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Letter from the Editors

Joe Pellegrino  
jpellegrino@georgiasouthern.edu

Delores D. Liston  
Georgia Southern University, listond@georgiasouthern.edu

Nikki DiGregorio  
Georgia Southern University, ndigregorio@georgiasouthern.edu

Delena Bell Gatch  
Georgia Southern University, dbgatch@georgiasouthern.edu

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Letter from the Editors

Abstract
This letter from the editors of IJ-SoTL introduces one of the overarching themes of volume 16, number 3. We discuss the idea of being “invitational,” and how that varies from being “welcoming.” We conclude that the scholarship of teaching and learning has to concern itself with structural matters that can be codified and evaluated, not just the interpersonal matters that happen within a classroom.

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INVITATIONAL EDUCATION

In its twenty years of existence, IJSoTL has been known for its eclectic mix of articles. Because of this, it’s rare to be able to piece together a common theme or an overarching metaphor for a single issue. This issue, however, bucks against that trend. And while this umbrella may not cover every article here, we can consider many of these articles to be addressing, let’s call it, “Invitational Education.” Are we inviting in our approaches and in our communications with students? Have we considered how our students actually learn the material? Do we address common hurdles that students experience throughout their academic careers? While the rigor of recent work in neuroscience and education should cause us to flinch at fuzzy phrases like “creating a safe environment for learning” or “building a positive classroom culture,” there is nevertheless something at the core of these ideas that does accurately reflect our realities as educators.

Invitational vs. Welcoming

The term “welcoming” in education is usually attached to the idea of inclusivity, making educational spaces where all students can commit themselves to their education careers, free from bias, prejudice, or the fear of personal attack. Unsurprisingly, this idea of welcoming is used to address issues attached to race, gender, and sexuality in the student population. Basic human dignity (and the UN Charter on Human Rights) makes this both an obvious and a necessary move for our institutions and for us as individual educators. But such a move presupposes that the students are already in our classrooms, and have little to no freedom about that. “Invitational” education, at least as far as we see it, occurs before we are welcoming. In most of our institutions, students have choices to make about their schedules; within certain limits, they decide when, where, and with whom they will take a particular course. While we’re not advocating cannibalizing our own programs to recruit students for “our” classes as opposed to those offered by colleagues, our authors in this issue present several avenues for us to create more attractive invitations to learning, all while maintaining a sense of rigor and commitment to our disciplines. We can be welcoming in an interpersonal way, once students have chosen to study with us, but we are invitational at a structural level. In short, invitations occur around a course; welcoming happens in the classroom.

The other crucial distinction between these two is that, in welcoming, we’re doing all the work. The student is not acting, but is acted upon. They are the recipient and the beneficiary of our welcome, and are passive consumers of the process, not active participants. In invitational education, the student cannot be passive; they must choose to accept or reject our invitation, and then act on their choice. They must accept their share of the responsibility for their education. And if they choose to reject our invitation, or do not assume responsibility for their education, the onus is not on us, but them. We have extended our services, and have given them the respect they deserve by refusing to spoon-feed them their education, so we have done our part.

It seems that almost every content provider, from national and international clearinghouses to collections of individual anecdotes, can offer us reasons and methodologies for creating a welcoming classroom — edutopia, for example, has 620 items covering the subject. Most of these offer prescriptions for our demeanor as educators, checklists of interpersonal skills, lists of language for us to employ or avoid, and the like. In short, they focus on our day-to-day interactions with students, and strategize about our soft skills. They assume our good intentions, and look for us to create safety and inclusivity because of those intentions. It’s easy to rely on good intentions; when you know your audience has those, you can afford to address matters that are essentially impressionistic, and therefore difficult to quantify or codify. Things like body language, warmth, tone, openness, and presence do not lend themselves to easy measurement and replication, yet all of these might need to be addressed and, in some cases, modified, in order to create a welcoming classroom. But since there is no common set of descriptors for such individualized forms (what one student sees as an expression of
you passion about the subject another may perceive as intimidating), there’s no way to move these classroom-bound interventions beyond our personal interpretations and implementations.

On the other hand, those same education-focused content providers are almost completely silent when it comes to invitational education. And that is unfortunate, because, here, at the structural level, is where we can articulate a common understanding. That common understanding allows us to move beyond the personal to a place where things are quantifiable. Because of this, then, we are able to improve our curricula and our instruction not through the hit-or-miss of some process that looks like it might work, but through evidence-based decision making. Addressing structures requires rigor, and that can only come with reliable information, repeatable processes, and a common language for appraising them. Improving invitational education can be done at a level of specificity that welcoming teaching can never touch.

**Ramping up for rigor**

In this issue we’ve got a number of articles situating the invitational as a precursor to the welcoming. Articles here either implicitly or explicitly address potential barriers to learning for students: one’s particular socio-economic status, our presentation of the class and their place in it before it even begins, their expectations about interactions with other students, and perhaps the most intimidating, the way we evaluate their achievement. All of these matters, and more, are invitational; we can address them all structurally, at a global level, and we can rely on solid evidence about which interventions work and why they are effective.

As a profession, we’ve been struggling for over two decades with how to leverage the work of neuroscience in education. We have plenty of information about neuroplasticity, or embedded neural pathways in the brain, but we’ve made only halting steps in using that understanding to transform our teaching. Perhaps the gap between the contemporary understanding of how the brain works and the needs of educators is still too great to be bridged right now. But if we’re ever going to do it, if we’re ever going to wrangle such hard scientific data into a form that is usable for us in our courses, we’re going to have to start by acting on reliable evidence about invitational education, like the material in this issue.