

Concept Paper: **Creating Powerful Learning Environments: A Proposal for K-16 Professional Development at Smith**

Submitted by: **Al Rudnitsky**, Professor, Education & Child Study
Susan Etheredge, Associate Professor, Education & Child Study
Glenn Ellis, Associate Professor, Picker Engineering Program
Gail Scordilis, Director, Educational Outreach

Goal:

- ❖ To form a professional learning community for educators, K-16, aimed at helping them identify and put into practice current research in the learning sciences. The intent is to provide a structure so that teachers of all levels can collaborate on improving teaching and learning. This kind of collaboration represents an environment for sharing ideas that is unique in the world of professional development.

Statement of Need: Educators at all levels are interested in having students achieve higher order learning outcomes. These outcomes include understanding and skill that are: sophisticated; enduring; provide the basis for students setting and pursuing a lifelong learning agenda for themselves; able to be flexibly and creatively applied; and, enable students to work collaboratively to solve diverse problems. To achieve these ends, educators who work with young children through adult learners are experimenting with pedagogies that incorporate inquiry, authentic problems, collaborative learning, new approaches to measurement, and more. There is a rich and rapidly growing knowledge base, much of it grounded in cognitive science and instructional psychology, supporting instructional designs that employ these methods and are aimed at higher level learning outcomes. It is clear (and perhaps always has been clear) that there is no single instructional method that will insure successful teaching and learning for all learners, subjects, and contexts. Instead, the theories supporting teaching for understanding are increasingly focused on helping educators create powerful learning environments.

Creating an effective, let alone powerful learning environment, is enormously challenging and time consuming. Little in the education of teachers prepares them to do this. Therefore, advances in pedagogical practice depend upon professional development. Unfortunately the quality of professional development opportunities for teachers, at all levels, is woefully inadequate. Teachers themselves need powerful learning communities to advance their knowledge and their craft. A powerful learning community need not and indeed should not be limited to a particular level of education. Instead it should incorporate teachers of all age groups, grade levels, and content areas. A learning community where all participants can contribute and can profit is most likely to create and impart the kind of knowledge and expertise teachers need.

The Smith Model: An extended professional development environment in which Smith faculty could work with other teachers from a wide variety of contexts would benefit all the constituents in many ways, including:

- Providing opportunities to share expertise in classroom practice – creating synergies that have rarely been explored by having K – 16 teachers work together, and
- Advancing Smith’s goals for educational outreach and being an institution that is connected to the wider community.

The proposed program would build upon existing strengths in Education and Child Study at Smith as well as the strength of the college’s educational outreach. There are several ongoing professional development and educational outreach efforts that reflect the vision of this proposal, for example, the group of Northampton High School teachers working with Al Rudnitsky on employing the Japanese model of Lesson Study, and the group of science, technology and engineering faculty K-16 working with Al Rudnitsky, Susan Etheredge and Glenn Ellis through the GE-funded Engineering Education Partnership. The proposed model would build upon these and endeavor to create learning environments that include local educators and Smith faculty who share content area interests. In exploring the development of this model, we also would seek potential collaborations with the directors of the Jacobson Center, Educational Technology Services and the Quantitative Learning Center, as well as with the Campus School – already a laboratory for professional development, we would be looking to further extend the impact of this learning laboratory to the broader community at Smith and beyond.

Our work on this project would start with the creation of professional development opportunities locally – working with Smith faculty and Northampton teachers to create learning environments through intensive summer workshops on campus, followed by meetings throughout the academic year. Our vision for expanding the impact of this work includes the possibility of creating virtual learning communities for educators nationally – perhaps starting with the community of Smith alumnae engaged in teaching K-16.

Planning and Resources: The initial planning stages for this project would involve discussion and community outreach – both on and off campus - to identify faculty collaborations and institutional assets that together would allow for the development of a clear vision for the professional development programming to be offered. There is no need for dedicated space for this project and the Office of Educational Outreach would assist with the project’s administration. There are needs to develop funding sources to provide support for: college and public school faculty; work-study placements and summer internships for undergraduates; and, funds for campus workshops, symposia and travel. There is also support needed for the planning, design and implementation of assessments, and for the development of web-based resources, both to document and support the work, but also to potentially be the mechanism through which this work is extended to a national audience of educators.