

CENTER FOR
ENGAGED LEARNING

What Teaching Looks Like

Higher Education through Photographs

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2.01

Students in an engineering class at a doctoral institution listen as a faculty member in engineering provides guidance on a group assignment.

CHAPTER 2

Student Perspectives

Views from the Back of the Class and Elsewhere

I think this process has been very interesting. When you were [taking photographs in my class], all was fine. When I first saw [the images], I didn't like them; I didn't like looking at myself. But then I shared them with my students and we talked about them together. That opened up my thinking about them. Faculty are not the focal point—it's the whole environment.

—technical/professional instructor and participant in The Teaching and Learning Project, baccalaureate institution

What I think I was most pleased with is how I'm working with students and how they are working with me. . . . You can go back to this and say, this is why I teach.

—humanities instructor and participant in The Teaching and Learning Project, baccalaureate institution

Close Reading the Classroom

To begin our reflections on student perspectives, consider what you notice in the first image in this chapter. Do you see students working together, collaborating? Does their focus stand out, or does something else catch your attention? Does it seem like a typical moment in today's educational settings, or something special? Do you see the professor in the foreground, paper in hand, gesturing to the students' work on their shared screen? While the group in the foreground seems immersed, with each student expressing their own version of pensive reflection and cognitive work, you might also become aware of another group in the background, similarly immersed, their body language echoing that of the first group. If only the photograph didn't end there, with light streaming through the windows, you might envision even more such groups, or begin to feel surrounded by them in all directions.

In a sense, there is nothing transcendent here: no apparent insight or a-ha moment. No one seems especially entertained. This is not a moment of levity or overt happiness. Yet, the guts of teaching and learning today play out through myriad instances like this: students with instructors, students with students, learning and teaching, struggling, thinking, and growing. For every a-ha moment of big, obvious learning, research tells us there are very likely many more moments of deliberate practice, challenging tasks, and effort to make sense of new ideas (Ambrose et al. 2010). If a photograph "isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum" (Berger 2013, 20) then moments like these are worth pausing to notice.

What is it like to be a student in today's postsecondary classrooms? How can educators better understand and share students' experiences? Perhaps surprisingly, a skilled photographer in a classroom quickly fades into the background, their movements and actions barely noticed after a few minutes. The camera's lens,



2.02

A student in a math class at a doctoral institution raises a hand for assistance.

then, has the unique ability to access all corners and perspectives in a classroom, and through these photographic perspectives, present a new view of today's classrooms and learning environments, in which learning is nuanced, rich with meaning, and of pressing importance.

Toward Learner-Centered Education

The idea of a paradigm shift holds a special allure in academic communities, so when an article entitled “From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education” appeared in 1995, it seemed like we might be onto something big (Barr and Tagg 1995). The authors described a seismic shift already underway, already “lived in our hearts” (those of postsecondary teachers), but in need of clearer articulation. This big shift was to be from an “instruction paradigm,” in which colleges’ and universities’ missions and implicit beliefs put teaching at the center of the action (and all that goes along with a model where transferring or delivering knowledge is the goal: courses, content, credits), to a “learning paradigm,” in which the goal is to foster learning by creating environments where students discover and create knowledge (and therefore a focus on the design of conditions in which learners are empowered to succeed). In the years since 1995, the instructional paradigm has also come to be referred to as teacher-centered instruction, and the learning paradigm as student-centered, or more broadly, learner-centered instruction.

Shifting from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered framework also means upending non-trivial expectations and structures, including power dynamics in the classroom, the roles of teachers and students, and the function of content (Weimar 2002). These shifts build on constructivism and liberation pedagogy, philosophies of education in which learning is understood as an active process of constructing new understanding and as a pathway to individual and societal

freedom from oppression (e.g., Piaget 1971; Vygotsky 1978; Freire 1993). More recently, educational researchers have produced a slew of evidence showing time and time again that learner-centered approaches—ones that actively engage students in structured, guided activity, situating learning with the student—produce more effective, enduring, and inclusive learning. As these studies have accumulated, meta-analyses and consensus studies have further demonstrated and synthesized the effects of learner-centered instruction at larger scales (e.g., Freeman et al. 2014; Theobald et al. 2020; NRC 2015; NASEM 2016). Advocates for student-faculty partnerships, in which students and instructors work together to design courses, improve their shared learning and teaching experiences, and change educational practices in departments and institutions, point to potentially transformative benefits to this further extension of learner-centeredness (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). Now, in addition to its place in higher education as a philosophy and a paradigm, learner-centered instruction represents an array of evidence-based methods with the potential to make higher education more equitable for more students.

Higher education still struggles to fully and routinely embody learner-centered instruction. On the bright side, national surveys of US faculty show that learner-centered strategies like class discussions, cooperative learning, and student-selected topics have been on the rise since the 1980s. At the same time, though, the decidedly teacher-centered approach of extensive lecturing has become only slightly less common; in recent years, over half of all US faculty respondents reported using extensive lecturing in all or most of their classes (Stoltzenberg et al. 2019; Eagan et al. 2014). In some disciplines, such as STEM fields, the frequent use of teacher-centered approaches is even higher, and the aggregate numbers also mask differences in teaching methods across faculty demographics, with, for example, women tending to implement more learner-centered approaches than men (Hurtado et al. 2012). Notably, women remain un-

2.03

Students in a biology class at a doctoral institution listen and take notes during a lecture.

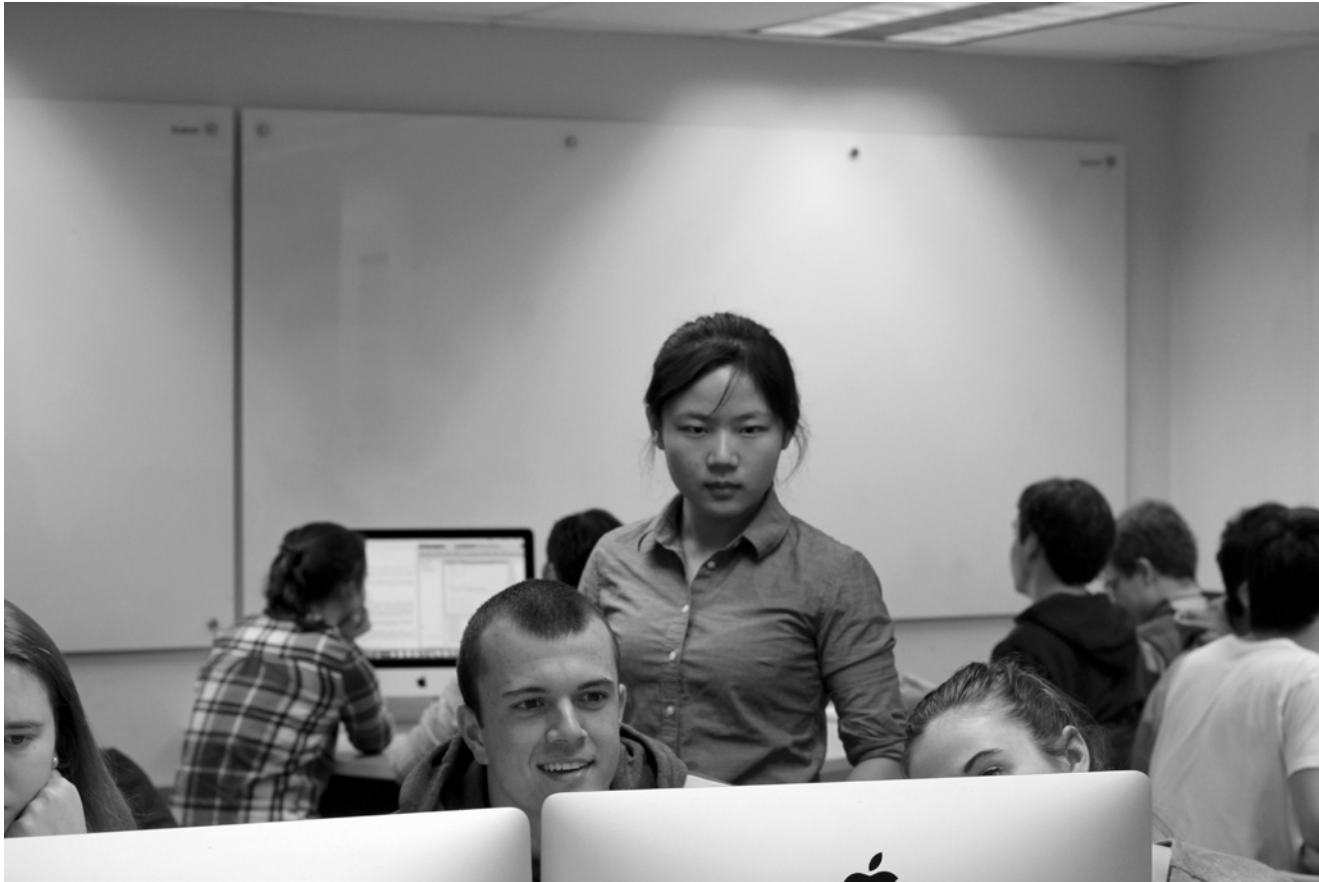


derrepresented in tenured faculty positions in the US (Hussar et al. 2020, 151) and in higher education leadership around the world (ACE 2021).

Given the complexity and sluggishness of changing the paradigm, it is important that people in higher education show and highlight learner-centered classrooms, making them a central part of the shared narrative among educators, students, and the public. Experts on how educational practices change have argued that symbols—the “cultural artifacts, language, knowledge, myths, values, and vision” and “underlying ways of thinking that give meaning to the structures,” such as in an academic department or a postsecondary institution—are crucial elements when culture and practice are changing (Reinholz and Apkarian 2018). In the ongoing process of change from teacher- to learner-centered instruction, photographs should play a more central role. As John Berger, British art critic and novelist known for the book and 1970s BBC series *Ways of Seeing* mused, “Cameras are boxes for transporting appearances” (Berger 2013, 66). The

appearances we choose to transport—and what roles, relationships, activity, and content they show—become part of our collective symbols for teaching and learning in college classrooms. If we more often see images showing college teachers as the “sage on the stage” rather than the “guide on the side” (King 1993) even as national data indicate that is becoming less likely, perhaps it is an indicator that our symbols have some catching up to do.

Photographs from the classrooms visited throughout *The Teaching and Learning Project* allow us to see and share what learner-centered instruction looks like, such as the group of images in the next section. In such classes, instructors are not bound to the front of the room; they could be anywhere, poised to help, attending to students’ progress on tasks designed to engage and challenge. The expectation of professing is undone. With the photograph’s viewpoint surrounded by students, it is their attention, rather than their teacher’s, that takes center stage. In foreground and background alike, students attend to one another. Gestures, gazes, and triangulation between learners and the stuff of learning—the papers and calculators and laptops, books and coffee, pipettes and Erlenmeyer flasks—come together to freeze the frame on elusive instants in the complex process of learning in college. As we come to understand and practice teaching as facilitation and as partnership, the visual representation of postsecondary instructors ready to collaborate—holding back, listening, and helping—needs to command as much respect and admiration as earlier archetypes, and we need images alongside research and exposition to make these modes of interaction part of the collective identity of college educators. Likewise, shifting the image of students in college classrooms from receivers to active contributors is vital: students’ interactions with fellow students and with themselves are as important as their relationships with the subject matter and instructors (Quinlan 2016).



2.04

*A graduate student instructor
assists students in a
mathematics lab at a doctoral
institution.*



2.05
Students in an African studies seminar at a doctoral institution engage in discussion.



2.06

A faculty member in art history at a doctoral institution observes as students in her art history class engage in a small group exercise.



2.07

A faculty member in chemistry at a master's institution observes as students in his chemistry recitation session work in small groups.

Emotion and Learning

It is not only what students do, but how they feel, that matters a great deal. The emotions that colleges and universities are willing to show, or not show, telegraph to students important expectations about higher education, learning, and more. You may very well approach the images that follow, 2.08 – 2.15, with your own set of expectations and values. Do you gravitate toward some photographs more than others, based on the apparent enjoyment, pride, or intensity of emotion they capture? Do some of these moments seem more collegiate or more academic than others—more in line with what you expect college to look like? How alike or dissimilar are these images from what you have encountered in university and college brochures, advertisements, and websites? (Note that a set of photographs on the theme of emotion and learning, with prompts for observation and reflection, are included in the online resource “[Close Reading and Observation Exercises](#).”)

A deeper examination of emotion in the classroom through images offers another window into students’ experiences. Scholars of education have advanced the notion that “students are not only intellectual but also social and emotional beings, and that these dimensions interact with the classroom climate to influence learning” (Ambrose et al. 2010, 156). Much past work on emotion sought and found associations between positive emotions—especially more activating ones like enjoyment, excitement, pride, and hopefulness—and desired outcomes like motivation, achievement, and flow experiences (Pekrun et al. 2007). Moments of obvious joy and success, as shown in some of the photographs in the next group of images, capture times when classroom activity itself seems to elicit enjoyment and spontaneous expressions of delight, perhaps due to a flash of insight. Indeed, educators and students alike hope and long for these moments.

But if we are after more than a passing insight or bit of levity, we need to reframe conceptions of emotion in higher education. Even in comprehensive models of affect in learning environments, researchers admit that “the overall effects of emotions on achievement are inevitably complex” and are linked in loops of “reciprocal causation” with other students, teachers, predictions, experiences, and learning itself (Pekrun et al. 2007, 28). Emotions that are not clearly positive or negative—expressions of confusion, absorption in thought, intensity, or struggling to understand—may actually be important signals of deeper learning: “Transformative learning is often initiated when learners come up against their limitations, go beyond the habitual, experience the unaccustomed, meet, split, or break down, face dilemmas, feel insecure, or must make incalculable decisions. Many examples indicate that irregular courses with obstacles, breaks, problems and challenges encourage emotional intensity and innovation, and in this way also promote transformative learning” (Illeris 2014, 11). So perhaps the student cradling head in hand and the one with the furrowed brow on the following pages bring to light necessary moments of engagement and crucial parts of learning, even if we are not so used to seeing them in the official photographs and representations of postsecondary learning.

Photographs represent and convey vital information about students’ emotions, learning, and authentic experiences in today’s college and university classrooms. As Berger reflected, “A photograph is already a message about the events it records. . . . At its simplest, the message, decoded, means: I have decided that seeing this is worth recording” (Berger 2013, 18). The images that institutional leaders, communications staff, and faculty choose to use, alongside text and other media, convey to students, their families, and the public how higher education matters and what it entails. It should be worth recording that students in college encounter the kind of good challenge—sometimes called “desirable difficulty” (Bjork 1994)—that leads to long-term retention, deep learning, and new

possibilities including jobs, careers, and contributions to their communities that will play out over their lifetimes. It should be worth sharing the message that universities are places where students and their teachers experience “passionate thought” (Neumann 2009)—an exhilarating and downright hard place of meaningful discovery. Students deserve to know that the depth of their thinking and feeling—in the midst of learning, not just after, and including their authentic expressions of curiosity, struggle, and joyful success—are all worth recording.



2.08

A faculty member in biology and forestry celebrates a student success in his soil science class at a mixed baccalaureate/associate's institution.



2.09

A student expresses happiness after answering a question in a business class at a doctoral institution.



2.10

Students concentrate during a physics exam at a doctoral institution.



2.11

Students in a disability history class at a doctoral institution review articles as part of a class discussion.



2.12

A faculty member in communications connects with students after class at a baccalaureate institution.



2.13

*Students engage in discussion
during a writing class at a
doctoral institution.*



2.14

Students use clickers to respond to questions during a statistics class at a doctoral institution.



2.15

Students share and discuss writing samples during a professional email communications workshop at a doctoral institution.

Views from the Back of the Class

The images explored so far in this chapter have largely provided glimpses of what it is like to be embedded alongside today's students, giving those outside of their institutions and classes a close-up perspective. We have not yet shown much, though, the views from the back of the class—something instructors may rarely have a chance to see. In some cases, all is well at the back of the room; for example, one technical/professional instructor at a baccalaureate institution commented, upon viewing photographs of their class, “I like the images of students taking notes. They show the students are engaged with the material. Especially students in the back of the classroom. I did not see that before.” But in other cases, images raise new questions, as this STEM instructor from a baccalaureate institution remarked: “Am I getting excited about the topic because I love it and thinking students are with me, but maybe they are leaning back or not as engaged?”

It may be hard to imagine what it is like to be one among a sea of students in today's universities. We offer such views in the group of photographs that follows. Based on data that institutions make public, the percentage of undergraduate classes with fifty or more students at US universities ranges from as low as 5% to over 30% (Public University Honors 2019). Some instructors manage to make even large lecture halls (a frequently used term for fixed-seat auditoriums and a reminder of their intended use) into active, learner-centered environments. In others, the professor appears as a distant figure on the horizon, along with a chalkboard or projector screen. In these examples, it is easy to empathize with students in the back rows, who may not perceive their presence as vital; whether they slump or sleep, attempt to multitask on other work or social media, attend alertly or lackadaisically has no immediate impact on what happens in the room, even as it may be important for their long-term learning.

A striking number of postsecondary students are employed: in 2018, approximately 27% of US full-time students worked twenty hours or more per week, and that figure was 71% for US students attending college part-time (NCES 2019a, Table 503.40). Given these employment rates, it is impossible to know whether a particular lecture hall nap is a result of a night shift, an all-nighter working on schoolwork, or something more whimsical. Students may also experience less risk in the back of the room; sitting in a circle, for example, can be experienced as a form of increased surveillance and coercion (Brookfield 2019), and the same could be true for being positioned closer to the front of a lecture hall. Given the complexity and many demands on students' time and attention, engaging with students purposefully during class through learner-centered and collaborative approaches, while respecting the variety of demands and experiences that they bring into the room, becomes even more important.

There are deeper implications when a student's presence does not seem to matter in the class. If students can find no evidence that they belong, what are they to conclude? Mica Estrada and colleagues note that for historically marginalized and minoritized students—those whose races and ethnicities have been and continue to be far less prevalent in higher education than in the population at large—their “sense of belonging and connection . . . to their academic community is complex and often obstructed. . . . There are real consequences to being in an academic environment that lacks cues affirming inclusion” (Estrada, Eroy-Reveles, and Matsui 2018). This crisis of belonging is especially acute in STEM subjects, where perhaps not coincidentally, learner-centered teaching methods are less likely to be employed than in other fields of study. The antidotes require not only using more learner-centered methods in classes of all sizes (Theobald et al. 2020), but also persistently communicating “kindness, dignity, and connection” (Estrada, Eroy-Reveles, and Matsui 2018).

When such communication occurs, we must also show it, in STEM fields and all disciplines. Let us show what kindness, belonging, and trust are like in colleges and universities. Let us extend that belonging and trust by sharing the reality and poignancy of what it means to learn in college today, through photographs and otherwise.

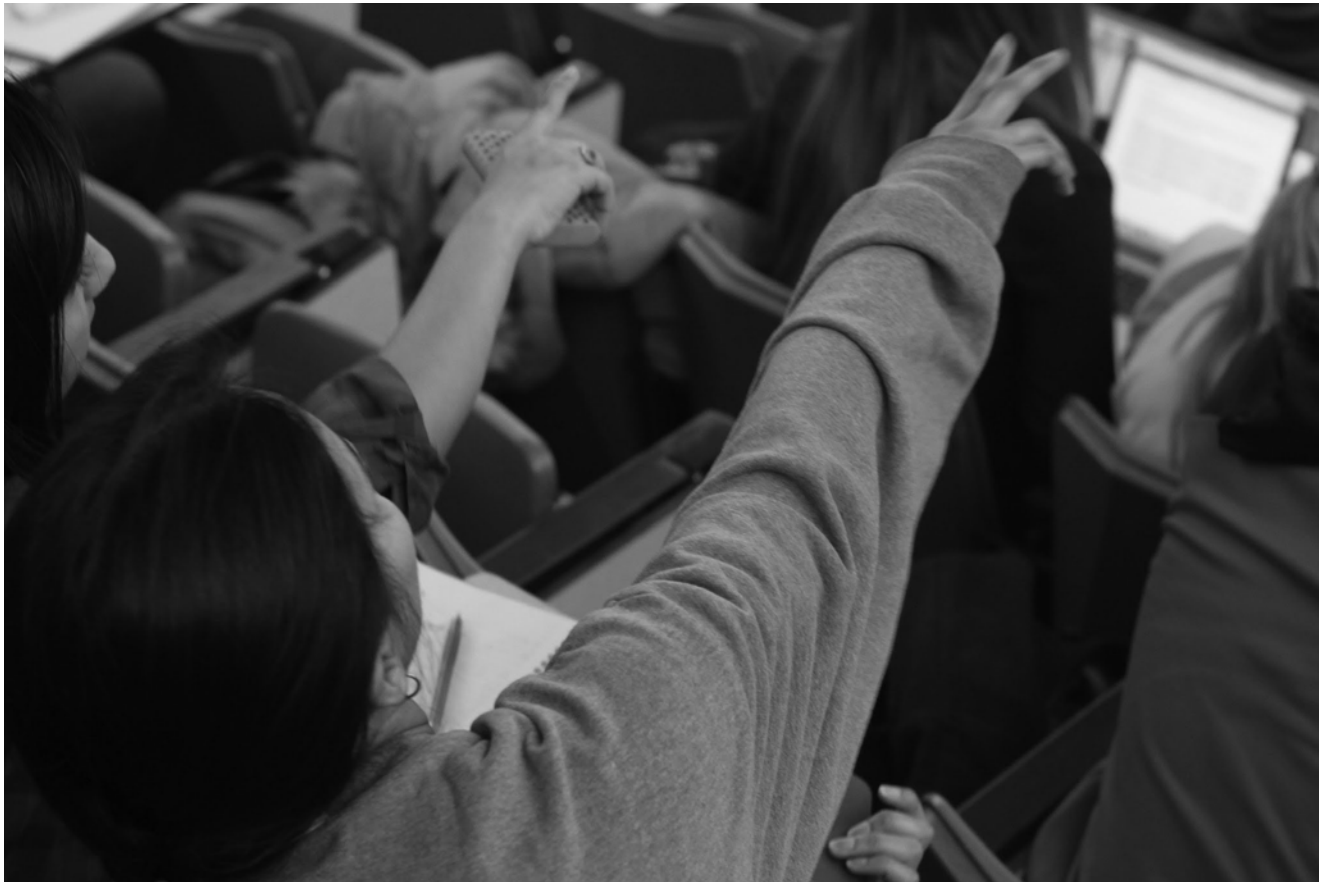


2.16

Students sit in rows in a large mathematics class at a doctoral institution.



2.17
*Students use laptops during
a large economics class at a
doctoral institution.*



2.18

Students participate in a physics class at a doctoral institution.



2.19

Students show different levels of engagement in a women's studies class at a doctoral institution.



2.20

Students prepare to work in small groups during a neurobiology course at a doctoral institution.



2.21

Students use clickers to answer questions during a statistics class at a doctoral institution.



2.22

Students participate in a large physics class at a doctoral institution.



2.23

Students take notes during a mechanical engineering class at a baccalaureate institution.

Teaching Beyond the Frame

We began this chapter by asking you one of the opening questions that we asked participants in *The Teaching and Learning Project* when we viewed and discussed photographs of their classes with them. But we are also aware of what photographs leave out—what is outside of the image, the selections presented here, and the project as a whole. As much as photographs fill in crucial information, such as perspectives and perceptions of students and of learning that we might otherwise miss, they remain incomplete.

This limitation emerged in our conversations with participants, too. For example, a humanities instructor at a baccalaureate institution shared this: “I was thinking about how the photos reference what’s beyond the frame. That’s hard to know. What are people thinking? You don’t know—that’s the thing about photography. It’s almost surreal, the possibilities for what surrounds the image.” Yet in that same conversation, details in the photographs opened up important aspects of teaching beyond the frame for our shared reflection and meaning-making: the instructor mentioned objects and examples of students’ work in the photographs that connected with their lives and interests, and although he did not know everything about his students, he nevertheless valued and appreciated what they each brought to the classroom and how they changed the space, him, and each other.

Berger distills the quality that allows photographs to be so limited, yet evoke so much: “A photograph quotes from appearances but, in quoting, simplifies them. This simplification can increase their legibility. Everything depends on the quality of the quotation chosen” (Berger 2013, 89). The quality Berger references requires both particularity and generalizability. We learn something new from images showing normally inaccessible settings like college classrooms; we have not seen these before. And we recognize our own victories and struggles;

we consider the students beyond the frame and beyond the campus, including those who have not had access to educational opportunities. In encountering the photographic quotation, we realize there is a larger system in which this snapshot is embedded.

We are hopeful that higher education will continue to make progress on its long transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction with an accelerated pace. As we choose how to convey this change, postsecondary educators will continue to talk and write, and we should also show the change through images so that our collective symbols for postsecondary learning align with what we know, and with what students need, from their colleges and universities.



2.24

Students engage in discussion during a women's studies recitation session at a doctoral institution.

Questions for Further Reflection

- If someone were to take photographs of your classes, do you think they would show a more teacher-centered environment, a more learner-centered environment, an environment based on partnership, or a combination? How would you be able to tell?
- What kinds of emotions do you observe in the photographs in this chapter? How comfortable or uncomfortable are you with seeing those emotions in the images? How about in your classes?
- What reactions, emotions, and thoughts arise when you view the images in this chapter showing views from the back of and within large classes? How do you think these views compare with experiences students and faculty have in large classes at your institution?
- Do your institutional images tend to represent learner-centered, teacher-centered, or partnership-based instruction? Why do you think that is the case, and are there differences depending on the context?
- Outside of this volume, have you found examples of institutional images that show emotions that are not clearly happy or celebratory? What role do expressions of absorption, intensity, and challenge play in your institution's values and representations?
- What questions do these and other images raise about what's beyond the frame—about larger, systemic issues faced by students and faculty in higher education settings?