**A Commitment to Excellence: Formal and Informal Review as Means of Improvement**

**in Teaching at Hanover College[[1]](#footnote-1)**

“It’s commonplace to nitpick on minor faults. But it's exceptional to correct them through enlargement.”

― [Bauvard](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6676833.Bauvard), [*Evergreens Are Prudish*](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/18175224)

As people who have chosen to participate in a community of learning, Hanover College faculty have made it their “business” to apply the “production process” of transformative learning to the “raw material” of young people in hopes of producing a “finished product” that embodies meaningful service and has a “warranty” that runs well beyond twenty years on “life-long learning.” In an era when quality is often equated to efficiency, there is a certain nobility in this particular “business model.” For those who have benefited from the gifts of a liberal arts education, the advantages to the Hanover College approach are manifest and manifold.

Despite my ironic use above of industrial metaphors, there are distinct parallels between the industry of physical goods and the industry of the mind and soul. In each case, the highest quality and most esteemed work comes from people who take a genuine pride in what they do and possess a high degree of introspection about how they might continue to work to their highest potential. But, to some degree, this is where the parallel ends: there is a qualitative difference between beaming with pride over an automobile or finely-carved piece of furniture leaving the factory, and gazing into the faces of a graduate and her/his family at commencement; or letting out a cry of joy when one receives an e-mail about a student accepted to law school; or opening an invitation to the wedding of a cherished alum. Thus, there is a subjective scale for excellence in this educational enterprise, and there is much at stake for faculty as we ponder how to achieve success, and how, along the path to this success, to improve the approaches, ideas, dreams, techniques, and overall learning we share with our students.

At the May meeting of the Board of Trustees, you heard how the College formally evaluates the success of individual faculty members through Faculty Evaluation Committee reviews in the second, fourth, and sixth years. Once a faculty member receives tenure, these reviews happen at seven-year intervals, or more frequently if a faculty members opts for an individualized plan for post-tenure/post-promotion review. As I listened to the report and the subsequent discussion, I was reminded of the fact that formal evaluation is but one measure of an individual faculty member’s performance, and/or continuous introspection and improvement. In a variety of substantive, creative, and even inspirational ways, Hanover faculty members engage in improvement and assessment practices that complement the formal evaluation process and contribute to the high quality of the educational experience that we offer to our students.

**At the Divisional Level**

One of the primary opportunities for evaluation and improvement at the divisional level involves the Liberal Arts Degree Requirements (the LADR curriculum). Division coordinators not only staff LADR courses, but they also oversee formal assessment of those courses. Recently, the Great Works coordinators implemented a new model for assessing the teaching of writing in Great Works. It's the first instance of third-party, blind assessment of the teaching of writing in Great Works since we implemented the program ten years ago. It's also a collaborative effort involving faculty and staff from the departments of English, Psychology and the Rivers Institute, as well as a team of our top student-writers and tutors. [See Appendix Four for a full description of this assessment tool.] Not only does this new model showcase the skill of writing and prioritize it as a potential site for transformative learning, but it also provides a measure of effectiveness for Great Works teachers and students.

**At the Departmental Level**

Another area where improvement occurs is at the level of academic departments. The faculty in the Theological Studies Department have adopted one of the most inventive approaches on campus, committing themselves to ongoing, collaborative assessment, even as this often takes place in seemingly casual ways. This happens in three primary forms (beyond official assessment reports):

* They begin their weekly departmental meeting with “Teaching Tidbits” in which they discuss challenges they are facing in the classroom or with particular students. Typical scenarios include:
* Why can I not seem to get this particular class of students to talk when the other section of the course is completely engaged? What strategies might I try?
* How should I deal with a small group of students who were so resistant to the ideas presented in yesterday’s class that they were actively disrespectful toward me?
* What can I do to encourage a student who is struggling with personal issues but is also failing to come to class or submit her work? How do I balance care and accountability?
* I think I have a plagiarism case. Help me think through this, please.
* Each August at their annual departmental retreat, they share one-year goals, including goals for teaching. At some point each semester, they discuss these goals, using one another for accountability and motivation.
* Finally, their most casual yet perhaps most significant practice is simply popping into one another’s offices and processing a challenging or difficult situation on the spot, especially if they need to act on something prior to the next meeting.

And the theologians also share successes and ideas, again frequently in passing. That is to say, ongoing assessment is just part of the culture of their department, so woven into their regular conversations that they rarely pause to consider it “assessment.”

Also worth noting is that two department members, Associate Professor Sara M. Patterson and Assistant Professor Krista E. Hughes, have participated in the Wabash Center’s Workshop for Pre-Tenure Faculty at Colleges & Universities (in 2009-10 and 2012-13, respectively). This program, funded by the Lilly Endowment, focuses exclusively on cultivating the pedagogical practices of teachers of religion and theology. The program helps teachers to bring awareness to each and every pedagogical decision, from syllabus design to daily class plans, always asking “What am I seeking to accomplish with this and how am I going to accomplish it?” In other words, assessment happens not only after the fact, but also on the front end.

The Business Scholars program also has several ongoing types of assessment. Most years they conduct a senior survey modeled on an assessment done very early in their program’s life by the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash. They also get a host supervisor evaluation for every intern, an evaluation that includes not only questions about the intern but also about interaction with the program. As a result they have identified areas in their program that needed to be beefed up based on the feedback from employers. Finally, they have a number of workshops and events (e.g., resume writing, mock interviewing, personal finance, etc.) for their Scholars. After every event, Diane Montgomery sends out a short survey to see what went well and what the Scholars believe could be improved.

The ALT (Annual Learning and Teaching) report offers another opportunity for academic departments to gauge their successes, as well as areas that need improvement. These ALT reports are often, as in the Business Scholars program example above, informed by observations from outside evaluators. Frequently they employ the same sophisticated methodologies that department members use in their scholarship. A recent Communication Department ALT report [see Appendix One] has its genesis in feedback from a professional external evaluator. With this evaluator, and with an eye toward standards from the National Communication Association, the Communication Department identified a series of departmental goals. Each course that is part of the Communication curriculum is now directly linked to one or more department goals. Each year the Communication Department selects a few goals to assess effectiveness and inform future goals. In this sample, the department assessed “effective communication” and “critical thinking skills” by surveying majors. Valerie Young, Assistant Professor of Communication, analyzed the results of the survey data and formulated conclusions and future goals for improvement.

**At the Individual Level**

The wide array of academic disciplines at Hanover College inspire different strategies for improvement across our campus. In some cases, particular subject matters carry inherent and unique challenges. In other cases, more universalized challenges confront teachers. Professors at Hanover consult both external and internal sources for guidance and to evaluate their own performance.

Sean O’Neill, a relatively recent addition to the Classical Studies Department, brings a specialization in archaeology to the College but also assists in teaching ancient languages. When it comes to teaching the ancient languages such as Latin or Greek, the Classical Studies faculty have sometimes struggled with the notion that some students are not, first and foremost, "literary" learners. Indeed, specialists in education have known for decades that some students are "visual" learners, or "oral/aural" learners (or a combination of the two). So, what can one do when the languages taught in one's department are highly inflected dialects which are not spoken in conversation, cannot be represented in figural images, and are intended only for \*reading\* while being learned via rules printed in books (or written on boards in a classroom)?

In order to address these concerns, Sean has been attending special sessions focused on these very issues at the Joint Annual Meeting of the APA (American Philological Association) and the AIA (Archaeological Institute of America). He has also been consulting several texts— including the highly recommendable *When Dead Tongues Speak* (ed. by John Gruber-Miller) on approaches to the challenges facing those who attempt the presentation of ancient language and literature to students who are visual, oral, and/or aural learners.

These special conference sessions and teaching guides have helped Sean develop several strategies for incorporating the reading aloud of and careful listening to both prose and poetry in his Latin classes. As students become comfortable with the oral and aural aspects of a highly inflected language, they more readily learn about the language's structure and usage. Moreover, *When Dead Tongues Speak* has also provided ideas for incorporating technology into the Latin classroom. Electronic texts can be displayed in a manner that allows for a controlled revealing of individual words as well color-coding. These and other techniques help visual learners to conceive of the structure and use of Latin as Roman speakers, listeners, and readers presumably knew it.

Jeff Conner, an associate professor in the Business Scholars Program, faces more basic challenges on occasion. One approach he uses, especially if a course section gets off to a rough start (e.g., student don’t look engaged or participate well), is some variation on the attached form [see Appendix Three], which features open-ended questions to get at the types of things that are working and not working for that particular group of students. He picked up the idea from an assignment in a reading group sponsored by a standing faculty committee, the Committee on Learning and Teaching. Conner uses it about every two weeks for troublesome courses and perhaps once or twice during the term for others. He shares with the class their responses and what he intends to change based on their input. Students appreciate that he is adapting his learning goals and techniques to them, and a by-product is greater student engagement.

Essential tools for all are the student evaluations of courses at the close of each term. Once final grades are in Celia Dollmeyer, Professor of Spanish in the Modern Languages Department, typically borrows her evaluations from the Office of Academic Affairs in order to read and reflect carefully on them. The notes that she takes on them later inform her syllabus design and classroom plans for the next term of for future offerings of a course. As convener of the Spanish faculty last year and again this year, she has also read the evaluations of all of her colleagues in Spanish to be aware of how they are performing collectively. In their first meeting of the academic year she reminds colleagues of what students most appreciate and consistently find helpful by posting positive comments gathered from all of the group’s evaluations.

As has been the case in other departments, Modern Languages completed an external program review that caused the department to rethink the goals of their LADR classes and begin to implement a new pedagogical approach, one placing more emphasis on culture and less on traditional grammar exercises—but without eliminating the use of Spanish in the classroom. As part of this implementation, Celia wanted to gauge students' reactions earlier rather than later in the semester. So for two years in a row she administered a mid-term evaluation in her Spanish 116 classes to see if students felt that the new approach was beneficial [See Appendix Two]. Their overall enthusiastic responses helped her to see that this new method of teaching (which is a lot more work for the professor) was worthwhile.

Like many others, Celia also finds professional conferences on the teaching of languages/cultures to be very helpful. Through sessions she attended and through informal interaction with professors from other colleges and universities she always comes away with new approaches. She also finds that professional journals on the teaching of languages/cultures give her ideas as well—she don't always find time to read them thoroughly during the academic year, but summer gives her a chance to catch up. She also receives regular e-mail newsletters from a few different professional teaching organizations—they provide a very brief overview of a few topics that she can scan quickly throughout the year. And, of course, her pedagogical reflections and self-examination take place on a daily and sometimes hourly basis. As she walks out of each class she has taught, she thinks about what she could have done slightly differently to have improved a certain aspect of the class. Once back in her office, these reflections become scribbled notes for the next class, the next session or offering of a particular course, the next term.

Two other examples of substantive reflection comes from Kay Williams. As a member of the Faculty Evaluation Committee, Kay frequently finds great examples of how to improve one’s teaching in the self-studies submitted to FEC by faculty and in the subsequent committee discussions of these files. As a professor in the Education Department, she has on occasion turned to her immediate colleagues for help with particular instances of critical evaluations, asking them to interview individual course participants and then compile feedback for her from those interviews. She has consequently learned that she tends not to teach or to treat assignments in a linear fashion nor as discrete tasks. She is currently in the process of clarifying this approach while minimizing multi-tasking.

Ruth Turner, Professor of Political Science, has been inspired and stretched professionally by team teaching Margot Tomsen, Professor of English. She relates that nothing in her professional development compares to what she has learned three times a week from watching Margot model intellectual activity at multiple levels. Given the increasingly wide range of preparation and personal struggles that our student body includes, she is very thankful for the collaborative opportunities in Great Works.

Jim Stark, Professor of Theater, describes his own routine: “I read. I practice my discipline in the profession by making new works, including short film projects with my brother.” Jim is especially gratified when new works include students as collaborators. He sees his own arc of improvement as being characterized by applying what is a great strength of his performance courses to his Great Works classes. Jim says, “I have taken my GW courses in a direction that is closer to my performance courses in the department. In an acting class it’s all about what the students bring in . . . to try out in front of their peers . . . and to show for my instruction. I am taking my GW courses more and more in that direction.” Jim’s students respond positively to this approach. He does not lecture on Greek tragedy; he tells them to read it and discuss it with him and then lecture him on Greek tragedy. Class time is more about his students’ work. This approach reflects Jim’s belief that education is a very long process, and, consequently, he does not look for breakthroughs; he looks for devotion to the process. Students consequently devote themselves to forming their own ideas and their own responses to significant texts and then become intellectual leaders in their peer groups. This approach addresses the learning goals of critical thinking and clarity in spoken and written expression.

**Conclusion**

Faculty commitment to excellence at Hanover College makes for good stories, but it also contributes to our mission by transforming the lives and world views of our students. The examples and anecdotes above demonstrate the high degree of introspection and the impressive range of concrete actions that constitute our faculty’s efforts to evaluate, improve, and deepen our students’ educations. Just as no student is alike, no method of evaluation or tool for self-improvement suits every faculty member. Evaluation of faculty teaching occurs in both formal and informal channels. Perfectionism and commitment to our students drive these formal and informal processes and determine that faculty teaching will, in a sense, always be a work in progress.

1. Appendices to this report, containing samples of the evaluation, assessment, and feedback forms discussed here, are available on the online version of this report on MyHanover. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)