



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 1, No. 11

April 1, 1989

Lighting the Way to Real Learning: A Student's View of Good Teaching

How do good professors splash color across their subject and make it come to life? What is the secret of their success? It is not just the knowledge the professor has acquired, for if you ask students, they will more than likely be able to tell you a tale of woe concerning a dull professor and a complex course. It is not merely the ability to entertain, for an entertaining professor does not always inspire real learning. When word gets out that a particular professor is outstanding in his or her field, students flock to the professor's class. There is a certain amount of magic involved when one experiences the joy of real learning and not just the mindless exhortation of facts. The scholastic enemy, apathy, is defeated, and the joy of real learning is experienced.

The secret is love. Good professors love their students. They want desperately for their students to love them. This relationship cannot be established without original feedback from the students, which encourages students to actively participate. Students begin to shy away from their usual apathetic approach and original thought takes place. Acceptance becomes a key factor and a subconscious message of "I'm okay, you're okay" slips across.

Good professors love their subject. They bring to their lecture a positive emotion which ignites curiosity. Students will be more inclined to tentatively explore a subject when they see a genuine interest on the part of the professor.

On the other side of the fence, an incompetent professor can be the ruination of scholastic achievement. It is the sad lack of enthusiasm for the educational process as a whole which takes the joy out of learning.

What makes a professor incompetent? It is an immense lack of originality. Professors become mechanical when they spit out information with no spice or fervor. There is, likewise, no affection for the students. Students become just faces in the sea of humanity, drowning in a storm of apathy.

Granted, students are responsible for their own enlightenment. However, professors act as a lamp which lights the way to knowledge. When a student collides with a deficient professor, the result is the reign of apathy.

Ultimately, there is no substitute for a truly good professor and no excuse for an incompetent one.

Caron Collier, student

Caron Collier is a sophomore honors student majoring in English. Her interests include writing for the *Western Carolinian* and working on the *Nomad* staff. This essay originally appeared in the *Western Carolinian*.

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Additional Responses to the March Faculty Forum

After our last issue went to press, we received a few more responses to Bill Kane's provocative essay, "Good Researchers Are Good Teachers: A Myth." In keeping with the Forum's editorial policy of airing all viewpoints, I am pleased to publish these additional responses. If your opinion has not yet been voiced, it's only because I haven't heard from you.

Terry Nienhuis, Editor

I did not respond initially to Bill Kane's March Forum because I was sure that in an academic community such as ours there would be a large number of faculty writing in the defense of research. In the March 15 issue, however, each article (as well as the article by Bill Kane) seems to subtly imply that research is undesirable and unimportant and that researchers are self-centered.

At Western, teaching is our most important responsibility; but without research, there would be nothing to teach. Even if we had subject matter to teach, we would not know how to teach it. Without past research, there would be little knowledge for us to pass on; and without current research, there will be no new knowledge to add to the curriculum. Without research, there will be no solutions to the great social, economic, and environmental problems faced by our world today. It is clearly the responsibility of each institution wanting to call itself a university to contribute new knowledge to each of the various disciplines taught there.

Richard Stephens, Mathematics

I heartily disagree with Bill Kane, not so much in principle as in terms of practice. First, the article and the responders are clearly attempting to support a counter-myth, that non-researchers are better teachers. Why perpetrate (or perpetuate) the counter-myth? Could it not as easily be said that this counter-myth is what some people want to believe so they can continue to justify what they don't want to do? How many of us really pursue Bill's Wissenschaft instead of doing research, and how many of us go home and mow the yard or play tennis or . . .? And secondly, isn't Bill sharing with us the fruits of his RESEARCH?

I speak out for the scholar researchers because without them I have no curriculum. Over my years of teaching they have most stimulated my enthusiasm and my students' enthusiasm for learning. Who are they? To name quite a few, look at the faculties of the three departments which have won the Chancellor's Unit awards. If you want to get a list of some of the better teachers on campus, I'll bet their names show up on the list of nominees for the Graduate School Research Award.

Gary Pool, Chemistry/Physics

I disagree with my colleague William Chovan about the difference between teachers and researchers. Research effort can indeed enhance the ego of the professor but so can teaching, and in a much more direct way. Furthermore, research can also be socio-centered, especially research conducted collaboratively with students. Indeed, there are many "personality traits" that are shared alike by teachers, researchers, and teacher-researchers.

Most of us have been educated at the graduate level so that the conduct of research has become part of our professional identities. It may be that the way we were educated is not the ideal preparation for a teacher at a place like WCU, but I believe that conducting research is one way for an individual to acquire knowledge and attitudes that enhance scholarship. Bill Kane's original point is that scholarship may or may not be translated into teaching effectiveness. There are other routes to scholarship, but research involvement is a defensible one. Research becomes a problem only when it is not kept in perspective.

Finally, I suggest that everyone read Profscam. I think Sykes is on target more than he is off. Some criticisms apply to what we do at WCU and some criticisms of the research universities do not apply to us but still imply what we could emphasize to make us distinctive.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology