



2-8-2016

Coaching the Team, Being a Member of the Team: Further Thoughts on the University as a Collection of Teams

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Recommended Citation

Bird, John and Teaching and Learning Center, "Coaching the Team, Being a Member of the Team: Further Thoughts on the University as a Collection of Teams" (2016). *The Weekly Reader*. 89.

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February 8, 2016
Volume 7, Issue 17

The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

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Winthrop University

Coaching the Team, Being a Member of the Team: Further Thoughts on the University as a Collection of Teams

Last week, caught up in the excitement leading up to the Super Bowl, I wrote about the parallels between a sports team and a university. I focused mainly on us as coaches, whether as teachers, department chairs, administrators, supervisors, or leaders of other jobs. The metaphor of the coach is very revealing, but so is the metaphor of team.

If you are the coach in your class, you class is your team. You have a responsibility to be the best coach you can be, but as it is in sports, so much depends on the team. The coach cannot totally control the team, just as we are usually not in full control of how our classes are made up. But the plans, structures, and attitudes we put in place have a big effect on the way the class operates.

Planning a course sometimes seems like drudgery, especially as we construct syllabi that must contain an ever-growing number of requirements and reminders and

assessment tools. But that planning is crucial to the success of the course and the success of students, individually and as a team. And when you teach a course for a second or third or thirtieth time, do you merely keep the same plan in place, or do you look for ways you can make it better—either with a slight tweak or with a radical change?

Also, the first three or four class meetings are crucial to the success of any course. We are already into the fifth week of the semester, so the personality of our courses are already pretty much set, but the first day will come around again, so it is worth thinking about.

Imagine you are a student in a class. On the first day, the professor comes in, hastily calls roll, hands out the syllabus, reads through it, highlighting important procedures, asks for questions (there are only a few from the nervous, bored, and overwhelmed students), then gives the first

assignment and dismisses class. And imagine that this happens in nearly every one of your classes.

Now imagine you enter a new class. Instead of calling the roll, the professor has you write a paragraph about yourself, your major, your background, and your hopes for what you will learn in the class. Then she has you share your responses with three or four other class members. (Or she starts with some other introductory, ice-breaking activity.)

Then, instead of giving out the syllabus, the professor introduces you and your fellow students to some central and intriguing aspect of the course. In an art history class, she presents a painting and has the students analyze it. In a literature class, she reads a short poem and has the students discuss it. In a political science class, she shows a video clip of a recent debate. In a chemistry class, she has an experiment set up, preferably one that involves smoke and even an explosion.

“Actually, the whole university is organized around the concept of teams. We have academic colleges, administrative units, work departments, committees, student support, student organizations, and on and on. I just made a rough count and realize that I am a member of at least eleven teams here, not counting my classes. In a few of those, I am the coach, but in most of them, I am a team member.”



Continued from page 1

What if we could begin building a cohesive team while at the same time we intrigue students and get them caught up in the excitement of learning about the course and the subject matter? The syllabus can come at the end of that class, something for students to read and discuss on the second day of class.

Another way we can build a class into a team is to foster and nurture the leaders in the class. Leaders will emerge naturally: the students who are willing to engage in discussion without being forced to, the students who will ask important and probing questions, the students who will serve as a spokesperson for the others when problems or concerns arise. But as coaches, we can help that process.

In all but my smallest classes, I divide my students into smaller groups, groups that will stay the same over the course of the semester. I do this on the first day of class, as part of team building. The whole class is a team, but these groups are teams too. A few years ago, I started asking someone to volunteer to be the group leader. That way, I let students self-identify, from

the first day, as a leader. I rely on that person to convey information to her group, then report back to me and the class after group activities.

As corny as it may sound, I give the groups names, or even better, have them choose a group name. It surprises me how much team cohesion this act of naming brings. Sometimes, the groups arise from the content of the course: in the class I am now teaching on *The Lord of the Rings*, the groups are Middle Earth races: hobbits, elves, dwarves, men, wizards, and orcs. In my critical thinking course, CRTW 201, I let the students pick their own names, serious or silly. The teams they form, the bonds they make with one another, and the tasks I give them make learning more focused, more independent, more student-focused, and more fun (and thus engaging).

But the concept of team goes beyond our classes. Our departments are teams, and as members, we need to be good team members. I have been a member of a dysfunctional department before (thankfully, not at Winthrop). Sometimes the problem is the chair, the coach, but more often it is

the team members, or a few members. How much better academic life is when your department can function successfully as a cohesive team.

Actually, the whole university is organized around the concept of teams. We have academic colleges, administrative units, work departments, committees, student support, student organizations, and on and on. I just made a rough count and realize that I am a member of at least eleven teams here, not counting my classes. In a few of those, I am the coach, but in most of them, I am a team member.

I was so proud of our Winthrop team this past Saturday at the 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning. We at the TLC have been working on the plans and details of this conference since August, and to see it all come together was very gratifying. Many thanks to all who attended, to all who presented, to President Mahony for his inspiring keynote speech, to Dean of University College Gloria Jones for her support and advice, and especially to the TLC Program Coordinator, Dana Bruneau, for her tireless work in planning, organizing, and executing the conference. I felt like we won the big game!

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session
At
www.winthrop.edu/tlc

The 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to everyone who attended and presented at our conference on Saturday. We had 102 attendees, who heard excellent presentations and an inspiring keynote speech by Dr. Dan Mahony. Special thanks to Dana Bruneau for her work in organizing the conference.

Thought For the Week

"I am different from Washington; I have a higher, grander standard of principle. Washington could not lie. I can lie, but I won't."
--Mark Twain