

# *Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning*

Special Edition Responses to "Students As Clients" by John W. Moore, 5/1/01

*Since we have had several provocative responses to John Moore's May 1 Faculty Forum piece, we have decided to run a special issue of our notes & quotes response page.*

Please check on your distribution of the Faculty Forum. Yesterday I got one that obviously had been mailed back in the 60's. The emphasis on "relevance" was nostalgic and worth a reminder. But the severe anti-intellectualism of the piece was a little much even for a boomer from the Sgt. Pepper days who once believed you can't trust anyone over 30 and that if it isn't relevant NOW, it is of no value. Grace Slick is right--there isn't much sadder than a 55-year old rocker up on stage. Bill and Terry were right too. Our students do not read, write or think enough and it is our fault.

***Bruce Henderson, Psychology***

It was an interesting juxtaposition on May 1 between John Moore's message and Newt Smith's. I am much more attracted to the collaborative, positive, growth-oriented perspective from Newt than the self-centered, negative, damned-if-you'll-teach-me-anything-I-decide-I-don't-need-to-know view that John shares. Not that Schank and Cleary don't make some good points about the need to loosen up some of our teaching techniques and engage students in the process, but their "Student Bill of Rights" seems to me to flirt with anarchy in the classroom.

***Sharon Jacques, Nursing***

John Moore argues that Schank and Cleary's assessment of the problems of higher education is more valid than Kane and Kinnear's. This is disturbing, primarily because Schank and Cleary's point of view seems so extreme. Many faculty expend considerable effort to make learning more student-centered. However, this practice does not generally go so far as to assume that students are, or in fact should be, nothing more than "adult business clients who pay us to consult with them about learning goals," as Schank and Cleary apparently assert. There are many flaws with this reductive "business" model.

1) Our younger students are not adults. This is not my judgment but national law: the United States does not allow anyone to drink before the age of 21 (in theory, at least), and does not allow people under 21 to act as adults in legal, financial, or contractual matters. Young people are, some would argue, actively discouraged from adult behavior in social or personal matters. Because they are not treated as adults by national law and custom, it seems unreasonable to expect students under 21 to have their adult "learning goals" already set in stone. Indeed, as anyone can attest who has been in a classroom, a fair percentage of underage students have not yet clarified their "learning goals." Other students have simplistically clear goals which will change with maturity and shifting interests. It would be poor service to treat teenagers who are exploring their options as adult business clients, or to give them the focused vocational training which seems to be the logical extension of Schank and Cleary's philosophy (and in which purely vocational schools may have already cornered the market.) Such training may be the short-term desire of some students, but it is unlikely to serve them well when they become adults.

2) A university is not a "business" in the popular sense of that word. University education is distinct from the so-called world of business in many ways, the most important of which is that very insistence upon breadth which Schank and Cleary find so contemptible. A university asks that learning be "universal" in the belief that there is more to life than business: that our students will be asked to be not only employees but spouses, parents, friends, and citizens in a national and global community. It is with a view to these roles that the less popular breadth requirements--philosophy, anthropology, literature, environmental science--are of use. It will do our students little good to be astute businesspeople if they have never thought about their code of ethics in a logical manner, if they

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assume that other religions and cultures are inferior, if they hasten the destruction of our limited natural resources, or if they have never been asked to think about their lives as human beings rather than as mere clients. Eighteen-year-olds often are interested in these issues; when they are not, however, it is fair for their society to ask them to at least consider the most basic elements of their social responsibilities. Many actual businesses recognize the virtues of these breadth requirements by offering incentives to their employees to receive a university degree rather than a trade degree.

3) Students are not our only "clients." WCU students do pay for a portion of their education, but Western's in-state tuition rates are low because it is a state-funded school: that is, the tuition paid by our students and their parents is not sufficient to cover the education they receive, and the very considerable remainder is borne by the taxpayers. Thus, students not only pay for their education, but in a real sense are paid to receive it. The state--our local society--offers this pay not from a generous wish to make individual business careers more profitable, but from the conviction that it benefits us all to have students who are better educated: students who give thought to their choices, who are familiar with the history and nature of their culture, who have some grounding in what it means to be spouses, parents, friends, and citizens. In paying for a good portion of that education, the state has some right to insist that students learn things which may not entertain them particularly now but which nonetheless may have long-term (and sometimes intangible) applications.

Schank and Cleary have some worthwhile points (including the inclusion of students on curriculum committees). However, I hope it is clear why I believe that their business model, under the guise of treating students "more like people," actually treats them as cogs in a corporate machine. Schank and Cleary ignore the students' potential to be people independent of their business, to have more than one business in their lives, or to develop into people broader than they are at eighteen or twenty.

Schank and Cleary's actual pedagogy, at least in the abbreviated form explained by Professor Moore, is similarly disturbing. For instance, while it is undoubtedly a mistake to sever the connections between "learning" and "doing," Schank and Cleary's phrasing actually reinforces that very split when it implies that learning alone (as in "pure" research, on which applications are sometimes built years or decades later) is somehow "doing nothing." In another example, they disapprove of standard curricula, ignoring the fact that when curricula are not standard between classes and schools, students are usually the first to protest. Most surprisingly of all, they claim it is a "mistake" to believe that "studying . . . [and] discipline [are] an important part of learning." While no one would deny that there are other ways to learn than study, Schank and Cleary imply that students learn better when study is not an important part of learning, and that study is inherently unpleasant and a violation of student "rights." These are strange assertions. And it is utterly unclear whence they derive their belief that discipline will not be necessary in the business world.

Once again, there are elements of Schank and Cleary's "Bill of Rights" which seem worth consideration. However, the criteria they offer are so vague as to make the ideas in question all but useless. If assessment is no part of the school's "natural role," who will assess the learning process to decide just what information is likely to be forgotten in six months? (Also, who will arbitrate the frivolous discussions of whether a datum will be forgotten in six months or seven?) Who can speak for the goals of "the society at large," particularly when every discipline has specific requirements for which "society at large" knows and cares little? And who will decide when an activity is sufficiently related to a student goal? Students can decide, of course (and they do so now, when they select majors, minors and elective courses), but, once again, students do not necessarily know all their life goals at eighteen.

While we all share with Professor Moore the goal of making learning as relevant to the lives of students as it can be, Schank and Cleary's rather condescending view of education's "mistakes" does not really seem likely to help us achieve that goal.

*Catherine Carter, English*