

# STARTING CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER

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The 2017 University of Calgary Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching took place May 2 to 3 with the theme *Conversations that Matter*; its goal was “to provide an opportunity for academic staff, students, staff and post-doctoral scholars to share, critically examine and build on our own collective knowledge of teaching and learning.” Collected in this second volume of *Papers on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching* are some of the conversations from this conference.

This volume carries on a conversational tradition that began in postsecondary education long ago. Postsecondary education is as old as the pyramids of Egypt; the oldest existing and continually operating academic institution in the world is the University of Karueein, founded in 859 AD in Fez, Morocco (Berkley, 2007). The University of Bologna, Italy, was founded in 1088 and is the oldest one in Europe, while the oldest university in the North America is Harvard, established in 1636. The conversations that began in these institutions continue in postsecondary sites today. Having conversations about teaching is part of our day-to-day academic lives. As teachers, we discuss pedagogical trends and their suitability to our classrooms, we debate the value of online learning versus campus based classes, and we argue in curriculum meetings about the selection and leveling of content. As researchers, we regularly present to colleagues the findings of our latest study and the associated implications for education.

The dawning of this century brought its acceptance as a knowledge era with unique challenges and postsecondary education must assume a primary role in addressing them. In other words, how can we harness the power of academic teaching and learning conversations to bring awareness, knowledge, life, and action to address some of these challenges? Presented in this volume are nine diverse conversations that began at the 2017 Conference and contribute to an informed knowledge base for teaching and learning within postsecondary education. These are important conversations that will help the reader move forward, whether you are searching for strategies to grow as a teacher, new interactive teaching tool possibilities, or for professional development.

The first conversation is from Dyjur, Lindstrom, Arguera, and Bair who discussed the use of mental health and wellness as a framework for course design. They provided a framework for promoting mental health and wellness that transcends mandated course content. The next conversation is my own article with LeNavenec and Stares, focusing on the interplay of lifelong learning and professional competency to practice. Competency is a topic of great interest to teachers in practice disciplines, particularly health and human care disciplines such as nursing. Carpenter and Sullivan describe a collaborative learning activity piloted in a first-year chemistry course. They found that inquiry-driven interactive technology contributed to meaningful student conversations and learning.

The conversation then turns to interdisciplinary communities of practice (CoP) within postsecondary institutions in an article by Wilson-Mah and Walinga. They applied an action

research approach to explore how a CoP emerges and is nourished in the postsecondary context, identifying key issues and principles for supporting a CoP.

The conversation changes again to the concept of power relations in the article by Reid and Kawash. A learner-centred approach may be jeopardized if one holds the traditional view that learners are not capable of making decisions about their learning and content needs. If the teacher is hesitant to shift the balance of power in the learning setting, by giving up the position of absolute authority, a learner-centred teaching approach will not flourish.

Goulding, Harlick, Kelly, and Oksanen turned the conversation to the topic of quick response coding of assignments to promote student engagement. While the role of interactive digital simulations in student conversation was explored by Goulding and colleagues, they recognized that incoming learners into postsecondary institutions are *digital natives*. Their work helps us to understand the acceptance and use of technology in the classroom.

Continuing the conversation on course refinement, Grewal and Doyle-Baker described how feedback from kinesiology students informed course development. Learners provided evidence to demonstrate that they were developing an awareness of themselves. This is followed by Marasco and colleagues who explored transforming algorithms into game mechanics within the context of an engineering course. The 21st century skills framework suggests that teaching critical reasoning, the use of system thinking, decision making, and problem solving builds a learner's ability to think both creatively and critically about the problem. The reader can see these skills emerge in students as they engaged in their project work.

The last conversation in this collection was crafted by Arcellana-Panlilio and Lohmeier-Vogel in their work on iGEM team meetings. These authors speak of building communities and working with a difference. They emphasize a key point that we do not do our work alone, and we need to seek alliances with others. Alliances offer support, knowledge, and practical strategies to promote teaching effectiveness.

While appearing diverse and indeed, the conversations are, they are also woven together by two strong threads. The first is that these conversations address the theme of classroom teaching effectiveness, whether online or in person. These conversations provide a wealth of opportunity for initiating higher-order thinking in a way that aligns with both teacher and learner development. The authors tell us that holding effective *classroom* conversations, requires teachers to do more than just ask a few spontaneous questions in the middle of a planned lecture. The second thread joining these conversations suggests learners are required to do more than just listen. The authors speak of active learning, conversations that actually promote learning. Within this context, instructional activities involving learners in doing things and thinking about what they are doing assumes prominence. Use of these activities in the classroom is essential because of their powerful impact upon individuals' learning.

In preparing this introduction to this volume *Papers on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching* as the guest editor, I have thought a great deal about the kinds of conversations most likely to contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning. These are some of the best pieces I have read for extending my own thinking about teaching and learning. Like Schön (1983), I believe that experienced teachers know much more about teaching than we can ever articulate. The principles offered by any pedagogical theory will be inadequate in recommending teaching practices, because the theory must be explored, developed, challenged, or cultivated in practice by a specific teacher, with specific learners, and with the specific content. In these conversations, the authors have done just that.

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