CREATIVE TEACHING

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STUDY CIRCLES AND TEACHING SQUARES: A NEW 'GEOMETRY ' OF FACULTY DEVELOPMENT?

If one didn't know better, one might think that faculty development at Delaware Tech's Wilmington campus was focusing on developing faculty members' math skills during the past year. This is because two program initiatives implemented by the Teaching Resource Center—one in cosponsorship with the Stanton-Wilmington Diversity Committee—were named, in part, after geometric forms. It can be stated unconditionally that any such connection is purely coincidental: the "circles" in *study circles* derive from the notion of spheres of human interaction, and the "squares" in *teaching squares*are reminiscent of the traditional square dance, in which dancers change partners a number of times.

The *Study Circles* program was developed by the YWCA of New Castle County, based on a national model. It involves groups of people examining their own and each other's racial stereotypes and prejudices, under the careful guidance of specially trained facilitators, using a specially developed workbook. To better reflect the program's focus, the Wilmington campus' presentation was renamed "Encountering Racial And Ethnic Diversity Among Colleagues and Students."

The program was run twice at the Wilmington campus: once in November and early December, 2002 with thirteen participants and once in March, 2003 with six participants. The November-December round consisted of eight hours of training over four days; the March round involved six hours over three days.

Participants report having gotten much from the experience. Michele Rawls, instructor in the Workforce Training department, said: "It was very helpful for staff to be able to get together and share in such a manner....Since [the program], when I see members of the group I feel a special bond. I learned a lot in many areas and took something away from each person who was involved that will enhance me professionally and socially." dianne goodell, who teaches in the Human Services department, said: "It was an informative and exciting way not just to learn about important issues around race and ethnicity, but also to get to know about fellow colleagues' struggles and triumphs in their own lives

FOCUS ON...

TOMMY LU

Mothers' fears for their children's safety and well-being don't usually set well with their children. But in Tommy Lu's case, it probably saved him from an obscure job tending some portion of his native Taiwan's vast forests, and ultimately led him to a rewarding teaching career at Delaware Tech. As it turns out, not all computer professionals are born that way.

Nor is this the only stereotype Tommy defies as a computer scientist. He is also quite gregarious, with a quick and easy laugh, an irresistible sense of humor, and an engaging personality. But then, he may just be grateful not to be isolated in a forest somewhere; he certainly seems to prefer people over trees!

After attaining his bachelor's degree in forestry and fulfilling his mandatory military service, Tommy was uncertain about what direction his career path would take; he only knew that it wouldn't be forestry. Then, his brother gave him a book on how to program computers in COBOL (Common Business Oriented Language), written in English. And Tommy "just loved it." (COBOL, developed in 1959, was the computer language used almost universally during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s for business applications, especially on large, "mainframe" computers. Early usage of it in financial and insurance applications was the source of the "Y2K" panic, since programmers routinely left two digits out of the year to save effort, never expecting these programs to still be in use by the turn of the century. But COBOL programs have endured well beyond those early

Tommy Lu

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with these issues."

The *Teaching Squares* initiative was brought to Delaware Tech - Wilmington by Valerie Bergeron and Karen Wallace-Braun, as a result of their attendance at the 2002 annual conference of the National Council for Staff, Program & Organizational Development (NCSPOD), held in Philadelphia in October, 2002.

Originally developed and implemented by two faculty members of St. Louis Community College at Meramec, the idea is to recruit volunteer faculty from different disciplines and organize them into groups of four. The four then make arrangements to visit one of each other's classes at least one time during a designated part of the semester. The purpose is to observe and learn from each other's teaching methods, not to evaluate each other's performance. One member of each group, identified as the square leader, has the responsibility of organizing and facilitating a "Square Share," an event which follows the visitations, in which participants share with each other their reflections on what they learned and how they might apply it to their own classes.

In its initial round at the Wilmington campus, enough volunteers came forward to form two squares, code-named "red" and "blue." The Red Team consisted of Karen Wallace-Braun (Human Services), Brenda Grassett (Allied Health-PTA), Kim Gregor (Math), and Kim McFetridge (English). The Blue Team consisted of Valerie Bergeron (Allied Health-Science), Jennifer DeLuca (Math), Portia Sterling (Office Administration), and Andrew Zimmerman (Human Services).

The participants unanimously agreed that the experience of visiting each other's classes had been both fun and very instructive. "I have a much greater appreciation for the DTCC faculty and the talent we have here at DTCC," Brenda Grassett declared. "I was so impressed by the level of enthusiasm, commitment and connection with the students.... I sat there wishing I had teachers like that when I was in college....What I will do more, now that I have participated in this opportunity, is to make more of an effort to get to know other faculty members better and use them as resources."

According to Portia Sterling, "...[T]his teaching experience added a new spirit and understanding of other technologies....One potential impact of this experience is the reaction of students who unknowingly were involved in this project. One student was amazed and made the comment: 'I didn't know that instructors talked to one another and shared ideas like this.'...I think this activity brought the instructors closer together, and it renewed my interest in teaching."

Andrew D. Zimmerman, editor

(Focus on Tommy Lu, continued) expectations: the language is still used in approximately 50 percent of "mission-critical" applications, according to recent estimates.)

As Tommy realized, his fascination with this book was not going to make him proficient at programming; he needed hands-on experience. His brother took him to a computing center which, back in those days, still used the IBM punch cards for programming. The elation he experienced from watching the computer perform the operations he had programmed it to perform, cemented his connection to his new-found avocation. A friend of his father's hired him as a programmer-trainee. In this capacity, he wound up working on three very large and impressive projects: the design of a national system for monitoring air pollution in Taiwan, an administrative and records-keeping system for a vocational-technical school, and a business financial management system. As a result of his work on these projects, he not only became proficient at programming, but also systems design and other important matters.

It was therefore a natural progression to pursue a graduate degree in computer science. Only there was one very large impediment: in Taiwan, Tommy explains, one cannot pursue a graduate degree in a field different from one's undergraduate degree. That would mean having to first obtain an undergraduate degree in computer science. So in 1984 Tommy instead applied to, and was accepted by, Southern Mississippi University. There was one caveat, however—one which, in varying degrees, commonly faces students coming to this country with college educations from other countries: to secure admission to Southern Mississippi, Tommy had to establish his credentials by taking several undergraduate courses in computer science. This still was, of course, far better than having to complete an entire undergraduate degree on top of the one he already had, and Tommy completed these courses, as the saying goes, "with flying colors."

Having completed his graduate degree in 1986, Tommy sought a position in industry. Unfortunately, immigration policy at that time restricted foreigners from being able take such positions, but an acute shortage of computer science *professors* allowed him to land a faculty position with Wesley College in Dover. Tommy taught at Wesley as an assistant professor for three years. He was then able to make the move to industry, which he did for the ensuing five years. In 1995, he was hired by Delaware Tech.

Tommy views his experience in industry as an enormous asset, because it allows him to "relate the theory of the classroom with the realities" his students will face in the workplace. This experience also helps him, he reports, to reinforce the problem-solving skills students will need to have to be successful, the presentation skills that are necessary for them to be effective communicators, and the ethical issues they will inevitably have to face.

He states that his greatest challenge as an educator has been how to effectively transfer what he knows to his students, given the diversity of backgrounds, aptitudes, and levels of preparedness of his students. His solution is to try to reach the greatest number, and then seek immediate feedback to see how *everyone* is doing. He does this in a variety of ways, but he has found two methods to be especially effective: quick quizzes and scanning students' faces, looking for comprehension or confusion. "You've got to be able to read faces," he maintains.

Tommy relates a story about how Connie Winner once asked him what kind of reward he got from teaching, given that he could make so much more money in industry. His answer? The reward of seeing one of his students walk across the stage at graduation, and later shaking his or her hand, more than made up for the difference. And that, quite simply, is why we are fortunate to have Tommy Lu as a colleague.