



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

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## **The Teacher as a Transforming Leader**

George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt. What do these American presidents have in common? They are all considered models of what we in political science call "transforming leaders," those who lead with a concept or vision that transforms the society they are part of, changing the rules of the game and creating eras that have a lasting impact on our history. These leaders were able to get others to accept their vision and act on it, thereby creating a considerably different and better nation. These kinds of leaders are contrasted with "managing leaders," those who effectively maintain the status quo. I believe that we can better understand quality education if we see that the effective teacher is also a transforming leader, one who creates a vision for the student to strive for--a vision, for example, of the student as learner, scholar, or practitioner--a vision that the student then accepts, internalizes, and strives to achieve, creating a new persona who will face the future in an entirely different way.

We do not need more teachers who are managing leaders, perpetuating the educational status quo, because it is pretty clear that business as usual is not very effective education. What is the status quo in higher education? Teachers lecturing? Students passively taking notes? Courses based on information retrieval? This is the way it has always been done and the way it tends to continue unless a teacher has a new concept of how to conduct a classroom. And it is far too easy to manage a classroom without a clear sense of vision, with only a fuzzy idea of what one is trying to achieve because the students generally don't demand a vision; ordinarily, they seem to be quite satisfied to be treated decently and rewarded with an acceptable grade. In fact, attempting to organize a class around a vibrant and exciting vision of what the student might become at the end of the semester is often met with scorn, apathy, or even hostility. Some of the presidents named above were distrusted and hated as much as they were loved and respected, so it is often easier to maintain the status quo, tepid as it might be, than to create a vision of the future and attempt to make it happen.

What will this vision of the student's future look like? A teacher's vision must first of all deal with values. A professor will either consciously or inadvertently convey to the class certain values, and for the transforming leader these values are chosen consciously, skillfully, and systematically. For instance, does the teacher expect students to go to the library or is learning considered a closed system ending in the classroom? Does the teacher respect differing opinions or does the teacher suggest that there is only one way of looking at things? What about a student who challenges accepted scholarly wisdom? Some professors will reward such students while others will quickly let it be known that such students are wrong and the authorities are right. Some faculty value rebels in class and encourage students to challenge what they say while others convey the impression that students, like children, are to be seen and not heard. I am not suggesting that transforming teachers must adopt a particular set of values, but I am suggesting that a transforming teacher must have consciously and systematically worked out a set of values to inculcate in the classroom.

Student autonomy is part of my vision of classroom activity. I think that transforming teachers structure their classrooms so students will learn to think for themselves. Confucius made the observation that students must find the fourth corner of truth on their own. Faculty who value the

development of autonomy will encourage students to structure their own approach to class materials and assume more responsibility for their own learning because overly dependent students will have a difficult time in today's world. Perhaps our classrooms are all so different that there is no one way to stimulate more autonomy in students, but to maintain the status quo is to permit the students to be passive and dependent on the teacher for their learning. However a teacher does it, I suggest that creating student autonomy is a way to be a transforming leader in the classroom.

Closely related to the valuing of autonomy is the concern for problem solving in the classroom. Transforming teachers realize that the student is preparing for a future that most certainly will involve the ability to solve problems. Whether engaged in science, education, or even personal life, students must learn to select the appropriate variables or factors and proceed through a developed rational process to find solutions to a dizzying variety of problems. Through the development of analytical and rational skills, the student becomes more prepared to solve problems in an age of increasing complexity. The status quo is perhaps the model of information retrieval--the student simply receives and reproduces information. Do we need more of that?

The age we live in requires, I think, that we place a great deal of value on second chances. Our students need to be reassured that we are sensitive to hidden, latent, or underdeveloped talent. Although many of our students are quite self-sufficient, in some students talent must be sought out quite vigorously because it is hidden by a cultural background that might not value learning, hidden in a web of mangled sentence structure, or blocked by serious personal problems. Outstanding faculty can see what is not immediately obvious, can envision what a future performance might be apart from present failure. These teachers encourage, tutor, and stimulate the underdeveloped but promising student, sometimes through advising and mentoring, sometimes simply through work in a classroom setting.

A final possibility for faculty vision is the concern for cultural diversity. Our students generally come from cultural backgrounds in which they have not experienced or critically examined diverse cultures or values. Their views are rigid and set, and universities are threatening places. Transforming teachers see the clashing of values, cultures, and views as an important part of a university education. In such a faculty member's vision, the examination of diverse values and assumptions will enable the student to function more effectively in an international age where diversity is the norm.

What kinds of questions can you ask yourself as you face next semester's classes? How about:

1. What values underlie my vision of my students' future classroom and postgraduate experience? Will I value, for example, autonomy, problem solving, courage in the face of failure, tolerance, or even the celebration of diversity?
2. How will these values be embodied in classroom activities and assignments? If students do library work, for example, how much help will I give them? What will my assignments require and what kinds of values will they imply?
3. Will the values I envision for my students last beyond their experience in my classroom? How can I be more certain of the survival of these values?

A teacher with a conscious awareness of what the future might hold for his or her students, a teacher who will attempt to systematically transform students into more effective adults, workers, parents, and citizens is a transforming leader, the kind we need in our classrooms at WCU.

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