

## Engaging Ideas: The Power of Possibility

What comes to mind as you anticipate convocation each semester? Coffee and catching up with colleagues, a few announcements, some passive listening? For those who attended the Northern Essex Community College spring convocation on January 19, 2007, expectations about convocation may never be the same. Immediately following the meeting and for weeks afterward, a common refrain, often in a slightly mystified tone, could be heard among colleagues:

“That was the best meeting we’ve ever had!”

What happened? Why did nearly everyone in attendance leave convocation energized and upbeat, feeling validated, recognized, and valued? Convocation, from the Latin, means “a calling together,” and a modern understanding adds the dimension that those attending have the same “calling” or vocation. The January meeting reminded us that we have heard that call. This article will take a look at what went on and how some of the activities, involving moving and story sharing, had symbolic as well as practical meaning. The engaging ideas that came out of the morning will also be presented, in the hopes that the positive start to Spring Semester 2007 will be sustained.

### *Setting the Stage*

We knew we were in for a different type of meeting when we arrived at the Technology

Center meeting room. Since the days of meeting in the Library, many people came expecting not enough seating, so instead of interrupting a speaker by poking through the rows for a chair, they would crowd into the doorways and listen for key pieces of information. This time, rather than finding seats arranged in rows, there were round tables, and plenty of available chairs which were quickly spotted by those standing. This was a key change for such a meeting, and it initiated a more positive ambiance.

The tables had on them a variety of items, and there were hand-lettered signs on the walls. Besides the agenda and a “trivia test” about the college, each table had on it a table-top sign: either Academic Advising, Collaborative Learning, Community Service, Classroom Instruction, Innovative Teaching Techniques, Experiential Learning, Technology, Campus Environment, Student Activities, or Career Exploration. Each of the topics was displayed on two tables. As we settled in to the meeting, these table top signs drew our attention, and some of us wondered, “What place has this topic in an informational meeting?” Others may have thought, “I’m an expert in this topic. What has someone got to tell me about it?”

In the meantime, the significance of the messages on the walls began to penetrate. Each sign stated a commonly held myth about deficits in community college, along with statistical facts that could effectively reframe those ideas. These were the messages on those signs:

<p>Only last chance students attend community colleges.</p>	<p>&gt;Nationally, 11.6 million students, nearly half of all undergraduates at public colleges and universities, are enrolled in community colleges. &gt;Twelve percent of students at community colleges have already completed a bachelor’s, master’s or doctorate degree.</p>

<p>Very few students ever graduate from community colleges.</p>	<p>Nationally, community colleges award more than 700,000 degrees and certificates each year.</p>
<p>Very few community college students actually complete bachelor's degrees.</p>	<p>Community college students who transfer to a four-year college have about the same likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree as similar students who began at a four-year college or university.</p>
<p>Community college students end up in low-paying jobs.</p>	<p>The average lifetime expected earnings of a graduate with an associate degree are \$400,000 more than an individual with a high school diploma.</p>
<p>A community college degree or certificate doesn't qualify you for a meaningful career.</p>	<p>&gt;Half of all nurses and a majority of other healthcare workers are educated at community colleges. &gt;Nearly 85 percent of first responders - firefighters, police, and EMTs - are trained at community colleges.</p>
<p>Community colleges don't have academic standards.</p>	<p>Students must take placement tests in order to qualify for college-level work. Additionally, small class sizes and a faculty focus on teaching instead of research and publication create a "learner friendly" environment.</p>
<p>Between jobs and taking care of families, students don't have time for anything else.</p>	<p>Between 2002 and 2005, the number of college students who volunteer in their communities grew 20 percent. Working students, including those who work 40 hours a week, volunteer more than students who do not work at all.</p>

After some preliminary welcoming remarks, the Northern Essex "trivia test" resulted in laughs and prizes. The game was designed as a group effort, resulting in enjoyable comradery, and the prizes, such as Border's gift certificates, were surprisingly thoughtful. But rather than

dwelling in the comfort of the small group, our next task was transparently symbolic: it involved getting up and moving.

### *Movement as Metaphor*

The arrangement of chairs and tables and the pleasant din of playful conversation contributed to an atmosphere of openness to possibility. So when the next part of the meeting was explained, we were all listening. One person at each table would be designated as leader, taking notes on the discussion, while others at the table would each respond to three “simple” questions with regards to that table’s table-top sign. The questions were, “Share a meaningful experience you had as student in this area, a time when you were fully engaged and benefitting as a student,” and “How have you or someone else at Northern Essex engaged students in this area? What worked?” And finally, “What could we do even more of in this area?” At designated intervals, everyone except the leaders would get up and move to a different table, and respond to the same questions regarding that table’s topic.

This method of active learning, based on ideas from K. Patricia Cross, had multilayered benefits. For one, it illustrated an effective alternative to the classroom lecture. Another was the pleasure of meeting new people, or even the adventure of stepping outside of our comfort zones and encountering different perspectives. The simple act of physically moving about the room had immense benefits in terms of energy and engagement. Moreover, movement is a social, even political, act. We didn’t sit and receive information. We generated our own ideas.

One of our favorite “distant teachers” at Northern Essex (one from whom many of us learn through reading what he writes) is Parker Palmer. Palmer has written about movement and

*movements*, and the movement approach to organizational change. As an organization deeply invested in continuous improvement, Northern Essex has taken many initiatives. Yet, as Palmer says, there is a distinction between an organizational approach and a movement approach to change. As an organization, we have recognized that change is far more effective when it comes from the ground up, rather than from the top down, in terms of individuals buying into changes (our change initiatives, particularly the present Appreciative Inquiry project, reflect that). But movement is “another avenue toward change ... [and] the genius of movements is paradoxical: they abandon the logic of organizations in order to gather the power necessary to rewrite the logic of organizations” (Palmer 16). Palmer points to the black power and women’s liberation movements as having grown outside of organizational boundaries, both returning “to change the lay - and the law - of the land” (Palmer 16). Our movement at the meeting was a subtle reminder of this hard-earned lesson, that change requires being active.

### *The Power of Story*

The heart of the “table” activity was story sharing, which made each person an expert in their contribution. It is no longer only the literature teachers who recognize the value of story, as “a concept and a practice, which is portable, flexible, and durable” (Bishop147). Story telling still must overcome a bad reputation, an alliance with making things up. But stories carry immense power, even if some part of them is indeed made up. As Elisa Davy Permain puts it, “Why are stories such a powerful medium? Let me offer some of the reasons that I know: Stories speak to us through images, pictures, and symbols. This is the language of the imagination. Images endure in our minds and our hearts long after the words are gone. Research bears out that lessons and facts are remembered better when taught through story” (x). Even in

fact-driven disciplines such as nursing, Northern Essex teachers know that stories permeate, and that “students remember stories better than they remember lectures” (Tangard).

Some participants at the meeting were hesitant to share stories; others jumped right in. The leaders, those who remained at each table and recorded ideas, took up the challenge of ensuring that everyone had a “say.” The three questions moved speakers from inward to outward, first exploring the idea of meaningful experiences as students ourselves, then considering how we have observed students becoming engaged, and finally imagining ways students could become even more engaged in that particular area. After several relocations from table to table, each person having had the opportunity to tell a story about many of the ten topics, the leaders used their notes to report key ideas to the assembly. Afterwards, the notes were collected. Many engaging ideas emerged from this activity, worthy of sharing again and with a wider audience.

### *The Engaging Ideas*

*Academic advising.* The stories recalling this topic when we were students generally reflected none or not very good advisement. But there were stories of observing Northern Essex students being directed to program coordinators and faculty for a broader perspective of programs. This table reported hands-on, direct, one-to-one advising which engaged students through in-depth conversations. Students were also observed taking ownership and linking leadership opportunities and activities to their academic goals and their future.

Some ideas about how we could improve involved changing the union contract to allow faculty to work in the Advising Center in lieu of office hours, to be more available to advisees, and to improve the rather sporadic advising that currently takes place. Another suggestion was

to use technology to generate the faculty advisee list, and to provide more student contact outside the classroom throughout the semester.

*Collaborative learning.* Stories about collaborative learning included recollections of study groups which resulted in better understandings and better lab reports - with or without the beer. Someone recalled that in high school biology a partner handled a live dissection, which was a good thing. Although more than one person noted that collaboration is now much more commonplace than it was in the past, most told positive stories about teachers leaving groups of students alone to figure things out together, without teacher interference. One story was about an online project from which no one could “hide” so everyone contributed.

Some of the observations or experiences reported about collaborative learning included making use of the Web CT discussion board, cohorts moving through a program together, and learning communities, such as the yoga and writing learning community. Other reading and writing collaborative activities were peer reviewing in basic writing, and making connections to literature through a random assignment activity to create discussion groups. One participant leaves the last 20 minutes of each class aside for discussions of group projects. Another reminded the group that cultural aspects of collaborative learning have to be considered, as Latino/a students often consider study groups essential. Most also agreed that for collaborative learning to be effective, teachers need to be flexible and realize that students will be more accountable to each other; grading, therefore, can be problematic as teachers need to be approachable and respect confidentiality.

Many ideas emerged about collaborative learning, such as promoting or even requiring learning communities, and developing theme-based learning across the curriculum. Other

suggestions were to provide more NCBI (National Coalition Building Institute) workshops in classes; for faculty to visit classrooms to observe effective group facilitations; and to provide some sort of reward system for faculty who make efforts to cross disciplines with collaboration. One person suggested checking how the physical environment in the classroom could improve collaborative learning, and another felt we should encourage understanding among both faculty and students about why different disciplines are required in any program, and to point out connections between disciplines.

*Community service.* There were positive stories recollecting community service activities when we were students, such as tutoring ESL students in Springfield housing projects, aiding in the Haverhill Headstart program, working with scouts and at Girls' Club, and striking in 1970 to support Cambodian students. In high school, some were pushed to volunteer; one person reported being scared to go at first but later developing friendships and broader knowledge. Another commented that in the past there seemed to be fewer opportunities for community service, whereas now it is required in some high schools and provides pay in some college circumstances. Overall, the experiences clearly provided intrinsic rewards beyond any compensation.

Examples of community service among Northern Essex students were many. In the athletic department, for instance, players who want to coach sometimes return to their communities to work with Little League, and the Boys' and Girls' clubs. There are free baseball clinics for Lawrence children, scout groups that come to meet players, and seasonal celebrations for families. In other disciplines, past nursing students are doing peer tutoring, and early childhood students who are placed in the community often end up volunteering beyond their



placements. Clubs and organizations organize clothing, food and book drives. One speaker pointed out that at Middlesex Community College, community service learning is incorporated into degree programs: a coordinator develops opportunities in the community, and students benefit by recognizing the value of service.

Some wishes for the future in this area were for the college to work with the Haverhill YWCA in a tribute to women, and to honor local high school students. Another was to invite students to our Foreign Film Festival and to develop other ways to raise political and social awareness. One suggestion was to include a service-based learning component in the design of new courses. Within the college community, an idea was to create a book exchange for students struggling financially, or a car pool system for anyone who wanted to participate. Most agreed that there was a need for awareness of what opportunities for service are available and how to access them, because many people, students and others, would be willing to volunteer but need more information.

*Classroom instruction.* In this area, in the stories about meaningful experiences, a common theme was about individual attention provided by a teacher, one who pulled his chair up to each student's desk, who convinced someone they were better than they thought they were, or who truly listened and responded to what was said. Some of the specific things in these stories included experiences when social and professional barriers were removed for more meaningful discussions, and using the New York times in a U.S. history class to understand present concepts.

Ways of engaging students in classroom instruction that we use or have observed here included case studies, talking about personal experiences and current topics, role playing,

translating concepts into real life, and group and partner work. Other strategies were using popular movies and talking about celebrities, using mindful learning techniques, bringing professionals into the class to discuss a job, and asking students what they want to learn.

When thinking about classroom instruction and what we could do more of or do differently, one suggestion was that there should be fewer adjuncts and more full time faculty invested in student success. Along that line, there was a suggestion to provide release time and some way for faculty to learn more about teaching; as a result, full time teachers could mentor adjuncts to do the job well. One suggestion was to purchase classroom furniture that makes for more flexible learning, and more ergonomic furnishings in smart classrooms. Many agreed that instruction would be enhanced with technology: working computers, DVD players, projection for video and audio, scanners, and electronic white boards. Another comment was to use caution not to rely too heavily on technology, to return to “chalk and talk” in order to maintain relationships.

*Innovative teaching techniques.* Innovative teaching techniques that made for meaningful experiences as students were often those that made learning visual and active, for instance, a math teacher showed how to derive the circle formula rather than just giving it out, and a literature teacher assigned authors to be a “steady date” for a year and had students write to them. In a social work class, one person spent a day in a prison, which reminded him of everyday things sometimes taken for granted. More than one person noted that theater activities were engaging; one even said that doing a play as a student teacher in Holyoke changed the direction of her life.

Ways that participants reported to have effectively engaged students with innovative teaching techniques often had to do with personalizing instruction and more active learning, for example, by taking field trips to businesses, and, in the honors program, to a Buddhist ashram where the Lama answered questions and reinforced what they had learned. Another trip was to a mill museum in order to understand the long history of being an immigrant in Lawrence. At the end of a government class, students were asked to balance the federal budget. Learning communities were cited as effective ways to engage students, especially when faculty enthusiasm is transferred to students. In an ESL class, students were asked to read to nursing home patients in English, and to write down their conversations with patients. Theater games and inviting NCBI facilitators also engaged students.

Ideas that came from these stories included providing support for field trips, or providing time in learning communities for field trips. In the classroom, experts or alumni who are practicing what students are studying might be invited. Other potentially innovative teaching techniques centered around teamwork, experiential learning, and cognitive decision-making. Further discussion explored ways to design and evaluate such methods, for instance, by forming three teams, one to make questions on topics, one to answer the questions, and one to review the answers, then evaluation could be accomplished by all team members, with the teacher getting the feedback - one's own work would be evaluated along with other team members'.

*Experiential learning.* As students, some of us felt engaged doing case studies in classes with no lectures, interning on a fellowship, and participating in a leadership academy. Others found online courses related to real work experiences engaging. Discussion turned to what Northern Essex could do even more of in this area, and one idea that emerged was to develop full

online degrees with adequate support for online students. Mentoring programs, both for students and for faculty, were discussed, and again there was a call for more time to be made available for faculty to develop new techniques.

*Technology.* Although technology, as we usually think of it today, was a non-subject for many of us as students, there were some who felt engaged with the use of film, and even when hatching eggs with an incubator in anatomy and physiology. Those for whom computers were part of being a student generally said that the discovery of databases and of the many ways to use tools such as Microsoft Word provided a powerful engagement.

Students were observed becoming engaged in learning with the use of technology in computer lab, and with assistive programs such as MyMathLab. One class did a graphic calculating project which involved pizza. The library orientation program was also referred to as a great way to give students an effective technological “how-to”.

Ambitious suggestions for providing even more engagement included locating grant money to provide each student with a lap top computer, and to pod-cast lectures. Other ideas were to save class time by giving quizzes on line, and to use message boards before class to state central questions. Each course might create a myspace page, and a discussion board. It was acknowledged that some instructors are already doing many of these things, but that with more support the ones with the best results could be better advanced.

*Campus environment.* Stories about engagement as students with regards to campus environment centered around two themes: the power of one person to create a positive (or negative) lasting impression, and the viewing of the larger picture and one’s place in it. One person described a small act that lasted decades, getting personal attention and name recognition

from a teacher. Another discussed being welcomed with open arms and not stigmatized by mistakes. Because teachers and students sometimes share attributes, such as deaf students and teachers, everyone's learning experience is enhanced. Other stories were about guest lecturers, and workshops, such as job fairs.

Observations of the campus environment promoting student engagement were very specific, such as taking into consideration students' feelings about being in the library basement when decisions were made about new computer labs. New furniture in Lawrence fosters student involvement, and student activities helps with student involvement. Jitters coffee shop and students having dinner parties on their own attest to the power of food to promote a positive environment. At the reading center, students were invited to bring their children, and faculty and staff donated new books to give them. The ESL lab invited people to bring a dish from their country to share. The grounds people were appreciated in their continuous efforts to keep the campuses safe.

In order to improve the campus environment to promote even more student engagement, one suggestion was to provide better access, such as more ramps, for people who need it. The campus might be made more inviting with more comfortable areas in the Spurr building to sit and talk and have coffee. In addition, the outdoor environment could be better used for classes during the good weather. Discussion also turned to expanding the environment to the town of Haverhill, to have the community become a "living" environment.

*Student Activities.* Those activities that people remembered as having been engaging when they were students were things that served to involve them in their college lives. One person talked about being on a committee to build a student center, another was part of a sorority

that did a project on diversity and the social environment. One was vice president of a student volunteer organization, another was a student advocate for a smoking area, and another helped in the establishment of honor societies on campus. Sunday afternoon sharing hour was a fond memory, as was poker, wine and cheese night, which relieved stress and provided an opportunity to see instructors as “real” people when they visited. Other stories were about making connections and developing community at film nights, and enlarging one’s world view in an international student group.

Engagement in student activities at Northern Essex was promoted through support for a Saturday study group, through recruiting students for learning communities, and through encouragement to become involved with the school newspaper, the Observer. The contemporary affairs club and student involvement in Appreciative Inquiry also made the list. Other events discussed were the photography contest and the “Who Wants to be a Renaissance Person” liberal arts general knowledge contest. Bake sales, campus fairs, and transfer day engendered positive stories.

Ideas about how to do even better with student activities to engage students included having student-friendly, inviting lounging and gathering areas, and a student-run area in each building. The newly-developed college success seminar could be required, and orientation could be more focused. Because students sometimes miss bulletin boards, there was discussion about how best to post events and share information, using a combination of traditional and technological means. Other practical ideas were to improve transportation between campuses, and to build better programmatic bridges between Lawrence and Haverhill.

*Career exploration.* Several of the stories told about meaningful experiences as a student in the area of career exploration were ones that resulted in a change of goals. Although there were people, such as a UMass Lowell math teacher, who were role models, other experiences, such as an internship in a New Hampshire hospital, discouraged someone from pursuing that career. Some stories reported being rebellious and unmotivated, others talked about learning respect, etiquette, and interviewing skills in workshops.

Some of the ways the participants or someone else at Northern Essex engaged students in the area of career exploration were through career nights, advising, and ESL (English as a second language) and workplace ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) classes. In early childhood and elementary education, a component of the program is conducting observations, by which students can find out what the job is really like. Other stories were told about CPAC (career planning and advising center) and cooperative learning, which helps with internships and other opportunities.

Things we can perhaps do more of or do differently to engage students are to require or provide more co-ops or internships, or to have a mandated practical experience for graduation. Others suggested we do more advertising about what is available, and increase field experiences job shadowing, or “ride-alongs”. Other ideas were to shift the focus from job fairs to career fairs, and to have fairs for men and for women returning to school. There was discussion about the Observer’s role in career exploration, and about how graphic design could bring ideas in from students and businesses.

*The Ripple Effect of Recognition*

This entire activity, which systematically directed people to see and even create possibilities, had multiple layers of benefits. It validated our past experiences and pointed out how we share understandings more often than not. It gave us permission to take pride in our work, as we told stories of successfully engaging students, and to be proud of where we work by realizing just how much we have going for us on behalf of students. Perhaps most important, finally, we were able to imagine and articulate ideas about improvement. There are so many good ideas out there, and this was a way to get at them. People weren't invited to go backwards and sound off about past petulance so they didn't. Even so, people surely have their own "causes". Here, they were able to bring focus to them in the supportive small groups - and this time every person was heard. Being heard encouraged us to hear others.

Another component of this meeting was viewing "Celebrate What's Right With The World," a stunning video by National Geographic photographer Dewitt Jones, which challenges the viewer to see possibilities. At the spring convocation's end, the positive energy was palpable. Who would have imagined that was possible?



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