



Faculty Forum

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Lessons Learned, Part 1

I realized some time this fall that I have been teaching at Western for 25 years. I didn't feel too bad about that because I started teaching here when I was 14, but it did make me a little more reflective than usual. I started to think about what I had learned about teaching at a university like Western over that quarter of a century. The results are not very insightful or exciting; in fact almost every idea that has come to mind is something that has been discussed in Faculty Forum by me or someone else. Maybe the fact that these ideas keep coming up is a sign of some sort.

Textbooks are a problem. In my first Faculty Forum article in 1988, I wrote about the tyranny of the textbook. I argued that textbooks had way too much influence on the way courses were taught and on the way students tried to learn. I think I argued that the person who wrote the textbook was the one who really got to learn (but those who write such books were not happy that I said that). I still think textbooks are a problem, but in my undergraduate courses I have made something of a truce with using a textbook. I have decided never to use the term "read" in association with a textbook. Instead I tell students to analyze the book. I tell them that they have to take a very active approach to the text in which they take on very small portions of a chapter at a time. I tell them to use the structure of the chapter the author provided in the headings to provide context, to circle and connect ideas in the text, to generate their own examples and write them in the margins, and to note questions they want to ask in class. They tell me they would write in the books but that they don't own them.

The book rental system is bad for student scholarship. I have been grinding this axe since my children were very small. Chancellors have told me that if I were a parent paying college bills I would appreciate the book rental system. At times when my first two children were attending schools where books were costing up to \$600 per semester I wondered. Now I have a child at WCU and I still don't like what the system does to our students' attitudes about books and learning from them. Not only are our students not free to write in their books or able to build a personal library, they come to see books as minor players in their education. I also fear that faculty members hesitate to have students read as much as they should because of the system, thus not challenging our students as much as they could.

We still are not sufficiently challenging our students. Despite all the talk of raising bars and new curricula, students at WCU often are not intellectually challenged. Eleven years ago in the Faculty Forum I pointed out that students were getting high grades with minimal effort, carrying heavy course loads and heavy off-campus employment loads while easily passing courses and watching hours of TV. From what I hear, things have not changed significantly. As there was a decade ago there are courses that are demanding in every college of the university. Yet too many holes remain to make the generalization that challenge is the norm at WCU. As has been said before in these pages there often seems to be an unspoken conspiracy between students and faculty members to keep the demands on each other to a minimum.

The consumers in education want to be cheated. I often tell my students that we are in the only business in the world in which the consumers repeatedly cry "Cheat me, cheat me, please, please cheat me." And we often oblige them. We start classes late, let classes out early, fail to meet classes, skip the last 2 1/2 hours of the semester, or cancel the last class before breaks. We make it clear that it would be politically incorrect to call to task a colleague on any of these behaviors. As we shorten semesters for our convenience and decrease the number of credit hours required for graduation for bureaucratic convenience, let us not fool ourselves into thinking that we have enhanced the education of our students. But, after all, maybe the amount of time a student spends in class really doesn't matter that much.

The real action in teaching and learning occurs outside the classroom. Perhaps the most important thing I have learned so far is that what I do as a classroom teacher pales in comparison to the importance of what I get my students to do when they are not in class and I am not around. An unusually good lecture or a particularly apt demonstration may inspire my students. An effective classroom exercise or discussion may clarify an important point. However, it is what happens in the 100-140 hours my students spend on my course outside of class not the 47 inside that is really going to determine how much they learn. I have to design each course and its assignments so that students will have to read, write, and think when I am not with them. I have to be willing to spend the time outside of the classroom to give them the feedback on their assignments they need. I have to design exams that will not only assess degrees of knowledge but also motivate students to study in effective ways. While it is important that I find ways to challenge and support my students inside the classroom, it is essential that I find ways to challenge and support them outside the classroom. I really achieve success when I can get students to become independent producers of their own learning experiences. When I pique my students' curiosity, help my students turn intellectual work into intellectual play, and get my students to actively engage important ideas outside the classroom, I have earned my pay.

In Part 2, I will focus on what I learn over the next 25 years.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

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