

Practice Ethic for Faculty and Student Learning Convenors

In the Bailey Scholars Program

Diane M. Doberneck, Colette Mitchell, Marquita Chamblee, and Patricia Burkhardt

January 2000

In the belief that we have learned something from our experiences "convening learning" in a collaborative, emergent class setting over the past two years, the academic affairs working group has facilitated several community-wide sessions designed to elicit reflections on the convening experience. The insights gleaned during this collective sense-making process have helped us characterize "what it means to be a learning convenor." Our reflections have shown that "convening learning" can be an immensely rewarding and an equally challenging experience that should not be entered into lightly.

With a better understanding of the nature of "convening learning," the academic affairs working group invites you to consider the significant differences between the role of a teacher/faculty in a traditional classroom and the role of a learning convenor in a collaborative, emergent learning setting. Even though all learners around the table share responsibility for organizing learning, learning convenors play a critical role in collaborative learning environments. Learning convenors are *responsible for creating and safeguarding the safe, hospitable environment that makes collaborative learning possible.*

The practice ethic detailed below describes how learning convenors contribute to creating and safeguarding the safe, hospitable environment. We have phrased the practice ethic as questions that prospective convenors might want to consider as they seek to understand the subtleties of their role and to evaluate their readiness to practice the art of "convening learning."

Responsibilities

At the minimum, learning convenors need to be responsible members of their collaborative learning communities.

- Because collaborative, emergent learning happens "around the table," it is important that learning convenors are committed to being an active participant within class. Similarly, because Bailey courses are typically small courses, your absence from class is magnified. *Given your other responsibilities and commitments during the semester (work and personal), are you available to participate in all class sessions?* Through our experiences, we have learned that convening these courses requires "after-the-fact" reflection. *Given your other responsibilities, are you committed to regularly*

attending the learning convenor meetings (weekly-ANR 210, 410 or biweekly ANR 310, 311)?

- Learning convenors must be fully aware of their ethical responsibilities and legal liabilities, particularly with off-campus learning experiences and issues related to traveling, alcohol, and minors. In addition to the evolving context of their classes, learning convenors must also keep the broader context of the Bailey community, the university climate, and societal norms in mind, and if need be, must remind student learners of this broader context when planning learning activities. *Are you willing to assume the meta-responsibilities of learning convenors?*

Additional Expectations/Considerations

In addition to evaluating their responsibilities, learning convenors should broadly consider why they are interested in convening the class, what contributions they hope to make to their class, and how they hope to learn from the experience. In assessing their own fit to the convening role, prospective convenors should consider how they might respond to the unique characteristics and associated with collaborative, emergent learning settings. Gleaned from community experience, the following seven expectations/considerations are offered for your reflection and self-assessment:

- In the role as a learning convenor, a learning convenor enters the classroom as a co-learner and not necessarily as an expert. Just like student learners, learning convenors are expected to engage in "stretch learning;" that is, to learn new things in new ways. *How might you approach this learning experience with humility and an openness to learning? How open are you to being changed by your experiences in this class?*
- Collaborative, emergent learning requires attentiveness, focus, and concentration on the matters that emerge around the table, as learners gather as equals dedicated to one another's learning and to their own individual learning. Such concentration and dedication demands an environment uninterrupted by weariness, false assumptions, and malaise. *How might you plan to enter the classroom with fresh eyes and enthusiasm, leaving behind preconceptions, preoccupations, and frustrations at the door? How might you prepare yourself to be open and engaged during the class session with other learners?*
- Learning convenors sometimes have to "hold back" during a class in order to create the space necessary for student learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Learning convenors must be willing to sit in the awkward silences that can occur; and, in the extreme, they must be willing to allow a learning activity to fail or fall flat or emerge late. Often more learning comes from the failures than from the successes. Finally, learning convenors must not give in to the student learners' tendency to "default to the convenors;" that is, turn to the convenors to organize learning on their behalf. Responsible convenors must be patient, firm, and supportive at these times, while refusing to take charge of the situation. *How might you approach learning in a*

attending the learning convenor meetings (weekly-ANR 210, 410 or biweekly ANR 310, 311)?

- Learning convenors must be fully aware of their ethical responsibilities and legal liabilities, particularly with off-campus learning experiences and issues related to traveling, alcohol, and minors. In addition to the evolving context of their classes, learning convenors must also keep the broader context of the Bailey community, the university climate, and societal norms in mind, and if need be, must remind student learners of this broader context when planning learning activities. *Are you willing to assume the meta-responsibilities of learning convenors?*

Additional Expectations/Considerations

In addition to evaluating their responsibilities, learning convenors should broadly consider why they are interested in convening the class, what contributions they hope to make to their class, and how they hope to learn from the experience. In assessing their own fit to the convening role, prospective convenors should consider how they might respond to the unique characteristics and associated with collaborative, emergent learning settings. Gleaned from community experience, the following seven expectations/considerations are offered for your reflection and self-assessment:

- In the role as a learning convenor, a learning convenor enters the classroom as a co-learner and not necessarily as an expert. Just like student learners, learning convenors are expected to engage in "stretch learning;" that is, to learn new things in new ways. *How might you approach this learning experience with humility and an openness to learning? How open are you to being changed by your experiences in this class?*
- Collaborative, emergent learning requires attentiveness, focus, and concentration on the matters that emerge around the table, as learners gather as equals dedicated to one another's learning and to their own individual learning. Such concentration and dedication demands an environment uninterrupted by weariness, false assumptions, and malaise. *How might you plan to enter the classroom with fresh eyes and enthusiasm, leaving behind preconceptions, preoccupations, and frustrations at the door? How might you prepare yourself to be open and engaged during the class session with other learners?*
- Learning convenors sometimes have to "hold back" during a class in order to create the space necessary for student learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Learning convenors must be willing to sit in the awkward silences that can occur; and, in the extreme, they must be willing to allow a learning activity to fail or fall flat or emerge late. Often more learning comes from the failures than from the successes. Finally, learning convenors must not give in to the student learners' tendency to "default to the convenors;" that is, turn to the convenors to organize learning on their behalf. Responsible convenors must be patient, firm, and supportive at these times, while refusing to take charge of the situation. *How might you approach learning in a*

way that is not "preemptive;" that is, taking developmental learning opportunities away from student scholars for the sake of ease and efficiency? How might you prepare yourself for inevitable frustrations that accompany emergent learning?

- We have found that engaging in judgmental and unnecessarily negative conversations creates an inhospitable atmosphere for learning. Making judgements or comparisons of previous year's classes with current year's classes, or current sections with one another, or Bailey classes with non-Bailey classes etc. undermines the essential spirit of openness and developmental learning. In addition, gossiping about students or faculty also undermines the required sense of safety in our classrooms. *How might you dedicate yourself to taking a non-judgmental view of your class, its learners, and its learning experiences?*
- Unlike typical classrooms where facts and figures are the central focus, collaborative emergent classes in Bailey tend to focus more on issues of whole-person development, including the emotional and relational aspects of learning. As a result, emotionally sensitive and often divisive issues come to the fore for discussion. *How might you commit yourself to emotionally mature self-awareness and self-management? How might you further develop your ability to not take such situations personally? How might you develop the persistence and sensitivity to overcome the natural discomfort created by such situations in order to "put the difficult issue in the center" for dialogue and resolution? During such difficult situations or times of class conflict, how might you lift up and re-frame these moments, so that they become learning opportunities for all concerned?*
- Small classes encountered in Bailey are frequently a mixed blessing. The small setting facilitates getting to know one another intimately, but sometimes magnifies significant individual differences in perspective or worldview. Small classes support envisioning of creative, "out of the box" learning experiences (such as field trips to distant places), which may unfortunately be impossible for some student or faculty learners to experience. Smaller classes also mean that there may be fewer diverse perspectives presented, therefore leading to an uninspired group think situation. *How might you seek inclusiveness in your class, even if individuals hold worldviews that differ from the other learners in the class? How might you accommodate an individual learner who is not able to participate in extraordinary experiences that many in the class view as essential to their class experience? How might you seek to incorporate requisite variety in your small class?*
- While collaborative learning experiences are often organized around learning interests or topics, recent educational research reveals the importance of also organizing around learning styles or learning preferences, the individual's more natural way of learning. Finding the balance between accommodating individual learners preferences and promoting stretch learning can be challenging. (Some examples of learning styles or preferences include learning by doing; through reading and writing; by relating to others; through dialogue; by reflection, from nature, etc.) Unfortunately, for learning convenors who fail to strike this balance, they may find that they have "stretched the learners beyond their comfort zones." By espousing the

developmental philosophy of "starting where the learner is," learning convenors commit themselves to understanding the preferences of the learners in their classes *How might you foster an awareness of different learning style preferences? How might you stretch beyond your preferred teaching and learning styles to accommodate the variety of learning styles in your in your classroom? How might you convene learning in a setting where several different student learning styles or preferences are present?*

On behalf of the community, the academic affairs working group offers these questions for your thoughtful reflection as you evaluate your fit with the responsibilities and as you examine the challenges associated with the role of learning convenor in a collaborative, emergent setting. Obviously, no one exhibits all of these characteristics or has honed all of the above-mentioned skills; however, each of us might consider "who we are" in relation to the role of learning convenor and identify areas for our own stretch learning and further self-development during our convening experience.