

## Understanding the Commons

A Conversation between Carnegie Research Scholar Cheryl Richardson, Vice  
President Pat Hutchings and Senior Scholar Mary Taylor Huber

### Transcript

CHERYL: So good morning, everybody.

MARY: Good morning.

CHERYL: I'm Cheryl Richardson of the Knowledge Media Lab and today we're talking to Mary Huber. Welcome, Mary.

MARY: Thank you, Cheryl. Good morning.

CHERYL: Good morning. She's a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation.

[Side comments]

CHERYL: Okay, shall we try again?

C: Yes.

MARY: I won't interrupt you. Good morning.

[General laughter]

[More chitchat]

C: Okay, take two.

CHERYL: Okay. I'm Cheryl Richardson of the Knowledge Media Lab at the Carnegie Foundation. This morning we're talking to Mary Huber and Pat Hutchings about the teaching commons. Mary Huber's a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation and she has worked many years and written widely on the changing cultures of teaching and higher education. Welcome, Mary.

MARY: Thank you, Cheryl. Good morning.

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CHERYL: Good morning. And with Pat Hutchings, Vice President of the Carnegie Foundation, who has written widely and worked on many initiatives on documenting teaching, the peer review of teaching and on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Good morning, Pat.

PAT: Good morning, Cheryl.

CHERYL: Good morning. And in 2005 Pat and Mary published the “Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons.” So today we’d like to explore this idea of a teaching commons to help us understand what issues the commons might address, how it works and how we can move forward on building one. But before we do that specifically I’d like to back up a little bit. What is a commons?

MARY: I’ll start out perhaps. This is Mary. The concept of the commons has been around for quite a long time. For people who are economists or political scientists it evokes a whole variety of settings and histories. Our national parks are frequently referred to as commons, there are green belts, the public air waves, and even academic research, the whole world of scientific research, can be referred to as a commons. One of the most probably widely known notions of a commons comes from England and the common pastures that people in the villages used until about the 1700’s and 1800’s with what’s known as the “enclosure movement”, when the landed classes took over those common fields and pastures and woodlands to improve, as they said, for commercial purposes. But that in a nutshell incorporates one of the major issues of the commons right now, of all commons, whether they are for public – any kind of resource that’s put aside for public use – is keeping available for public use and not having enclosure by commercial interests.

CHERYL: I see, I see. So a commons would be there for public use. So then what would be a teaching commons? What would that...?

PAT: Well I think my answer to that would actually start back a little ways, thinking over the last several decades, actually. One of the things we’ve seen and Mary’s noted it in her research and I’ve certainly seen it in my interactions with lots of different communities, is that there’s been a really incredible wave of interest in teaching and learning and a much more lively conversation on lots of different levels, at the campus level, within the disciplines, nationally. And so when you talk about a teaching commons I think you’re talking about a lively space where people who are engaged in thinking about teaching and learning certainly come together on this sort of common terrain that Mary’s metaphor – ‘cause of course that’s what this is – points to. So it’s a place for people to come together around the things they’re thinking about and doing as teachers in a way that wasn’t I think very common, if I may pun on that word, I don’t know, 25 years ago, 30 years

ago. I think it's an emerging development. It's been emerging over time and it's really very notably lively today.

MARY: I think the aspect of the larger concept of a commons, which most captures what we're interested in in talking about a teaching commons, is if you think about the world of scientific research back in the beginnings of the scientific revolution, the leaders of that movement met and founded societies and associations and journals so that the results of scientific research would be available to peers and to people who were capable of understanding it. And from those beginnings in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the scientific commons has grown and divided and is a many splendored thing. And what we think is happening with teaching is we can now, we now think we're on the threshold of having a similar kind of commons develop specifically for ideas and people to exchange those ideas around teaching and learning.

PAT: And that makes me want to add something, which is sort of the subtext here. I was saying that the interest in and conversation around teaching has grown over the last couple decades, but it could be put even more strongly. If you look at teaching as a profession historically – and I don't mean very far back – it's been an arena in which there were very few habits of exchange, teaching, as Lee Shulman, Carnegie's President has pointed out many times, was a kind of private enterprise that went on behind closed doors, both metaphorically and literally, and there were, as I say, very few occasions or habits in which teachers could share what they knew as a consequence of their practice and build the field. So the parallel I think with scholarly research is a really powerful one because this is about building, about generating knowledge and putting it back into practice.

CHERYL: Okay. So right now I've heard two slightly, well not slightly different things but maybe somewhere on a spectrum. We're talking about sort of a common field where people might come together and exchange ideas, and also the structures that exist in scholarly research. And in terms of a teaching commons, I assume it's not, you know, a group of people just kind of coming together in a coffee house, let's say, and chitchatting about teaching --

MARY: That's fine if they do. [Chuckles]

CHERYL: Or it could be. Okay. And so is there a range from that to publication in scholarly journals?

MARY: Absolutely. I think if we stick with Pat's history of these kinds of exchanges, one of the things, if you look, if faculty members look to their own practice if they're old enough to have been teaching say 20 years ago, the kinds, the places where you could go for ideas about teaching were – tended not to be too distant from yourself. You would go to a college down the hall or across the country or across the world if they were somebody you'd been to graduate school with or knew well

and where those kinds of questions could be done without too much risk and as just part of a general collegial relationship around work. But I think one of the things that's happened now is that the commons has become much richer. So it's possible to get ideas, exchange ideas with people who are much more distant from your own normal rounds of circulation and work. That means at some level yes, publications. It means conference presentations are going to be more widely available to you. If you go to your Disciplinary Society meeting, for example, you're likely to have more sessions where people are talking about issues pertaining to students learning, that field. On the Internet, as no one knows better than our friends at the Knowledge Media Lab at Carnegie, there are now quite a wide variety of resources. In fact, it threatens to become too wide a variety of resources. But there are now many ways in which to enrich your own ideas and experience about teaching with those of others who aren't in your personal network.

CHERYL: Okay. Thank you, Mary.

PAT: Yeah, I would just add to that, sort of again going back to Mary's analogy with the, you know, the common pastures, that one of the things that needs to happen is that we need to tend this common space. And, you know, in the case of a pasture you need to make sure it's not over grazed, you need to, I don't know, make sure it's a good kind of grass. I don't know how to follow this metaphor. But in the case of teaching there need to be things put in place that allow the conversation to be productive. So people talking in a coffee house, fine, but we also need some more, what shall I say?, sort of formal infrastructure to allow the conversation to move forward rather than just to go round and round. And the notion of, you know, occasions, conferences, publications – and there are quite a number of new publications that have been created or adapted, at least, over the last, I mean, very recently, over the last five years or so. So tending the commons means creating the conditions under which that conversation can be really productive in terms of affect on what we know and how we, how we behave as teachers.

CHERYL: Uh-huh. The teachers who engage in the commons, in this teaching commons, you mentioned before that 25 years ago the habits that faculty would use to improve their teaching would be to go down the hall or share it with a friend. How do they develop new habits so that they can – or what are the new habits they need to develop so that they can exchange their ideas about teaching with people they don't know?

MARY: Well one of the – I think the fundamental move that we talk about, certainly in the area of the scholarship of teaching and learning, is to start asking questions about student learning. That certainly has been happening more and more I think in a variety of fields for a variety of reasons. We kind of see a convergence of forces here that make it make sense to ask questions. Once you start asking questions, then your conversations with your colleagues and your searches for others who

might have ideas about things are more focused. They make sense, they bear on something that you're concerned with right now. So instead of just talking abstractedly though, let me give you an example.

CHERYL: Okay.

MARY: In the sciences, the whole -- virtually all of the science fields, the stem fields that people talk about, science technology, engineering and mathematics, there has long been terrible dropout rate from science. First year courses in the sciences and mathematics have tended to be courses where students were weeded out on the basis of often their mathematical skills, their problem-solving skills, and if they were having trouble, that was fine. They were -- they didn't have what it took to --

CHERYL: Right, the sort of --

MARY: -- be scientists and go on through.

CHERYL: The gatekeeper courses.

MARY: Now there was a point in not only individual faculty members' thinking but in national policy level thinking, in thinking of fields where that was no longer acceptable. Maybe there were things that could be done, especially in teaching and learning and curricular thinking, that would bring students along, would help them achieve what they needed to to go on in science instead of just dropping them out right away. We realized that for purposes of scientific manpower, for one thing, we couldn't afford to lose so many people. We realized that there were inequities involved. A lot of those who were not going on were women or minorities. And so that became an issue that was more widely spoken about in the science community, the National Science Foundation came along and funded large scale curriculum and pedagogy programs to help, to provide an occasion for people to innovate and think of new ways of doing these things. That's the kind of thing we're talking about. That effort alone did a huge amount to expand the teaching commons in science fields.

PAT: And I'll just add a quick example. It's sort of a different kind. Mary's talking about, you know, people rallying around a, a sense of need, a problem that needs to be addressed. On the sort of other side of the coin, you can think about the introduction of new technologies into the classroom and into the learning process. And without going into a longer account of this, I mean, there's a new opportunity that I think many faculty have been interested in seizing. In lots of settings their students are already ahead of them. So it isn't, you know, something that needs to be fixed or addressed, but an opportunity that people want to seize and that they can together more effectively than alone.

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CHERYL: Uh-huh. Okay. I wanted to go back a few sentences, paragraphs ago, to something I believe that Mary mentioned. And it had to do with -- You said that if you were old enough to have been teaching 25 years ago. So I'm wondering about new scholars or new faculty members.

MARY: Yeah, good question.

CHERYL: How do they, how do they -- what role do they play, might they play in this?

MARY: Well for one thing I think in the past -- I don't know how to date this; maybe ten years or so -- graduate students have become activists around issues of their teaching responsibilities. I don't think you have to go as far back as 25 years to find teaching assistants, graduate students in the role of teaching assistants, who were given very little guidance and advice and community for their efforts to conduct the discussion sections in all the things that they did. That has changed and I think that, for one thing, has resulted in greater attention in graduate school to teaching opportunities. Another thing that's happened is with the tightening job market over the past quarter century certainly teaching in some fields, especially in the humanities, has become an important differentiator between otherwise fantastic, fabulous new scholars, who have shown themselves to have huge promise to contribute to their field. But some will have had a greater and richer teaching experience in graduate school and that is taken account of. But I think perhaps this is a question that I'll turn over to Pat, who is one of the authors of a new book on graduate education at Carnegie.

CHERYL: Right. I was going to ask you about that, Pat. Pat's, she's a contributor to the book, "The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", just published in 2008.

PAT: Well and I guess I'd echo what Mary's saying. Clearly there's been a trend toward greater attention to teaching and to the scholarship of teaching in graduate education. And in addition, I mean, I think that needs to be put in yet a larger context of a broadening conception of scholarship, which has -- it's still, shall we say, emergent, but I think in at least some graduate programs there really is an attempt to think more broadly about what scholarly work looks like and where the scholarship of teaching, if you will, intersects with disciplinary scholarship. So there are I think people coming out of graduate school now who are much more attuned to that more integrative view of scholarship and will bring to teaching and to their other scholarly work really a different mind set than we've seen in the past, all of which is by way of saying I think that young scholars, new faculty members bring incredible energy and insights to this work and their contributions can really lead the way.

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

MARY: I would just add to that that these things are working at multiple levels in multiple places at the same time and that's one of the things that gives us hope and – for the future growth of the teaching commons. But these same graduate students who are paying more attention in their graduate programs to issues of the scholarship of teaching are also finding in their disciplinary societies more opportunities to develop those interests and have those interests taken seriously. I wouldn't go so far as to say that that has prevailed in fields but fields that have traditionally been weak in that area are getting better and fields that have traditionally been strong continue to stay strong. I'm thinking in particular of fields like composition or gender studies, ethnic studies, where concerns about teaching have long been part of the actual disciplinary work of the field.

PAT: Yeah, I think all of this, you know, raises an interesting issue about how the disciplinary communities intersect with the teaching commons sort of at large. And Mary's comments about disciplines remind me that just last night I was reading a piece in the newsletter of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning by a very prominent economist, who was really arguing for the importance of the disciplinary context and not losing that along the way, and arguing as well that in his field of economics there has for some time been a very lively community around issues in economic education. And that's true in a number of fields and that's an opportunity again for young scholars in graduate school and beyond to do this work in ways that connect with rather than pull them away from their disciplinary or interdisciplinary homes.

CHERYL: And a lot of our conversation has touched upon the scholarship of teaching and learning. Pat, can you define for us what that is exactly?

PAT: What that is exactly.

CHERYL: Or...

PAT: I actually resist the idea that it's something exactly.

CHERYL: Exactly. Uh-huh.

PAT: Mary and I have had a lot of fun with the metaphor of a big tent. But in general, I mean, I see the scholarship of teaching and learning as the enactment of some sort of big ideas about teaching, that it's intellectual work. It's not just tips and techniques. It has everything to do with how I think about what it means to know my field deeply and how novice learners become more expert learners in the field. It has to do, as we were saying earlier, with thinking about teaching as a site – teaching and learning – as a site that raises really interesting questions, consequential questions, that can be systematically investigated, and it has to do with a sense of community, seeing that your work is part of a larger enterprise to which you can contribute and from which you can borrow. So we've been I think

working hard not to think of the scholarship of teaching and learning as a narrow kind of research that would involve only a few scholars, but as a big arena, a commons, in which there are sort of lots of different ways depending on context, institution, discipline, where people were in their career trajectory, but that would bring them together around sort of those big ideas.

CHERYL: Okay, so you wouldn't have to have training in the scholarship of teaching and learning --

MARY: Oh, absolutely not.

CHERYL: -- to engage in the commons.

MARY: No. If you think of that word of “engage”, I mean, there are many ways of engaging in the commons. You don't -- Some people and -- think of the core of the work, and I perhaps am among them, as faculty inquiring in their classroom about student learning and then making public what they're finding out, engaging with others along those lines. But there are many ways to engage with the commons as you're involved in your life as a teacher. If you are thinking about, for example, adding a service learning component to your course or if your department is thinking about adding a service learning component, when you start going out there to find out what other people are doing and talking to people, you're engaging with the teaching commons. And the nice thing about the growth of the commons in recent years is that it's a much richer conversation that you're going to have. The people you talk to are going to be more knowledgeable, there are more resources out there, people have thought through issues that earlier were stumbling blocks. So there are -- that's one way of engaging with the commons. Then let's say you get your program up and running, you go out and you speak about it at a campus conference or at -- to the community, to your disciplinary society. All of those occasions are other ways of engaging with the commons that don't necessarily involve a very discreet project of research, although those projects of research are things that have a lot of power to move the commons forward.

CHERYL: The discreet projects of research, it does seem like they would have more power because they're very specific. How does the enactment of a -- or one person's specific project about her teaching in a specific place, how can she articulate or have it make sense to someone who does not teach in her setting or her discipline or...? I mean, how does she begin to have those conversations?

PAT: Well there's a big question. I guess I would begin by thinking about the analogy to that question in any field of research. And I think one of the marks of powerful scholarship is that it's particular, it's, you know, it's a very focused project about a manageable piece of something or other. It becomes powerful when it is connected to a larger conversation. And that's one of the things that I think we

get better at by engaging in this work with a community within a commons. So I think, you know, a typical sort of trajectory here is that people do start with a small, pretty local issue in their own classroom and -- But one of the benefits of the commons is that it's an occasion to think about what that's a case of, how it connects to what other people are doing in their classrooms, and soon we begin to build a sort of repertoire of larger ideas. So what makes that possible? Being in conversation with others, being part of the commons and constantly asking ourselves the question, you know, "So what? So I've looked at this little piece. What does that tell us about the larger picture?" And as I say, I think that's a habit that's characteristic or definitional of good scholarship regardless of whether it's in teaching or in some other arena.

MARY: Yeah. Maybe an example would be helpful here. Some years ago a colleague of mine in anthropology, who teaches at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, was exploring service learning in an anthropology course. And she was finding that she had questions about the kinds of -- the ways in which you could engage students in a service learning project that would expand their sense of identification with the people they were trying to help rather than just solidify stereotypes. And that was a big issue for her and she came to me because I worked at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, "Who do you know in anthropology who's doing this?" And so together we combed the field and found several people and then my colleague organized a session where five or six people spoke about how they were dealing with that problem in their classroom, what it was they were able to figure out about how their students grew or didn't grow during that process, what were some of the roadblocks to students enlarging their sense of humanity or what were some of the things that made it easy for that to happen. And then they pulled back, they pulled it together, the two, two of the participants became editors of a special issue of a journal, and therefore what began as a local question became something that my colleague discovered was shared by others and through her entrepreneurial activity she was able to figure out how to get a conversation going and then how to make that conversation even more public than to a small audience at a national meeting through a special issue of a journal. So that's one of the ways these things happen, by having a common problem, or in some cases we find that people who have a common method, who are exploring a methods potential. One example that we have found people to be very intrigued with are "think-alouds", where students are asked to look at a problem or a text from their field and to talk aloud as they read through or work through that problem or text so that you get a little window onto their thought processes. That can be very interesting and very revealing to people. Maybe, Pat, you have experienced that?

CHERYL: Well it sounds like the example that you gave us, Mary, is a real example of field building --

MARY: Yeah.

CHERYL: -- within anthropology. So is there something similar with think-alouds, where people collect around this method and build understanding?

PAT: Well there's certainly, as Mary suggests, a number of places where the notion of think-alouds has sort of taken hold and I think of mathematics in particular, where thinking is so often invisible because you have the problem and then you have the answer and everything in between is sort of in the black box. And in our work with community colleges, in some work at Georgetown University – I'm sure there are lots of other places – the notion of getting students to talk out loud as they mentally work through say a word problem in mathematics, it opens a fascinating window on what's going on in the black box. And that in turn opens up lots of questions for further inquiry. So I guess I wouldn't quite say there's a field around think-alouds but there's an interest in figuring out how we can see more clearly what's going on sort of behind the veil, as students engage in complicated but otherwise invisible thinking.

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

MARY: I think the think – the reason that people get interested in the think-aloud is because it addresses a question, certainly in cognitive psychology, where the procedure was developed and elaborated. The question had to do with how expert, experts in a field think through a problem as opposed to how novices in a field think through a problem, and what that might mean for how you could move a novice into a more expert mode of thinking. So that's a, that's a subject matter or what do I – that's not a subject but that's an issue which any field can latch onto. And the think-aloud is a tool for exploring that, which any field can latch onto. So it's been a great topic for conversation across boundaries of fields.

CHERYL: Oh.

MARY: People in psychology have worked on this say in history and engaged historians --

CHERYL: Right.

MARY: -- that way. People in mathematics have seen this and have, have dev-, have elaborated and adapted that tool for their own questions. So instead of a think-aloud they, we have a couple of colleagues who are mathematicians who call it a "proof-aloud" because they've been asking the students to speak out loud as they worked through a proof. And so it's kind of fun to watch something like that engage people from quite disparate fields and provide a means of conversation that's quite fruitful for people who would otherwise not see a commonality among the issues they're dealing with.

PAT: And I -- This makes me want to kind of pull back from the particular sort of protocol of a think-aloud and say that I think the spirit of that is, is really the animating force of the scholarship of teaching and learning. And that is to look much more closely at the student learning process. And you can do that through a think-aloud, you can do it by what, joining up with a few colleagues to carefully read a set of student papers, you can videotape what goes on in small groups, as a number of folks we've worked with have done, and look much more carefully than you normally can at what's really going on there. And I think, you know, what's really going on there is in some sense sort of the core question behind the scholarship of teaching and learning. It's not about, you know, finding, as we were saying earlier, tips and techniques. It's about a deeper understanding of a very complex process. And I think that's what gets most faculty excited, to be able to see what's going on with their students in a new way through some of these heuristics that we're talking about and by working with colleagues who bring yet further perspectives to the experience.

MARY: Yeah. I think that's right and I think that also moves us to some of the growth areas, the new areas, in the scholarship of teaching and learning, which have to do with working together with colleagues on a common problem from the beginning. So that a good example might be all of those folks who are teaching a certain level of math at a particular institution getting together and asking some common questions about what they expect their students to be doing, what their students are actually doing or not doing that they might not be aware of, and finding ways to create, I guess you'd call it, a local teaching commons in their department or in their program and to develop common ways of talking about it that might lead to more powerful modes of instruction and learning in that field.

CHERYL: In that institution. I have a question, going back just a step. What is the relationship -- We were talking about think-alouds. How much do faculty members, in your experience, draw upon literature already published about the way people learn? Or how much is it relevant to their everyday practice that they see?

PAT: Well hard to generalize but I guess one thing I would say is that people engaged in this kind of work do turn to the literature, if you will, but they turn to it at different stages as it is helpful in their thinking. And often, as we've been saying, they begin with, you know, a very particular thing that's making them curious or troubled in their own classroom. And it's only after they begin to dig into it that they get pointed toward or somehow connect with a larger body of literature that might be relevant to their question and inquiry. So I think it, the intersection happens in different ways in different settings. But clearly, that's key to the notion of being part of a larger conversation. And we're using "conversation" here very metaphorically. It's the research literature, the colleagues down the hall, the conference and so forth.

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CHERYL: Uh-huh.

MARY: Yeah, I think one of the things that's important to keep in the picture is that in our understanding the teaching commons includes a lot more than the scholarship of teaching and learning, per se. It would include the work by researchers in psychology or cognitive science on learning, it would include the work of philosophers, anybody's work that people can draw on to give them a richer sense of what's going on in student learning. So it's a large territory and it's through the work of other scholars of teaching and learning that it expands. So if you have a colleague who draws on the work of Herman Utick(?), philosophers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, that's great. Then they're part of the teaching commons. If you have work that's going on in schools of education, in schools of medicine, schools of neuroscience that bears on this that people draw on, then that becomes available to others who read the work of the scholar of teaching and learning who's found a way to make that speak to important issues that transcend their particular classroom.

CHERYL: Right.

MARY: So people will draw on a wide variety of things and as Pat says, at different stages in their, in their work. Work you might not have known about or even been able to read with any interest or understanding at the beginning may become of burning interest to you as your understanding of the learning issues you're dealing with matures.

CHERYL: Okay. I have one more question, and that has to do with the role of K-12 teachers and the teaching commons. It seems to me that K-12 teachers could learn a lot from faculty members about modes of inquiry and investigation, and faculty members could learn from K-12 teachers about their training in the act of teaching. How do you see these groups interacting with each other in the commons?

PAT: Well as we've been saying, the commons is by design, at least in our use of the term, meant to be big and inclusive and certainly we would see a place for teachers from across the spectrum. And in fact I'd say some of the most interesting conversations in history, for instance, have been in some ways generated at the K-12 level --

MARY: In the field of history.

PAT: -- in the field of history. Yes, thank you.

CHERYL: Right, [..?..]. Yes.

MARY: [Chuckles]

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PAT: -- in the field of history, have really come out of the K-12 arena and made their way into the higher education community. No doubt there are examples that go the other direction as well but thinking across the Great Divide, if you will, is not only a way to enrich the conversation but to think in a more integrative way about students' learning, which doesn't neatly divide into two periods.

CHERYL: Yes.

PAT: So finding occasions to bring teachers from those two different arenas together is not so simple. I think all of us would say that would be a good thing but figuring out the right occasions for it is the challenge.

MARY: Yeah.

CHERYL: Okay. On that note, I'd like to thank you both for joining us this morning and we look forward to more publications and conversations.

MARY: Thank you.

PAT: Thank you, Cheryl.

MARY: Thanks very much.

[END OF RECORDING]