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Shifting Paradigms? Don't Forget to Tell Your Students

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The following essay was prompted by my recent experience at the 2004 Teaching Professor Conference. A panel of four students, in response to the moderator's questions about how they learned, persisted in talking about what teachers had done in their classrooms. Despite the efforts of the moderator, not one of the four panelists spoke about her own learning, or claimed responsibility for his own intellectual growth. Education had happened to them all.

The move from teacher- or content-centered teaching to learner-centered teaching is a radical paradigm shift for our students. Unless we understand and acknowledge how different this makes the classroom experience for them, our forays into new kinds of practices will be misunderstood and met with resistance. In learner-centered teaching, the balance of power in the classroom is shared by the teacher and her students; content becomes not the end, but a means to promote learning; teachers become guides rather than experts; the responsibility for learning is shifted to the students; and evaluation is used to promote learning, not merely to generate grades.

This is new territory for most students. After all, experience has taught them that passivity is expected, even desirable: their teachers generate assignments, lectures, and evaluations. They have mastered a set of rules that privileges teacher action: get the right answer (the teacher's answer); expect every action to merit some tangible reward from the teacher (points or extra credit); work just enough to earn the grade you desire, as defined by the teacher's standards. Our best students have used this approach and achieved great success. They graduate at the top of their class and leave college with job offers in hand. Why should we expect them to abandon what has worked so well?

Their struggle is strikingly similar to the one most teachers face when they themselves embrace change. Which of us would not feel anxious, reluctant, even hostile, if told we had to retool all of our courses? Which of us does not experience dissonance when we see evidence that our teaching produces inferior learning? Like our students, we are products of a teacher-centered paradigm where the expectation is that teachers lecture and then test.

However, research tells us that deep learning requires students to be engaged and that the role of the learner must be central. How then, are we to bring our students along with us, as we shift from old practices to new? We must begin by making the process of change a continuous open dialogue. We must talk about learner-centered practice again and again as a course progresses. It must become a philosophy that stands at the center of our course design and practice, not at the periphery. Here are some ways I think we can accomplish this:

Use reflective learning logs at several points in the semester. An early log might ask students to respond to the course syllabus, taking note of any element that seems unusual to them. Or, one might ask students to strategize their approach to the course, to lay out their plans for study and homework, and to make predictions about their performance on course goals and objectives. In some cases, merely asking students to think about their own learning is surprising to them.

Solicit and share feedback often. After the first test, ask students to reflect in writing about what they learned from taking it. Ask them how they prepared for the test, and how their preparation will change next time. Gather the responses, share them in class, and talk about the kind of learning that testing promotes.

Reinforce, again and again, that the course is about their learning. Maintain a dialogue about their learning goals, and their perceived successes. Always ask, "Did this activity help you to learn? How might it have helped you to learn better?"

Be flexible. If we operate in a learner-centered classroom, then we can expect any group of learners to have somewhat unique needs. Accept this, and make changes as dictated by the feedback received from students.

The need to help students shift the paradigm of their thinking about what should happen in class is critical if we are to transform them from passive to active learners who think about ideas rather than about grades. If we consistently reinforce the value of their own learning, we can radically alter their thinking about what "going to school" means.

In This Issue

THE Teaching PROFESSOR

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- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
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Understanding How Students Perceive Workload

Students think some courses are harder than others. They also work more in some classes than in others. Faculty still routinely tell students that for every hour spent in class they should spend two hours studying out of class, even though much survey data has established that even students who do very well in courses do not spend two hours studying outside of class.

Some researchers have been looking at student perceptions of workload, trying to sort out how students measure the amount of work a course requires and how students decide how much effort to expend in a class. Research by David Kember (reference below) illustrates how naïve some of our thinking about course workload is. For example, it is the perception of workload that shapes student response to a course, not the actual number of contact hours or the actual time students spend studying for a course. That is not to say that these actual variables are unrelated; clearly a student is going to work harder in a four- as opposed to one-credit course. But Kember's study found that student perceptions (what they think about the workload in a course) "are more important than measures of time spent in class and studying independently." (p. 182) Neither of these two factors, separately or combined, correlated at statistically significant levels with the workload perception scale used in the study.

Kember gathered data on workload in two different ways. In one case students (266 of them from 17 different classes and at seven different universities) kept diaries for one seven-day period. For each day, they used a two-page form, one side for recording machine-scorable data and the other for written comments. At hourly intervals between 8 a.m. and midnight students were asked to respond to four questions: 1) were they studying and if so what subject; 2) how were they studying (students selected from 15 different options); 3) were they studying alone or with others; and 4) what language were they using to study (the research took place in Hong Kong where most of the instruction is in English but most of the students' native language is non-English)? Second, interviews were conducted with a sample of students from each class who were completing the diaries. The research article contains five detailed case studies constructed from these interviews. They are fascinating to read.

The study is an interesting blend of quantitative and qualitative research methods with results being combined in some creative and very useful ways. It's still research, which means the article is long and contains some jargon, but this is a piece of research well-worth reading. Kember uses the case studies to justify a set of inferences that explore relationships between time and workload; content and difficulty, student-student relationships, teacher-student relationships, and workload and learning approaches, among others.

In a final conclusion section he summarizes: "Students are prepared to work long hours for courses which are well designed and well taught — though there is a limit. Piling the work on will eventually become counterproductive as students resort to short cuts and undesirable study approaches to cope with excessive demands." (p. 182)

"It is clear that perceptions of workload and the amount of, and quality of, work by a class can be shaped by the teaching approach and curriculum design in the broad sense. Teachers and course designers are very important elements in influencing the way students approach their learning tasks. With good course design and by developing appropriate motivation it is possible to inspire student to work long hours to achieve quality work." (p. 182)

Reference: Kember, David (2004). Interpreting student workload and the factors which shape students' perceptions of their workload. Studies in Higher Education, 29 (2), 165-184.

Plagiarists I Have Known

By Carl B. Bridges
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Many instructors would rather take a beating than deal with a case of plagiarism, but unfortunately this is as much a part of our job as teaching or grading or sitting on committees. What's the best way to respond to the problems of plagiarism? The tips listed below come from long and sad experience. (If any reader feels shock and dismay that students at religious colleges sometimes cheat, please take a moment to get used to the idea, then read on.)

1. Publish the standards.

Students caught plagiarizing often claim they didn't know the rules, even though most colleges clearly convey their standards to every entering student. We should at least put a line in each syllabus saying, "The college's standards of academic integrity, as described on page X of the student handbook, apply in this course." The more detailed information we add to that simple statement, the more we will create a situation in which the student "knew or should have known" the standard, and we will hold the moral high ground when someone does plagiarize.

2. Google the rascals.

In the bad old days before computers, a wily student could find 11 books on her subject, put 10 of them into the bibliography, and hold back the 11th to copy from without attribution. This approach was hard to catch, because few of us know our literature well enough to recognize every book a student might borrow from. We could know in our bones that the work was not original, but we couldn't always prove it.

These days, students plagiarize by downloading whole essays off the web or by cutting and pasting from several websites. We can catch this kind of borrowing easily with search engines like Google, Yahoo, or AltaVista. When I spot a sentence that sounds too erudite, or too old-fashioned, for a student, I enter the whole sentence into Google, surrounding it with quotation marks to lock the words together in the search. This approach usually takes me right to the site where I find the material the student borrowed.

For some students we don't even have to use a search engine. "Not all students are good cheaters," my dean says, and he's right. A colleague of mine once received a paper he had already graded a year or two before — with his own marks still showing. One of my students told me she didn't think she had cheated because her friend had downloaded the material and given it to her. She didn't download it herself, an important distinction in her world.

3. Build an airtight case.

When caught plagiarizing, experienced cheaters reply with an impressive array of defenses. They didn't know it was wrong. They knew but were under time pressure. They knew but they are so sorry, and (in Christian colleges) don't we believe in forgiveness? They were told to write the paper this way by another instructor. They didn't have time to go back and put in all the references. Sometimes a student will advance four or five of these excuses at once, never noticing that they contradict each other.

Anticipating excuses, rationalizations, and tears, we need to keep quiet until we have evidence that no reasonable person could deny. The student may keep on denying, but if we have a solid case our academic leaders will back us up.

4. Don't let them get away with it.

At our college we exact penalties for plagiarism based on the severity of the offense. A student might fail the project he cheated on, fail all the projects of the same type (e.g., all the papers for the course), fail the whole course, or suffer penalties through the college's disciplinary procedures. Even when faculty members deal with cases themselves, they often report to the dean of students so that patterns in

PAGE 5 ☛

Teaching Professor Conferences, 2004 and 2005: A Note from the Editor

I did want to take a bit of space to thank those of you who participated in the first Teaching Professor Conference. The crowd was large with many disciplines and institutions represented. The various sessions and conference activities generated good discussion and considerable energy. It was invigorating to be together with 600 faculty who care about teaching and learning. Meeting many of you who have written for the newsletter, written to me about the newsletter, or faithfully read the newsletter was a special thrill.

Thanks to those of you who took time to provide careful and thoughtful feedback about this first event. We are using it to make the 2005 event even better. Information about this next conference can be found at www.teachingprofessor.com The call for session proposals can be found there. Please be encouraged to share your expertise at this next event. I look forward to seeing you there.

How Faculty Learn to Teach Better

I've been doing some thinking lately about how faculty develop as teachers. There's not a lot of literature, neither theory nor research, that describes how college teaching skills change or don't across a career. If growth and development occur, much of it is automatic, resulting naturally from processes that happen without much faculty awareness. This fact does not imply that we don't take our teaching seriously and work to improve, but most of us aren't terribly systematic about the development of our teaching skills. We grow and change more by happenstance than by design.

My thinking was piqued by a huge review of the educational research on how basic educators learn to teach. The research team (referenced below) looked at 93 empirical studies in order to establish the state of knowledge on this topic and to critique the research. The review is long and thorough, not easy reading, but some of findings are interesting and I wonder about their relevance and application in the post secondary realm to new and not so new college teachers. For example, this collected body of research includes "very little evidence" that supports trying to help people learn to teach by giving them information about teaching, as in telling them how to teach. (p. 160)

"What emerged as a more productive approach in learning how to teach was the designing of programs that built upon the beliefs of beginning teachers." (p. 160) That ended up being the most common recommendation made by researchers in the studies reviewed. Those who reviewed this research see this implication: "At the core of this approach lies the epistemological stance that learning how to teach is a deeply personal activity in which the individual concerned has to deal with her or her prior beliefs in light of expectations from a university, a school, and society in the context of teaching." (p. 161) There is also the assumption that if beliefs are changed, practice will change.

What resonated with me was the conclusion that learning how to teach is a deeply personal activity. I wonder if that doesn't relate to the fact that teaching ends up being such a personal expressional. We teach in ways that reflect our personhood and that makes us vulnerable, particularly when we implement changes.

Thinking about more systematic professional development made me wonder what kinds of resources, programs, and activities might support faculty growth if we orient to learning how to do it (or how to do it better) as a deeply personal activity. About this time I read the description and evaluation of a unique faculty development program offered to clinician educators at Johns Hopkins University.

Listed goals for the program include; "(1) teaching effectiveness, (2) professional effectiveness beyond teaching, (3) teaching enjoyment, and (4) learning effectiveness." (p. 470) The program runs for nine months and participants meet in stable groups of four to eight with one or two facilitators for three-and-a-half hours a week. The stable groups are designed so that trust and collaboration will develop between participants and with the facilitators. The curriculum covers seven content areas that include giving and receiving feedback, small group leadership and participation, precepting in clinical settings, lectures, and others relevant to the medical education environment. Instructional methods used in this program rely on cycles of observing, practicing and applying teaching skills and then reflecting on those experiences. For example in the case of giving feedback, participants are first taped giving feedback. Then they observe others using the skills, identifying less and more effective behaviors with other participants. Next they observe their tapes, self assessing first and then soliciting feedback from other participants. They also give other participants feedback. Finally they return to their self-assessment to refine their sense of strengths and weaknesses and to identify the resources they might need to improve their skills. It's an elaborate process that puts the faculty member at the center and in control of his or her development, but puts around those individual efforts an elaborate support network.

Pre- and post-evaluations generated data for participant and nonparticipant cohorts across eight years of this program. And the findings attest to the effectiveness of the approach (which the description above highlights but does not describe in complete detail). Participant self-assessments of 12 teaching and professional skills increased significantly for all but one of skills. Contrastingly, nonparticipants self-assessments increased in only one area, lecture. Their enjoyment of teaching decreased significantly whereas in the participant group it remained stable.

This grant-funded program is probably too labor intensive and expensive ($6,400 per participant, the article reports) to make it a viable model for most post-secondary institutions. However, its carefully designed and very learner-centered curriculum does illustrate what reflective, self-directed learning looks like for faculty developing teaching skills, and it shows how colleagues can be deeply and positively involved in each other's professional development efforts. Most importantly it contrasts growth by design with growth by happenstance. And the contrast is pretty stark, leading me to believe that for the most part we have pretty much underestimated what's involved when the learning about teaching is substantive and significant.

References: Wideen, Marvin, Mayer-Smith, Jolie, and Moon, Barbara (1998). A critical analysis of the research on learning to teach: Making the case of an ecological perspective on inquiry. Review of Educational Research, 68 (2), 130-178.

Cole, Karan A.; Barker, Randol; Kolder, Ken; Williamson, Penelop; Wright, Scott M.; and Kern, David, E. (2004). Faculty development in teaching skills: An intensive longitudinal model. Academic Medicine, 79 (5), 469-480.

Motivating Students: 8 Simple Rules for Teachers

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Principles of Accounting has the reputation of being a "hard and boring" course. It is difficult to motivate students to invest the time and effort necessary to succeed in the course. To meet this challenge, we have assembled a list of eight simple rules for keeping students focused and motivated. These rules are not original, and they aren't just for those of us who teach accounting classes. Indeed, most of these time-honored suggestions apply to any course students find hard and boring, and we think that makes them broadly applicable.

Rule 1: Emphasize the most critical concepts continuously. Reiterate these concepts in lectures and assignments throughout the course. Include questions relating to these critical subjects on every exam, thus rewarding students for learning, retaining, and, hopefully, applying this knowledge in a variety of contexts.

Rule 2: Provide students with a "visual aid" when possible to explain abstract concepts. A significant proportion of today's students are visual learners. For these students, a simple diagram or flowchart truly can be more valuable than a thousand words in a text or a lecture.

Rule 3: Rely on logic when applicable. Point out to students which information is merely "fact" that must be memorized and which course material is based upon "logic." Show students how to employ logical thinking to learn and retain new information. For example, in the double-entry bookkeeping system, "debits" equal "credits," and debit entries cause assets to increase. These are "facts" or features of the system; they are not based on logic. However, once the student accepts the system, logic can be used to operate within the system. Continuing the example, if debit entries increase assets, it is logical that credit entries will cause assets to decrease.

Rule 4: Use in-class activities to reinforce newly presented material. After a new concept or subject has been presented via text reading, lecture, or class discussion, allow the students to put the concept into action by completing an in-class assignment. These assignments can be short, but they must be developed to ensure that the students understand the critical concepts underlying the new material. Typically, the most learning takes place when the students are permitted to work in small groups, to refer to their text and notes, and to ask questions of the instructor while completing the assignment. If these in-class assignments are part of the course grading scheme, class attendance also improves.

Rule 5: Help students create a "link" when teaching something new. If the student can "link" the new material to something already learned, the odds of learning the new material are greatly increased. Examples of possible "links" include: prior material learned in this course (e.g., the critical concepts described in Rule 1), material learned in prerequisite courses, and "real-life" experiences of the students outside the classroom.

Rule 6: Recognize the importance of vocabulary in a course. Students often struggle with new vocabulary in many courses, especially introductory ones. To succeed in these courses, students must become comfortable with new terminology. As subjects are presented, new and/or confusing terms should be identified and introduced to the students. Present "real-world" definitions and alternative terminology, in addition to textbook definitions. One way to help students assimilate the course vocabulary is to create a "living" glossary on the instructor's website where new terminology is added, explained, and illustrated throughout the course.

Rule 7: Treat students with respect. Patronizing behavior may be expected of primary school teachers, and "drill sergeant" strategies may be effective in military boot camps. However, most college students will not respond well to these techniques. Give students their dignity, and they will give you their best efforts.

Rule 8: Hold students to a high standard. If students are not required to maintain a specified level of learning and performance, only the most highly motivated students will devote the time and effort necessary to learn. In contrast, maintaining high standards not only will motivate student learning, it also will be the source of student feelings of accomplishment when those standards are met.

Each of these rules can help motivate even the most lethargic student, but Rules 7 and 8 are the most important. If students are not treated with respect and held to a high standard, scrupulously following the first six rules will have much less impact and might end up being an exercise in futility.

PLAGIARISTS

FROM PAGE 3

student behavior can be detected.

The most crafty students plagiarize their way through college — and probably high school before that — by convincing each instructor, each time they're caught, that it was their first offense. Not so. They "knew or should have known," and we gain nothing, for the student, the institution, the profession, or ourselves, by letting students convince us otherwise.

Does this sound harsh? I suppose so; but then who wants a doctor, lawyer, engineer, or any of the professionals our students intend to become who cheated their way through school?

Videogames: Lessons About Learning?

Most faculty would agree: our students tend to be better at memorizing than thinking. Professor of reading James Paul Gee, in an excerpt from his book, *What Videogames Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, makes this point: "Learning isn't about memorizing isolated facts. It's about connecting and manipulating them." (p. 91) And this he contends is what videogames make players do.

He observes that videogames as agents of mental training have not been studied, and he thinks that's an unfortunate oversight as these games (which are highly attractive to kids, including many who attend college) do successfully employ some well-established learning principles. For example: "The secret of a videogame as a teaching machine isn't its immersive 3-D graphics, but its underlying architecture. Each level dances around the outer limits of the player's abilities, seeking at every point to be hard enough to be just doable." (p. 91) Learners simultaneously experience pleasure and frustration, both of which end up being highly motivational. How often are these emotions experienced by learners in college classrooms?

Videogames also use expertise in interesting and highly successful ways. "They tend to encourage players to achieve total mastery at one level, only to challenge and undo that mastery in the next, forcing kids to adapt and evolve." (p. 92) Gee contrasts this with the way students become "good" at taking courses and getting grades but often have trouble adapting and applying what they know in contexts anything other than the classroom.

Some videogames require 50 to 100 hours to complete. Again the contrast with college courses is stark. Material presented in texts and sometimes in class has been made easier, and students are challenged less often. Gee concludes that most schools are in the "cognitive-science dark ages." (p. 92)

Gee thinks the emphasis on the violence of videogames has distracted us from thinking about them as models for learning. "We don't often think about videogames as relevant to education reform, but maybe we should …. Kids often say it doesn't feel like learning when they're gaming — they're much too focused on playing. If kids were to say that about a science lesson, our country's education problems would be solved." (p. 92)

Reference: Gee, James. Paul. (May 2003). High score education: Games, not school, are teaching kids to think. *Wired,* pp. 91-92.

Are Faculty Doing the Scholarship of Teaching?

Recently a national survey of 1,424 faculty members at five types of colleges and universities and from four different disciplines was completed to ascertain the extent to which Boyer's notions of scholarship, have been institutionalized. And if so, whether they are being done at one kind of institution more than another, by some disciplines more than others, or by some kinds of faculty more than others.

The survey solicited information on all four kinds of scholarship (discovery, integration, application, and the scholarship of teaching) proposed by Boyer, but our discussion will focus on what was found about the scholarship of teaching. And the results are bleak indeed. Using an inventory of scholarship that includes specific examples of scholarly activities, unpublished scholarly outcomes and publications, researchers found that faculty engagement in the scholarship of teaching is considerably less than publication productivity levels in general. Almost 75 percent of the cohort surveyed had no publications associated the scholarship of teaching domain during the last three years. This compares with the 41 percent of faculty documented in previous work as not having published anything during their academic careers. The lack of pedagogical publication was not a function of institutional type or academic discipline. It was not influenced by gender, race or ethnicity, or tenure, among a collection of individual characteristics.

The researchers believe that the problem of less-than-impressive publication productivity results in part from the failure to embrace a definition of the scholarship of teaching. But there are even more fundamental questions involved. Must committed teachers publish? Do publications improve practice—that of the person involved and that of those who read the publications? Would more and better pedagogical publications gain respect and recognition for teaching? If there were more publications and they were better, would teaching count for more at tenure and promotion time? Does teaching and learning need an established knowledge base on which new scholarship builds? Why don't more faculty learn about teaching by reading?

One of the promises held out by the scholarship of teaching was that it would help us see teaching as a scholarly activity. Has that happened? The fact that we aren't publishing and have not as of yet grappled with how practitioner pedagogical knowledge is established, built, and passed on would seem to indicate a lack of progress, or has this editor just turned old and cynical? Opinions, insights, and proposed answers to the questions are welcome: send them to the editor at grg@psu.edu

Reference: Braxton, J.M., Luckey, W. and Helland, P. (2002). Institutionalizing a Broader View of Scholarship Through Boyer's Four Domains. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report: 29 (2). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Collaborative Exams: An Educationally Sound Practice?

The idea of collaborating on exams is a tough one for both students and teachers to get their minds around. For so long, testing has been about individual performance and competitive environments. And grades are still measures of individual mastery. Group grades hide those students who haven't prepared or can't competently handle the material.

These concerns are valid, but still an increasing number of faculty are fussing around with exam structures that do encourage students to work with and learn from each other. The study referenced below provides an interesting model and its assessment of results contains evidence few would not find compelling.

The context is relevant here (as it is in any consideration of conditions that make for constructive collaboration). The students were enrolled in five education methods courses part of two graduate teacher credential programs. We are not talking about beginning students, but then sometimes it's the adults who are most vested in individual performance.

Two different exam formats were used. In the first case students (who selected their own groups) worked the period before the exam responding to guidelines the instructor provided. When the essay exam (containing three questions that required both a synthesis and application of course content) was distributed, students worked in their groups constructing answers which they then prepared and submitted individually. The second condition differed from the first only in that groups actually prepared the essay answers and the grade the group earned was given to every individual. Interestingly for both conditions and in all the sections, students were given the opportunity to work individually but they were not encouraged to do so. Only about one student per class chose to do so.

To assess the effectiveness of this collaborative structure, the faculty researcher looked at its "soundness" across four dimensions: reliability, validity, efficiency and effect on the learner, using descriptive data to analyze each.

One of the major faculty concerns about collaborative exams is whether they allow an instructor to obtain an accurate measure of ability and discriminate among individual performances. In the first condition the instructor was able to measure individual performance. But students rated both conditions equal to or higher than traditional methods. "This finding suggests that one significant reason for not using such practices, that students would feel their grade had been unfairly determined, participants did not report as an overwhelming concern." (p. 276) What students did report was that the group context motivated them to try harder and to study more so that they would not let group mates down. However, based on grades earned on the individual answers, the researcher estimates that one in five group members contributed marginally to the group answer constructed in the second condition.

As for validity, 64 percent of the group felt that the collaborative format was a more valid form of assessment. "Many participants suggested that the collaborative format was more authentic and/or necessary for the collaborative world of teaching that they expected to be entering." (p. 277)

More than 70 percent of the students thought that the collaborative exam was a "more" or "much more" "efficient/doable/manageable way to assess the applied methods course content." (p. 278) Part of this positive response, the faculty researcher attributes to the very collaborative structure of the entire course. Students worked together in groups on various projects throughout the course.

Perhaps most compelling of all is the effect of this experience on the students as learners. An impressive 94 percent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement: "The collaborative exam format helped me to think critically about the course content." (p. 279). Another 90 percent thought the collaborative exam was more effective than individual exams in promoting positive relationships among class members. Of note here as well was the fact that in responses to open-ended queries, a significant number of the students reported that they went into the exam experience thinking that it was not going to work well. They were surprised at how successful it was.

Based on these findings, the faculty researcher identifies four reasons why he is committed to continuing to use this and other collaborative structures in his course. He believes these data support that his students learned more in the collaborative conditions, especially when taking into account that students reported that the collaborating on the exams promoted more and longer lasting critical thinking. Second, he is interested in avoiding assessment experiences that produce "thinkers who are more interested in getting answers right than growing as learners." (p. 281) He believes that these data support that collaborative exams and other group activities create a classroom environment where the sense of community motivates this kind of individual growth. Third, he believes faculty have the responsibility to provide opportunities where students can learn "to sink or swim in a collective effort. If we withhold the experience of dependency upon others, we are denying our students one of a limited number of opportunities to develop these critical skills." (p. 281) And finally, he cites evidence that teachers are likely to teach as they are taught and for that reason he wants his students to experience innovative methods.

Reference: Shindler, John V. (2004). "Greater than the sum of the parts?" Examining the soundness of collaborative exams in teacher education courses. Innovative Higher Education, 28 (4), 273-283.

Good Advice on Greatness

Articles offering advice to new teachers appear regularly in our pedagogical periodicals. Most give good advice; occasionally one contains insights relevant to new and "old" faculty. The article highlighted below falls into that category.

Rosemary O'Leary teaches public administration. She's won numerous teaching awards. Her two pages of advice begin with a familiar scenario. The great, nationally recognized, awesome, usually male professor confidently arrives in the classroom after the students are already there. With a flourish, he approaches the blackboard and begins writing formulas and constructing diagrams. Within five minutes the board is full, and the problem that took the best students three hours to solve is done. One awe-struck student comments, "I could have never solved that problem," to which the great professor responds, "if you could have solved it, you would be the professor and I the student."

O'Leary finds this view of the great professor troubling on several different levels. First, the focal point in this classroom is the teacher, not the students. And in this case the action of note involves a demonstration of the teacher's intellectual prowess, not the students' learning. Then there's the expectation that the great teacher must prepare the perfect lecture — the one that keeps students attentive and awestruck. And finally, there's the emphasis on the student "as a passive knowledge sponge." (p. 91)

Out of the negative aspects of this scenario O'Leary draws the "secret" to her success — the most important advice she has to pass on to new teachers: "Turn it inside out: Focus on the students as great learners, not on yourself as a great teacher." (p. 91)

One simple, but concrete way O'Leary proposes shifting the focus to students involves preparing for class. She rereads all the material assigned to students and then takes a "moment of silence." She uses this quiet time to confront two essential questions; first, "what do these students really need to know from this material," and second, "what is the best way for these students to learn this material." (p. 91-92) Her answer to the first question usually involves less, not more material, and her answer to the second summons a wide range of different strategies and approaches.

She also recommends preparing students up front for what's about to happen in the class. She puts a "warning label" (something akin to what one finds on a cigarette package) in her syllabus. It goes something like this: "Warning! This is a course with a unique blend of traditional readings and lectures, mixed with nontraditional role-playing, student participation, and discussion groups. Class sessions will be interactive with high quality, thoughtful, open-minded, and respectful class discussion expected. If you are interested in a safe lecture class where students are allowed to act as passive knowledge sponges, this class is not for you. I look forward to a great semester!" (p. 92)

As for what she calls the "great man theory of teaching," it's dead and O'Leary thinks there are three reasons to celebrate its demise. First, "no one has to be a great man to focus on learning." (p. 92) This contrasting view of teaching is much more inclusive — it accommodates faculty of every size, shape, color, and teaching disposition. Second, "no one ever gets it right the first time they teach a course. No one." (p. 92) It takes time, energy and considerable analysis to figure the best ways for students to learn a particular kind of content. And this view allows for mistakes so long as teachers fess up to them and offer students an alternative way to learn the material. And finally, "there is no excuse for poor teaching." (p. 92) We're all in it together, or as O'Leary puts it "we all work for the same firm and our goal is to serve a common client." (p. 92) This means we can and should ask each other for help; we can and should share with each other what we've discovered does and does not work.

Reference: O'Leary, Rosemary, (March, 2002). Advice to new teachers: Turn it inside out. PS: Political Science and Politics, 91-92.

12 Commandments for PowerPoint: One Objection

Ed.'s nte: Otto Helweg of North Dakota State University (otto.helweg@ndsu.nodak.edu) shared this view of on one of the PowerPoint Commandments that appear in the June/July, 2004 issue of the newsletter.

I endorse all the "commandments" regarding the effective use of PowerPoint with the exception of "commandment 8" which read, "Thou shalt not read the slides word for word." Actually, the commandment should be the opposite. The 3-M literature on using transparencies declares that "When a verbal presentation accompanies the slide, be sure that the words you say are the same as the ones you are showing — you are, in effect, reading aloud with the audience." There is nothing more frustrating than attempting to read a slide with text at the same time you are trying to listen to the speaker who is saying different words. The reason for presenting written information is for the audience to read it. This visual stimulation along with the verbal reinforcement increases retention. Consequently, the presenter should read the slide aloud as the audience follows, concentrating on the message that is both heard and seen.