

Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Response to "Illusion Is Not Deep Culture,"

by Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear, 3/1/93

Professors Kane and Kinnear do a service in calling into question the Polyannish acceptance of the WCU unique theme as it relates to our pedagogical milieu. In reality, there is little evidence that our undergraduate learning environment is particularly unique in any meaningful way. During the past 20 years I have taught at three other colleges. My sense is that the general quality of teaching at WCU is about the same as one of those, better than another, and not quite as good as the third. Overt recognition and reward of good teaching was not the variable that differentiated the learning environments of the colleges. If anything, there was less reward for good teaching at the school that most approximated the "community of scholars" ideal that we have heard about ad nauseam over the past year. The school was small and poor, merit pay was non-existent, and there was no teacher-of-the-year award. Classroom competence was simply assumed.

In short, I think that Bill and Terry over-emphasize the importance of the institutional reward system in motivating good teaching. It is nice to occasionally celebrate teaching excellence and recognize its practitioners. However, the moral imperative for doing what we do well ultimately rests upon our individual shoulders as faculty. I suspect that good teachers aspire to excellence because of intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards such as merit pay and promotion. Institutional acknowledgement, discouragement and encouragement of pedagogy is largely irrelevant, except to the degree that we are obliged to resist administrative policies that interfere with our job.

Hal Herzog, Psychology

Kane and Kinnear are brave to point out our problem with pretentiousness, our collective inability to accept what we are. Too many of us

think we are professors at Research U. or St. Elite. Yet, I am not sure the problem on our campus is purely a question of valuing teaching. We do value it as something that needs to be done well enough that our clients don't complain too loudly about it. That level may not be hard to reach given that our clients are not very discriminating (Why should we expect our students to know what they need?). Moreover, I am not sure I want good teaching to be "rewarded" so much as I want it to be facilitated, appreciated, and, most important, respected.

The other day a colleague told me that he did not see much difference in the nature and range of quality of teaching at Western Carolina in comparison to other places he had taught, including a small college and a large university. He was right. We teach our students here much like those at Penn, Bucknell, UNC-CH, Minnesota, and Furman are taught. We do so in spite of the fact that our students, on average, are much less well prepared than students at those colleges. This is the central illusion that we are living with at WCU. We are either unwilling or unable to admit to ourselves that the teaching behaviors that we were subjected to in our own undergraduate and graduate schools will not work with students with an average SAT of less than 900 and high school class ranks in the middling range. We should not be ashamed of our students, yet neither should we ignore the need to develop new ways to educate them. As Kane and Kinnear have suggested, we need to deal with the problem of our pretentiousness as a community. We need to create new models for working with the particular students we get and to do so from a base in disciplinary and pedagogical scholarship.

Some of our number will not want to deal with reality because it will infringe on their ideal of what college professors should be doing. That will not be an adaptive response in the face of our state's and our society's re-examination of

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continued

the resources directed at the college sector. If we cannot dispel our illusions, they will be dispelled for us.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

It is sad that I found Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear's piece, "Illusion Is Not Deep Culture," to be bold. Their article was bold because it challenged us as a community to engage in "scholarly dialogue," to dedicate ourselves to "student-teacher involvement in learning," to admit that we could be doing differently and better. It is sad that such constructive analyses and caring, yet harmless words, must be viewed as bold. It is sad that they had to twice acknowledge that illusion nay-saying is "to put oneself at risk" within our current system.

I applaud their bold assertions and suggest they/we go one step further by identifying specific strategies, specific recommendations to put into concrete action. For example, in their *Faculty Forum* piece, Bill and Terry observed that "we do not evaluate teaching using accepted and available scholarship" but noted no specific methods to do so. We recently heard George Keller call for us to study the process and outcome of the learning that takes place at WCU; is this what Bill and Terry are supporting? Are they supporting Keller's recommendation that "scholarly teaching" (not necessarily publishing) be given greater rewards? If so, what exactly do they, and others, suggest? What tools, at what points, with what costs and rationale?

I ask for the specifics--similar to President Clinton's specific 150-point plan to reduce federal spending--so that discussion and debate of the details can begin. I guess I grow weary of talk of talk and talk of illusions, images, and deep culture. Though I am aware of the "double bind" and the needed "paradigm shift," I believe the "real work" is in the details.

Chris Gunn, Counseling & Psychological Services

Well, they are at it again. Professors Kane and Kinnear say that our uniqueness of teaching excellence is probably an illusion. They do, of course, have something of a reputation as disgruntled troublemakers. Read "institutional level" as "administration" and we are on their favorite target, presumably the entity which makes it "hazardous for those individuals" who challenge the illusion. Kane and Kinnear cite George Keller--another negative for some of this community. Mr. Keller is an historical curiosity. He proposes African-American studies! Separate but equal histories long ago went the same way as separate but equal education facilities. This is vintage 1960's. Reduce international activities! This is probably the unconscious isolationism of the Vietnam War generation. The world has moved on since then; we need more, not fewer such activities. Nevertheless, Mr. Keller may have some valid points; even Jeanne Dixon gets a few right each year.

My point is that I sense a tendency to dismiss the Kane-Kinnear essay on what is essentially an ad hominem argument. The subject is too important for that. I suggest that they be invited now to write a clear list of what needs to be changed to get us engaged in our "real work." The why and the how, stated as dispassionately as possible, should accompany the list. Then, without prejudging yes or no, we should thoughtfully consider each point on its merit.

Ellerd Hulbert, History

