Way back in the 20th century, I witnessed an exchange that stayed with me. I was a little ways into my third year of teaching high school English staring blankly at a copier in the “Teacher’s Work Room” when a student walked in to retrieve something or other for someone in authority. “Hey!” a colleague shouted in a mock-bully tone. “What are you doing in here? How dare you impersonate a teacher?” The student rolled her eyes and moved along, but a nearby colleague took the moment to observe aloud, “Isn’t that what we’re all doing?”

I love this kind of thing. And I suppose I’m always heartened, at least a little, by a bemused word of self-deprecation from someone nearby while in the thick of things, but the moment probably lingered longer because of the wide-eyed response I received when I recounted the exchange to a friend who taught at another high school: “No one would ever say that at my school.”

What a sad environment to imagine. No wondering aloud if you’re a pretender? No honest expression of confusion permitted? No living aloud the question of whether or not education genuinely occurs in the hours we share with students, paychecks notwithstanding? No openness to the possibility that it might turn out that every so often, in the cold light of what’s really going on, the service we’re supposedly rendering for so much money isn’t carrying over, that we aren’t really teaching?

So much can get lost in the theatrics of expertise, of trying to make an impression, of trying to demand—as if it were possible—respect. And that quieter work of living out a vocation—knowing and enjoying what we’re good at and experiencing the thrill of doing it well, staying and being true—can get buried in the endless busyness of keeping up appearances. The subtler all-important questions of how to go about being a gift to other people and how to experience others as gifts in all we’re up to can often go unasked.

Not long ago, in the Teaching Center’s portion of New Faculty Orientation, I spied a lifeline coming at me in the form of a question. It was a moment of transition that preceded a break just before we were about to separate into groups to process one more thing. Mike Pinter asked everyone to contemplate a question without feeling compelled to articulate an answer aloud. Very helpfully, he just asked that we take a moment to respond to it in our minds: “How would you change your syllabus if you were to put it in the form of a promise?”

What an amazing signal flare in the middle of a long day. I see them all the time around here, but this was an especially welcome one as I was trying to orient myself to the life of Belmont and the living traditions lurking within it, those pockets of people steadfastly sustaining and cultivating the possibility of lifelong learning. This one living tradition, I came to find out, invites people to read books together in the hope of invigoration, discernment, and communal consciousness, what Parker Palmer refers to as living life divided no more.

So we went for it together. Like Wendell Berry, Palmer is never far from the questions, concerns, and sensibilities bandied about by folks involving themselves in Teaching Center culture, but our text for gatherings this time around was Parker Palmer’s Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit, and there was much to wonder over. The book is both a challenge and a guide in the sense that it invites us to note how, in our age of Hurry Up and Matter, we’re increasingly encouraged to speak in conversation-stoppers, to prepare our hasty responses to the words of others while we could be listening to them generously, and to become people who can’t change their minds and won’t change the subject.

Palmer proposes an alternative ethic which, however difficult and counterintuitive it might initially feel, is both tried and true. He invites us to return again and again to the “heart-work” that involves holding out our own hopes and fears with open hands and communicating an open-heartedness to the people who populate our everyday, especially those with whom we might find ourselves in disagreement. Whether drawing on the example of Rosa Parks, Black Elk, or Garrison Keillor, he offers practical examples of how we might repeatedly escape from our “issue silos” and become people of active—rather than theoretical—hospitality, learning to hold tension in life-giving ways in our relationships with one another. Whether we take up the challenge or ignore it, the way we relate to people, Palmer notes, is what constitutes our hidden curriculum, within or outside of the spaces we call “school.”

I can testify that whatever kind of day I was having took on a brave new hue as I listened and occasionally chimed in on these conversations. And I was refreshed and enlivened in my vision of my own work, reminded again that a realization, my own or someone else’s, can’t be force-fed or even imposed, but it probably can be fostered wherever two or more people open themselves to one another, sharing what they know—or think they know—and proffering them enthusiastically as findings, insights, intelligence, and gifts. Or as Annette Sisson recently observed aloud at a Teaching Center workshop, “Human learning is not owned.” But it is undertaken, received, and experienced, maybe even conducted, when there’s an ear to hear and an eye to see.
Social psychologist Claude Steele, provost at Columbia University, presents in a fresh and captivating way how threats to a person’s identity impact subsequent performance and behavior. He coins the term “stereotype threat” to describe this phenomenon, one where someone is acutely conscious of the stigma or stereotype associated with their origin, gender, race, orientation, appearance, age or even address. As Steele posits, people’s behaviors are impacted either positively or negatively based on that stereotype.

The title is unexpected but is related to the story of a young African American graduate student who felt the impact of racial stereotype as he walked home through Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood. Not until he began whistling classical music as he walked did he project the sense that he was non-threatening to passers-by. This anecdote is only one among many personal experiences or observations that led the author to seek answers through deeper research.

In Steele’s narrative, his interest is further sparked as he is asked to assist universities trying to address the issue of poor academic performance of minority students, in particular African Americans. Completely unexpected are his research findings on the significant, immediate and protracted impact stereotyping has on an individual’s performance. In experiment after experiment, Steele demonstrates how the threat of confirming a stereotype about your race or gender affects how you interact with others, perform tasks, or even choose to work, study or live. For example, when brilliant female math students were reminded about the stereotype that women do not perform as well as their male counterparts in higher levels of math, the female students underperformed compared to times when this stereotypical threat was removed. By way of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), additional physiologic evidence showed a distinct causal relationship between stereotype and mathematical performance. Namely, when someone is reminded of stereotype prior to performing difficult math calculations, the parts of the brain engaged are not relevant to intellectual performance. Such is not the case when the threat is removed.

In an upbeat fashion, Steele describes the differences in the use of study groups among African American students compared to Caucasians and/or Asians and the impact these groups have on academic performance. According to Steele, differences exist also within the races in how they may utilize office hours, respond to failure, respond to faculty recommendations about their work, and spend time studying. He guides the reader gently, yet convincingly, through experiments that demonstrate how performance can be reversed by deliberately addressing stereotypical threats.

Identifying the causes for underperformance would be of little value without an attempt to help individuals reduce the impact of such threats on their performance and without an attempt by others to refrain from creating environments where such a threat may be inferred. As Steele points out, affirmations, an increase in the number of minority faculty, recruitment of enough minorities to reach a “critical mass,” the use of narratives of success, and cross race conversations are simple ways to decrease threats. We ought to think about what messages or environmental cues we are sending when, for example, we admit only one or two African Americans to a selective program of study with 75 students. Decreasing stereotypical threats alone, however, is not sufficient to improve student performance, but without such a decrease, content knowledge and skilled teaching are equally likely to fail.

The book is a profound piece of history, sociology, politics, and psychology and a must read for every faculty member. The writer’s style is both captivating and educational, and faculty would be well served to educate themselves about how to improve the performance of all their students. First, they must be aware of the threats different students might face, and second, faculty must be deliberate about decreasing such threats for all students in their classrooms.

Though admonished as a child to “never judge a book by its cover,” I have to confess that I usually do. I was especially intrigued by the title and subtitle of Sherry Turkle’s book, and Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other proved to be thought provoking and behavior changing.

The introduction immediately had me picking up my pen to write in the margins and underline things I wanted to think about more fully and discuss with my group. The first was this: “Technology makes it easy to communicate when we wish and to disengage at will.” I was convicted by this idea because I recognize that using technology to communicate in both personal and professional relationships has made me a more reluctant in-person communicator.

Part One of the book is entitled “The Robotic Moment: In Solitude, New Intimacies,” and the chapters in this section made it interesting to remember where I was, technologically speaking, at the different points in time Turkle discusses. In one chapter, she provides an overview of the history of robotic development at MIT and other institutions. Most of these descriptions were in the realm of what I expected—for example, robotic dogs serving as caring companions in a long-term care facility. There were, however, descriptions of robotic “inventions” that ranged from somewhat disturbing to downright eerie, such as a female robot that was kept blindfolded when not in use, and a second female robot that was programmed to assert her boundaries when being touched in intimate ways.

As a Generation Xer who was too old for the Tamagotchi and Furby crazes when these toys emerged, I enjoyed the chapter about the appeal of these toys to children and enjoyed reading the reflections about their experiences playing with these robotic creatures. Finally, one last note about Section One: it is the first time I have heard the word singularity used by someone not on a Federation Starship (I married a Trekkie, what can I say?).

Part Two of the book is entitled “Networked: In Intimacy, New Solitudes.” A couple of chapters in this section provide the most food for thought for us as educators of young adults who have grown up with technology and social media.

In the chapter titled “Reduction and Betrayal,” the author spends a good deal of time on the role of virtual communities (Second Life, Chatroulette, Civilization, etc.), providing not only a description of each community and her own experience with it, but also weaving in narratives from interviews with other users. Many of her engaging interviews are with people who spend as much time and emotional investment in these alternate communities than they do with people in their three-dimensional lives.

The chapter entitled “Growing Up Tethered” seems applicable to teaching in higher education. Here, Turkle posits that the constant access that technology provides parents and their adolescent/young adult children has altered the process of a youth’s search for identity, and that “…adolescents don’t face the same pressure to develop the independence we have associated with moving forward into young adulthood” (p.173). Turkle goes on to discuss how social media has changed the way we view intimacy (intimacy without privacy), and she also includes rich interviews with adolescents regarding the anxiety they feel about managing their social media image.

The conclusion includes some reflections that encapsulate my biggest takeaways from the book. As the author notes on page 280, “The ties we form...
I have noticed a definite “creep.” I have been guilty of it myself in long meetings (ahem), so why would I expect my students to be different?

As luck would have it, one of the classes I am teaching in the fall is a macro-practice course, where students learn about and practice organizational and community assessment and intervention. I think this setting will be a great context for having a discussion on the first day about what makes up a community, and the ways in which my students have seen technology affect community and communication. I am going to ask this group to commit, along with me, to making the classroom “device free” for the first 6 weeks of class, unless they need the device for an accommodation. Whether we keep the class community device free or not, my hope is that we will all be more intentional with our use of technology in and out of the classroom.

Technology is a tool, and I want to be more mindful of how I use it. As Turkle notes on the last page of her conclusion, “…we have agreed to a series of experiments: robots for children and the elderly, technologies that denigrate and deny privacy, seductive simulations that propose themselves as places to live. We deserve better. When we remind ourselves that it is we who decide how to keep technology busy, we shall have better.”

SLOAN-C WORKSHOP REFLECTION: “STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT RESEARCH AND CURATION”

Ted Poetz, Ph.D., Department of Sport Administration

In 2010, Google CEO Eric Schmidt explained that we now create as much information in two days as we did from the dawn of civilization until 2003. This explosion of information is two-sided; on one side we have never had the ability to access so much material as quickly as we do now. The other side of this phenomenon is the confusion and uncertainty that can come from such a wide range of communications. As such, of growing importance is the work of content curation, defined by Tony Karrers as the “act of finding, grouping, organizing, or sharing the best and most relevant content on a specific issue.”

This form of information literacy has become a skill critical to success in the 21st century. Jennifer Jason has noted it is a skill that should be supported throughout the curriculum. The Sloan-C workshop I recently completed examined the topic of student research and curation and allowed me the opportunity to explore digital resources available to support this process.

With the ability to locate so much information at the click of a mouse, the concept of curation can be a bit overwhelming. I picture the cartoon of the exhausted worker whose “to do” file continues to pile higher and higher while his “completed” file never seems to move. In this vein, academics can all relate to the often slow moving process of conducting research, and for a student new to the curation process, this feeling can quickly turn to frustration. This workshop challenged me to consider the educational opportunities available when curation is taught as an aspect of critical thinking. Given the importance of this skill, it is imperative that we strive to teach this process in a manner that is as relevant and engaging as possible. Rohit Bharagva has argued for five models of curation which provide a helpful way to conceptualize this topic:

1. **AGGREGATION:** Pulling the most relevant information about a particular topic into a single location
2. **DISTILLATION:** A more simplistic format where only the important ideas are shared
3. **ELEVATION:** Raising the larger trend
4. **MASHUPS:** Merging existing content to create new points of view
5. **Chronology:** Organize historical information by time to show how understanding has evolved

Using Bharagva’s five models of curation as a foundation, I started to review the digital resources available. Rather than the traditional “research a topic and tell me what you know about it” approach, content curation is a more actively involved process of gathering and sharing. With the web-based tools now available (many of them free of charge), students take on the role of curator and decide what information or content should be included in their collection. The result can be considered an “exhibit” which is oftentimes far more appealing and useful than a term paper or annotated bibliography. During the workshop, I became engrossed by other participant’s curation projects that I would of most likely have skipped over if they had been done using traditional means. From antibiotic resistant bacteria to the music of John Cage, I found myself fascinated by the content as well as the presentation of the information. With very little effort, I was able to become a curator myself using current web based tools presented in the workshop. Although the Sloan-C courses often focus on online learning, the information and resources offered in this workshop could easily find a home within a traditional classroom setting.

One of the tools I found particularly useful was called Storify—https://storify.com. Although Storify is mainly used as a site to curate what people post on social media, it can also be a great way to develop and explore research ideas. Chances are students will be familiar with Storify and thus less intimidated when it is incorporated into an assignment. The finished projects go far beyond social media posts, and can include scholarly journal articles and multimedia. Best of all, the platform is extremely user friendly and can be shared between classmates. I can’t wait to use this in my research methods class to get students actively engaged in the research process!

Another tool presented in the workshop was called Learnist – https://learnist.com which allows users to organize online learning resources. This collaborative tool is a terrific way to get students discussing each other’s projects. The formatting of the site really seems to speak to a generation of students who are accustomed to posting, liking and commenting with others on social media. For someone who doesn’t utilize social media sites much, I found many of these resources to be very manageable. Also, once you are on sites like Pinterest, Diigo, and Listly (other sites mentioned in the workshop) you begin to realize the value they could potentially have to classes you are teaching.

After a week-long Sloan-C workshop, I don’t consider myself an expert on using social media, but I have come around as to its value in the classroom. The last assignment we did for the workshop was to develop an assignment using one of the sites presented. I didn’t have to stretch far to incorporate Bloom’s Taxonomy (my preferred method of structuring an assignment) into a research assignment I plan on using this fall. I am optimistic that the students will find using web-based curation tools to be an effective and appealing alternative to activities I have done in the past. I strongly encourage anyone interested in content curation to explore the sites I have listed and start implementing them into your class activities.

through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy. We text each other at family dinners, while we jog, while we drive, as we push our children on swings in the park. We don’t want to intrude on each other, so instead we constantly intrude on each other, but not in real time. …We go online because we are busy but we end up spending more time with technology and less with each other. We defend connectivity as a way to be close, even as we effectively hide from each other.”

As I have begun thinking in more detail about my fall classes, I have also been thinking about how to set parameters around technology use in classes. As an educator of future social workers, I want them to build community with their peers and me as they learn how to be professionals. While I wouldn’t say I have had huge trouble with inappropriate use of technology in classes, I believe that the use of technology is a tool, and I want to be more mindful of how I use it. As Turkle notes on the last page of her conclusion, “…we have agreed to a series of experiments: robots for children and the elderly, technologies that denigrate and deny privacy, seductive simulations that propose themselves as places to live. We deserve better. When we remind ourselves that it is we who decide how to keep technology busy, we shall have better.”
On August 11 and 12, the Teaching Center hosted Dr. Ken Bain as presenter at this year’s August Teaching Center Workshop entitled “How to Foster Deep Learning.” Dr. Bain is a renowned teacher and researcher regarding teaching and learning in higher education and the author of What the Best College Teachers Do (2004) and What the Best College Students Do (2012). Below are some Belmont faculty responses to the workshop with Dr. Bain:

One aspect of Ken Bain’s workshop I have used, in particular, is the idea of asking the “Big Question” and centering the class around that question. Prior to the start of the semester, I sent out an email to my Sport Marketing classes and asked if they had questions on an aspect of sport marketing that we could address. Students came up with a number of questions, and in a slight variation from Ken Bain’s one big question, I am using a different question to start off each class. I also use each question as a way to frame the lecture for that class. I have found that this approach instantly takes the students away from a surface level understanding of the issue into a more applied and critical examination of the topic.

Ted Peetz, Sport Administration

I am incorporating his recommendation to have a conversation with students about grading, and in some cases, I have reserved an entire class to calibrate my grading criteria to my students’ work. I used his ideas wholesale on introducing my course, and I rewrote one syllabus in its entirety. Also, and I think more importantly, I am taking to heart the idea of approaching class as a collaborative effort between me and my students. I can’t quantify this, but I certainly feel as though this mindset is helping me connect with my students a little more this term.

Jayme Yoo, English

I reworked my syllabus based on what I learned, and I changed the format of the first day of class. On that day, students in 3-D Design were given an invitation to join me for tea at the end of the semester. We then brainstormed as a group on what items we would need in order to have tea together, they chose which of those they would like to design and make, and we are now in the process of designing and making each one. There’s a lot more to this project, of course, but that’s the general overview. I also changed Sculpture I considerably and spent the first day talking about toilet paper, . . . but that’s another story entirely. To assess the effectiveness of the new approach to the first day, I invited colleagues to observe the class and provide feedback. The feedback was very positive.

John Watson, Art CVPA

I greatly benefited from the 2014 August Teaching Center Workshop where I learned several teaching techniques to help create learning environments and to foster deep learning, including providing students with fundamental questions to intellectually define a course and developing a syllabus that gives students an opportunity to assess their own progress of learning. Implementing this new approach in MDS 1500 Mass Media and Society on the first day this semester, I shared a couple of research studies that examined the impact of media on society. One considered the relationship between the level of exposure to mass media and self-esteem and body image. The other reported on the change in Republican vote share in presidential elections between 1996 and 2000, contrasting the towns that had adopted Fox News by 2000 and those that had not. I asked students what big question the course might help them answer, and we came up with “What is mass media and how do different media affect our society (and you and me)?”

Hyangsook Lee, Media Studies

I actually have used much of what Ken Bain presented as thought-provoking questions for our teacher candidates to reflect on: What is “real” when teaching students? How can you engage your students in “deep thinking?” and what is “deep thinking?” What types of questions can you get your students to ask about the content that will lead to a deeper level of thinking? I’ve also started to consider how I might use Carol Dweck’s Mindset, referenced by Bain, with our teacher candidates.

Kate McGuigan, Education

Since the workshop was held shortly before classes started, I was unable to make any major structural changes in my courses at the syllabus level for this semester. However, since most of my classes follow a seminar format, my discussions with students have been noticeably shaped by Ken Bain’s workshop. Bain’s discussion of how to foster “deep learning” and the students’ awareness of their own “flexible intelligence” has helped me guide classroom discussions of the texts on learning and liberal education that we are using in the pilot version of the First-year Seminar anthology. I have found myself discussing the flexibility and adaptability of human intelligence quite frequently with students this semester in other contexts, particularly when encouraging first-year students not to “give up” when confronted with difficult or complex readings and course material.

Daniel Schafer, History

I thought this was the best teaching workshop I’ve attended in the past seven years. Others have been very good, but this one was extremely thought provoking on many levels. There wasn’t time to modify syllabi to follow Ken Bain’s ‘invitational’ model, but I did use the idea to frame how I introduced students to what we would be studying this semester. For the first time, I talked to students about the concept of deep learning and the three typical student learning types and had them reflect upon which approach they primarily take and what motivated them. In other words, Bain’s ideas about creating strong learning environments directly affected both courses I am teaching this semester, but the upper level seminar is where I was able to shift my teaching model to implement these ideas more fully.

Judy Ballington, Art CVPA