



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

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We received three responses to Mike Jones's opinion piece on Bloom's taxonomy. A number of faculty have responded in casual conversation, but those responses will unfortunately not reach the wider audience the FORUM was designed for. Please don't be shy. Write your responses down and send them in to share with the rest of the faculty!

Faculty Responses

Michael Jones has raised a level of concern about our General Education program, particularly F-3, that should not go unnoticed. He reminds us that little or no effort has been given to refining concepts relevant to higher-ordered thinking. To simply adopt Bloom's taxonomy for F-3 will not do for reasons that Jones so aptly points out. Higher-ordered thinking skills should be defined as those requiring cognitive processes beyond the knowledge base defined by Bloom's taxonomy. What is missing from the taxonomy is self-knowledge--the capacity to think about our own metacognitive thoughts.

William Chovan, Psychology

My discipline, the study of literature, automatically requires analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. It's what we do constantly; it's how we teach and what we teach. Although I have not concerned myself much about Bloom's taxonomy as such, I was looking over a student's rough draft recently when I found myself face to face with a curious gap. The taxonomy clarified the problem for me. The student was describing all the relevant data but was not going on to draw conclusions and tell me what it all meant. I am beginning to wonder whether I could help students learn the discipline and write better papers by articulating more clearly the need to synthesize and evaluate--teaching these "secrets" explicitly rather than implicitly in the way I handle a poem or story in class. I could do this, at least in part, by structuring assignments differently, perhaps along the lines Robbie Pittman suggested for essay text questions. But I think it would take more explicit modeling as well. The taxonomy might be a useful construct to aid in that process. Mike's argument is well taken, but I don't think I'll throw Bloom's baby out yet.

Elizabeth Addison, English/FCTE

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Mike Jones raises some interesting questions concerning Bloom's taxonomy and our general education discussions. While discussions of Bloom's taxonomy entered the conversation after the new general education program had been in place several years, it is possible that we have reified the metaphor. There are, however, several points to be made as we continue the discussion.

First, as Mike points out, Bloom advanced a taxonomy, not a theory. Taxonomies are constructed in the earliest stages of theory development and are attempts to classify the phenomenon in question. Theory development proceeds after the classification. In the behavioral sciences, for example, we have made many theories but no laws comparable to Boyle's gas laws. The suggestion is made that we are treating Bloom's relatively crude taxonomy as a law, when I would argue that it is being used as a heuristic. In using behavioral science theory to explain and predict we are always in a hypothesis testing mode as we are dealing with theories as opposed to laws. As we use Bloom's taxonomy as a heuristic to temporarily resolve ambiguity we must keep in mind that the taxonomy or theory may be nonsense. However, the heuristic allows us to make sense of the phenomenon for the time being and as we proceed we might learn enough to cast aside the original device and put in its place some new development. In the current state of development of behavioral science theory the best that we can do is to go forward using what is available, but always being cautious since what we are using is still in the testing stage.

The second point is that since Bloom's 1956 work there has been a considerable amount of work concerned with the issue of learning and some of this has been included in our ongoing discussion. While we are not using much from the psychometric approach we are using pieces from the developmental, behaviorist, and cognitive approaches. Bloom provides a framework and a language on which to hang the more recent work and we may be using Bloom's taxonomy in ways that he never intended. But that is precisely the power of using Bloom's taxonomy as a heuristic. We can advance our understanding of students' learning, on a trial and error basis, "cutting and pasting" as different pieces of different theories "seem to make sense." This incremental process may eventually lead us to a new, integrated theory or even a law, and then again we may end up in a cul-de-sac. But that is the nature of the process.

Bill Kane, Management/Marketing

Editor's Note: At the end of February I will be reading a paper at the National Conference on Successful Teaching in Orlando, Florida. My topic is "Sustaining the Institutional Zest for Teaching" and I am reporting on the extent to which the Faculty Forum has helped (or not helped) to sustain the zest for teaching at WCU. I need from you quotes that assess the Forum's impact at Western. Please don't be shy if your assessment is negative. I need all the anecdotal evidence you can provide. Please send a sentence or two to me c/o either the English Department or the FCTE. Thank you.