

Let's Talk First and Foremost about Good Learning

Don't get me wrong. I am delighted that we are talking more these days about teaching than we are about research; I believe we are getting closer to our professional responsibility. But I am afraid that all of our talk about good teaching is going to prevent us from getting to the heart of the matter. We need to focus now on what makes good learning.

When we emphasize good teaching, we imply that the primary issue is "what is the teacher doing?" But shouldn't the main issue be "what is the student doing?" For example, the topic for the next Faculty Issues Forum is "Risk Taking" and the talk is likely to be about the risks that teachers must take. Let's also ask whether the students are taking risks. If they are not and should be, we should be talking about how we can encourage students to take risks. Is risk taking necessary for good learning? Why are students reluctant to take risks? What kinds of risks will the students be taking in the world of work and how do those risks relate to the risks we ask them to take in school? If we spend too much time talking about teachers taking risks, encouraging each other to be more bold, we are likely to fall into the assumption that education is teacher-centered rather than student-centered, that education is primarily about what the teacher does rather than about what the student does as a result of the teacher's intervention.

I believe that in our present emphasis on good teaching we are trapping ourselves into thinking about teacher performance. Is this teacher a dynamic lecturer? Can this teacher lead a discussion with Donahue-like electricity? Are the students excited in class? Do the students respond with raves? We applaud when teachers put on a good show, assuming that a good performance must necessarily lead to learning. But we are setting ourselves up for disappointment. Our students have been entertained by experts. They may treat our performances with respect and even applaud from time to time, but when it comes to real fun they will take the entertainers of popular culture every time. We need to convince our students that reading can be as exciting as watching movies, that thinking precisely and elegantly is as satisfying as making a lot of money, that the slow and steady pursuit of an educational goal is more likely to succeed than sudden luck or overnight brilliance. As teachers we are in a life and death struggle with popular culture to save our students' minds and souls. When we talk so much about good teaching we are likely to lose track of our objectives as educators and fall into the trap of seeing ourselves as entertainers competing for the students' entertainment dollar.

What will change if we focus on good learning? We will see that it doesn't matter what the teacher's style is, only what results the teacher gets. It won't even matter as much if the students are pleased by their teachers. Our only concern will be whether the students grow in significant

ways. Our "research" will be focusing on students rather than on our disciplines and what we are "sending" to the students. Much more important than what we are "sending" will be what the students are "receiving" and whether or not they are capable of "sending back," creating new knowledge and understanding rather than parroting what we send. We will ask questions like "are the students in this class active or passive? Are the students thinking or dozing? If the student is increasing an information base, will this information be retained for a significant length of time? If the student is learning a skill, will this skill be useful for the rest of the student's life?" And when we talk about good teaching we will not be talking about good performances; we will be talking about what teachers can do to create good learning in students. The emphasis will be on student results, not teacher performance. The old philosophical conundrum says "if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it really fall?" If a teacher puts on a good performance and nothing really significant happens, was it really a good performance?

I feel strongly about these observations because I have spent most of my adult life introspecting on my own struggles with the learning process. For over twenty years I have consciously set out on programs to learn things so I can introspect on learning itself. I have enrolled in classes at Western as a student to remember what it is like to meet educational demands rather than to create and evaluate them. I have taken on numerous personal learning projects to feel the dynamics of the learning curve. In some cases I have succeeded as a learner and in some cases I have failed, but in all cases I have learned more about what it is to be a learner. For example, I am now a competent bridge player because I have spent the last four or five years teaching myself how to play a game I once was afraid to attempt. I now "study" bridge every day. But when I contrast my own experience with the learning behavior I see in my students, my conclusions are frightening: my students are not very good learners. So I go back into the classroom trying to figure out what I can do to make them better learners. As you know, it's quite a struggle.

My personal learning experiences have convinced me that the key to learning is not intelligence but diligence, not inspiration but attitude. If you work long and steadily enough, you will learn what you set out to learn. As Donald Norman says in an essay entitled "What Goes on in the Mind of the Learner" (copy available from the FCTE), "something like five thousand hours are required to become an expert on any topic. Five thousand hours is two years of work, forty hours a week." Our students are not going to school to become experts, but they are supposed to be acquiring the behaviors that will permit them to become experts at something some day. Are they acquiring these behaviors? I think not. And we are the ones responsible because we are the ones who supposedly have high learning skills and know how to pass them on to others.

My impression is that our students leave us not much more adept or motivated about learning than when they came as freshmen. As seniors many of them still cannot read analytically, write effectively, solve problems independently, or generate much enthusiasm for learning. They are still more interested in "getting a good job" than they are in becoming more wise. They are still motivated more with getting good grades than they are with satisfying their curiosity and exploring their intellectual interests. They still see the classroom as their primary educational responsibility and their work outside the classroom between classes as a set of unpleasant obligations. They still "cram" for tests and write papers the night before rather than making

learning a steady and daily project. They still live for parties rather than for lectures. If given one wish, they would still wish for classes to be canceled. I think it is no wonder that employers in the "real world" are complaining that college graduates aren't worth much to them.

But we can change that. Our students are not "dumb." The genetic intelligence of a species does not decline in a matter of decades. Our students only need to be educated better. But this does not mean more electrifying performances from teachers. It means more skillful assessments of where students are, what they are doing, and how their behaviors can be changed. We need to get together and talk about what we see in the students. We need a seminar on student learning behaviors. We need a workshop on how to create in students the willingness to work diligently and joyfully on course objectives outside of class. We need faculty talking together about how to lessen student fear and frustration about failure. These and many more topics could consume our attention for the next ten years. Maybe then we will have become real experts in higher education and will be able to call ourselves a true center for excellence.

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Comments or Questions?

If you would like to make comments or ask questions about this essay please send them by the 8th of the month to Terry Nienhuis (FCTE; phone: 7196; WP Mail/Vax: Nienhuis). Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.