

Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Responses to Bill Bowers

Contrary to Bill Bowers' assertions, I began my teaching at WCU by overestimating the abilities of my students. In talking with colleagues, this seems to be a common pattern among new faculty members. We discover that students in general do not come to class knowing how to synthesize or argue and are initially discomfited by being asked to express an opinion. For some teachers, I suppose, this leads to depression and a throwing up of the hands, and it is to these despairing professors that Bowers refers. Others of us, myself included, take a new look at our courses and attempt to teach students the requisite skills.

"Memorization," Bowers' bugbear, is of course a loaded term in education; it smacks of rote learning, a pedagogical tactic that is now generally despised. But if we eschew this term and say rather "mastery of material," it is clear that all learning must begin here. If students fail to prepare for class or to comprehend what they have read there is no point in attempting to introduce higher cognitive skills. Once "mastery of material" has been achieved, however, Bowers is correct that real education must go beyond this initial level of accomplishment. I have found that students are capable of more than memorizing lists of information, but I would emphasize that higher skills must be demonstrated and taught, not assumed.

Gael Graham, History

Mr. Bowers' categorization of the faculty is one that should displease all of us, not so much that it may or may not be a true representation but that having spent nearly four years with us Mr. Bowers would define us in such a low light. Thus, I do not wish to argue with his perception. Each one of us should stop and examine the extent to which our classroom behavior and method of teaching may lead a student to his conclusion.

On the other hand, Mr. Bowers makes the assumption that each one of us should teach at the cognitive level of each individual student. Though this is admirable and perhaps a goal to strive toward, it does not play out with the average class size on this campus. It is not very practical. Nor are there, at the undergraduate level, accurate means to determine or implement a teaching plan based on the cognitive levels of individual students. His position assumes that all knowledge to be learned can be easily taught on the highest cognitive level. This is just not the case. There may be other flaws in Mr. Bowers' reasoning, but his message should nonetheless be seen as a challenge for us to work to assure that other students will not reach the same conclusions.

Wilburn Hayden, Social Work

Bill's essay is right on target, but he describes a learning situation which is best fitted for adults. Do professors view students as adults? Or do we, as Bill Bowers suggests, view students as children? To engage students as adults means getting them to see their education as a full time job, forty hours a week, with two days off for the weekend. This requires teaching time management, teaching students to chart out each of their five days a week in the fifteen minute segments suggested in some of the cognitive development literature as the optimum attention span during a period of study. As teachers we must set high expectations for student performance, teach the strategies necessary to meet those expectations on a regular basis, and guarantee our willingness to help facilitate the goal directed behavior.

Bill Bowers is right; professors spend too much time emphasizing the rote process of memorization. But to get students to move beyond that cognitive level requires viewing

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the students as adults rather than as children. It requires communicating a strategy to facilitate learning and then selling that strategy. What is required is nothing less than a paradigm shift from an expectation of mediocrity to an expectation of excellence.

Sam Dyer, Communication and Theatre Arts

We learn through thinking but there are other ways to learn. We also learn through feeling and action. One rarely forgets an event or subject which touches one emotionally, and the body is capable of retaining information (consider dancers learning a dance) because the body responds effectively to pattern. The fullest understanding of learning must include all three experiences--thinking, feeling, and action. In the standard sort of classroom, the element which is most obviously missing is action. In Bill's case the desire for engagement in cognitive interplay is a desire for a more active element in learning.

Jackie Palmer, Biology

I agree 100% with Bill Bowers' basic proposition that most instruction takes place at the lowest levels of Bloom's taxonomy. I also agree that there must, by definition, be a cognitive gap and that we should do our best to close it. And I agree that while there are many reasons why this gap exists there are none which justify it. It is easy to feel that the "facts" in each of our disciplines are so important in the scheme of world order that no person can survive without knowing them, but while it is certainly true that a math student, for instance, must learn quadratic equations in order to comprehend "higher math," these cases do not excuse any professor from his duty to assist students in developing their cognitive abilities. As Bill Bowers suggests, we are all capable of assisting students in developing these skills, but I believe that we are sometimes so in-

involved in presenting a subject to which we have devoted our working lives that we don't get our students to really "think about" what we are presenting. I applaud Bill Bowers for (1) his interest in his fellow students' welfare, (2) his bravery in making his suggestions, and (3) his good sense in making them after he had graduated.

Bill Hyatt, Criminal Justice

Bill Bowers' comments on the failure of professors to engage students in participatory learning were interesting and provocative, but there is an opposite side to the question as well. He assumes that each student is enthusiastic about learning, prepared to think at the higher levels in Bloom's taxonomy, and not only willing but eager to participate in the learning process. While I think that inattention or indifference on the part of students should challenge professors to find ways to stimulate thought and promote intellectual interaction in the classroom, this is often an unrewarding endeavor, especially in large lower-division classes. I don't know how many classes Mr. Bowers has taught, or what his other responsibilities were when he was teaching those classes, but it would be interesting to know if his criticism of professors would be the same after ten or so years in the classroom. While professor-bashing is certainly the trend at the present time, I think that most people who teach are doing so to the best of their abilities, that they are dedicated to their profession and generally underpaid, and that they have a commitment to education that is often not reciprocated by their students.

Anne Rogers, Anthropology