non-traditional, they virtually attend class at all hours of the day. While I have made instant messaging available to students, they have rarely used this capability to contact me.

The final issue is that of student communication itself. Students are already reluctant to ask the instruction questions and approach them during class. With the computer in between the instructor and the student, this reluctance is exasperated. Students will often struggle with the class material, but not indicate that they are having difficulties with the course. Instead, the student will simply not do the assignment, after which it is too late to help them. To attempt to mitigate this, I now randomly e-mail students throughout the semester to ask them how they are doing. This simple act can help some students by seeing that I approachable and will make efforts to assist them should they need it. Unfortunately, it is often the case that students do not respond to these e-mails.

4 Conclusion

Teaching in a community college is a challenging, but rewarding experience. There are substantial differences in the teaching environment in a community college setting versus that of a traditional university, and attempting to use the same techniques that your professors used to teach you is sure to be a futile effort.

It is easy to dismiss community college students as less capable than university students, but I have found that this is not the case. It's certainly true that the student population is more diverse than that of a traditional university setting. There is large variance in age, income, studying habits, prior education, motivation, and even attitudes about the fundamental role of education. The challenge for instructors such as myself is to see this broad student diversity as an asset that can be used to enhance the classroom experience, rather than a liability.