



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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## **Student Learning is a Faculty Problem**

Chris Argyris has been writing for years about why organizations cannot learn. He argues that organizational members, although competent and intelligent, make sure they do not formally talk about anything important. They develop kabuki-like routines that create the illusion important matters are being addressed when, in fact, issues fundamental to organizational learning are carefully and skillfully ignored. Members know what the deep issues are but believe it is inappropriate to raise them. Furthermore, it is against the rules to acknowledge the fact that critical issues are not discussed. Argyris calls this a "double bind."

Today, we wish to break the "double bind" and raise one of these "undiscussable" issues: that student learning at WCU is generally unsatisfactory because the students don't spend enough time engaged in the learning process, particularly out-of-class. But the problem is not the students; the problem, and the solution, is with the faculty (see Willimon and Naylor's 1995 The Abandoned Generation for a discussion of the responsibilities of faculty and administrators). Students at Western do not develop their potential to learn because our faculty enables dysfunctional student behavior. As a faculty, we do not enforce standards regarding college-level work. Some faculty permit students who do little to no class preparation to succeed. Faculty reward unprepared students and frustrate the high performers who prepare well for class and are ready to move deeper into course material. In general, we often "dumb down" classes and outside assignments, require minimal writing, accept poor writing, use evaluation methods that test only short term memory, and conduct class so those who have not read might pass the course. Most egregious is that we, as a faculty, turn a blind eye to this less than professional behavior, which is characteristic of the double bind.

The authors have gathered information to support these assertions. The historical rule of thumb is that students should spend two to three hours preparing for each hour of class time. But institutionally gathered, self-reported data from students enrolled in WCU General Education courses indicates that no more than one hour is spent working outside of class on each course. General Education students are working less than 20% of the time necessary to perform at the college level, and upperclassmen do not appear to be substantially different. Through our own experience and through conversations with faculty at different experience levels, across disciplines, across colleges, and at all course levels, it has become clear that students consistently attend class underprepared and that total lack of preparation is not unusual. The persistent failure of students to spend appropriate time engaged in intellectual work has been well documented here and elsewhere for over two decades. Lack of engagement over a period of time results in a cumulative deficit of knowledge and skills, both within courses and eventually across the curriculum. While we may notice that individuals fall further behind in our particular courses, the gravest consequence is that students generally do not develop the habit or ability to engage in intellectual work. Simply put, our students are not learning how to learn! While we as faculty can offer the students subject matter knowledge, can structure learning opportunities, can provide clarification and can lend support, we obviously cannot learn for our students. They have to learn how to do this for themselves and we are not helping them do it. They are not "mindful" or learning how to learn.

We are well aware that problematic learning behaviors are typical of university students nationally, but this does not mean we cannot develop a unique solution for Western. Enrolling students with higher SAT scores will not solve the problem. Current Western students are quite capable of engaging in serious college-level work; they simply do not know how to. Many are not even aware of their potential.

Why do we as a faculty enable dysfunctional student behaviors? Specific reported reasons include the fear of getting poor student evaluations, of not getting a merit raise, or of not getting tenure and/or a promotion. But the reward system can be changed through the development of a new reward system focused on student learning. Student evaluation forms and Annual Faculty Evaluations can be changed to assess student learning rather than faculty behaviors. Others argue that the Chancellor wants us to enhance retention and that to be more demanding of students will be harmful to retention efforts; others simply say, "I don't want to work that hard." Indeed, serious efforts to change student behaviors entail hard work, consume much time, and are not formally rewarded. However, is it not inherent in our professional behaviors as scholars and educators to rise above the extrinsic reward system and do what we understand to be the right thing? Is there not some minimal level of serious intellectual work that must be done for a meaningful college education? If facilitating such student efforts is not the faculty's job, whose is it?

To help students develop the appreciation for and capability of doing intellectual work, the faculty must interact differently with students and this may mean doing the right thing despite the external reward system. How might the faculty change the way it interacts with students? Reread Newton Smith's March 1, 2001 *Faculty Forum* essay on learning communities (particularly paragraphs six and seven) and the subsequent student responses. The faculty must engage in more student-centered learning behaviors, which may entail learning what student-centered learning really means and how we might go about it. Then we must begin by enforcing college-level standards and helping students learn how to achieve them.

We will have a new freshman class in the fall and our new Liberal Studies curriculum will be in place, but the broader academic context for these students will essentially remain unchanged. We must help *all* students develop appropriate study habits and a sound work ethic. To do so we must acknowledge that what we have been doing is not working (like we did with General Education). The faculty must break the "double bind" and recognize the self-imposed behaviors which prohibit us from publicly exposing existing problems. We must be willing and able to discuss, at a deep level, the previously undiscussable. Are we ready to admit, in a public forum, that we are not challenging students effectively? Are we willing to face our responsibilities for the general failure of learning at WCU? We can do this only through true dialogue, which is very different from the formal discussions and forums we typically have at Western.

Both of us have facilitated dialogues at professional meetings, primarily based on Peter Senge's (1990) methodology. With the help of the Faculty Center, we are willing to conduct dialogues here early next fall. But will the faculty come? Can we, as a faculty body, discover creative ways to resolve the difficulties and deficiencies of student learning? The alternative is to continue to pretend we are educating the vast majority of our students when we clearly are not.

#### **Bill Kane and Terry Kinnear, Management**

*The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.*