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Key Practices for Fostering Engaged Learning

By Jessie L. Moore



Jessie L. Moore is Director of the Center for Engaged Learning and Professor of Professional Writing and Rhetoric at Elon University. She leads the Center's multiinstitutional scholarship of teaching and learning initiatives and received the 2019 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Distinguished Service Award.

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In Short

- Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning facilitates multidisciplinary and multiinstitutional scholarship of teaching and learning collaborations that now collectively represent over 200 scholars from over 120 institutions across more than a dozen countries.
- The collaborations have explored issues of engaged learning, in and beyond the classroom, and identified six key practices: building on students' prior knowledge and experiences, facilitating relationships, offering feedback, framing connections to broader contexts, fostering reflection on learning and self, and promoting integration and transfer of knowledge and skills.
- High-impact practices often include these practices, but faculty and staff also can enact them in on-campus employment, residential campus activities, and other campus spaces.
- The six key practices facilitate students' sense of belonging on campus and prepare graduates to transfer their learning to the workplace.

High-impact practices (HIPs), like mentored undergraduate research, first-year seminars, and community-based learning, are widely recognized for their transformative potential and correlation with student retention. Unfortunately, unless HIPs are strategically integrated into

curricular structures with resources allocated to facilitate access for *all* students—including first-generation students, working students, historically underrepresented minority students, transfer students, student-athletes, and others—their benefits often are underrealized. Ensuring equitable access to one or more of the 11 “official” HIPs,

especially to HIPs “done well” (Kuh et al., 2017), is complex and challenging. Therefore, universities need to focus their attention on HIPs’ shared, underlying characteristics and the key practices that can foster engaged learning both in *and beyond* HIPs.

For the past decade, I have had the privilege of organizing international, multidisciplinary, and multiinstitutional research collaborations that now collectively represent over 200 scholars from over 120 institutions across more than a dozen countries. Each year, Elon University’s Center for Engaged Learning invites applications for a new, 3-year research seminar on a focused engaged learning topic and selects two- to three-dozen teachers and practitioners to collaborate. From 2014 to 2016, for instance, 34 researchers from 26 institutions in four countries joined our exploration of one HIP, Excellence in Mentoring Undergraduate Research. Participants formed six multiinstitutional research teams and used mixed methods to explore specific research questions under the seminar’s broad umbrella. Meanwhile, seminar leaders and I promoted connections across teams and synthesized their comprehensive findings.

Table 1 demonstrates the diversity of institutions and countries represented across seven of these research seminars.

While several of the research seminars have focused on official HIPs (e.g., writing-intensive courses, undergraduate research, global learning, capstone courses, and projects), others have

focused on engaged learning pedagogies that are not formally designated HIPs but share characteristics with them. Additionally, one research seminar explored how to help faculty adopt these practices.

SIX KEY PRACTICES FOR FOSTERING ENGAGED LEARNING

As the convener of these research projects, I look for themes both across teams within individual research seminars and across the seminars. From this work, I have drawn six key practices for fostering engaged learning that have proved important across the research seminars to date (Figure 1). Individual staff and faculty—and institutional structures in colleges and universities—can foster engaged learning by:

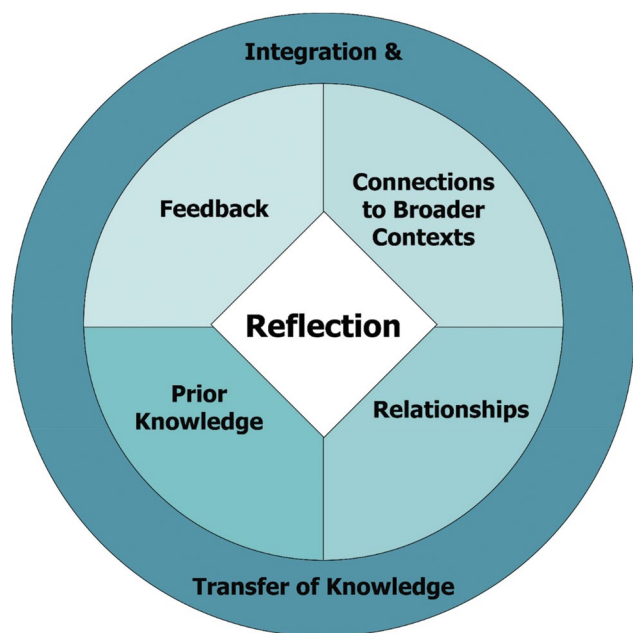
- acknowledging students’ prior knowledge and experiences,
- facilitating relationships,
- offering feedback,
- framing connections to broader contexts,
- fostering reflection on learning and self, and
- promoting integration and transfer of knowledge and skills (Moore, in press).

As Figure 1 illustrates, the six practices are interlocking. Reflection functions as a facilitator for the other key practices, prompting students to consider what prior knowledge might be relevant to a new situation, who in their relationship network

TABLE 1. RESEARCH SEMINAR TOPICS AND SCOPE

Years	Focus	Institutions Represented	Countries Represented
2011–2013	Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer	27	Australia, Denmark, Ireland, South Africa, United States
2014–2016	Excellence in Mentoring Undergraduate Research	29	Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, United Kingdom, United States
2015–2017	Integrating Global Learning With the University Experience	20	Canada, United States
2016–2018	Faculty Change Toward High-Impact Pedagogies	5	Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, United States
2017–2019	Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice	22	United States
2018–2020	Capstone Experiences	21	Australia, Canada, United States
2019–2021	Writing Beyond the University	32	Australia, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Kenya, Oman, Singapore, United Kingdom, United States

FIGURE 1. SIX INTERCONNECTED KEY PRACTICES FOR FOSTERING ENGAGED LEARNING



can support their academic and personal development, how to respond to feedback, and what connections they can make between classroom learning and broader contexts. In addition, the first five key practices collectively support students' integration and transfer of learning.

These key practices echo and reinforce the “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and characteristics of HIPs (Kuh et al., 2017). Yet the key practices also reorient the attention of faculty, staff, programs, and institutions to six priorities that are based on findings from multiinstitutional research representing research-intensive universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and many other institutional types. Because research seminar participants explore engaged learning practices across these varied institutions, their studies inform more generalizable recommendations for practice—and a more robust understanding of what adaptations might support learners in specific contexts.

Moreover, faculty, staff, and administrators can implement the six interconnected key practices in and beyond the classroom. Are they applicable to student experiences in officially designated HIPs? Absolutely! Yet they are also key practices for fostering meaningful learning in on-campus employment, residential campus activities, advising conversations, and yes, college classrooms.

ACKNOWLEDGING STUDENTS' PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES

Students' dispositions and identities, as well as their prior experiences, have the potential to inform their learning in and beyond the classroom. Drawing on surveys, interviews, and analyses of students' written assignments, multiinstitutional collaborations from the center's 2011–2013 research seminar on Writing and the Question of Transfer, for example, established that:

Whether crossing concurrent contexts (e.g., courses in the same semester, or university course work and a part-time job) or sequential contexts (e.g., courses in a major's or minor's scaffolded sequence, high school to college, or a university degree program to a postgraduation job), individuals may engage in both routinized (low-road) and transformative (high-road) forms of transfer as they draw on and use prior knowledge about writing. (Moore, 2017, p. 4)

Moreover, students' dispositions and identities inform how they approach applying or adapting prior knowledge to new tasks.

Yet, in a 2019 survey of 1,575 U.S. college graduates, ages 18–34, only 58.9 percent reported having multiple experiences during college of faculty asking them to draw on prior experiences when they learned new things (Center for Engaged Learning/Elon Poll, 2019). Alarming, 14.5 percent reported *never* being asked to apply prior knowledge.

Acknowledging students' prior knowledge and experiences can be as simple as asking students:

- What have you done before that you think would be similar to what you are being asked to do for this assignment?
- What strategies did you use successfully for that task?
- What might you need to do differently?

FACILITATING RELATIONSHIPS

Fostering relationship-rich campuses also matters in the pursuit of engaged learning. In a 2018 national poll of college graduates:

Graduates who had 7 to 10 significant relationships with faculty and staff were more than three times as likely to report their college experience as “very rewarding” than those with no such relationships. Similar effects were found for peer relationships in college. ... 79% of graduates reported meeting the peers who had the biggest impact on them during their first year of college. And 60 percent reported meeting their most influential faculty or staff mentors during that first year. (Lambert et al., 2018)

Substantive interactions with faculty, staff, and peer mentors help students form meaningful relationships (see Felten & Lambert, 2020) and extend their professional development networks.

A research team from the center’s 2017–2019 research seminar on residential learning communities (RLCs) surveyed college students living in RLCs at four private universities and two public universities located in six different states. The team reports that, although academic interactions are important, “social and deeper life interactions between students and faculty/staff are important for students’ psychological sense of community” (Sriram et al., 2020). In other words, while campus initiatives often focus on facilitating relationships among faculty and students toward academic goals, whether in the classroom or through activities like mentored undergraduate research, relationship-building among faculty/staff and students beyond academic pursuits is just as important for fostering belonging, and in turn, supporting students’ retention and persistence.

While 83 percent of recent college graduates in the 2019 survey report having one or more meaningful relationships with faculty or staff during college, 17 percent report never developing these relationships.

Faculty and staff can help students build relationship networks by:

- Inviting students to use name plates in class so that peers can address each other by name. Even in small classes, students benefit from supporting tools for learning names, especially

since (like their faculty) they might be moving among multiple classes each week.

- Encouraging group work on select class projects and introducing collaboration strategies. Employers value graduates’ ability to work in teams (see Finley, 2021), but students need strategies for and practice with developing collaborative, working relationships.
- Scheduling strategic overlap in student work schedules so that near peers can mentor each other on tasks and get to know other student employees.

OFFERING FEEDBACK

In the *Elon Statement on Global Learning*, participants in the 2014–2016 research seminar on Integrating Global Learning with the University Experience noted that “pre-testing and debriefing of student intercultural competency prior to leaving campus” can support learning during study away experiences. The Diversity/Global Learning HIP focuses on helping students explore different cultures and worldviews, which requires learners to develop intercultural awareness and humility. Offering timely feedback enables students to identify their current intercultural competency, adjust their ongoing practices for interacting with members of other cultures, and make sense of troublesome knowledge when new information or experiences conflict with prior understandings.

Faculty do not have to be the only sources for feedback, though. Bill Hart-Davidson and Melissa Graham Meeks (2020) noted that “Giving helpful feedback is a way to practice something that students must do themselves to be successful: revise their own work” (p. 79). Furthermore, the number of words given to peers during peer review is a better predictor of course performance than the number of words students write for their own projects, a phenomenon that Hart-Davidson and Graham Meeks call “Giver’s Gain” (p. 80).

In the center’s 2019 survey:

- 71.8 percent of recent college graduates report receiving feedback from faculty/staff on a submitted final project multiple times.

- 66.1 percent report receiving feedback from faculty/staff on drafts multiple times.
- 58 percent report receiving feedback from peers on drafts multiple times.

While that snapshot is promising, 9.9 percent of recent college graduates report never receiving feedback from faculty/staff to guide their work before submitting a final version, and 14 percent report never receiving feedback from peers to guide their work before submitting a final version. Unfortunately, 35 percent of the graduates who reported never receiving feedback from faculty/staff also reported never receiving feedback from peers on work in progress—highlighting a missed opportunity to support students’ engaged learning.

Faculty and staff can facilitate opportunities for feedback by:

- integrating peer feedback (in or out of class) into assignment sequences,
- encouraging students to visit the campus Writing Center,
- coconstructing a reader feedback checklist (parallel to assignment criteria) with students so that they can request feedback from the reader of their choice before submitting a revised paper or project, or
- scheduling time for check-ins early in a project cycle when student workers or campus organization leaders are embarking on new-to-them projects.

FRAMING CONNECTIONS TO BROADER CONTEXTS

Gains associated with high-impact practices like undergraduate research, global learning, service- or community-based learning, and internships often relate to putting theories or classroom knowledge into practice. Paula Rosinski’s (2016) survey and interview research for the 2011–2013 research seminar reported similar outcomes for writing-intensive courses, noting that students develop more effective strategies for adapting their writing for different audiences when they have opportunities to write for real audiences beyond their instructors. Writing successfully for clients or community partners requires students to learn

more about their audiences and, often, to experiment with genres beyond the five-paragraph theme and other familiar types of academic writing.

In the 2019 survey of college graduates, 87 percent reported having opportunities to practice real-world applications of what they were learning during college. Faculty and staff can help push this statistic closer to 100 percent by:

- Integrating cases based on real examples, client projects, and service-learning into class materials and projects.
- Encouraging student employees and student organization leaders whom they supervise or advise to take stock of the things they are learning or practicing in their classes that would apply to their work in these extracurricular contexts.

FOSTERING REFLECTION ON LEARNING AND SELF

Several of the center’s research seminars have reinforced the importance of reflection for engaged learning. In the *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer*, for instance, 2011–2013 participants suggested that learning how to reflect on their prior knowledge and relevant writing strategies helps students to inventory how that knowledge might be adapted to write successfully for new-to-them writing tasks. Similarly, the 2014–2016 participants noted that guided reflection during study away and after students return to campus helps “learners document and internalize their global learning growth” (Center for Engaged Learning, 2017, para. 14).

In the 2019 poll, 66 percent of recent graduates reported having multiple opportunities to reflect on how what they were learning would apply to their futures, and 23 percent reported having one opportunity for reflection. Faculty and staff can increase the likelihood that students have opportunities to reflect by asking questions, such as:

- What was challenging about this task? How did you navigate that challenge?
- What did you learn or practice by completing this assignment that might be applicable to your future _____ (coursework, service-learning, internship, career, etc.)?

PROMOTING INTEGRATION AND TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

One of the foundational goals of postsecondary education is to prepare graduates who can integrate learning from across their curricular (and cocurricular) experiences and transfer that knowledge to workplace and civic contexts beyond the university. Research seminar teams also repeatedly document the importance of integration and reflection across high-impact educational practices. In the *Elon Statement on Global Learning*, the center's 2014–2016 seminar participants emphasized “the importance of ... structured activities that offer an avenue for integrating learning from prior and current experiences” (para. 14). In the *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer*, 2011–2013 participants wrote, “Practices that promote writing transfer include... [e]xplicitly modeling transfer-focused thinking and the application of metacognitive awareness as a conscious and explicit part of a process of learning” (Center for Engaged Learning, 2015, para. 8). And 2018–2020 participants highlighted the ways that integration in some capstone experiences helps students articulate how their college educations prepare them for the workplace.

Yet *explicit* opportunities to integrate learning seem to be missing for many students. In the 2019 poll, only 55 percent of recent college graduates reported having multiple opportunities during college to reflect on how the different parts of their college experience fit together. A full 17 percent reported never having had that opportunity. ePortfolios and capstone experiences are two HIPs that have the potential to facilitate students' integrative learning, but promoting integration also can be as simple as asking students:

- How does what you are learning in this class relate to what you are learning in your other classes this term? To your previous classes in the major/minor? To what you have learned in general education requirements?

“Several of the center's research seminars have reinforced the importance of reflection for engaged learning.”

- How is the work you are doing for this job or internship allowing you to practice skills or strategies you have learned in your courses?
- What prior coursework has prepared you for this undergraduate research/study abroad/internship experience?

FOSTERING ENGAGED LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

All students need equitable opportunities for engaged learning. Unfortunately, the 2019 survey of recent college graduates suggests that many students have limited exposure to all six key practices that could deepen their learning and contribute to their persistence and success. HIPs and other intentionally designed curricular requirements can be sites for implementing these six key practices, but staff and faculty working across campus spaces also can adopt them. Collectively, the six key practices prepare students to identify and apply relevant prior knowledge, work with diverse others, request and use feedback, make connections, and reflect on their abilities to contribute to the world's wicked problems (Moore, in press). As a result, enacting these key practices ultimately is an act of social justice to ensure all students have meaningful learning experiences that enable them to actively participate in their own lifelong learning and to contribute meaningfully to their communities and workplaces. ☐

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