Pedagogical Inquiry Grant (PIG) Report

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Pedagogy Beyond the Pale

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•What was the outcome of your project and how did it align with your original goals as stated in your application?

Our group came together with a singular mission, but constituted out of diverse experiences. While we planned to run the PIG in a more-or-less traditional way by sharing and exchanging "texts," broadly defined, from our respective fields and expertise to explore what kinds of interdisciplinary flourishing might occur, we were not seeking a shared pedagogical approach to emerge out of our collective work. In the proposal we stated our goal this way: "Over the course of a semester, we hope to interrogate and understand the experiences that we have all had that are, paradoxically, both hard to capture in language and discourse and simultaneously sometimes too often papered over by language (again, we might consider the language of "wellness and "selfcare" here)."

In one sense, interrogation and exploration took a standard form: each participant selected a text or set of "texts" that both helped exemplify the individual life-changing events they have gone through and pedagogical insights that emerged from them. We defined "text" loosely. We read traditional philosophy (Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Intruder;* Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity),* ethnography *(*Robert Murphy, *The Body Silent: The Different World of the Disabled),* and critical social science, and history. (MANY texts here – see the PIG proposal). We also watched a film together (namely *Orlando, My Political Biography)* and participated in a group somatics class that was focused on exploring, safely, the vulnerabilities we carry around our bodies, as well as collective emotional experience.

Needless to say, all of the sessions included extremely frank discussions. While we might have known each other as colleagues before, and perhaps had a thumbnail-sketch understandings of each other's life-altering events and processes, we lacked details. To get to a place of meaningful discussion, we had to be mutually vulnerable. As presenters, we had to tell "our stories"; as listeners, we had to become comfortable asking questions

about each other's personal lives, requesting that facilitators fill in the gaps of their stories. As we enacted this form of telling and disclosure, we were surprised to collectively discover how our interactions mirrored, in significant ways, the ways we might interact with students, as we present personal aspects of ourselves. We then stopped and considered different ways discovery and disclosure might happen and the various problems and possibilities therein. How can you be "open" with students without unduly burdening them or forever marking yourself into a version of your condition or experience? We didn't necessarily answer that question but we were able to share different models captured in the different way each faculty member "shows up" for students.

Following a period of disclosure, we had productive, wide-ranging discussions of each of the contributed texts. We considered them pedagogically and personally with the following questions always present:

a. What constitutes being changed? How are we changed as people?
b. How do these changes impact how we show up in the classroom, in both positive generative ways, but also in negative and destabilizing ones?
c. How can we channel these changes into meaningful encounters in the classroom?

What sense do you have at this point that your project has enhanced teaching and learning and what will you be looking at in the future to know whether the project was successful?

This is difficult to say this soon after the PIG convened. I don't think there are tangible outcomes like shared syllabi, co-teaching, etc. Definitely, the group is planning to do a group presentation to the faculty about our work, and using this platform as a way to regularize similar kinds of encounters across the faculty. One of things we realized in sharing experiences and talking (anonymously) about other colleagues on campus, EVERYONE could participate in a group like this. It's my hope that we find a way to make this an informal meeting group or a regularly offered PIG.

While the enhancements that might come from this PIG are in-process, here are a few statements my group members shared upon reflection after the semester. I think these quotes capture the ways this PIG impacted us in surprising ways. While it might be safe to say we collectively believed the PIG would be about faculty-faculty relations and how that shapes us as teachers, what more profoundly emerged was how our personal changes and challenges impact how we show up and work for students. Here are some demonstrative ideas-in-process that speak to that development:

“At first I thought that this was going to help me process and adapt myself in the classroom, but I think that it has made me more aware of the traumas through which my students and colleagues are going. And because we learned through our assigned work and the distance that, for example, reading of another’s experience through reading about it, there is a degree of distancing and the potential for mis- or different interpretation. This reminds me that we learn of our students’ disabilities through the sterile (and legally so) notification process of the ARC that erases the students’ humanness and limits our understand and maybe our ability to empathize. Also, it brings up the unwarranted shame and secretiveness that many feel about their traumas.”

“One very rewarding part of this PIG was simply working together with faculty from many different disciplines to engage in challenging works and topics far outside of my field. This will especially help me to develop as an instructor in the First-Year Seminar, for which I prefer to participate in the collaborative, multidisciplinary fall semester. Our group discussions provided insights into different ways of understanding academic work, teaching it to students, and engaging in difficult subjects that combine the academic and the personal. As a result, I expect to feel more prepared to engage in similar conversations with my next FYS faculty group and class of students.”

*“*After reading and hearing about different ways major life changes shape and re-shape identities, perspectives, and methods, including different ways to understand and analyze these changes, I've come away with an affirmation for teaching informed by an increased awareness of: challenges faced by students who are ill or are working with physical impairments (visible and/or invisible and/or shared, documented, private etc.), varying levels of privilege connected to health care and ability and disability, and varying levels of stress or bodily/somatic "compression" in direct relation to the degree to which a person's embodiment moves in accord with socially constructed norms of physical ability/mobility, identity, etc.”

Something that was particularly enriching for me was learning about different faculty members’ experience with gender and/or transition. This has already directly impacted my work with specific students, allowing me to pass on specific textual and filmic resources as well as mediated experiences/stories. [...] I feel like it modeled a different style of vulnerable conversation, and where I might be a little tentative about that in a classroom context, I feel more confident in how I would negotiate that conversation in office hours or in a mentoring context.”

What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?

The greatest challenge – maybe the only real challenge – was finding a mutual time to come together to meet. Since we realized pretty quickly that our meetings required at least two hours, maybe more, finding schedules that matched proved very difficult.

• How do you envision sharing the results of your work with other colleagues at Whitman (or elsewhere)?

Our group plans to a faculty forum next fall (when I am back on campus) and, as discussed above, are interested in finding a way to regularize faculty groups like this.