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Teaching as Intentional Learning:  
The Power of Beliefs and Assumptions in the Learning Age

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About CASTL

The Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) was established in 1998 in the Department of Foundations and Leadership at Duquesne University School of Education. CASTL engages in research programs dedicated to understanding, advancing and disseminating evidence-based study of the teaching-learning process.

Mission and Goals
The Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning promotes systematic and intentional inquiry into the teaching-learning process and, through careful and collegial study of learning-centered environments, seeks to advance the understanding and dissemination of evidence-based study of the teaching-learning process in service of all learners.

To promote its mission, CASTL intentionally pursues the following goals:

- Promote socially just, learning-centered environments that bring excellence and equity to all learners;
- Foster systematic and intentional inquiry into the beliefs that educators hold about educational theory and research and effective practice;
- Honor research, theory, and practice as legitimate and complementary sources of knowledge regarding the teaching-learning process;
- Elevate professional learning and educational practice to the level of scholarship;
- Advance the conceptual framework of leadership as learning;
- Develop a knowledge network fueled by researchers, theorists and practitioners who contribute to advancing the study of the teaching-learning process;
- Establish and perpetuate an international community of teacher-scholars representing a variety of teaching and learning environments;
- Promote and coordinate communication within a network of educational institutions and organizations that collaborate in the recruitment and education of teacher-scholars;
- Create a culture of professional learning based on research situated in schools and in other learning environments;
- Examine and develop methodologies by which the teaching-learning process is studied;
- Advocate for the enhancement of the teaching-learning process in service of all learners; and
- Share what is learned about the teaching-learning process.
This report is one of a series from our ongoing research effort to advance the study of teaching and learning. If you have any questions or comments on this report, or if you would like to find out more about the activities of CASTL, contact:

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An Invited Keynote Address to the International Conference on Improving University Teaching

It is an enormous pleasure to be part of this prestigious gathering and I would like to add my sincere welcome to the eloquent greetings that preceded me.

I stand before you as an unabashed teacher. Honestly, I can’t remember a time when I did not know with unwavering certainty that I was a teacher.

I share this background to provide context for my remarks today. Teaching, for me, is not something that I DO but rather it is who I AM—and have always been. I am one of those people who feel that I was born to teach. That is why I am thrilled to be among so many devoted teachers, professionals from all over the world who share a passion and a reverence for teaching.

Teaching, in its most exquisite form, deserves our reverence. It is an endeavor that involves a sharing of spirits and as such it can change lives and transform societies. For those who understand what I am describing, the classroom is holy ground. Those of us lucky enough to spend some of our earthly days engaged in this noble enterprise, understand that teaching requires everything that we can give—every part of us—our minds, our hearts and our spirits.

It is in this spirit, that I would like to share some thoughts with you today and to thank you at the outset for the privilege.

While I believe that I was born to teach, I do not believe that I was born knowing how to teach—and the difference is significant.

I believe that after all of these years, after all the reading, after all the studying, after all the practicing, and after all the reflecting, I am beginning to hit my stride. I am becoming a fairly good teacher—and tomorrow I expect to become an even better one. I presume that I share this belief with many of you in this room—the belief that we are all works in progress.

I believe that each of us have a moral obligation to spend our lives in the intentional pursuit of improving our teaching—becoming a better teacher each and everyday. That belief, along with countless other beliefs, that I hold about teaching and learning, determine every decision that I make and ultimately determine the evolution of my teaching career. But, I am getting ahead of myself, and so, let me regroup.

At this age and this stage of the game, I know a great many things, but some subjects remain a mystery. For instance, I don’t know much about how to capture a monkey in the wild, but I have heard a story about how it is done. You take a coconut, and make a hole in it just large enough so that a monkey can squeeze its hand in.

Next, you tie the coconut down and put a piece of orange inside. The monkey smells the orange, puts its hand into the coconut, grabs the treat and then finds that the hole is now too small to remove its fist. As the monkey struggles feverishly to get free with the orange, the hunter can stroll over and cover the monkey with a net, sealing its fate. The capture does not depend on the hunter’s prowess, speed, or agility. Rather, it depends on the monkey’s tenacious hold on the orange—a hold that keeps it blind to a life saving option—opening its hand.

Make no mistake. The hunter does not trap the monkey. The hunter merely gathers the monkey into his net. The monkey’s tendency to stick firmly to its decision—without changing or doubting it—is the trap that holds it captive.
Like the monkey trapped by its hold on the orange, our fates are determined by our beliefs and assumptions. In fact, most of us, even those of us in this room who are so dedicated to improving our teaching, teach each day without considering or realizing the powerful influence that our beliefs and assumptions have on our lives.

In addition to sharing my passion for teaching with you, I would like to share, some of my thinking about the influence that our beliefs have on our professional lives, and how they shape our teaching each day, and every day throughout our careers. My thinking, is a product of an eight-year learning and research program, at the Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning, in the School of Education, at Duquesne University. Known as Teaching as Intentional Learning, this program encourages teachers to reveal the beliefs that they hold, about the teaching-learning process, and supports them as they challenge and examine those beliefs, make them public, hold them up to scrutiny, and gauge their validity against evidence from educational theory, research, and effective classroom practice. As the architect of the program’s conceptual framework, and as a researcher and a participant observer in the program, I am learning that meaningful improvements in teaching happen at a belief altering level, or they do not happen at all.

If left to my own designs, I could talk about this subject for days, but I have it on good authority that I should limit my comments. Therefore, I would like to explore some of the beliefs and assumptions that pervade our teaching cultures, point to their origins, and suggest ways that we might begin to open our hands, and let go of those beliefs, that hold us captive.

To do this, I want to speak with you as learners—that is I want to speak with you as professors who are teaching to learn, rather than as professors who are acquiring strategies in order to improve their teaching. Specifically, I want to speak with you today as the leading learner in your classroom. I want to ask you to think about what might happen, if you planned your courses, entered your classrooms, designed your assessments, and graded your assignments with the intention to learn?

The Trap of “Best Practice” Models for Improving Teaching

Let’s begin by focusing on an issue that, although pervasive in our efforts to improve teaching, is rarely examined. Like the piece of orange inside the coconut, it is neither good nor evil, but by holding on to it as tenaciously as we sometimes do, we are blinded to the beliefs and assumptions that it promotes.

The beliefs that many college and university teachers hold about improving their teaching, hold about how students learn and hold about the ways that teaching pulls and supports that learning, are often colored by the best practices rhetoric that dominates many college teaching improvement programs. Frankly, by focusing on best practices, many universities and colleges still operate by what is best described as a deficit model for improving teaching.

In this type of model, learning how to improve teaching is cast as “an event or a series of events that teachers attend” supplemented by books, web resources, and handouts. After attending the events, teachers are expected to enact, adapt, or implement other people's constructs about educational practice. These programs tend to tell university teachers what is “good, right, and true”, and assume, that once teachers hear the truth, their prior beliefs, if they have any, will disappear. What we know is that this does not happen. Although well meaning improvement programs, present clearly defined
and logically ordered strategies and techniques, many teachers perceive them as unconnected to the diverse issues that they face in their disciplines, and the changing issues that face them as their student population shifts.

Even when these programs provide structures for college teachers to engage in group discussions, or small study groups, the focus tends to be on instruction, and group time is spent sharing how a certain practice works in each individual’s classroom, along with swapping tips and strategies for applying a certain practice, to a specific discipline.

These well meaning programs reduce teaching improvement to a “one size fits all” mindset, cast improvement as the acquisition of pre-packaged strategies, and do little to encourage teachers to view their own teaching as a source of meaningful learning.

Let’s consider for a moment, the unspoken message of a best practice focus, and the beliefs and assumptions that underlie it. If, we are able to single out and provide, workshops on best practices—then, surely, there is a list somewhere of “worst practices”. Indeed what is considered “best practice” today, may be cast as “worst” practice tomorrow.

A “best practice” label, often depends on the shifting teaching improvement culture at a particular university, that validates and support its “best-ness”. For example, in many places lecture has fallen out of fashion, and there are those who demonize professors who prepare and read organized lectures to their students. While I agree that all lecture, all the time, for all seasons, does not foster a learning-centered environment, I could easily make the same argument about class discussions, that run amuck, have no point, and do little to enhance conceptual development. Here is the bottom line as I see it, classroom practices are not good, bad, or neutral. They are tools and techniques. As such, they become relevant and useful, depending on the way that an effective teacher uses them to promote student learning toward specific learning goals.

To explore this idea further, let’s consider the artificial debate that rages in the best practice culture, concerning student-centered versus teacher-centered practices. This debate is encourages many teachers to throw various teacher-centered strategies, of all kinds, on to the “worst practice” heap. The debate is so familiar at this point, that most of us can chant the rhyming form of the argument: A teacher should be a “guide on the side” rather than a “sage on the stage.” Notice, there are only two choices here. It is one OR the other. Nothing exists in between.

Our tendency, to sort educational practices, into good versus bad categories, that force teaching decisions into “either/or” frameworks, is, perhaps, one of the most destructive by-products of best practice models for improving teaching. These artificial dichotomies influence our beliefs, limit our options, and hold our thinking captive. And, as we enshrine the best of practices in a gleaming “hall of fame”, we promote the assumption, that we must relegate the rest—the worst practices—to an impenetrable “dungeon of shame”, to protect ourselves, and our students, from the mayhem they might unleash.

Because of the either/or nature, that characterizes best practice orientations in general, and, the teacher-centered, student-centered debate specifically, many university teachers feel compelled to abandon lecture, direction, and explanation, for fear of compromising their students’ ability to learn. They assume, that since student-centered strategies are labeled as “best practice” teaching, then a teacher-centered strategy like explanation has little to no merit.
Simplistic debates, like this one, ignore the spectrum of practices used by effective teachers, in a LEARNING-centered environment. And, by pigeonholing practices this way, we waste enormous energy, measuring what is right and what is wrong, with inaccurate and simplistic yardsticks.

Think of the other assumptions that best practice orientations promote, and how they render teachers susceptible to an insidious process of enculturation. Teachers tend to describe their teaching according to the “best practices” that they use, noting, for example, that they DO cooperative learning, USE case studies, PUT their students into cooperative learning groups, or TEACH with technology.

Because they tend to think of their teaching, in terms of specific strategies, in terms of what they DO, even in changing times, they will strive to become better and better at doing “more of the same”, often with diminishing returns.

In this way, a “best practice” approach, can create a climate similar to the plight of the frog, placed in a pot of cool water, over a burning flame. As the temperature shifts, the frog who is unable to sense the gradual change, ultimately boils to death. In other words, striving to become better at doing more of the same tends to promote locked-in behavior patterns resulting in a death spiral of decisions.

Clearly, effective teaching, is not a matter of choosing between teacher-centered or student-centered strategies. Separating teaching techniques into opposing camps, grossly simplifies effective learning environments, and ignores the ways that effective teachers employ myriads of options—teacher-centered, student-centered and infinite combinations and connections among instructional strategies, that make perfect sense within a learning-centered environment—an environment focused on learning rather than on instruction.

Asking how we can improve university teaching, must always beg the complementary question: How can we improve university learning? In fact, I would suggest that the latter question—How can we improve university learning?—might be the only one we need ask.

Asking that question, moves us from an instructional focus to a LEARNING focus, moves us from an instructional culture to a LEARNING culture, and promotes improvement initiatives, where all of our decisions, focus like a laser beam, on creating and maintaining LEARNING-CENTERED environments.

Environments, where, as the leading learners, we lead learners and learning.

In case at this point, you think I am building an argument for eliminating best practice teaching strategies, let me make myself perfectly clear. Teaching practices have no inherent good or evil properties. They are simply, specific routines and procedures, that have merits or shortcomings, depending on why and how effective teachers use them. I am not arguing against effective practices. I am arguing against building our professional cultures and identities around a prescribed set of them.

I am suggesting that we intentionally change our focus. I am suggesting that we intentionally change our concept, about what it will take, to genuinely improve college teaching.

Intentionality is the key, but intentional learning does not come naturally. In fact, the mental habit of “intentional learning is an achievement, not an automatic consequence of human intelligence. Intentional change is only possible “when a person intends to change his or her conceptual understanding”. Even so, intentional learning and intentional conceptual change about how to improve teaching, is an achievement to which we can aspire.
In his 1996 edition of his educational psychology text, my friend and colleague Rick McCown wrote the following words: “Learning is the measure of teaching”. Six words that pack one heck of a punch. Simply put, if no one is learning, then teaching do not occur. But who does this learning? We can quickly and dangerously jump to the conclusion that the learners are our students—and that is another dangerous mind trap.

**WE** are the leading learners in our classrooms and universities, and as such, we have the honor to lead learners and learning. Think about the impact of that statement. Can we truly enter our classrooms, deliver a lesson, and call it teaching, if **WE** do not learn something from it—not just something about our topics, or our content, but something about how learning takes place, and how we can effectively place our teaching in service of that learning?

What I am building a case for today, is that we can accomplish significant and meaningful learning if we enter our classrooms, plan our courses, organize and deliver our instruction, and reflect on our decisions, with the intention to learn about the beliefs and assumptions that underlie our decisions of practice. “Teaching as Intentional Learning”. I like the ring of that. What if, we conceptualize teaching as a process of systematic and intentional inquiry into our own beliefs and assumptions?

**Beliefs: Driving Into the Future While Looking In the Rearview Mirror**

Our beliefs and assumptions are the driving force in all that we do. Our lives unfold, and continuously oscillate, between the known and the unknown. The unknown is fraught with both danger and promise—a tension that our beliefs embody. The known, in the form of our beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge, protects us from contamination with the unknown. But, the known also stifles us, because our ingrained beliefs, knowledge, and assumptions pull us away, from exploration of the new or inconsistent, and in doing so, can severely limit new thinking and creative action.

When we encounter the unknown—when something unexpected happens to us, or when we encounter some new theory or practice—we suddenly find ourselves in a strange situation, where our traditional knowledge is non-functional. Driven, as we are, to make sense of the unknown, to make meaning for what we do not understand, we impose our existing schemes, we rely and depend on what is familiar, and we weigh our new experiences, with our old experiences. Anytime we come up against something new, we compare it with what we already believe. We pattern from the past. Thus, as we go through our lives, we are "dragged into the future" while "looking into a rear-view mirror". That is the power that our beliefs hold over our every thought, decision, and action.

What makes this so gut wrenching at times is that humans do not process information objectively. In fact, what makes us human—the connection between our minds and our hearts, our thinking and our feelings, our objectivity and our subjectivity—limits our willingness and our ability to transform our beliefs and assumptions. Altering our beliefs, depends on everything that makes us human, all of the cognitive, motivational, and emotional factors that make us who we are. For us to uncover and examine our beliefs, in order to possibly change them, we must view the possibility that new theories or ideas will be understandable, credible, and fruitful. To put it simply, new beliefs and assumptions have to be “cognitively appealing” and emotionally friendly.

Such human tendencies create painful dilemmas. To move forward, we must have the ability and the will, to transform, and sometimes detach ourselves, from our present and past beliefs—beliefs that dictate the ways that we think, feel and practice.
I hope by now you are getting the idea, that for most people, changing beliefs can be excruciating. And, it is even more painful for experts. Willingness to change a theory or a belief, does not come easy to experts. Experts feel sure of what they know, they form their identities on what they know, and they link their success to what they know. Changing all of that does not come easily or happen quickly. That is why, when expertise is threatened, experts will take steps to nullify or reject new information in order to protect the status quo.

Ten years ago, Peter Seldin noted that one of the major barriers to improving college teaching, lay in the fact that few college teachers considered the need to improve their teaching, since most of them viewed their own teaching as above average.

In this room tonight, a full decade later, we can conclude two things. First, expertise sometimes exists only in our own minds. And, second, not much has changed.

**Seeing What We Look For: How Beliefs and Assumptions Shape Our Inquiry Into Our Teaching**

Could we promote meaningful changes in our teaching if we taught with the intention to learn? Let me pose the question another way: What might we see if we intentionally looked at our own classroom practice?

What we might see, and therefore what we might learn, would depend a great deal on what we look for. All observations, even what we observe about ourselves, are naturally selective and we interpret observations from our particular and unique frame of reference.

It follows then, that what we can learn, through inquiry into our own teaching, depends a great deal on the situations, conditions, and issues that we intentionally investigate. And, the kinds of situations that we investigate, depend on our a priori assumptions that we will find something significant if we look there.

While it may be easy for us to operationalize that tendency when it comes to our research, it might not be as easy to notice that tendency when it comes to our teaching. Let’s consider an extreme example to illustrate this point. Consider a teacher who questions why attendance in his course is waning. If he believes the reasons for sporadic attendance have nothing to do with his teaching, he will never question, investigate, or see the reason to change what he does. Instead he will question student values and motives blinded to the reality that his lecture notes have not changed for a decade and that copies of his notes are easy to get.

Like the professor in the example, each of us holds personal beliefs and assumptions about our teaching, that are so firmly rooted, that we will continue to cling to them, even when they no longer accurately represent reality or logic.

That is because teacher beliefs represent one of the most provocative forms of personal knowledge. And as such, they can be so deeply engrained, that they become very difficult to change. In fact, without intentionally revealing and challenging them, our beliefs about teaching rarely change, even after extensive traditional forms of education and professional development.

Here are some of the reasons why.

While all individuals approach new situations armed with deeply etched belief structures, the beliefs that teachers hold about how to teach are particularly unyielding.
Teachers arrive at the university, and enter a world, that is essentially the same, as the one that they experienced, throughout their undergraduate and graduate studies. At the university, they find familiar contexts and practices all about them. And, they find little that is puzzling, or that requires them to challenge their existing perceptions, of how to teach. Drenched in the familiar surroundings of the university, teachers maintain a belief in status quo rather than state-of-the-art practice, in spite of exposure to new educational theories and innovative strategies.

We tend to favor these personal beliefs over theory and research, because “the contexts and environments within which we work, and many of the problems that we encounter, are ill-defined and deeply entangled. Therefore, our personal beliefs are supremely suited for making sense of what we experience, and we are not eager to let them go.

In this way, our personal beliefs and theories, restrict not only the breadth of our inquiries, but the depth. Like the professor who sees class attendance steadily decreasing, and jumps to a decidedly poor conclusion, we can remain on the surface of an issue with mistaken certainty, never going deep enough to discover the causal explanations that lie beneath.

Because of the tenacity of personal beliefs, even in the face of counter arguments and evidence, beliefs and assumptions are the best gauges of the decisions that we make.

As such, beliefs may be, the most valuable psychological construct for teaching improvement initiatives.

In fact, the more we study teacher beliefs, the more strongly we can conclude, that this multifaceted and layered form of personal knowledge, lies at the very heart of teaching.

To put it simply, teachers do not teach in ways that ARE effective, valid, and meaningful, they teach in ways that they BELIEVE are effective, valid, and meaningful. What makes it worse, is that without support and encouragement to uncover tacit and hidden beliefs, teachers struggle to understand and justify their decisions of practice. This is exacerbated by the fact, that there can be huge discrepancies between what teachers espouse as their beliefs, and what they actually practice in their classrooms, since teachers often embody conflicting beliefs and use contradictory ideologies to justify incompatible actions.

Finally, what teachers assume to be true about how learning takes place, and what they believe about how instructional practices enhance, encourage, and support that learning, determines the questions that they will ask about their own teaching, the nature of the arguments that they make for or against certain practices, the evidence that they will accept to verify that a certain practice produces meaningful results, and, the ways that they will interpret the validity and relevance of research on “best practices” in teaching.

That is why so many well-meaning teachers, begin an academic year armed with a new practice, but rarely see it through until the end of the semester. More times than not, within a few weeks, they discard the new practice as useless or time consuming, and return to business as usual. Unfortunately, new strategies, like new diets, New Year’s resolutions, and fruit flies, have a very short life span. Change causes dissonance and dissonance makes us uncomfortable.

When teachers try to alter their practices, the cultural norms present all around them—in their departments, schools, and universities—cause dissonance and promote a powerful form of inertia. Even, when the most innovative teachers decide to enact a newly acquired best practice, they smack up against the pervasive cultural norms and practices that surround them.
Think about that for a moment. While these teachers, grapple with the internal dissonance that occurs when they attempt to change their own thinking, understanding, and practice, they are at constant odds with the thinking, understanding, and practice of many of their colleagues. So, as they struggle to adopt 21st century best practices, they are, in a very real way, held in check by “principles of 19th century instruction”. This toxic situation, can bring any improvement initiative to a screeching halt, especially when a change in practice is not securely fused to a change of belief.

**We Are Human Becomings: Not Human Doings**

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could just eliminate the human equation? If we could all teach—or marry, or invest our money, or raise our children for that matter—without being influenced by our personal and cultural beliefs. If we could do that, we could all function 24 hours a day on a best practice trajectory. That is, we could wake up each and every day and continue on our quest to methodically reduce or eliminate the defects in our lives.

The problems that we might encounter on this quest, would be the same problems that programmers encounter when they debug a computer program. Like a best practice orientation, debugging is a methodical process of finding and reducing the number of defects in a computer program, thus making it behave as expected. Debugging tends to be harder when various subsystems are tightly fused, because changes in one subsystem may cause bugs to emerge in another.

For those of you who are not computer whizzes, let me illustrate with a more commonly understood metaphor. Best practice approaches to teacher improvement can be like putting on a girdle. You may be able to smooth things over in one area, but something is certain to pop out somewhere else.

Happily, we are not computer programs. And just as happily, we are human beings, NOT human doings. Teaching is not something that we DO. And improving it is not a matter of adopting and DOING a new practice. One of my favorite quotes takes that notion even further by stating: “We are not human beings, we are human Becomings.”

And that brings us to the heart of the matter. Put simply, beliefs matter in matters of learning.

As we leave this hall this evening, let us not forget what matters. We are not here to change what we DO. Merely changing what we do is like counterfeiting. Genuine improvement cannot happen at a surface level—it cannot be a matter of adopting new practices that are not authentic, because they are not accompanied by a real change in our beliefs about teaching and learning. Genuine change is transformation, and transformation happens at a belief altering level.

In 2005, we find ourselves at the dawn of the 21st century—a time that some are calling the golden age of learning. Compared to just 50 years ago, we find ourselves in a miraculous time when more people are learning and learning more. People are learning in more places, in and from more contexts, across time and distance, and across more of their life spans than ever before.

Some might assume that we are here tonight because of our passion for teaching. I believe that we are here tonight, on the cusp of this new century, bound by our passion for learning.

Our collective passions can become a force, a force that can change our concept of university teaching, from an act of instruction, to a process of intentional learning.
We can only change the prevailing culture, to the extent that we can change ourselves. We can only change ourselves, when we **reveal, examine, and challenge** our mistaken certainties.

Let us become tenacious in our pursuit, of the beliefs and assumptions that **can** lie buried within us, unless we have the courage to dig down deep and hold them up to scrutiny.

We can **redirect** our passion for learning. We can **re-frame** our idea of what’s possible **in our teaching** and **in our journeys of becoming**—becoming better teachers tomorrow, than we are today. This means questioning and seeking alternatives to our basic assumptions. By doing this, we can **stretch** our conception of what’s possible for ourselves, and the choices we can make.

Let’s begin tonight, let’s begin at this moment, to channel our passion for learning, to **use** our passion to **inspire** each other, along individual journeys of becoming.

Passion works **because** it inspires.

For those of us here tonight, passion for learning is the coin of the realm.

Rub passion and it remains unchanged,

**beyond counterfeit,**

**golden to the core!**

Thank you.
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