



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

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Once again, the number of responses continues to dwindle. This month we received only one response to William Chovan's opinion piece on the problems of teaching thinking. Luckily, it is a very thoughtful and penetrating response, adding significantly to the dialogue the Forum tries to generate. Next month the response sheet will give you a chance to indicate whether you want the response format to be continued.

Faculty Response

In response to Dr. Chovan, I would like to suggest that good thinking can be improved, taught, and evaluated quite simply by teaching good writing skills. Writing, after all, is God's way of showing us what sloppy thinkers we are.

We can discuss the poor quality of our students' thinking until the cows come home and we won't solve a thing. Talk is cheap and the solution may demand more of us than we are willing to give. Teaching writing requires faculty to spend more time reading papers, to put more thought into their grading process, and even to face the challenge of becoming better writers themselves.

If we are willing to give the necessary time and commitment, we must first teach our students that writing is important. Most complain that writing is just for English classes and that all they need to do to learn is retrieve information. All too often I have been flattered or impressed by my students' ability to regurgitate all that I have said in class. Of course, it is very tempting to give them A's and consider my job done. But there is more to teaching thinking than inspiring or threatening your students into being able to recite all that you have said in class.

If we can convince students that writing is necessary, we must next teach them that it is perfectly acceptable for them to be ignorant or confused about a subject. The most basic obstacle to good writing (and good thinking) is the fear factor. It may be that a student had poor handwriting as a grade-schooler and teachers in the early stages focused solely on the fact that a paper was sloppy. From that instant a student responds to the fear of criticism by concerning himself only with the prettiness of the written assignment. Later, this same paradigm might be repeated with grammar, punctuation, and spelling, with the student learning to equate good writing (and good thinking) with avoiding errors. Even later, a teacher might instill reticence by objecting to the frankness of a student's language, his subject matter, or the sloppiness of his adherence to a research format. You see the

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point. As teachers, we are growing up with our students. We know that good thinking is more important than all these tangential issues, but how do we communicate that to the students?

But now that we know that we can get good thinking through good writing, what does it look like on the page? The answer sounds simple, but once again it will be deceptively difficult to recognize, reward, and encourage. Good thinking is first and foremost **HONEST**. That means that the students don't try to impress with what they know or can remember from lectures and they don't try to hide their ignorance with officious (rhymes with suspicious) writing. Good thinking and good writing is candid and straightforward, not rambling or unnecessarily repetitive, and definitely not overworked or contrived. Good thinking will not try to hide behind one or two facts that a student may have in control but will openly discuss things a student is confused about or even doesn't understand at all. When and if you are lucky or skillful enough to get students to disclose this kind of information on paper, you will be well on the way to teaching good thinking.

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