

## *Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

Responses to "Let's Talk First and Foremost about Good Learning,"  
by Terry Nienhuis, 11/1/94

I like your thoughts very much. It seems that what you are saying is that teaching is important, but perhaps we are confused about what we are supposed to be teaching. Instead of feeling that I have to teach criminal law, I should be worrying about how to teach the students to "learn" about criminal law and should also consider whether some of the artificial "hoops" that I create in the class such as tests and papers are really hindrances to the student's learning about criminal law as opposed to learning a series of facts which will be forgotten in short order. This is not to say that we should not test but that we need to carefully examine everything we do in the class to see if it is accomplishing the longer term objective of teaching the student how to learn. If we successfully teach the student to learn, the burden of learning the relevant facts shifts to the student and we only have to guide them in determining what are the most important facts to know. It is a very exciting prospect but also one fraught with great anxiety because it requires us to teach in an unfamiliar area. I would clearly be less comfortable teaching someone how to learn than I would be "teaching" them criminal law, primarily because I have been trained in the law, not in how to teach someone to learn, and most of the literature I have seen deals with teaching subject matter rather than learning itself. I am delighted you are raising this issue.

**Bill Hyatt, Criminal Justice**

Terry is right. The average Western student spends less than 13 hours per week in classrooms. Besides the excellent suggestions Terry made, here are some other things we can do to shift the focus from teacher as entertainer to student as learner:

1. For years, our general education students have reported spending 1-2 hours per week per course working out of class. We need to provide more challenging, intellectually stimulating out-of-class assignments that make students read, write, and think.
2. We can change the way we evaluate nominees for teaching awards and tenure and promotion. We should eliminate videotaping of candidates in their classrooms--a procedure that receives too much weight from evaluators. Videotaping of teachers could be replaced with videotapes of randomly chosen students or alumni being interviewed about the effects of out-of-classroom activities and interactions with faculty members. The effectiveness of out-of-class assignments could also be evaluated by peers in the discipline.
3. Instructional improvement funds could be designated for out-of-classroom activities.
4. We all could work to enhance the general intellectual climate of our campus. For example, we could make a decent daily newspaper available on campus. We could institute weekend colloquies on intellectually hot topics or topics that bridge the "academic" and the "popular." We could change student attitudes about books and their use by using fewer textbooks and more real books and by eliminating the book rental system. We could offer senior-level general education courses that emphasize the development of the intellect instead of preparation for jobs.
5. We could stop believing that native ability is more important than the quality and quantity of intellectual effort.

**Bruce Henderson, Psychology**

# Responses to "Good Learning"

continued

I greatly appreciate your thoughtful commentary in the *Faculty Forum*. My experience has primarily been in the public schools and I was often fatigued by reading and hearing about how poorly our schools were doing. There was little mention of the student's responsibility. Here's another wrinkle to your commentary. I believe too many people in this country get an opportunity to attend a four year college. They simply are not ready and the college experience may actually delay their developmental progress. Some sort of marriage between a system which requires students to earn the privilege to attend the university and our present system may be worth considering. We assume that our present system, "public schools" and higher education, is set up to meet the needs of the vast majority of students. As a former school psychologist, I disagree. Many students are doomed to do poorly for many reasons yet we continue to plug them into the conventional system. If the students' motivations and/or scholastic aptitude are weak they should have reasonable alternatives (pre-vocational training within the elementary school setting and beyond, for example).

## Chris Tuten, Health, P.E. & Recreation

1. People learn best when they have a need to know. Of all the things we know about learning, this fact is probably most basic and most often overlooked. We expect students to need to know what we want to teach them--or if they don't, they should! Rarely do we make much effort to discover student needs and relate teaching to them. The genius of good teaching lies not in providing information but in helping students to discover a new need to know.

2. Learning is a deeply personal, affective experience. Modern brain research tells us that our brains are not switchboards or computers but marvelous organs for the discovery of personal meaning. Any information will affect a person's behavior only to the degree to which the learner discovers that this information is personally meaningful. And emotion is an indicator of the degree to which any experience is personally meaningful. The more personally meaningful, the greater the degree of emotion and the more profound the learning effect. What is learned without personal meaning or feeling is unlikely to have much effect upon behavior.

3. All behavior involves self concept. How people relate to any experience, including schooling, is inevitably determined in large part by what they believe about themselves. People who believe they can, try; people who don't believe they can, avoid the confrontational experience or defend themselves against it. What a student learns about self in the classroom, moreover, may be far more important to growth and development than the subject matter he or she is confronted with.

4. Learning is governed by the experience of challenge or threat. People feel challenged when they are confronted with problems of interest to them which they believe they can cope with. They feel threatened by problems they do not feel they can handle. The experience of threat is destructive to most learning while challenge enhances learning. Whether students feel threatened or challenged by teaching experiences, however, lies not in the the teacher's conceptions but in the eye of the beholder.

5. Feelings of belonging and of being cared for have vital effects upon learning. People who feel they belong and are cared for are likely to be excited, interested, motivated, and involved. People who feel rejected or alienated are likely to be turned off, discouraged, humiliated, disillusioned, and apathetic, seeking to escape the scene or to attack those who have made them feel bad.

6. Effective learning requires feedback. To be truly helpful, feedback should be immediate, personal rather than comparative, related directly to performance, and point the way to future success. None of these things are accomplished by the grading system.

## Anonymous Student