

Fostering the Self-Renewal of Teachers: An Underutilized Approach to Innovating Interdisciplinary Education

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ABSTRACT

Our goal is to call teachers' attention to the need for self-renewal, challenging them to consider it a necessary approach to innovating interdisciplinary education. Our prescription for sustained self-renewal: *Each teacher assembles a gallery of intellectual heroes — gifted and articulate thinkers — to serve as their own life-long teachers.* In this paper, we share our experience teaching a “skills course” to interdisciplinary graduate students in Purdue University's Center on Aging and the Life Course. The course, entitled “To See and To Seize Opportunities”, exposes scientists-in-training to an array of skills and attitudes that foster peak performance and self-renewal. Leading educators must work hard to create better opportunities for self-renewal. By envisioning even our best teachers as unfinished and under construction, we open up a new dialogue situating the self-renewal of teachers at the very core of educational excellence across a broad range of disciplines. To innovate interdisciplinary education, we believe it is time for a curricular re-think, emphasizing the importance of a transdisciplinary skills course in which students and their teachers can explore transformative ideas on personal development and self-renewal — in the classroom together.

Keywords: personal skills, learning attitudes, peak performance, leadership, heroes, self-renewal, interdisciplinary education.

Good teachers instruct students on how to function in the world. Great teachers show students how they can transform it. By seeing education as a dynamic and

transformative process, great teachers grow to recognize their own unfinishedness. Their philosophies and methods are in a state of both permanence and flux. The nameplate outside their door reads “Under Construction.” They are experts, yet open to change.

Disciplinary education journals publish perspectives on great teaching written by award-winning educators who share wide-ranging insights on achieving excellence in the classroom, offering innovative ways to inspire active learning. To these thoughtful recipes for educational success, we would add another key ingredient — *the teacher's process of self-renewal.* Where does the teacher turn for self-renewal? What skills and attitudes prime the teacher for continued high performance, to navigate the ever-changing territory that is the teaching-learning space? What keeps teachers from becoming closed-minded, from slipping into the ruts of their own expertise? Both teachers and administrators recognize the immense importance of self-renewal [1]. Yet few opportunities for the self-renewal of teachers are built into the educational system.

This paper is a call for teachers to take action — to innovate the education process by reaching their highest potential through self-renewal. We seek to call teachers' attention to the need for self-renewal, challenging them to consider it a necessary approach to innovating interdisciplinary education. We have proposed a schema for self-renewal that we believe can assist even the most accomplished teachers with their unfinishedness [2]. Our prescription for sustained self-renewal: *Each teacher assembles their own personalized, hand-picked gallery of intellectual heroes — gifted and articulate thinkers — who in turn serve as their life-long teachers.* The approach has an appealing rationale. If we as teachers

can spend a bit more time *thinking about our own thinking*, then we will begin to see our own teaching philosophy from new angles, both analytical and creative. By investing in our own self-renewal, we are putting students first — harnessing new energy, gaining fresh insights into structuring the kinds of educational experiences that will nurture the skills and attitudes that can enable each student to go beyond knowledge to expertise.

In Purdue University's Center on Aging and the Life Course, an interdisciplinary unit fostering both research and education, we are promoting the value of tethering oneself to intellectual heroes. By assembling your own personalized gallery of intellectual heroes, you gain greatly by becoming both teacher and student. You direct your attention toward rapidly expanding your skills of reading and listening — the art of being taught [3]. This activity fosters personal growth, shaping new understandings that enable teachers to perform at the highest level.

We posit that progress, whether in the public domain of scientific knowledge or the private domain of personal thought, is benchmarked not by the results, but rather by the questions we ask [4]. A commitment to question making is a prized product of the “skills course” offered to our interdisciplinary graduate students in Purdue's Center on Aging and the Life Course. The course, entitled “To See and To Seize Opportunities”, exposes students to an assortment of skills and attitudes that encourage peak performance and self-renewal. Fresh insights provoked by our intellectual heroes have sparked in us a deeper reflection, coming to see our teaching and the learning process from new angles of vision. The product of this effort has been a steadily evolving collection of questions that invite thoughtful exploration, providing teachers with a framework that is well-suited for across-discipline inquiry:

- *Are your students trained in the art of problem finding, not just problem solving?*
- *Could the quality of your thinking be enhanced by increasing your ability to be precise with language? Have you ever considered taking a course in general semantics to transform your language behavior?*
- *Do you teach the history of your discipline, enabling your students to witness the uneven spits and spurts of progress in that discipline?*
- *Have you reflected on the important role that provocation, rather than instruction,*

plays in your own learning?

- *How often do we mislead students with a false impression of how much we know versus what we believe? Are you training students in the art of making judgments under uncertainty?*
- *If mastering the art of seeing the similar as different, the different as similar is an enviable achievement, shouldn't you be teaching a course on comparative something?*
- *Have you dedicated yourself to acquiring the opposing skills (analytical vs. creative) necessary for developing a disciplined imagination?*
- *Have you ever considered how your writing influences your reading? Is it time to re-think the way you write?*

CONCLUSIONS

The intent of this paper was to call teachers' attention to the need for self-renewal, challenging them to consider it a necessary approach to innovating education. Leading educators must work hard to create better opportunities for the self-renewal of teachers [2]. By envisioning even our best teachers as unfinished and under construction, we open up a new dialogue situating the self-renewal of teachers at the very core of educational excellence. To innovate interdisciplinary education, we believe it is time for a curricular re-think, emphasizing the importance of a transdisciplinary “skills course” in which students and their teachers can explore transformative ideas on personal development and self-renewal — *in the classroom together.*

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