The SFU Honeycomb Project: Experiencing Collaborative Learning
A Report - June 1, 2011

The SFU Honeycomb Project is designed to inspire faculty innovation related to interdisciplinary, community based & experiential learning. In 2010/2011, Honeycomb encouraged dialogue among faculty at SFU about teaching and learning through within-faculty workshops and a university-wide retreat.

Honeycomb is among nature’s most collaborative enterprises, constructed by thousands of bees that each secrete simple flakes of wax and together form them into a highly complicated and robust structure. It is the venue upon which bees exchange information, communicating their experiences inside and outside the hive, creating awareness of their own community and the external environment.

Honeycomb embodies the ideas of collaboration, experience and learning that we imagine characterize the project.

Vision

To inspire interdisciplinary, community based & experiential learning

Context and Structure

SFU’s 2010-2013 Academic Plan encourages student learning that expands the traditional classroom into local, national, and international communities. It focuses on experiential learning that develops skills in group work, analysis, and communication, is relevant to the broader community, engages with the public, and integrates teaching and research with real world issues.

Experiential and Community Based Learning
Faculty Dialogues 2010-2011

From Fall 2010 through Spring 2011 Mark Winston and Janet Moore arranged two-hour lunchtime session with 7 of the 8 Faculties at SFU focused on experiential learning. There were no presentations, no PowerPoint and no definitions offered to the participants. Rather, we started with a brief introduction of the project and encouraged stories from the participants’ own learning experiences, and then asked them to grow curricular ideas that emerged from
their own best experiences. The dialogues were composed of 2 specific questions and structured to encourage conversation and storytelling:

Question 1- Think back through your own life to a moment when you experienced your learning. Share that story with the group.

Question 2 - Consider the courses you are teaching now. What could be expanded into experiential learning? Tell us about what is possible, not about the barriers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SFU Group</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology</td>
<td>Wed. October 20, 2011</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of the Environment</td>
<td>Tues. November 30, 2011</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Science</td>
<td>Wed. February 23, 2011</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Education</td>
<td>Mon. January 31, 2011</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Business</td>
<td>Thurs. February 10, 2011</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Applied Science</td>
<td>Thurs. March 3, 2011</td>
<td>Snow day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences</td>
<td>Thurs. March 10, 2011</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrey Campus</td>
<td>Wed. March 9, 2011</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
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Outcomes

We were impressed that almost all participants remained through to the end of each session and were remarkably focused on listening to the stories of their colleagues, unusual in our experience where concerns often predominate and many leave early due to other obligations. We encouraged faculty to move past structural impediments or barriers and remind themselves of why they love their discipline. We heard incredible stories of transformative learning moments, many of which happened outside of classrooms.

The workshops provided faculty with the unusual opportunity to interact about teaching and learning, something most of them had spent little time doing with other faculty members. They also enjoyed having conversations outside of their own departments and sharing experiences in the classroom. In many cases participants began discussing possible collaborations for team teaching and coordinating classes.

The workshop also gave us the opportunity to inform the faculty about the Honeycomb Retreat that was held in late April 2011.
Faculty Retreat and Learning Intensive - April 28-29 2011

This two-day retreat enabled 19 faculty members to integrate experiential and/or community based learning into one or more of their courses. Faculty members applied by outlining a new or existing course for which they would like to develop curriculum that engages students through experiential and/or community based learning.

The application was intentionally short (maximum 2 pages), as we understand the time constraints of faculty members. Many faculty members commented that spending time writing the 2-page application was an important step in beginning the reflection process about their own courses.

We began the retreat with an evening dinner at Brioche restaurant in Vancouver so that participants could get to know one another in a relaxed setting. All participants attended as well as 2 Deans.

The dinner was followed by a 2-day (overnight) retreat at Brew Creek Lodge near Whistler, BC.

The first day of the retreat focused on faculty working in small groups to begin discussions about what is currently happening in their classes followed by a discussion of what they wanted to change. We engaged all participants in a number of large group dialogues and experiential exercises to spark creative thinking and foster a trusting group environment.
The evening dinner was followed by a storytelling session by former professor and current sculptor Lee Gass. He encouraged participants to face the fears they had in classrooms and told stories of how his teaching shifted over his career.

The second day focused on moving new ideas into plans of action. Faculty worked in groups of 4 that crossed disciplines and Faculties. Each faculty member gave a short presentation in the afternoon and the group provided feedback and suggestions for moving forward.

During the final round of reflections we asked for 3 words that described the experience.

Feedback from Participants (sample; full set of responses available upon request)

“As a relatively new teacher I appreciated the chance to learn strategies and approaches used by a wide range of faculty from various disciplines . . . and to get valuable feedback on current courses and teaching strategies. The format of individual, focused-small-group, and large-group-feedback was ideal. “

“The retreat was an incredibly unique experience for me – one of the first opportunities in over 30 years of teaching at SFU to meet and openly discuss and exchange stories, ideas and experiences among colleagues who represented a wide spectrum of disciplines and teaching practices. I came away refreshed, re-energized and grateful for the opportunity to feel part of a community within SFU that was caring, highly engaged and was truly interested in engaging students in community outreach and experiential learning.”
“I re-evaluated my thinking on depth vs. breadth for upper level courses. I also am planning to use more stories and experiences from my own research in course lectures and discussions.”

“I got several ideas of how to expose my students to experiential learning. Although the topics of my courses are highly technical and mathematical, it is still possible to start them with observation of an example and then moving to learning the theory behind it.”

“Some of the discoveries for me were:
• how similar others’ interests were aligned with my own.
• how receptive everyone was to suggestions from others.
• strategies for engaging with students through story telling.
• the strong interests expressed by participating faculty in cross-disciplinary collaboration in new courses.”

“The retreat provided the opportunity for academics who never interact in the normal course of university life to share ideas and perspectives. I met more people outside of the Faculty of Science during this retreat than I had during my previous decade at SFU”

“I wish we had more initiatives like this.”

Sample of Innovations Developed by Faculty During Retreat

• I will focus more consciously on group dynamics and community building in the classroom itself. I already do a lot of this, but the retreat helped me realize just how important this component is for any kind of student-led learning.

• Trust my students more. Relinquish more control. I think I will always be someone who values organization. I like there to be a sense of organization in my own learning experiences. I will definitely NOT not do administrivia on the first day; that’s not my style or my inclination. But I also think that I will move to give my students more responsibility for their learning rather than feeling that I need to organize everything for them.

• I will introduce select “modules” within my courses where the control, exploration of an issue is assigned to the class. This will balance course content delivery with engaged student participation.
• I am going to experiment with more flexible evaluation approaches – e.g. “how do you want to be evaluated?”

• I am going to explore new ways of inviting external actors into the classroom.

• I want to create a sense of community within the classroom to show the students that they have a voice and a role in their own education. I want to create a feeling of engagement by developing activities that will allow them to explore theoretical concepts in an engaged and meaningful way.

• I want to facilitate a deeper exploration and understanding of their own community at SFU through the course material…Students can use the SFU community as a research base to explore their understanding of these concepts.

• I will try to create a dialogue in the classroom. I have attempted to have discussion in the past but students often feel they do not have adequate knowledge yet. I will refocus the discussions to show how they have valuable contributions to make despite not yet being experts in the area.

• Less chalk and talk. Even though my class focuses on very factual material I know I have to get the students more engaged in project and problem-based learning approaches if they are going to learn the material correctly.

• The biggest idea/revelation for me was to consider offering various types of projects and letting the students chose. Hopefully this will allow them to chose work that is more their strength.

• I plan to reduce (but not eliminate) the use of power point as a conduit for content-based learning.

• I plan to incorporate more discussion of my own research into course lectures.

• This retreat has fundamentally challenged my thinking on how to teach and assess this course. A greater emphasis will be placed on the conceptual underpinnings of science rather than on merely carrying out a survey of facts … a much larger emphasis will be placed on exercises that encourage critical thinking. For example, students will take part in panel discussions on selected topics; in these panels, the students will be the “experts”.

• I am going to set up an advisory group composed of community/professional partners who will work with me on defining teaching and research topics that I will build directly into some of my senior undergraduate courses. I will meet with them twice a year.
Appendix – Agenda and Information about Retreat

**Wednesday April 27, 2011 - Reception Dinner**

6:30 p.m. Brioche
7pm – Opening Remarks

**Thursday April 28, 2011 - Experiencing Education**

8 am Leave for Brew Creek Lodge in car pools

9:30 am Coffee, Snack and Gathering in Main Lodge

10-11 Sacred Learning Space
Overview and Introduction to Honeycomb Project – Ground rules for Dialogue
Experiential and Community Based Learning – Introduction Icebreaker

11-12 Small Working Groups Round 1
Integrating Experience and Community into your Course- Sharing experiences

12-1 LUNCH

1-1:45 Experiential Walk – Sparking Creative Ideas

1:45- 2:30 Reconvene and Present ideas

2:30-3:00 Coffee Break

3:00 – 5:00 Small Group Workshop Round 2
Working together to propose and give/receive feedback on course/program ideas

5:00-6:00 Break

6:00-7:00 Dinner

7:00 -9pm Storytelling with Lee Gass in Guest House
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00 am – 8:45 am</td>
<td>Breakfast Day 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00 – 10:15</td>
<td><strong>Engaging with Community</strong> - Whole Group Discussion:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.</td>
<td><strong>COFFEE BREAK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>10:30 – 12:00</td>
<td><strong>Creating Change in Your Course</strong> - Individual Working Time to Prepare for 3 minute Pitch</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:00-1:00</td>
<td><strong>LUNCH</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1:00 - 2:30</td>
<td><strong>Idea Pitch and Feedback Session</strong> in Whole Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:30 pm – 2:45 pm</td>
<td><strong>COFFEE BREAK</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:45 – 4:00</td>
<td><strong>Idea Pitch and Feedback Session continued</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>4:00 -4:30 pm</td>
<td><strong>Final Reflections and Closing</strong></td>
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Mark Winston

**Academic Director and fellow, Centre for Dialogue**

Mark L. Winston has had a distinguished career researching, teaching, writing and commenting on bees and agriculture, environmental issues, and science policy. More recently, he has utilized dialogue in classrooms, corporations, non-profit organizations, government, and community settings to develop leadership and communication skills, conduct strategic planning, inspire organizational change, and thoughtfully engage public audiences with controversial issues. His research, communication, and dialogue achievements have been recognized by many awards, including the Manning Award for Innovation, Sterling Prize in Support of Controversy, British Columbia Gold Medal in Science and Engineering, Academic of the Year, Eve Savory Award for Science Communication, Michael Smith Award for Science Promotion, a prestigious Killam Fellowship from the Canada Council, and election as a Fellow in the Royal Society of Canada. He currently is Academic Director of Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, and a Professor of Biological Sciences.

Janet Moore

**Assistant Professor, Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue**

Janet Moore is an Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue where she teaches in the Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue Program. She has imagined, designed and facilitated courses that focus on community engagement, resilience, lifestyle activism, food systems, group process and urban sustainability at UBC, SFU and the Great Northern Way Campus (a collaboration of UBC, SFU, BCIT and Emily Carr). Janet is currently the University Teaching Fellow for the new SFU Faculty of Environment and a research associate with the SFU Centre for Sustainable Community Development. She has been involved with a number of innovative sustainability education projects in Vancouver including university engagement on sustainability curriculum at UBC where she completed her doctoral dissertation Recreating the University from within: Sustainability and Transformation in Higher Education in the Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education. Janet is passionate about teaching and learning, facilitating dialogue and participatory processes.

Lee Gass

For more than 60 years, my consuming passion has been to integrate these parts of myself into a unified whole and to share that process with others. Now I work every day in my studio on Quadra Island, surrounded by rocks, trees, ferns, and wildlife. I occasionally speak, write, and consult on education. My sculptures embody the “shape” of my experience of the world. Recurring themes arise, and manifest in sculptural form. My art, like my life, is a work in progress. Each nourishes the other. They are inseparable. Learn more at http://leegass.com.
For more information and engagement on this project please contact:

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