1. Project Summary
Because we wanted to create a space where there was a significant shift in faculty/student power dynamics, where student voices could truly be heard, we organized a team to redesign an undergraduate course.

2. Context for the Project
Hutchings (2005) asserts that giving students voice in pedagogical matters will make them better learners. Will it also result in better teaching? Better courses? What happens when students challenge instructor’s assumed norms of “good” teaching? This project explored these questions. By acknowledging and shifting faculty/student power dynamics a space was created where students were central in the redesign of a university course. Initial findings suggest that inviting teachers and students into the larger commons supports powerful learning for everyone involved.

3. Activity Description
First one student. Then another. Then another. What began as a trickle soon turned into a flood of complaints. “This course isn’t meeting our needs!” “We hate the textbook!” “The professor is terrible!” It was clear that the traditional responses to obtaining feedback might simply “normalize” this course, make it more palatable, without truly addressing the underlying issues. What began as a significant problem turned into a rich opportunity. A Course Design Team (CDT), including two faculty members, seven undergraduate students, and the director of the teaching center began meeting in December 2005 and January 2006. The collaborative process of reinventing this course became a vehicle for studying what happens to students, to faculty, and to courses when students challenge the assumed “norms” of good teaching—and faculty listen.

Sessions were organized to intentionally make the student voice central to the course design process. A space was created where there was a significant shift in faculty/student power dynamics where student voices could truly be heard. This space provided opportunities for students to “go meta” with their learning and for faculty to “go meta” with their teaching. Research questions included:
- What do the students on the design team learn from their involvement? How are they different as learners?
- What does the faculty on the design team learn from their involvement? How are they different as teachers?
- How is the process of course design changed by including the student voice?
- How is the resulting course different?
Evidence collected included pre and post video interviews, personal response journals, and materials generated for the redesigned course. Initial analysis of findings reinforces the notion that inviting “not only teachers but also students into the larger commons . . . can support powerful learning” (Huber and Hutchings, 2005, p. 113)—and powerful courses.

4. Reflection

From the beginning, we were very open to this process and excited about the opportunities and possibilities. We felt that this research was cutting edge and different from anything we had experienced—either as professors or students. However, at times we grew frustrated that we were not moving further faster. This process was murkier and messier than we had anticipated. We had thought in the beginning that we would develop an agenda for Course Design Team (CDT) meetings and in the end design a syllabus for the classroom management course. Cut and dry, right? Ultimately, this was not the case. Often times we were left with more questions than answers.

Time escaped as we realized that the CDT could not truly develop a meaningful course if they were unaware of current research on classroom management. This awareness made it clear that we needed to honor the students’ need to establish a level of confidence through the exploration of the concrete and practical before they could abandon some of their preconceived ideas and grapple with more ambiguous questions. As a result, we spent half of our time reading and learning about the content with the students, and the other half grappling with the implications of that content in the design of the course. Interestingly, CDT members indicated that the most rewarding session was the one that was most unsettling. During this session, as a group, we grappled with difficult questions, questions that continue to be debated by experts in the field. The students on the CDT actually enjoyed dealing with the ambiguity and uncertainty in the discipline.

Indeed, this process was transformational for us. We learned to let go of the confinements of a detailed and structured syllabus in order to allow for spontaneity. Similar to other courses, we had clear goals, outcomes, and final products. The difference was that the means to the end changed frequently. This was exciting as it reflects our philosophies of teaching—continually addressing and revising as the needs of the CDT evolved. Students were thinking at a deeper level and had to consider and weigh various ideas both independently and collaboratively. This excitement carried over as the redesigned course was received extremely well.

This type of research is important because course design collaboration between students and faculty is rarely evident on university campuses. The design of this study made the student voice central in the course design process, and provided both students and faculty the opportunity to “go meta” with their learning. This model for course design might serve as one way to follow Huber and Hutchings’s charge to invite “not only teachers but
also students into the larger commons that can support powerful learning through a lifetime” (2005, p. 113).

References