



# Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 4, No. 2

October 1, 1991

## Quit Insulting Our Intelligence

Picture the harried student pouring over his notes, memorizing laundry list after laundry list of facts and figures and preparing to regurgitate it all on tomorrow's examination--all to be quickly forgotten once safely outside the classroom door. Is this learning? Is this education? Dare we call this preparing our students for the "real world?" I think not.

Much has been studied and written about the way human beings learn. Research typified by the work of Benjamin S. Bloom suggests there are a number of cognitive levels associated with human thinking and learning. Beginning with the lowest and most elementary level, *memorization*, the hierarchy ascends to its highest levels: *analysis, synthesis and evaluation*. Of course this is nothing new for most professors, but, sadly, my experience as a student has taught me that even if they are aware of Bloom's taxonomy, the vast majority of professors wallow at the bottom of the hierarchy, emphasizing memorization and seldom, if ever, engage the student at the higher levels of the cognitive domain.

Why do professors continually insult the intelligence of their students? Some may bear the scars of past experience, having learned from earlier attempts that students just aren't capable of handling higher-level cognitive thinking, that students generally lack the prerequisite knowledge or skills to respond to such a challenge. Others bring to class an attitude of superiority, an attitude that says they have acquired a lot of knowledge and wisdom over the years and therefore have a lot to "give." While this may be true, their approach, unfortunately, is to spew their learning about the classroom, expecting students to soak it up and demonstrate their mastery by, alas, regurgitating it on the next quiz. Finally, I must admit my suspicion that some professors are just plain lazy, indifferent, or at best preoccupied with other, "more important" matters, and therefore cannot or will not invest the additional time required to engage students in the higher-level cognitive processes.

Whatever the reasons, I argue that there exists a *cognitive gap* between the students' true intellectual abilities and the cognitive level at which professors choose, consciously or unconsciously, to engage them. This gap exists with all professors since no one can ever know exactly what is going on in someone else's mind, but with some professors this gap is a yawning chasm. Further, I also hypothesize that there is a high degree of positive correlation between the extent of

STEERING COMMITTEE: FACULTY CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Steve Eberly (7264)	Rita Noel (7401)	Duncan Tye (7401)
Casey Hurley (7415)	Jane Perlmutter (7108)	Jim Wallace (7244)
Bill Hyatt (7272)	Anne Rogers (7120)	Al Wiggins (7491)
Glenn Liming (7260)	Carol Stephens (7113)	

CENTER STAFF

Ben Ward, Director	(7196)
Ellen Bacon, Fellow	(7196)
Terry Nienhuis, Fellow	(7196)
Kathleen Wright, Fellow	(7196)

a given professor's gap and his/her perception by students as being a "bad" or "good" instructor: the narrower the gap the better the instructor.

Fortunately, since all professors make the choice, all can take steps designed to narrow their own cognitive gap. I wish to offer a few suggestions for narrowing this gap:

- (1) try designing all exams so they are "open book"
- (2) don't provide outlines for "case" assignments
- (3) rely less on the textbook and more on outside material that addresses current issues regarding the subject matter
- (4) when planning the presentation of your next chunk of subject matter, ask yourself the question, "How can I teach this material while sitting down in the back of the classroom?"
- (5) always remember that while your last class may have been a disappointment, your next class may be a delight
- (6) never give up believing that students will respond to a cognitive challenge
- (7) if you are doing more than fifty percent of the talking in the classroom cognitive abilities are not being engaged, much less challenged.

All subject matter lends itself to the higher-level cognitive processes, and I believe every professor has the creativity and imagination needed to develop a teaching approach that focuses upon engaging every student at his or her highest cognitive levels. In the process, not only will students have the opportunity to perform up to their highest abilities, but professors will have an opportunity to discover a new joy in the classroom as well.

**Bill Bowers, MBA, WCU, May, 1991**

**Editor's Call for Responses:** Bill Bowers graduated from Western last spring and is now working on a doctorate in Business Administration at Louisiana State University. Do you think that Bill's portrait of our faculty is accurate? Are his suggestions useful? If you would like to respond to Bill's opinion piece, please send your comments to Terry Nienhuis at the FCTE, 161 Hunter Library. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.