THE Teaching PROFESSOR

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# Teaching Professor Learns Lessons of Being a Student

A year ago last fall, it was astronomy. I took the course with 60 first-semester students. Last fall, it was chemistry. I took the course with 20 first-semester business majors. Both courses fulfilled general education science requirements; neither were courses for majors. In both cases, the students enrolled in a one-credit first-year seminar that I taught.

For years, I've (sort of) facetiously proclaimed that if we are really serious about improving college teaching, there is a simple way we could accomplish that goal: require college faculty to take a course not in their field once every three years. I will continue to make that claim, but no longer facetiously. Being a student is a powerful motivator and mechanism for change — in one's classroom and in one's thinking about how education works. Here's a brief run down of some of the most important insights that came to me through this process.

1. Beginning college students connect first and foremost to the instructor — not the content. They don't see the content as relevant, accessible, or particularly interesting. They gravitate to the prof and define their relationship to the course in terms of their feelings about him/her. They characterize these relationships in highly personal ways that most of us would consider irrelevant: "He's mean." "She's nice." "He doesn't like me." "She intimidates students." Most amazing and frightening to me is how strongly these thoughts about their teachers impact motivation and learning.
2. When you are required to learn something that you don't see as important or relevant, you don't experience the joy of learning. The thick fog of all that is required — assignments, reading, labs, and homework — obliterates the landscape. The beauty, general shape of and the connections within a knowledge domain, the answers to questions that do matter, none of these are seen by students. I took both these courses because I'm 55 and all but science illiterate. I thrilled to finally understand the difference between global warming and ozone depletion. Students take these courses to get credit, because they're required, something to get out of the way on their way to other courses. Will they be science literate when they're 55? Will they love learning?
3. There is joy when you learn by doing. I loved chem lab; it smelled strange, the drawers held glassware with funny names and other weird equipment we learned how to use. We wore safety goggles and knew how to operate the emergency shower — it wasn't like a "regular" classroom. We collected data with not a clue as to why we were getting those results, and we wondered why. The questions arose naturally out of what we were doing and sometimes so did the answers. And those were moments of insight, revelation, and understanding. Even class curmudgeons were on occasion captivated.
4. Our own disciplines and fields of study we wear like a pair of glasses — everything passes through and is changed by those lenses. Folks in the sciences don't define theory anything like we do in the humanities do — it took me way longer than it should have to figure that out.
5. Perceived prowess as a lifelong learner can melt like ice under a hot sun once you find yourself in a new and unfamiliar learning territory. In both of these classes, after concerted attempts to understand basic concepts, I seriously wondered if I had what it took to master the material.
6. The gap between the one who knows (the teacher) and those who don't (the students) is much larger than I ever realized. Sometimes you literally cannot figure out what you need to ask. And then when you finally do get a question framed, sometimes the one who knows doesn't understand the question, probably because it's framed in such a convoluted manner. And then when he or she answers, you don't understand the answer, probably because it's framed in a way totally unrelated to what you do know and understand.
7. It is safer and often more productive to first ask questions of fellow students. They don't always know and sometimes give wrong answers but in the process of trying to figure it out together, you work with the content. It does become clearer, and you do learn more than when you are just given the answer straight out.
8. Exams provoke enormous amounts of anxiety. Even if you keep up with the reading, attend all classes, take careful notes, and do the homework (I tried to model productive student behaviors),

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## *In This Issue*

THE Teaching PROFESSOR

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- We are interested in a wide range of teaching-learning topics.
- We are interested in innovative strategies, techniques, and approaches that facilitate learning and in reflective analyses of educational issues of concern.
- Write with the understanding that your audience includes faculty in a wide variety of disciplines and in a number of different institutional settings; i.e., what you describe must be relevant to a significant proportion of our audience.
- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
- If you'd like some initial feedback on a topic you're considering, you're welcome to share it electronically with the editor.

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# Characteristics of Good Teaching: Redux

It is good for all of us to regularly revisit those aspects of teaching that make it exemplary. We have done this in previous issues of the newsletter and will continue to do it in future ones as well. We cannot measure up or press ourselves to accomplish more unless we have those standards of excellence clearly in mind. A 2002 report prepared by the National Research Council ("Evaluating and Improving Undergraduate Teaching in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics" — look for a review of this entire report in our next issue) contains a research-based and ably articulated set of standards (pp. 27-31). Here are the five characteristics of good teachers they identify and some of the bulleted explanations offered in elaboration of each.

## 1. Knowledge of subject matter

- They can help students learn and understand the general principles of their discipline.
- They are able to provide students with an overview of the whole domain of the discipline.
- They possess sufficient knowledge and understanding … to answer most students' questions and know how to help students find appropriate information.
- They stay current through an active research program or through scholarly reading and others types of engagement with peers.
- They understand that conveying the infectious enthusiasm that accompanies original discovery, application of theory, and design of new products and processes is as important to learning as helping students understand the subject matter.

## 2. A range of appropriate pedagogies and technologies

- They are organized and communicate clearly to students their expectations for learning and academic achievement.
- They focus on whether students are learning what is being taught and view the learning process as a joint venture between themselves and their students.
- They have the ability to recognize students who are not achieving to their fullest potential, and they employ the professional knowledge and skill necessary to assist them in overcoming academic difficulties.

## 3. Understanding and skill in using appropriate assessment practices

- They assess learning in ways that are consistent with the objectives of a course and integrate stated course objectives with long-range curricular goals.

## 4. Professional interactions with students within and beyond the classroom

- They demonstrate respect for students as individuals.
- They contribute to the ongoing intellectual development of individual students and foster confidence in the students' ability to learn and discover on their own.
- They advise students who are experiencing problems with course material and know how to work [with] them in venues besides the classroom to help them achieve.

## 5. Involvement with and contributions to one's profession in enhancing teaching and learning

- They see teaching as a scholarly pursuit that takes place in collaboration with departmental colleagues, faculty in other departments, … and more broadly across disciplines.

# Better Beginnings: Preparing Students for Independent Research

*By Sharon A. Hollander*
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Many undergraduate and graduate departments require a thesis or research project as part of a senior, capstone course. This project makes the majority of students anxious at least and miserable at most. In truth, many professors find supervision of these research papers or projects a daunting task as well. Few have been trained to advise students on projects like these, and fewer still would find the dissertation advisement they received a model worth replicating. Furthermore, mentoring students is not an especially popular topic in the literature on college teaching. So, how can students and faculty be better prepared to handle what should be the most intellectually rewarding experience of a college career?

The research process is typically broken into four tasks: formulate ideas, collect data, analyze data, and report findings. The first step, which usually takes place outside the conventional research course, is often overlooked. It is easy to ask students to select a compelling topic and learn more about it, but most need help with this effort. Sometimes, as professors, we offer ideas that we like, and students then feel compelled to pursue these topics. Or students jump on the first idea that floats past because they feel like they're drowning in a sea of possibilities. The solution: students should be taught how to foster their own ideas and interests.

I keep track of my interests and ideas with a running list and numerous folders of copies and clippings from journals, books, popular media, e-mails, and more. Most of these are not examples of good research, but they help build my knowledge base, and I've come to see how they help me get projects completed. I can work when I have the time or energy, and I write something efficiently, because I have been thinking and collecting materials for a while. Do we teach students to work on their research projects this way?

The truth about independent research is that it is not really independent. It is a department-wide or college-wide responsibility. All faculty members, advisors, and non-advisors, can help. How? Research topics and process should be tied in with the content of many courses. Faculty should encourage students to talk and write about, as well as collect, information on their favorite ideas starting with those first courses in the major sequence.

On nearly every large exam, I include a short essay question asking students to transform material from class into a possible research project. Their responses have been fresh and interesting, and they help me connect students with similar interests or direct them to other faculty. This could also be a short written or oral assignment, a long paper, or a thought-provoking option for extra credit. In some courses, I ask students to keep a binder, portfolio, notebook, or folder (pretty much anything) to hold material on their topic of interest. Ultimately, this folder helps students build an annotated bibliography, another possible step in the development of research ideas.

Student researchers need support from everyone on campus, especially librarians. The behavioral sciences librarian and I regularly offer student researchers unstructured time in the library when we are both available. During this period, we are able to model the research process, as well as our enthusiasm for building on areas of interest and tracking down sources. I think the synergy is noticeable; ideas and questions fly back and forth.

From a practical standpoint, students who have a clearly defined research area early in the process have many advantages. As mentioned, they can be connected with appropriate people resources. They also have more time to obtain primary source documentation, especially those sources not readily available online or from the college library. And their ideas have time to percolate which results in more and deeper insights. Although some students' research ideas may still be too broad, too complicated, inappropriate, or esoteric, at least there is a starting point; and collected ideas and materials may have other uses in the future. Lastly, encouraging students to pursue their own ideas and interests early benefits motivation. It promotes curiosity, creativity, and confidence. These students end up being committed to their topics!

Research activities, from incubation to completion, are an important part of the college experience. Many people are involved in the "independent" research process, and the capstone project should be an achievement of pride for students, research advisors, and everyone on faculty. In my experience, the truly outstanding projects are the products of long-standing interests that have been nurtured by both student and faculty — there's a researcher and a research mentor in all of us.

## BEING A STUDENT

*FROM PAGE 1*

you still cram the night before — focusing on memorizing details, going over notes, doing problems. Are you learning? Yes. Are you loving it and finding pleasure in this mastering of the material? No. The sense of mastery gets inextricably tied up with the grade only at that point where a sinking feeling tells you that you wouldn't do nearly as well on this exam if you had to take it again right now.

9. I couldn't believe that I, self-proclaimed devotee to learning, bragged shamelessly about earning an A, complained bitterly about getting a C, and that I did both without ever discussing what I learned.

What is the best way I can describe my experiences in these two classes? Exhilarating and humiliating. As a consequence of these experiences, I have resolved never to forget what may be my most important insight: learning takes courage. Teachers must respect that.

# Facilitating Group Work in a Large Class

*By Ken MacMillan*
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Last summer, I learned that I would be teaching a third-year history course that usually enrolled about 40 students. Although not a very experienced teacher, I had recently learned new teaching techniques variously called "experiential," "inquiry," and "problem-based" learning. I decided to lecture two hours per week and spend the third facilitating group work. I was perfectly willing to give up some content in preference for student involvement, especially if that time could be used to discuss course readings.

Then I found out that enrollment in the course was closer to 120 students. I pondered reverting to pure lecture and experimenting with online discussion boards. But persuaded that students can learn in groups, I decided to muddle through with my original plan. I would have small-group discussion in the big class, make it a graded component of the course (10 percent), and learn from my mistakes. In the end, the process was much more rewarding than I had ever anticipated, although it did change some of my ideas about group work and the classroom management necessary to make it work. Here's some of what I did and would recommend to make group work successful in this challenging setting:

## Keep it casual

Even though the group work was a graded component, I wanted the atmosphere to be less formal and the work to be enjoyable. I wore jeans to encourage a more casual setting and students quickly adapted to the different cadence of these days.

## Set a specific task

I gave the class a specific, written task relevant to the week's work. Tasks ranged from projects in abstract thinking to preparing and answering a question for use on the final examination, to designing PowerPoint slides, which drew together course content. The latter I incorporated into the next lecture slot and then put on the course website.

## Give a time limit

I prefer to give a general time limit and see how things progress, adjusting the time if necessary. Generally I gave students 15-30 minutes, depending on the task. In all cases, the time should be just short of what the project requires to discourage unrelated discussion.

## Establish groups and scribes, and collect written work

I used four- to six-member groups, formed by the students themselves. After the first couple of weeks, the groups contained pretty much the same people, which was fine with me. Each group appointed a scribe, and that task rotated weekly among group members. In large classes, it's important that groups make a written record of their work because you can't have each group verbally reporting. I make it everyone's responsibility to see that the group's work gets turned in.

## Spread out

I recommend turning the lecture hall into a meeting room. Encourage students to go out into the halls or come to the front of the lecture theatre if there is too much background noise, but remind them to stay close.

## Play Snuffleupagus*

Travel among the groups but try to keep a low profile. Answer or ask questions if the group is confused or off to a bad start. If you have a teaching assistant, s/he should be circulating as well. I used my proximity to the groups to get an idea of how quickly they were progressing, and then I could encourage some to step up the pace and others to be more reflective. This is also a great opportunity to hear what got through from your lectures and to have direct contact with the students.

## Give five-minute and two-minute warnings

Flash the lights, play the Jeopardy theme song, or use your deepest lecturing voice (if you have one), whatever works. Be sure to tell the groups out in the hall.

## Debrief

Take at least 10 minutes to debrief the class on the task, either by addressing each question or as a general discussion. I don't have students return to their seats — if this means that some are hanging off the podium, so be it. Students will want "the right answers," so be sure to credit good ideas but also gently to correct misconceptions or faulty thinking.

## Evaluate

My grading system was generally a checkmark, or a check with a slash through it for sub-standard performance. After the first couple of sessions, you can give the class some constructive criticism about its performance.

One of my concerns was that some students would slum off the rest of the group, which is difficult to determine with 20 groups. Then a student told me he began to do his weekly readings after being chastised by his group for not contributing. I hope that their chastisement was good-humored, but this is evidence that some groups did self-police. I also worried that students would see these classes as optional. That fear proved unfounded. At the course's end, about 72 percent of the students had missed no more than one session. In the end, the students learned as much about the course in their group work as I could have communicated in an equal number of lecture hours. Better still, friendships were forged, the classroom seemed smaller and warmer, and the students took an active and responsible role in learning the course content. Next time, I'll try having each student assess his/her own performance in the group. You can see that I've already committed to using groups next time.

**Ed's Note: If you don't know who Snuffleupagus is, check out "Sesame Street."*

# Is Assessment Making a Difference?

It's a broad question and the answer we are about to discuss relates to one discipline. However, the question of whether assessment is making a difference is relevant to faculty in our departments and at our institutions. Most of us now recognize that systematic review of educational experiences in terms of learning outcomes is long overdue. But now that there is this strong pressure to collect data about learning outcomes, what are we doing with the results?

Start with your department: "Does your program involve some type of overall program outcomes assessment?" If so, what method(s) do you use to make that assessment: a comprehensive written exam, a comprehensive oral exam, a commercially available exam, a thesis or senior project, focus groups or senior surveys, alumni surveys, internal reviews of student papers and exams, external reviews of the same, or capstone course products? Or perhaps you use something entirely different.

Using a carefully constructed sample of sociology programs, Theodore C. Wagenaar analyzed responses to these queries from just over 300 faculty respondents at both public and private institutions of various sizes. Almost 60 percent of his respondents indicated that their departments did use some sort of learning outcomes assessment. As for the methods they used, alumni and senior surveys topped the list with almost 52 percent reporting use of alumni surveys and 45 percent using senior surveys. Least widely used were oral exams (by just over 2 percent) and external reviews of papers (by just over 4 percent). Other methods spanned percent ranges from almost 29 percent for thesis/projects to 41 percent for capstone products.

Wagenaar reports that "few of the school type and school size differences are statistically significant, suggesting that the results apply generally across different types of schools, or that the sample size is not large enough for the differences found … to be statistically significant." (p. 408)

Most interesting in this survey, however, were two questions Wagenaar asked about impact. He wanted to know how much the results of these assessments were affecting teaching and the curriculum in the department. Just over 36 percent of the respondents reported the results were not at all or minimally affecting the curriculum and over 39 percent said the same for teaching. Only a bit more than 22 percent described the effect on the curriculum as considerable and extensive; not quite 22 percent said the same for teaching.

For these questions, the public-private distinction made a difference. Faculty at public institutions reported negligible impact on both the curriculum and teaching substantially more than their counterparts at private institutions (almost 46 percent versus almost 20 percent for the curriculum and almost 50 percent versus 23 percent for teaching). Size also mattered. Those in large institutions saw mostly a negligible effect; those in medium-sized schools saw the greatest, and those in small schools reported a modest impact.

But the overall low impact perceived by faculty does raise questions about the utility of this kind of program assessment. Wagenaar wonders if the results would have been the same had he surveyed department chairs or program directors. But his findings do support the fairly cynical attitude many faculty hold toward assessment. In summarizing the literature he reviewed for the article, Wagenaar offers a conclusion that sums up both the literature and his findings: "This failure of assessment to generate a perceived impact feeds faculty cynicism that assessment gets used more as an administrative tool to promote organizational compliance with accreditation and legislative demands than as a useful strategy for measuring and improving student learning (and teaching)." (p. 405)

**Reference:** Wagenaar, T. C. (October 2002). Outcomes assessment in sociology: Prevalence and impact. *Teaching Sociology*, 30, 403-413.

# Is Grade Inflation a Myth?

Many faculty and most administrators share the view that grades are inflated: that the number of A's and B's received has increased disproportionately and inappropriately. They sense that students are getting better grades than they have earned or than they used to.

The evidence is mixed, causing proponents and opponents of grade inflation to disagree. In a recent *Chronicle* article, Alfie Kohn takes the position that grade inflation is a dangerous myth. He tackles head-on recent evidence that supports the opposing view.

Sometimes the acrimonious tone on both sides of this debate clouds the issues, causing an emotional rather than rational response. However, the debate involves a central tenet of educational practice. Faculty need to review the evidence and discuss its assumptions and conclusions with colleagues. The best outcome? Using the issue to stimulate reflective analysis of one's own grading practices — what justifies a particular approach and how it influences student learning. In the interest of promoting that kind discussion, analysis, and reflection, what follows is a collection of points and questions Kohn raises as he tries to establish that grade inflation is a myth:

- "It is surely revealing when someone reserves time and energy to complain bitterly about how many students are

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# Weaning — or Encouraging Autonomous Learning

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***Ed.'s note:*** *Here's the second in our new series of occasional but regular columns by Larry Spence. TP provides lots of tips, tricks, strategies, and creative ideas that can be used by teachers in their classrooms tomorrow. But as essential as techniques are to teaching, good instructional practice rests on much more. The teacher who promotes learning is a thoughtful, reflective practitioner — one who thinks deeply, carefully, and often about the reasons behind the actions. Larry asks questions about practice that lead us to those places of analysis and critique. Go with him there and respond. Ask him questions, share your thoughts, disagree, agree, or challenge. He welcomes your e-mail, and we're committed to continuing the dialogue in subsequent issues.*

At 8:30 a.m. she stood up in class. I wanted to sit. She glared, shooting me with her eyes. "I'm paying good money for this class," her thin hands shook. "My parents are sacrificing. It's your job to just tell us what this book means." She waved a worn copy of Immanuel Kant's essay, *On the Old Saw: That May be True in Theory, but It Does Not Apply in Practice.*

"I can do that, but it will burden the rest of your life."

"What do you mean?"

"You will always have to take me with you. If you marry, I'll be there. On your honeymoon, I'll be there. You will need a special room to keep me in your house. I misplace coffee cups and scatter paper clips. I'll need a desk next to yours at work. A special seat where I can work in your car…"

"Stop it," she shouted. "I don't want to drag a professor through life."

"Good," I said. "Then I can't tell you what the book means. Think of all the books, articles, policy papers, and memos that you will have to read. If you don't know how to understand them, you will be lost as a citizen, a worker, and an individual. So you can either figure out what Kant means or you can adopt me for life."

The class's growing laughter filled the room as they imagined living with a seriously uncool prof. "But aren't you paid to teach us? How am I supposed to know what this old German guy meant?" asked a burly tight end.

"No, it is my job to see that you learn how to discover the meaning yourself."

"This class is weird," came a comment from the baseball cap section.

Students' expectation that I could explain the world marred every course I taught. Their intellectual dependence was frightening. On bad days, they were so docile and dependent I understood how good storm troopers were made.

John Abbot of The 21st Century Learning Initiative (*http://www.21learn.org*) writes that we should adopt the biological idea of weaning to direct our educational efforts. Young children should have plentiful help and direction. Then we should gradually back off as children take over their own learning. He argues that to adopt the weaning model, we have to turn the current system upside down. Lots of resources for teaching in small classes should be spent in the earliest years. The resources we now expend in colleges and university should be curtailed. By the time students reach adolescence, they should be self-directed.

Is he right? Does the system encourage intellectual dependency, wasting the creativity and curiosity of youth? Is it too late to wean them in higher education — to move them away from dependence on formal instruction to become free-range learners? Current research on the biology of learning backs Abbot's contentions. My own experience attracts me to the idea.

But, oh, in the classroom the dependency is sticky and thick. Students seem confused, indifferent, and desirous only of getting this grade, that course, and eventually the big-ticket degree. The best strive for that special relationship, "teacher's pet." They work to say all those things that feed faculty egos. For many years, I saw little hope for developing autonomous learners. Then I made a discovery.

A group of my students toured with a national champion drum and bugle corps. I went to see them perform. Their precision, quality, and panache astounded me. I could not believe they were the same creatures that shuffled through my courses. They worked twelve hours a day on their musical skills, slept on gym floors, and were driven from city to city without relief. They were disciplined adults.

I walked away with words like "co-dependency" and "enabling" ringing in my ears. My best efforts taught students that to learn was to follow instructions. They didn't need that or my careful explanations, or my crafted syllabi. They needed access to the world's scholarship and some tough coaching like they got in the bugle corps. And most of all they needed choice and opportunities to pursue their own passions for inquiry and expression.

Maybe we smother the best learning instincts of our students. Seymour Papert writes, "The scandal of education is that every time you teach something, you deprive a child of the pleasure and benefit of discovery." Maybe we should stop chewing and pre-digesting the intellectual food we give our students. We need not joke and enact an excitement we wish they had. We need to focus on the learning and not the comfort of the learners.

In earlier times, people took the passion and energy of adolescents as signs of maturity. They weaned them on responsibilities. The impetuous George Washington was surveying frontier lands

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# "How'd ja do?" — How Accurate Are Student Self-Assessments?

Ask any student that question after a test and they'll have an opinion. "I did well." "I bombed." "I think I got a B." But how accurate are those self-assessments? Most of us who've been teaching for any time know that frequently it is the weakest students who are most off in their assessments. They think they've done well, and the disappointment, dismay, anger, and frustration are palpable when the exam is returned. Researchers Kennedy, Lawton, and Plumlee (reference below) observe that these students can't accurately assess their performance because "they don't know what they don't know." (p. 244) This leaves the teacher with two tasks: teaching students that they don't know something and then teaching them that something.

Exams are the most common way we try to help students learn that they don't know. On the basis of their literature review, the research team above hypothesized that a group they called incompetent students (those in the lowest quartiles on exams) would overstate how well they performed on exams compared with a group they labeled competent students whom they predicted would understate their expected performance. They also predicted that the ability of both of these groups of students to accurately estimate their test scores would improve in a course as the semester progressed. And they believed that these improvements would not be affected by the type of institution the student attended, their discipline, instructor, or year in school.

To test these hypotheses, they asked students immediately after every exam in a course to provide their names and an estimate of the grade they expected to receive. They collected these data from graduate and undergraduate students in three different disciplines, from courses taught by different instructors, and at two different universities.

The results verified their first hypothesis: incompetent students "overestimated their performance by a substantial margin." (p. 246) The average grade they predicted they would receive was a B-; the actual grade they received was a D+. And the competent students also consistently underestimated their exam scores. However, the poorer students overestimated by a larger margin than the better students underestimated.

Did the students' abilities to estimate their test scores improve across the course? Yes and no. The incompetent student group did become better estimators of their scores over time. "In short, they learned, at least to some extent, what they did not know." But the longitudinal analyses of data did not reveal a similar improvement for the competent student group. Their self-assessments were no more accurate by the end of the course. The researchers wonder if this result might be explained by the fact that these students are smart enough to know what they do not know. As for the third hypothesis that the students would under- or overestimate consistently across different courses, instructors and institutions, this prediction was verified.

The research team makes a number of recommendations that could help weaker students recognize their lack of knowledge, more accurately assess their performance, and hopefully then be motivated to work harder at acquiring what they need to know. They recommend frequent testing but acknowledge that in some instructional situations that is not always possible. They believe that other forms of frequent feedback will help, including face-to-face or electronic feedback from instructor to individual student. They also propose that instructors create accurate expectations by making very explicit what it is they do expect. They should share those expectations in writing, supporting them with examples and clear assessment criteria.

They conclude with one of those obvious but frequently overlooked truths: "Educators have a great challenge to help students know what they do not know. It is when we have reached this goal that we can truly begin to teach." (p. 252)

**Reference:** Kennedy, E. J., Lawton, L. and Plumlee, E. L. (December 2002). Blissful ignorance: The problem of unrecognized incompetence and academic performance. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 24 (3), 243-252.

## Grade Inflation

*FROM PAGE 5*

getting A's — as opposed to expressing concern about, say, how many students have been trained to think that the point of going to school is to get A's."

- Grades sort students for employers, graduate, and professional school. Would anyone subscribe to *Consumers Digest* if every blender were rated the same? But is the professor's job to rate "blenders" for the convenience of corporations, or is it to provide feedback that will help students learn more skillfully and enthusiastically?
- When students are sorted via curve grading mechanisms, those grades reflect relative standing rather than absolute accomplishment. "The number of peers that a student has bested tells us little about how much she knows and is able to do."
- The "harder is better" assumption confuses quality with difficulty. Do students perform better if A's are harder to get? Here's a good example of where the evidence offers mixed results. Yes, they perform better as measured by retention on multiple-choice exams. But stringent grading has never been shown to improve understanding or to promote interest in learning.
- Grades do motivate students, "but the reality is that it doesn't matter how motivated students are; what matters is that students are motivated. A focus on grades creates, or at least perpetuates, an extrinsic orientation that is likely to undermine the love of learning we are presumably seeking to promote."

**Reference:** *http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/gisources.htm*

# Learning Journals Engage Students, Develop Critical Thinking Skills

Management faculty Donna Varner and Sharon R. Peck have been using learning journals for seven years. "We have learned a great deal in our use of journals, and as committed teachers we believe that through critical assessment of our pedagogy we can learn more and share that learning with others." (p. 53)

In this excellent article (reference below) they integrate their experience with the education theory that relates to this mode of learning and share via appendices a number of resources they have developed that illustrate how they use learning journals in their courses. If you've never used logs but see their potential, or if you struggle with the way you use them, this is a first-rate resource that will clarify your thinking about the goals of this learning activity and enable you to use it more effectively.

Varner and Peck use their learning journal assignment to accomplish three objectives: first, they provide students a way to learn and practice conceptual skills; second, they facilitate comprehension and retention of course material; and finally, they can be used to effectively assess comprehension. With the first objective, writing about course content gives students the opportunity to practice critical skills like the ability to reflect, to think critically, and to learn continuously. With the second objective, the journal entries facilitate comprehension and retention because they "meaningfully engage" (p. 57) students with the content of the course. Some of their entries have students using course content to solve problems they have experienced in the workplace. And finally, the log assessment constitutes a valid assessment method because with this content students need to be able to demonstrate that they can "apply, analyze, devise solutions and critique." (p. 58)

Journal assignments themselves can take a variety of forms. Varner and Peck see those differences existing along two primary continua: journal assignments may vary in structure, and they may vary in focus. "A structured assignment may require students to address a set of guiding questions. On the other hand, an unstructured format may call upon students to engage in open-ended, stream-of-consciousness writing." (p. 54) The assignment may encourage an inward focus (at one end of the continuum) that aims to develop self-awareness. When the focus is outward, the purpose relates to developing knowledge of course content.

But as any of us who've used journals know, this learning activity is not without its challenges. Varner and Peck are forthright and honest in their discussion of two of them. They begin with issues of evaluation and feedback: to grade or not to grade. Students put time and effort into those assignments that count, but their professors describe the grading task as "time-consuming" and "difficult." They do grade logs and point out that the more difficult query involves deciding what to grade. Here's where the article is so useful. Included in the appendices are the evaluation criteria they use to assess the understanding, application, analysis/evaluation/action, and the professionalism of the entry.

The second challenge they address relates to individual student differences and the fact that this assignment fits with the learning styles of some students better than others. "We suspect that certain types [of students] find the assignment to be a very natural way of demonstrating and understanding the material. For others, the process may be so unnatural that the learning benefits are minimal and their writing may not represent their grasp of the content." (p. 64) Furthermore, in addition to these differences in cognitive approach, some cultural issues are relevant. If students come from cultures where relationships between teacher and student are formal and respectful, some of these students "find it difficult to critically assess or challenge either the professor or the readings. Their journals tend to include thorough discussions of various theories, but frequently fail to include personal applications or critiques." (p. 66) For this reason, these authors believe that learning journals should only be one of a variety of assignments used to assess student learning.

Also included in appendices accompanying this article is the complete assignment description that these faculty members distribute to students and a journal entry template they use to help students understand what they should write about in an entry and at what level of detail.

A student comment aptly sums up why these authors remain committed to learning journal assignments. "A few nights of studying [for an exam] would require far less work than having to write all of these journals. However, I must say that I learned considerably more in the process of writing these journals than I would have in taking two or three tests." (p. 76)

**Reference:** Varner, D. and Peck. S. R. (2003). Learning from learning journals: The benefits and challenges of using learning journal assignments. *Journal of Management Education*, 27 (1), 52-77.

## AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

*FROM PAGE 6*

by the age of sixteen. By 21, with only a few months of formal education, he could ford rivers, chart mountains, charm legislators, and lead troops. Lord Fairfax wrote his mother that he was "a man who will go to school all his life." Washington's classrooms were the forest, the battlefield, and the halls of government. He never asked what was going to be on the final.