



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

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Every month many faculty respond verbally and informally to the FORUM, and with Bruce Henderson's opinion piece this kind of response was very enthusiastic. For example, within the first week after its publication, Bruce received 10 notes from faculty commenting on his opinion piece! However, we still need more responses to share with our colleagues, and as you can see from the responses we did receive, the continuing dialogue is very valuable. Don't be shy. Write your responses down and share them with the rest of the faculty! If you have any concern about making your writing public, remember that it is my responsibility to edit the responses carefully. If anything is ever misspelled or inelegant, it is my fault, not yours.

Faculty Responses

Bruce Henderson's "Encouraging Student Risk-Taking By Balancing Challenge and Support" was an excellent article! In my opinion, it emphasizes the reason universities exist--to help students grow and become learning oriented.

Davia Allen, Home Economics

Dr. Henderson again presents a thought-provoking challenge to WCU faculty: how to allow students to learn heuristically and actively, free to make and learn from errors.

I was particularly struck by his suggestion that we ought to emulate parental support of young children. The ability of young children to learn quickly in many different kinds of situations has always impressed me, particularly in the light of how slowly adults learn similar skills. One example might be languages. I have always assumed that children learn languages more quickly than adults because they have a better "ear," but Dr. Henderson points out a more convincing causation: that young children often have a far better support environment than most adults have even in universities, which are professionally dedicated to provide optimum support for learning.

I often tell my students that the majority of "real" learning takes place outside the classroom, resulting from the interaction with the friends one associates with most closely and the level of commitment a student is willing to make to learning in those more informal situations. Stimulated by Dr. Henderson's article, I can now see that the good friends and acquaintances are providing support for active learning.

But Dr. Henderson has also restored my faith that such support can be more consistently generated by professors. I have already discovered, by trial and error, some of what Dr. Henderson presents under his three points (Availability, Teaching Styles, and Room for Error). Small-group learning, journal writing, and frequent one-on-one conferences have been marvelously helpful in encouraging many of my students to do better work. This article, however, encourages me to try to expand this effect further in my classrooms. Thank you for another stimulating and encouraging article!

Steve Eberly, English

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I applaud Bruce Henderson's comments on students, teaching, and risk taking. I wish more students would explore. I find that large classes restrict both my ability to communicate well and the students' willingness to go out on a limb (in any form). However, Bruce Henderson's comments are somewhat of a motivator to try other methods with a large group.

anonymous

I enjoyed Bruce Henderson's piece on encouraging risk-taking in the classroom, and it occurred to me that what he said had very clear applications to the creative writing classes I've been teaching here at Western. Last semester the students in my introductory creative writing class seemed to produce one-act plays of unusually high quality. When I discussed this phenomenon with visiting actor and playwright John Maxwell (Oh, Mr. Faulkner, Do You Write), he asked me what I did in assigning the one-act project. I recalled how distinctively open-ended the assignment had been. I had pointed out the plays in our text, suggesting that I didn't think they were all that great, and I told the students that I sincerely thought they could write one-acts as good or better. I emphasized having fun and profiting from the feedback they would get from fellow students and visiting writers who would respond to their plays in class. Then the assignment was simply to create a one-act play, in any style, using any subject.

Maxwell suggested that it was probably the supportive environment that produced so much success. The students were comfortable taking risks because they were confident of success. There was criticism, of course, but it was seen as constructive and not intimidating. Often I have found that students simply go through the motions with challenging writing assignments, but these students had surpassed even their own expectations. At first I was confused and even a little guilty about the students' success. What had I done to deserve such results? I guess what I discovered was the power of a supportive atmosphere.

Philip Paradis, English