

Using SoTL Studies to Reach the Programmatic Goal of Independent Student Thinking

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Since September 2005, Maryville University has been implementing a SoTL Seminar Program. Annually, ten faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Schools of Health Professions, Business, and Education volunteer to spend two years examining and documenting teaching and learning in their classrooms. The goal is not only to encourage individual faculty to do research at the classroom level, but also to attract a critical mass in departments who will work collaboratively to achieve programmatic changes to enhance student learning over time.

Marcia Baxter Magolda's research on student learning (2001; 2004) is of particular interest since many faculty recognize, as she does, that freshmen often enter with an unhealthy reliance on external authorities. The focus of numerous SoTL studies is to identify teaching strategies that will help move students from "following external formulas" to "self authorship" which Magolda defines as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and relations with others."

The Graphic Design faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences is a case in point. Three of four faculty who teach all 75-80 majors have completed the SoTL program; one is a current participant. Our goal is to work collaboratively from Freshman through Senior year to develop students who are independent, resourceful thinkers with theoretical and technologic confidence; young designers who are capable of analyzing complex communication problems and creating unique but functionally precise visual solutions.

Individually we are investigating our teaching practice using various action research methods. The objective for each faculty member is to cultivate knowledge that enables students to make and defend independent design decisions, or become "self-authors."

J. Baltushunas introduced a writing component into his freshmen studio courses. A five-minute reflection essay on each project opened up a personal and immediate dialog between John and his students. It quickly communicates the effectiveness of his teaching and the quality of their understanding of the design process.

J. Fahnestock developed physical models of virtual computer processes and learned how

these tools could bring increased student attention, more thoughtful questions and become strong reference points for future discussions.

C. Fister crafted a systematic approach built upon design theory to help students move beyond literal, image-based solutions to confidently experiment with nuanced abstract solutions.

These individual innovations and the collaborative approach used to integrate them into our program have moved us closer to our goal and have implications for other disciplines. We request the equivalent of two paper presentations (40 minutes) to explain our individual research findings, including images of student work/teaching models and discuss how this shared inquiry is affecting students and faculty programmatically and reshaping our departmental culture.

References

Baxter Magolda, M.B. & King, P.M. (Eds.), 2004, *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice for self-authorship*. Sterling, VA. Stylus.

Baxter Magolda, M.B. (2001) *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Sterling, VA. Stylus.