Task Force on Pedagogical Innovation
Middlebury College
2011-2012
Final Report, May 2012

INTRODUCTION

Last fall, Provost Alison Byerly oversaw the creation of a number of campus-wide task forces engaged in the process of "envisioning the curriculum of the future." In her charge to the Task Force on Pedagogical Innovation, the provost asked for specific ideas and proposals that could be carried forward by other groups on campus. Our discussions were to reach beyond the particular members of the group to other members of the campus community as well as to other institutions.

Through our active and frequent conversations over the past six months, we have aimed to meet and exceed these goals. Our group brought together representatives of most academic divisions (including foreign languages, social sciences, arts, and interdisciplinary programs), staff from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Research (CTLR), and community representatives. Members of the task force have had varying levels of experience with innovative pedagogy and are at various stages in their careers. Since December, our full group has had seven full meetings (some with student representatives) and sent a team to Harvard and MIT. In between, we have shared resources and ideas via email and individually spoken with colleagues and students about the meaning and value of pedagogical innovation.

We began with a shared commitment to learning in the broadest sense of the word, with the intention to reexamine the skills and information that we want our students to learn. We also share a recognition of Middlebury's already impressive strengths in teaching and learning while reaffirming our goal of standing out as an institution that uniquely facilitates student learning and engagement.

In this memo, we recount and summarize the themes and debates that animated our task force, in an attempt to set the stage for the future. We begin with a few scenarios that Middlebury teachers might encounter in the classroom. We then discuss the concept of engagement and its usefulness in understanding the value of pedagogical innovation. Third, we offer a list of specific ideas of how both the institution can facilitate innovation and engagement for both faculty and staff. We end with a set of suggestions for the College to take this discussion forward.

WHAT PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION LOOKS LIKE – SOME EXAMPLES

What happens in Middlebury classrooms? We begin with some ideas of what might be happening in various places around campus.

Professor X, an Associate Professor in the Psychology Department, is teaching "Introduction to Psychology," and has as one of her goals that students learn the principles of scientific experimentation. Four weeks into the semester, she senses from a recent quiz and in-class comments that students' comprehension is uneven. Rather than continuing on as usual, Prof. X decides to **check-in with the class** by conducting a short in-class questionnaire in which she asks students what aspects of the course have been most helpful for their learning, what changes in the structure of the class would improve their learning, and whether they have any additional suggestions for improving the class.

In response, most of the students indicate that the class is going well and they are learning a lot about the scientific method. They say it's been particularly valuable to them when Prof. X uses a few minutes of class time to go over an authentic empirical research article from the psychology literature to illustrate the principles of scientific experimentation in action. Prof. X is delighted to discover that many students report that they are learning so much from those; she also gets valuable feedback form the students who have yet to really grasp the key concepts. Using the feedback from all of the students, she decides that, rather than assigning a paper on scientific experimentation, she'll have students select an empirical article of interest to them and present it to their peers, illustrating the principles of scientific experimentation in action. As the semester continues, she finds that this raises the level of comprehension for most students in the class.

Professor Y gets a call from the ADA Office, notifying him that a blind student has enrolled in his course for the fall. The course is a visually-intense art history course that includes many slides. Prof. Y has no idea how he's possibly going to accommodate the student. Checking out the College's **teaching repository**, he finds that a handful of colleagues have faced the same challenge in the past, and have turned to principles of something called "Universal Design" – an approach that embraces the idea that we need to provide as multiple "handles" as possible so that every student has at least some one handle to grab onto in understanding course concepts.

He is skeptical, but then watches a video from the teaching repository showing a colleague in Biology, displaying an illustration of photosynthesis, but also describing the process verbally, and then having students act out the parts of various cells and plant parts. This approach really resonates with him, and he can start to envision how he could accommodate the student who is blind. At the same time, watching the students in the video, it occurs to him that they, too, are benefitting from these multiple methods of presentation, not just the blind student.

Prof. Y wants to try this out, but it's going to take time, money and expertise. He applies for **Ada Howe Kent funds** to hire an outside consultant expert in this area and to hire a student to expand the metadata associated with the slide collection and scan new materials. The changes start to feel like a wholesale revamping of the course, and Prof. Y is worried about whether it's worth all the effort and risking lower teaching evaluations. He decides to apply for the course to have **experimental status** for the coming semester. Now he is free to tinker with the course,

without worrying that it will affect his upcoming review for promotion and tenure.

To test the success of his course re-design, he develops a plan for assessing outcomes (i.e., how will he know if it worked better than business as usual? How will he know if the visually impaired student has learned?) When the course is finished, he uses this experience to "feed back" into the teaching repository by submitting comments and video from his own course. Later in the semester, a colleague calls Prof. Y to say she is considering incorporating principles of Universal Design, as well, and to ask if she might **sit in** on Prof. Y's class to get some ideas.

Professor Z wins the Marjorie Lamberti teaching award in the spring semester. At the well-attended college-wide celebration, quotes are read from students' nomination letters about many Middlebury professors. The celebration is one of several moments during the academic year to celebrate innovation, leadership and effectiveness in the Middlebury classroom.

From the nomination letters for Prof. Z, it's clear that he was chosen for the Lamberti award because he is particularly skilled at facilitating lively discussions. In what has become a tradition for the Lamberti winners, Prof. Z delivers the opening talk, in September of the following year, of the annual **teaching talk series**. The talk is well-attended, and leads to some smaller roundtable discussions among faculty and students about what constitutes an effective discussion, and how faculty and students can share responsibility for the quality of discussions and the learning they are designed to serve.

Professor J has been teaching at Middlebury for 20 years and is known as an outstanding teacher and scholar, but never before has she seen a class like the one she is teaching right now. The students seem disaffected and are occasionally even rude, arriving late for class or checking texts on their cell phones in the middle of lecture. Whereas Prof. J ordinarily connects easily with her students, something about the chemistry of this particular group is making them feel distant and disengaged. Because none of Prof. J's usual remedies are working, she calls the **"second set of eyes" team** and asks if they'd be willing to come watch and offer their thoughts on how she might salvage the rest of the semester. Three colleagues from the team are available and come to observe. Two of them report that this just seems like a particularly difficult group, and encourage Prof. J to hold steady and do her best. The third colleague happens to have had several of these same students before, and identifies two circles of friends who are sitting together, possibly distracting one another or feeding off of each other's disaffection. Prof. J decides to mix the group up a bit. For the group activity, for which she ordinarily allows students to work with their nearest neighbors, she instead has students "count off," one through five, then groups all the "ones" together, all the "twos" together, and so on. This doesn't turn out to be a magic cure, but does seem to shift the dynamics of the room and give Prof. J some hope that she can revive the class.

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These hypotheticals are not entirely imagined – these sorts of adaptations to the daily challenges of teaching happen in many places around campus. The goal of our committee is to allow faculty colleagues the possibility of adopting a range of innovations in the years ahead. For all of these

hypothetical situations, we imagine that our colleagues all share an interest in realizing a more engaged classroom.

SETTING A GOAL: ENGAGEMENT

Students who come to Middlebury learn to engage the world.
– Middlebury College Mission Statement

In our discussions of the value of pedagogical innovation, we have used the concept of *engagement* as a frame for understanding the value of innovative teaching. We value innovation not simply because it is different or new, but rather because it offers the possibility of creating more engaged students who will have learned more from their Middlebury experience. There are many paths to student engagement, and we believe that faculty can and should try different techniques. A frequent theme of our discussions has been a debate over what "pedagogical innovation" actually means. Some techniques may be widely used elsewhere but new for a particular faculty member, while others may be truly novel approaches to teaching. Regardless of what innovation means to a particular faculty member, we generally agree that the College can take a number of steps to help create engagement in each course on this campus. Additionally, we recommend that any proposed changes that the College, departments, or individual instructors undertake should be in service to creating more engaged teaching and learning.

An important dimension of engagement is the need for both faculty and students to participate in creating a vibrant, rigorous, and thoughtful environment, inside and outside the four walls of the classroom. In our mission to help students develop the capacity to act as independent leaders in their lives after College, we must begin by sharing with them the responsibility for learning that happens here.

In our discussions, we found useful the distinction between actual pedagogical innovation and ways that the College as an institution can facilitate that innovation. We spent a substantial amount of time discussing specific examples of creative teaching techniques, but we felt that our mission was to focus on the ways that the College can create infrastructure in support of innovation, rather than suggest particular strategies to our colleagues teaching diverse subject matter across an array of disciplines.

In the following section, we outline a number of ideas, big and small, that might help both faculty and students develop innovative ways to achieve greater classroom engagement. We have discussed a number of impediments that may discourage pedagogical innovation, and we hope that the ideas below may serve as ways to overcome those impediments.

FACILITATING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION

We have created a list of ways in which Middlebury College could facilitate student engagement and pedagogical innovation. We divide these into three categories: proposals for immediate action, proposals requiring faculty discussion and approval, and proposals requiring substantial institutional commitment. The table below summarizes these proposals, followed by an expanded description of some of these as needed.

proposals for immediate action	• Unified repository of teaching resources – blog, library, etc. • Encourage faculty members to seek periodic student reflection during the semester (reminder via "course warning" email) • Speaker series on teaching (both faculty and outside speakers) → ongoing conversations about teaching and learning. Methods: breakfasts, department lunches, cocktails at 51 Main, reading groups, greater use of commons • Openness of class visitation – encourage faculty to invite visitors to their classes and to visit other classes themselves. This can happen within and across departments. • Multiple multi-day workshops around innovative strategies – universal design, service learning, information technology
proposals requiring faculty discussion and approval	• Experimental space (different types of courses) – faculty approval for new sorts of courses, new mechanisms for evaluation • More robust faculty mentorship program that extends to all faculty. Links among junior and senior colleagues if the results of midterm evaluations are troubling. Modeled after Appeals Committee (only meets when needed). • Examine institutional policy for faculty compensation for professional development related to teaching
proposals requiring substantial institutional commitment	• Dedicated financial support for pedagogical development • Space for faculty to come together informally – endowed faculty club

A. Proposals for Immediate Action

Unified repository

The repository could take a number of forms (written documentation, a video library, online resources), but the main idea is to have a readily available, easily browsed set of resources focused on teaching ideas and innovations. All faculty would have an open invitation to contribute their own curricular innovations, novel assignment ideas, or successful examples of how they met a particular challenge, such as designing a set of progressively more demanding assignments. Ideally, the repository would be searchable and would give faculty the opportunity, when contributing, to "tag" their contributions with appropriate identifiers. The CTLR already has many examples of these kinds of ideas, of course. The difference in what we envision is the unified, user-friendly nature of the repository. Another possibility for the repository is to allow students, when they have a particularly noteworthy learning experience, to contribute an account of that experience to the repository, or to initiate an electronic invitation for the faculty member to do so.

Midterm check-in

Pedagogical innovation does not always demand large-scale intervention to achieve meaningful results. Checking in with students midway through the semester is a small-scale strategy that allows faculty to evaluate course objectives and student engagement in time to make adjustments that can substantially improve student learning. The College could support faculty members in this type of informal check-in, for example by making potential survey items available, or providing other supports such as those suggested by Harvard's Bok Center.

Facilitating conversations about teaching and learning

We envision a number of opportunities to make conversations about teaching and learning a more visible, active part of campus life. A few possibilities follow:

- Invited speaker series: This would be an opportunity for Middlebury faculty and invited guests from other colleges to share ideas, including experimental pedagogical strategies they have tried, initiatives on their campuses, and research on effective practices. For example, a guest speaker might talk about study skills, meta-cognition, or taking classroom learning outside of the classroom.
- Teaching lunches: On occasion, departments could request funds for a lunch dedicated to discussing pedagogy. Some departments, collections of departments, or divisions might even decide to have a "teaching retreat" where pedagogical issues can be discussed. CTLR can be a useful resource to collaborate with departments.
- Roundtable discussions with faculty and students: These conversations would be designed to explore and illuminate the shared (yet different) roles and responsibilities of faculty and students in the learning process. They might take place in follow-up to a recent invited talk, or provide a forum for students to present (to faculty and students) on how they've applied their classroom learning in some non-traditional setting, or target a particular pedagogical issue of interest.

- "Brainstorming Team": We envision a (perhaps rotating) set of colleagues who can be called upon when faculty members want to brainstorm ideas for achieving particular goals or solving particular problems. For example, maybe a faculty member hopes to achieve a certain level of discourse in a first-year seminar, and wants to chat with colleagues to generate possible ways of achieving that goal. She could sit down with colleagues from the brainstorming team to spawn ideas.

Culture of openness to class visitation

Currently, visitation happens only when a faculty member is under review. However, COR members and senior colleagues often note that they get great ideas to "steal" when they visit others' classes. If such visits became more a part of our culture, we could all benefit, instead of only the select few who, by virtue of the review process, gain a window into others' classroom practices. Questions of implementation remain, but a possible pilot program could involve a designated "open-door week" when faculty could opt to welcome visitors. The collective wisdom of faculty ought to be shared and celebrated, and currently there is no good mechanism for doing so.

B. Proposals Requiring Faculty Discussion and Approval

The need for "experimental space" that encourages innovation

We envision a formal system whereby faculty members could petition to designate a course as experimental for a particular term. The faculty member would develop a plan, in consultation with CTLR or other colleagues as desired, that would outline the proposed course or modifications to an existing course. This plan would include criteria to evaluate whether, after the newly designed/modified course has been offered, the modifications achieved the desired outcomes. An additional component would be flexibility/discretion in the use of course response forms and how/whether they would be considered in reviews.

C. Proposals Requiring Substantial Institutional Commitment

Dedicated financial support for pedagogical development

The Ada Howe Kent fund currently provides funds for developing new courses and other related activities. Other sources of funding for teaching, however, are linked to specific types of initiatives, such as community-connected teaching or "green" activities. However, many faculty have exciting ideas that do not fit with the priorities of the existing funding sources, such as ideas for incorporating new technologies into their courses. We envision expanded internal funding opportunities, a centralized source of information regarding internal and external teaching-relevant funding opportunities, and an expanded role of the Sponsored Research Office in outreach and support of pedagogical funding.

CONCLUSION: TAKING THE DISCUSSION FORWARD

Our lively discussions over the past six months represent only a fraction of the conversations around pedagogical innovations that happen around the Middlebury Campus. We hope that our work, and this memo, prove a positive contribution to those discussions.

Importantly, we did not spend a substantial amount of time on the topic of assessment, but we see the issue of pedagogical innovation directly tied to the assessment of learning goals. Thus, the work of this task force should be understood as part of other discussions about what works, and what doesn't work, in the classroom.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our work with the Middlebury administration and community.

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

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