



## Make the Most of the Learning Moment

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It may happen only once in a 50-minute class. It may not take place at all. It may be days before it happens again. Then, suddenly there it is — a learning moment — that one instant in a classroom when teacher and student(s) merge. Until recently, I would have called it a teaching moment. But with the recent shift to learning, the designation seems out of place. It hardly matters since they are the same thing. When the moment arrives, a space opens up, and the class is stilled. An insight is shared; a quiet wonder descends. The student sees or several of them do, if it's a good day. Minds have been touched. The teacher glows inwardly. She feels her *raison d'être*.

And then it's gone, evaporated into thin air. A learning moment rarely lasts — at least not in undergraduate classes and never for the duration of a whole class. Even when it lingers, it cannot be controlled or charted or even reinforced. These moments of elusiveness and mystery cannot be captured and held, even by very experienced teachers. But those teachers take every advantage of their presence — they ride the wave for all it's worth, for however long it lasts. It is this response that separates the artist in the classroom from the ordinary practitioner.

Many times in my long career, I have stumbled on learning moments unwittingly or failed to notice them until too late. As I improved my craft, I became more attentive to their presence, more willing to abandon my agenda and heed their call. I have never been able to make them happen, nor has any other teacher to my knowledge. We do the best we can to

orchestrate a setting in which a learning moment might take place — just like Socrates did in his conversations with his fellow Athenians 2,500 years ago. But there are no guarantees. Even Socrates was unable to sustain the moment for long. Because of this, he considered himself a failed teacher. Surely, this is too harsh.

How many of us have known the frustration of coming upon a learning moment near the end of a class session, hoping to continue the moment the next day, only to find nothing there but the husk of memory? We start again prosaically: "Well, if you remember yesterday we discussed . . ." But no magic ensues — nothing happens.

Most of the recent studies in educational journals attempt to measure the effects of learning (and teaching). This is especially true of assessment. While assessment is an important wedge against classroom incompetence, it can never touch the essence of deep learning, which is largely impervious to quantification. A learning moment erupts in its own time and place, on its own terms. A psychic space opens ready to be filled with new insights, enlightenment, and understanding. The alert teacher responds. Measurability becomes nothing more than a tracer sent after the fleeting event, the scaffolding erected around the geyser. It quickly subsides, leaving only the apparatus standing.

Over time, students can become quite adept at handling the apparatus of learning. They simulate spontaneity, take tests, work in groups — they know how the game is played. Far too many have built successful undergraduate careers (scaffolds) with these utilitarian skills. But few if any real learning moments erupt through this structure of academic success.

Even skilled teachers may not be able to break it down once it becomes so permanently rooted. Still, learning moments do occur in our classrooms, somehow breaking through, and we should be on the lookout for their advent.

A good lecturer can model learning; a discussion leader may ask appropriate questions; a caring mentor can nudge a student toward self-confidence. But not even the most outstanding teacher can summon a learning moment. The most we can do is fashion a context for them. The ideal environment is one that avoids rigid-

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## Why Students Resist Innovative Teaching Methods

Educational reform and innovation have been slow to take hold within the academy. Straight lecture still prevails in many classrooms despite compelling empirical evidence that students learn more, retain it better, and think about it at higher levels when they are actively involved. Why does change come so slowly? Mark Benvenuto thinks that there are “formidable roadblocks” on the road to change. He says they are being placed there by faculty, administrators, and students. Consider the four reasons he says students prefer a lecture format. Collectively they don't paint a particularly pretty portrait of students, and we do want to be careful not to generalize to all students, but most of us who've tried innovative approaches can relate to these students responses.

**Traditional methods are familiar and comfortable.** It's the way they've been taught and the method under which most of them have successfully found their way to college. They know what they're supposed to do, and they've proved that they can do it. It's not that these students are afraid of the new approaches per se; it's what they think those approaches might do to the almighty grade. Few students are willing to risk a grade even when the outcome might be more and better learning.

**Traditional methods are easier.** Lectures encourage students to be passive. There might be a couple of questions, but usually the same students answer those. “A large lecture format offers the comfort of anonymity, and the assurance that if students arrive unprepared for the lecture, there will be no punishment for their lack of preparation.” (p. 66) But if class requires discussion of pre-assignment materials in groups with discussion products then presented to the rest of the class, that's more work and students resist. They often do so by pointing out that they didn't pay to teach themselves — as if teachers who were doing their jobs learned the content for students as well.

**Sheer laziness stands in the way of change.** When students miss a lecture, they operate under the assumption (although they seldom test it) that they can get notes from somebody else and be covered. They haven't missed anything! Miss a group activity and nobody has notes to copy and nothing in the text “covers” what happened in the group. Closely related to the previous point, many college students today opt for ways that require less work. They are busy, lead complicated lives, and are accustomed to instant gratification, which explains why many think that learning ought to occur with minimum effort and no pain.

**Traditional methods better obscure the varying paces at which people learn.** If you're bright and grasp the material quickly, you don't want to wait around for the rest of group or worse yet devote your time and energy trying to explain it to less-enlightened others. In lecture, the instructor may repeat material you already understand, but during that explanation you can just sit quietly and do nothing. If you're not as bright and don't grasp the material quickly, those knowledge gaps will more than likely get revealed in a discussion with fellow classmates, something painful and worth trying to avoid. But in a lecture, nobody knows, and you can always con yourself into believing that you'll get it by test time.

And how do faculty tackle these kinds of student resistance? Benvenuto says by committing themselves to reform, by taking risks and thereby ensuring that “educational reform doesn't become an endless discussion — with no results.” (p. 72)

**Reference:** Benvenuto, Mark (2002). *Educational Reform: “Why the Academy Doesn't Change.”* Thought and Action, 18 (1 & 2), 63-73. 📌

## Assessing Teaching: Can't We Do Any Better?

Sometimes the way we use student ratings to evaluate teaching seems like such a wasteland. It starts with the veritable mountain of research that's been done, documenting virtually all the details needed to develop empirically valid and reliable processes. You can hardly name an aspect of student ratings about which some, if not considerable, research has been completed. Next comes the practice of collecting assessment data from students. Practice continues to plod along considerably behind and out of step with research findings. Faculty almost uniformly decry the process. They object for good reasons and bad, but much like giving grades, the end-of-course rating event has become one of those least-popular aspects of instruction.

Is the disconnect between research and practice causing the problem? It certainly contributes. When institutions use instruments that look like camels created by a committee, when the data are not presented in meaningful ways, and when the results are applied to faculty and administrators in irresponsible ways, that certainly does not gain credibility for the process. But there's got to be more — even those of us who win at the ratings game, even those of us at places where the processes incorporate more of the research findings, and most especially those of us assigned to work with faculty who need to “improve” their ratings, something about the whole approach seems wrong and out of whack. Sometimes it's the preposterousness of thinking that a set of closed questions ranked on a seven-, five- or whatever point scale can capture the complex, dynamic milieu of events that make up the teaching/learning process. Sometimes it's the standardization of the whole process — that one form equally fits all teachers, all content, all instructional approaches, all learning outcomes, and all institutional contexts. And sometimes it's what the results do — transforming faculty so that they look more like those point grubbing students who are willing to do whatever, just so long as they get those ratings up.

It was comforting to discover that these concerns about ratings are shared by others. Larry Braskamp, co-author of the 1994 book, *Assessing Faculty Work* and long-time researcher and practitioner (he's been an academic dean as well as a faculty member), proposes that we consider what he calls more holistic approaches to assessing faculty work.

He starts by juxtaposing two current images of faculty work: one that starts with learning and sees the mission of college to produce that learning and a second that begins with the teacher as a person, not to be equated with techniques. These teachers do much more than transfer knowledge well; this teaching “touches and transforms people through relationships and community.”

Braskamp does not say which image is best or which predominates — he actually sees them as more complementary but describes them here in more extreme form so that the differences are clearer. About both, he asks four assessment questions starting with why do we assess? Traditionally, two goals are cited — one having to do with faculty development and the second having to do with accountability. When the focus is on learning, assessment aims to improve teaching so that it produces more learning. When the focus is on teaching the goal should be developmental, but it is not. “The focus of the evaluation of teaching has not been on the development of the soul of the teacher, that is, the identity and integrity of the professor as a person.” (p. 24)

What are the standards and criteria of quality and effectiveness? “The student-focused perspective defines the value of a faculty member's work in terms of influence and impact on the student.” (p. 24) Braskamp explores here the increasingly important role of technology and how it mandates that we expand the domain of teaching evaluations as technology changes the roles and contributes of teachers. He also points out that as education becomes more of an industry the personhood of the

teacher becomes even more challenging to include in the equation, especially given current assessment practices.

What do we assess? When learning is the most important element, then “measures of student performance are the cornerstone of assessment.” (p. 25) He worries that this may lead to a standardization of education so that quality ends up being compromised. He also sees teachers as becoming part of a “team-based” delivery system that renders a single teacher-based evaluation system increasingly irrelevant. And certainly current approaches do not evaluate aspects of the teacher's personhood.

And he concludes by asking, how do we assess? If we focus on learning, then we must look at reliably measured student achievement. If education becomes increasingly consumer driven, he thinks that quality will be compromised on this score as well. On the other hand, “if we focus only on the teacher or teaching, we will not move beyond our current practices. Many of our student-based evaluation procedures aimed at evaluating the teaching and teaching methods seem out of date and out of touch.” (p. 27)

This exploration is more theoretical than practical but it does ask the kind of questions needed to move forward our thinking about assessing faculty work. Our conceptions of teaching and learning are changing, but the way we assess faculty work in the classroom is not. Could this explain the growing disconnect, disillusionment, and disenchantment with instructional assessment?

**Reference:** Braskamp, L. A. (2000). Toward a more holistic approach to assessing faculty. In *Evaluating Teaching in Higher Education: A Vision for the Future* edited by K. Ryan. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 83, 19-33. 🍀

## Five Reasons to Use Peer Assessment in Groups

The use of graded group work continues to grow. Although by no means the perfect instructional method, it is an approach that includes many potential side benefits. For example, many instructors incorporate peer assessment as part of the grading process. In this case, students, using criteria supplied by the teacher or ones created by the group under the teacher's guidance, evaluate the contributions of others in their group. A recent article contains a list of the justifications behind using peer assessments in groups.

- This policy removes faculty from the position where they are the “sole arbitrators of success or failure.” (p. 275) When part of the evaluation process is given to students, they experience a policy that operationalizes the shared responsibility that is inherently a part of learning in collective contexts.
- Teachers cannot be a part of everything that happens in all the groups. Students know firsthand what happened in their group and that puts them in a “logical position to be able to judge ... the individual contributions of their peers.” (p. 275)
- Peer feedback is specific — it assesses what an individual did in the context of a particular task. That makes it especially valuable. And usually in the case of peer assessment in groups, the feedback is delivered promptly when it stands to have the most impact.
- This approach builds accountability into the group process. It holds students accountable to others in the group. They may be able to pull the wool over a teacher's eyes, but it is much more difficult to deceive fellow group members working jointly on a shared project.
- Students need to learn how to constructively deliver feedback to peers. It's a skill required in many professional contexts. It is not a skill acquired by osmosis. Students learn by doing it. Peer assessment teaches them “valuable skills about the learning process and about teamwork efforts.” (p. 275)

This list is part of a much longer article on the design and assessment of group work. It includes several forms that can be used by students to assess overall group effectiveness as well as the contributions of fellow group members.

**Reference:** Willis, D. and Millis B. J. (2004). An international perspective on assessing group projects. *To Improve the Academy*, 22, 268-283. 🍀

## Our Stories About Students

By Jim Downton

Making up stories is inevitable. What we say about them arises from our day-to-day experience as teachers. Some of us tell generally positive stories; others repeat more negative ones. Those stories shape our interpretations of students' motives and behavior. They affect what we look for and see. The quality of our relationships with students, how we teach, and how we feel about teaching are influenced by the nature of our stories.

When I was a new teacher, I worried about students deceiving me. I lived in a story that they would lie and cheat if I failed to keep my eye on them. This story made me suspicious. Over time, I discovered that my story was simply not true for the vast majority of my students, who had personal integrity and could be trusted.

I eventually realized that my negative story was diminishing my enjoyment of teaching because, expecting deceit, I had to live in a gloomy picture. Imagine taking

a vacation where you think someone will grab your purse or pick your pocket at any moment. It would not be much of a vacation, because the constant suspicion would take much of the pleasure out of it. That was precisely what my negative story about students was doing to my enjoyment of teaching.

I acknowledge that I did have a few students who either took advantage of me or tried to deceive me when it was in their interest. But, it was such a small percentage; I wondered why I should mistrust the vast majority of students who were honest. So, I made a decision. Instead of thinking that lying and cheating were the rule, I would treat them as minor exceptions. I decided I would trust all of my students and deal with any student who lied or cheated on an individual basis. This decision meant that I had to accept being duped by a few students in order to fully trust all the rest. If the dishonest students got away with something, I knew it would work against them in the long run and

they would pay a price.

Making that decision was one of the best things I did for myself as a teacher. It gave me a positive story to live in that increased my enjoyment of teaching. Now students know that I trust them and expect trust to be a principle that exists between us. This shift toward trust has produced many positive and productive relationships with my students over the years.

This passage, reprinted with permission, is excerpted from *Awakening Minds: The Power of Creativity in Teaching*. For more information about the contents of the book and other books by this author, visit [www.lifegardening.com](http://www.lifegardening.com)

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## 10 Characteristics of Effective Feedback

Teachers provide students feedback all the time. Because it is such an ingrained part of our instructional lives, we can do it without being consciously aware of what an important part of student learning experiences it can be. For that reason, we take time again to offer a set of guidelines for effective feedback. This particular set appears in a recent Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education monograph on feedback referenced below. If you don't have a good resource on feedback in your library, you might consider acquiring this modestly priced one.

Author Sergio Piccinin points out that these guidelines apply in varying degrees whether you are giving or receiving feedback and whether the feedback itself is oral or written, positive or negative.

### • Solicited

If a person asks for feedback, they are much more likely to accept what is offered. But how realistic is it to expect students to solicit feedback? Piccinin recognizes that this is not the natural student response, but he does point out that, like the rest of us, students do want to know how they are doing. They are less likely to ask though, when they think that asking makes them look weak, when asking reflects poorly on their self-confidence, or when it makes it look like they can't do the work. They are more likely to ask if their teacher takes the lead. "Perhaps one of the most powerful ways to foster solicitation of feedback is for the professor to model this behavior." (p. 28)

### • Attentive, caring, and respectful

The problem with having to deliver so much feedback is that we can become casual and slipshod in the way we deliver it. Students are sensitive and if the feedback belittles, threatens, or otherwise intimidates, even if that is not the instructor's intention, its potential to teach diminishes significantly.

### • Collaborative

The most effective feedback jointly

engages sender and receiver in a constructive exchange of information. Obviously sometimes we need to tell students what to do but rather than proposing definitive, fixed solutions to student problems, the more constructive approach explores alternatives with them. The objective is to involve the student in the process of assessing their own performances and moving their learning to the next level. "Feedback which is collaborative reduces the power distance in the relationship, making it more egalitarian, less threatening and more encouraging to the receiver to solicit feedback related to the performance in question." (p. 29)

### • Well-timed

As demanding and difficult as many of our teaching loads are, that does not change the fact that feedback is more effective when it addresses recent behavior. Students need to receive negative (and sometimes positive) feedback in private for their own sakes, but also because negative feedback delivered to an individual in front of the rest of the class may affect that teacher's relationship with the entire class.

### • Clear and direct

"Feedback is clear when it is not open to interpretation." Likewise it should be "straightforward and frank, not vague and circuitous." (p. 31)

### • Specific

Focus the feedback on behaviors, what the person has done, not what we imagine that they intend. This means the feedback should be expressed more in terms of adverbs (because these relate to action) and less in terms of adjectives (because these describe the qualities of a person). So it is better to say that a student "talked a lot in class" rather than describing him or her as a "loudmouth." It is better to report that three assignments have not been submitted rather than labeling the student as lazy.

### • Directed at behavior the person can change

The example given involves telling a basketball player that she would be a better player if she was taller versus telling that player to work on her dribbling and free throws.

### • Focused on a limited range of behavior at a time

This is especially true when there is much that needs to be improved. Most receivers are likely to respond to a barrage of negative feedback by first feeling overwhelmed and then concluding that improvement is hopeless. It is better to focus on a few — the most serious or those that the student has the best chance of improving.

### • Rounded or balanced

Avoid linking positive and negative feedback in ways that make it seem as though the positive feedback is just an attempt to be nice — while the real message is in the negative. "You have some promising ideas in this paper, but it's disorganized, and your ideas are not supported with logical extensions or persuasive examples."

### • Provides direction for improvement

Commenting on a paper that "this needs to be rewritten" is the same as saying to a teacher "you need to improve." Both examples of feedback contain no hints on how to fix a problem and if the receiver truly doesn't know what the problem is, this feedback is not helpful. It needs to offer some suggestions.

**Reference:** Piccinin, Sergio J. (2003) *Feedback: Key to Learning*. Green Guide No. 4. Halifax, NS: Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Green Guides may be ordered from the Dalhousie University Bookstore, phone 902-494-6704 or fax 902-494-3863 or email: [bookstore@dal.ca](mailto:bookstore@dal.ca). This 60 page monograph is available for \$9 (US), \$10 (CAD) plus shipping and handling. 🍎

## Student-Centered, But Focused on What?

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“Twenty-five cents,” she said, handing me a grande cup of gourmet coffee. I took back the two bills and fished my pocket for change. “It’s final’s week,” she beamed “We do it for the students.”

I looked around the student union. More luxurious than most hotel lobbies, the mezzanine boasted over-stuffed chairs, low tables, and gentle lights with CNN blasting out of an 8-foot by 4-foot screen.

The students, for whom the room was built and the coffee discounted, filled every chair. Some curled in sleep, some chatted on cell phones, and some sipped their waking jolt of caffeine. Their eyes were red and swollen. They simmered with the edgy

energy of harassed and sleepless children.

“We are a student-centered university,” the woman reminded me. “Ah yes,” I said and walked out the doors into the early morning gloom of the last week of spring semester.

Absurdities annoy more than they amuse. The bumbling ways that universities justify ever higher fees and demonstrate educational values now sends me growling to a thesaurus on a quest to find new words for stupid,— like inept, heedless, vapid, featherbrained, or puerile. Calling out these names temporarily assuages my anguish. But I’m still at a loss to explain policies and procedures that so effectively undermine our educational mission.

Take the morning images. It is thoughtful for a university to discount the price of coffee during final exams. But what about the lack of thought demon-

strated by ending all courses at the same time — projects due and comprehensive exams in every course during an abbreviated time period? What is the net effect of that policy? The last two weeks of each semester are lost to learning.

I once invited former students to review the final work of an honors course. Each team of five students presented their final project analyzing Truman’s decision to drop a nuclear bomb on Japan. They had worked hard. Indeed, they had been up all the night before. Their presentations were long on enthusiasm, the use of political science jargon, and lethal PowerPoint slides. The evaluators applauded politely.

After the students left, the alumni evaluated the presentations using a grading guide the students themselves had devised.

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## Assignment Choices: Student Responses

Two rationales are usually given for offering students a choice among assignments to complete in a course: It allows them to learn via mechanisms that are best for them, and it gives them a sense of control, which can increase the time and energy they devote to a course.

Two faculty members (reference below) report on experiences with this approach in an organizational communication course taken by 123 mostly juniors and seniors at the University of Texas. Students completed two learning activities (50 percent of their grade) and took a comprehensive final (the other 50 percent of their grade). They selected the two learning activities from a collection of 10, which included a traditional research paper, a synthesis of academic and practitioner literature, shadowing a business professional for a day and summarizing observation as well as video and audio productions.

The researchers sought to answer the following questions: 1) did students like

having assignment options? 2) did students believe that this choice-based design affected their learning? 3) how did students select learning activities? 4) did the criteria used to select assignments predict students’ self-assessments of their learning?

Students responded favorably. On a 7-point Likert-type scale with 7 being “like,” the mean was 6.34 (SD = .77).

A factor analysis of 15 considerations used to decide which assignments resulted in a four factor groupings that accounted for 66 percent of the variance. The four factors were Social Influence, a group that included what the professor said about assignment options in class, and what other students thought about them; Costs, which involved perceptions about how much time and effort the options required as well as how difficult students thought the option would be; Short-Term Payoffs, which included factors relevant to how interesting students thought the option might be and how likely they felt they were to get a high grade if they completed

it; and Long-Term Payoffs such as how much students thought they would learn and how relevant they saw the option being to career plans.

The researchers found that students who had their eye on long-term academic and career goals were more likely to see the choice-based approach as beneficial to their learning than did those students concerned with the more short-term cost issues associated with the options.

Open-ended queries yielded the following: 63 percent of the students made positive comments about the desirability of having more choice and control, and 36 percent worried that this approach made the grading more subjective.

**Reference:** Lewis, L. K., and Hayward, P. A. (2003). Choice-based learning: Student reactions in an undergraduate organizational communication course. *Communication Education*, 52 (2), 148-156. 🍓

# What to do When Students Weep

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Students lead lives full of stress, and sometimes that stress overflows as unexpected tears while they are in our offices or classrooms. What should we do when they weep?

First, we should consider what a student's emotional outburst might mean. Most of the time, students lose their composure in our presence for one of two reasons: we have made them angry or unhappy, or they are angry and unhappy for reasons of their own.

When we are the source of their unhappiness, is not mysterious because the cause is evident: the student has failed an exam, or written a terrible paper. He has behaved inappropriately in class, has plagiarized, or cut too many times. Whenever our own actions or policies ignite students' emotions, we should remain calm and objective while helping the student to see the error, understand the principle, or acknowledge that our policies are, if not what she wants, then at least what she must live with. We need to remember that most of these situations are teachable moments: students can make tremendous discoveries about themselves in the midst of such stress.

But when students are emotionally distraught for reasons of their own, we face a different dilemma. How do you deal with the woman who is overcome with sobs when discussing a rewrite? Or the student whose tension is so palpable, you know he is on the verge of tears, even as he packs up his things to exit your classroom? What do we do when a simple "How was your weekend?" elicits the trembling lip and moist eye?

Here are reasons for students' tears other than the obvious academic ones:

- They are experiencing independence for the first time, making decisions about how they live, what they do on weekends, and how they manage their time

each day. They are learning that their decisions have consequences.

- Their expectations of themselves, of their teachers, or of their peers are unrealistic. This is especially true of first-year students, accustomed to being at the head of the pack in high school, but now running hard just to stay in sight of the leaders.
- They are extremely anxious about grades because their financial aid is often tied to their grade point average.
- They are physically stressed by their sleeping and eating patterns.
- They may be reacting to volatile life events of which their teachers have no knowledge at all: divorces, deaths, accidents.

When students weep in our offices, we should have more to offer than a tissue. Here are some suggestions:

- **Listen.** Find out the cause of the student's distress. Do not offer to solve the student's problem, but listen with care and concern.
- **Restate.** Sometimes, it helps students to hear another person name the problem.
- **Correct misinformation.** A first-year student upset with her grades needs to know whether financial aid is re-evaluated each semester, or at the end of the year. A student who has failed a test needs to know what opportunities exist to raise his grade.
- **Offer resources.** Most colleges have a counseling center or offer counseling services. Most students need a nudge to use them. Usually, there are academic support systems available as well. Explain how to access them. Remember that even if the students have heard this information before, it has not been relevant to them before. Now is when they need it.
- **Offer hope by normalizing your relationship to the student.** It is very embarrassing for students to lose control in front of a professor. They feel foolish and irrationally fear that we will ridicule, despise, or pity them.

Therefore, the best thing we can do is to assure them, often by our subsequent actions, that we do not think any less of them for their outburst. Tell students you want to talk to them again, soon, and mean it. The next time you see the student who was weeping in your office, greet her. Make eye contact. She may want to tell you how the emotional situation was resolved, or she may not. But she needs to know that you are still speaking to her, that succumbing to stress should not be embarrassing, and that life will go on. 🍀

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## LEARNING MOMENT

FROM PAGE 1

ity and fosters a sense of ease; where a certain lightness, even playfulness, reigns. But even more important is our mind frame. We must stay open, keeping our minds nimble. Most of all we must learn to abandon what we thought was important and surrender to their serendipitous nature. Put succinctly, teachers (as opposed to one-way lecturers) must learn to live on the balls of their feet, expecting the unexpected. Then surprising things may happen in a classroom.

Though they have their place, we must not become obsessed with evaluation, assessment, testing — with the quantifiable — the scaffolding — lest we miss the magic moment, evanescent though it be. It is at the heart of learning, the simplest intuitus. The act of teaching, in its supreme moments, is larger than us. It becomes an act of allowance, an exercise of getting out of the way, of letting something work through us, taking its own directions. We tap energies whose original source and ultimate end no measuring instrument can calculate. I think we need to be reminded of this in an age of learning objectives, concept maps, and grading rubrics — the avalanche of paraphernalia that can obscure the very reason we are in the classroom. 🍀

# Teaching Involves More than Telling, Training

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Lately it seems that teaching is getting a bad rap. The focus is on learning, as if to say we had it all wrong to think of what we do as teaching. I think there's a misconception involved here, and it has to do with what teaching is and is not.

First off, teaching is not telling. If I walk into a classroom and start reeling off information, I am not teaching. If I devote 30 minutes to describing the history, layout, and interesting features of the periodic table, I may think that I'm teaching. But I haven't the slightest idea whether or not the students are even hearing me, to say nothing of whether or not they comprehend this content. And even if they do understand, there's no guarantee that they have assimilated that information so that they can recall, analyze, or apply the information subsequently.

Second, teaching is not training. I can show somebody how to use a photocopier or a digital camera. I can slowly work through the steps with them, answering any and all questions along the way. If I'm a good trainer, the person I've worked with will be able to use the device competently.


But what happens when the device malfunctions or breaks down? I have trained my "student" to follow a set of steps, but if that process doesn't produce the desired outcome, even good training is of no value.

I can train a student to solve a particular problem by plugging numbers into a standard equation and then using a well-defined algorithm. I can have the student repeat the process until they can perform it perfectly. But the minute I change the problem the student is flustered and unable to solve the problem. I have not taught the student problem-solving skills. I have not equipped them with a way of thinking that enables them to solve different kinds of problems.

Effective teaching does involve both telling and training. But there is much more besides. In my case, I teach when I give my students a holistic, multi-layered approach to solving problems. I show them why and how careful study, detailed analysis, and critical thinking positions them to solve a variety of problems. Students must understand that they need to look at problems from different angles, even explore dead-ends before they arrive at solutions that work. When confronted with new and different problems, they must be able to make mental adjustments

that lead them to solutions.

My students need to be able to perform calculations in chemical equilibrium. This is the type of problem that shows up in complex chemical reactions. I work with them on different ways to arrive at an "answer." But a very important step follows after they have that answer. Does it make sense? How does the answer relate to results from a slightly different composition? Or a vastly different composition? What are the approximations used in arriving at the answer? What are the limitations of the approach? What if we begin the analysis at the end and work back to the initial conditions? When students work through these kinds of questions, they develop confidence in their answer and more importantly they begin to see how it "fits" into the larger scheme. Getting them to that place involves teaching.

Effective teaching is not telling, not training, and it is not separate from learning. Learning is the key term in the equation. We've all been in or heard of classrooms where learning isn't taking place. Maybe the problem is poor teaching but more often, I'm inclined to think, that there's no learning because there hasn't been any teaching! 

## STUDENT-CENTERED FROM PAGE 6

I watched with horror as the best team in the class received a C-. It went downhill from there. "Look," I said, "I know they were a bit disorganized... ."

"Disorganized, they ignored the rubric."

"They're under a lot of stress. This is finals week. They haven't had enough sleep."

"Are we evaluating their performance or their situation? We think their performances were poor."

I started to protest once again, but I was looking at the faces of some of the best

students I had ever taught. Worse, they were looking at me curiously. One woman said, "We were like this at the end of the semester, and you praised our work."

"What could I do? You worked so hard. You were so exhausted. You..."

"So you let us get by," one lawyer indicted.

"OK, OK," I admitted and to myself noted all the excuses for sloppy final projects I had contrived over the years.

We discussed alternatives. We decided that class work in the course should end in 12 weeks. The students would prepare and present their projects the 13th week, and the last two weeks would be spent either on revisions or helping me improve the

course.

I put the plan into effect. I invited the alumni back. At the end of the presentations they stood and applauded the students. Every project received an A.

When I read or hear pronouncements about student-centered this or that. I ask is that policy learning-centered? Would it have a positive effect on how much and how well students learn? As Alan White says, 'Learning-centered teaching' is all about keying our practice to learning, making an effort to understand the learning process, and making a clear commitment to facilitating learning as our central task. 