



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

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Are We Teaching More Than We Intend?

Imagine that you are a student listening to a spirited lecture. Ten minutes left in the period, and you have a question that seems to demand immediate attention. You raise your hand but your teacher ignores it, intent on finishing the lecture. Your teacher's actions have just taught you that the teacher's lecture is more important than your questions.

Imagine that your teacher speaks passionately about the value of learning but then locks the classroom door promptly at the beginning of the hour to exclude late students, sending the clear message that learning is not nearly as valuable as being on time.

Imagine that your teacher lectures on ethical behavior and the social importance of law but then gives you handouts of copyrighted materials.

When we go into a classroom, all of us intend to teach well, but sometimes we teach more than we intend. Whether we like it or not, we are on stage every minute that we can be seen by students, and our actions influence many of them considerably more than our words. However much we may want them to listen to what we say, they usually pay far more attention to what we do.

This was made most clear to me one day while I was working as the coach of our tennis team. Although I was the WCU tennis coach for several years, I am, at best, a mediocre tennis player. When I play, I routinely violate most tennis fundamentals, such as preparing early to hit the ball and gripping the racquet properly. Yet, for years, when I worked with members of the tennis team, I harped constantly on these very fundamentals which I ignored in my own game.

After one trying practice, I complained to a particular player for what seemed to be the one hundredth time that he had to prepare earlier if he was going to be successful. He snapped back that I seemed to do alright without preparing early, and he was simply doing what I was doing. When I calmed

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down, I realized that the players were paying considerably more attention to what I did than what I said.

We can't preach to students about doing assignments carefully and submitting them on time if we don't come to class prepared. We can't expect students to take class attendance seriously if we cancel classes frequently for our own convenience. We can't teach students to respect the feelings of others and then ridicule a question which we consider inappropriate, silly, or ill-timed. We can't lecture against prejudice and then reveal prejudices of our own.

I don't mean to suggest that any of us is deliberately treating students badly or corrupting their ethics. I daresay that we all have good intentions when we teach. But when we are in the classroom we are on display, and a substantial portion of what we "teach" is gleaned by the students from our actions, attitudes, and expressions.

It is perhaps difficult to perceive oneself as a role model, but if we accept that many students do emulate our behavior, then we become responsible not just to deliver a fine lecture but, in the strictest sense, to practice what we preach. If we wish to be truly effective teachers, particularly in the life skills of fairness, ethical conduct, and critical thinking, we cannot simply tell the students to practice these traits; we have to consistently demonstrate them ourselves.

Bill Hyatt, Criminal Justice

The Faculty Forum is your opportunity to express your considered opinions on issues related to college teaching. Our goal is to spark a lively, constructive dialogue, and all viewpoints are welcome. If you would like to respond to this opinion, indicate whether you want to be quoted by name or anonymously and send your response, whatever its length, to

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We also invite all readers to submit more lengthy opinion pieces or a teaching tip. We want to share your insights with the entire university community.