



## Top-of-Hour Break Renews Attention Span

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It is 10 minutes before the end of class, and the mass of 375 students is beginning to get restless. Ballpoint pens retract, papers rustle, notebooks close, and bookbag zippers swoosh together. These disturbances, minor at first, ripple quickly across the room signaling that class is over and nothing else of consequence will occur. You envision quite a different conclusion for the 50-minute class. The final 10 minutes are for summarizing, showing relevance and connection to other course topics and answering questions that your passionate and enthusiastic presentation generated in the active minds of your students.

Most likely the problem is not you specifically but the mismatch between the typical 50-minute class schedule and the adult attention span that wanes after about 20 minutes. Even though the vast majority of your students are normal adults, they present more challenges, because they are conditioned by TV programming with its approximately seven-minute segments followed by commercials. Even the best of lectures has a three- to five-minute warm-up period at the beginning, followed by 10 to 18 minutes before attention lapses into an interval of inattention. As a lecture continues, attention spans become shorter and often fall to three or four minutes between periods of inattention toward the end of a standard lecture. All of these intervals and measures of attention span have been established through research.

The scenario described above portrays my experience teaching a large-enrollment undergraduate class in environmental conservation at Purdue University. The course is required for a few majors, but most stu-

dents use it as a science elective for primary/secondary education or business management, as well as a general elective for the university at large. This means that students do not come to class with a robust dedication or career attachment to its content. It was quite apparent that straight, uninterrupted lecturing was not an effective way to teach even when using colorful PowerPoint presentations supplemented with two-inch-by-two-inch slide images and at least two active overhead projectors splashed upon a jumbo screen, all narrated with theatrical voice changes and hand gestures. The normal attention span of college students was a challenging goliath that needed a different tactical approach to conquer.

For the past five years, I have experimented with an instructional technique I call the "Top-of-the-Hour-Break." Class starts on the half-hour and lasts for 50 minutes. I interrupt each session at exactly the top of the hour to show a two- to three-minute video clip, to conduct a short hands-on activity, to show tangible items, to chat about my personal experiences traveling, or to discuss private consulting activities. Although these short breaks are totally extraneous to the topic of that day, most of the content or activities are directly related to course material that was presented earlier or will be presented later in the semester.

Selection of the break material is critical to ensure resetting the attention span. It is essential that the content be unpredictable, entertaining but substantive, and not blatantly pedagogic. Occasional use of human-interest stories about my family and grandchildren seem to be very effective in providing both an opportunity to reset attention span while at the same time

improving my rapport with the class. The personal accounts provide a view of me as a person with a life and interests outside of the university. I also use these breaks to integrate real-world experiences with conceptual material presented in class. The various activities can be used to add diversity, inspire debate, create opposing points of view, or to increase student interaction.

I am very pleased with the outcome of the breaks, and student evaluations of this approach are very positive. The following written comment received on an end-of-semester course evaluation reflects student enthusiasm for the idea: "Whoever came up with the break idea is the closest thing to a college professor superhero that I've encountered."

The Top-of-the-Hour-Break is a slightly different twist to the established idea that change-up during lectures is very effective (i.e., using video clips, turn-to-

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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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## Bored and Ignored or Gained and Maintained: Role of Attention in Beginning Class

By Brenda M. Davis, Randolph-Macon College, VA [bdavis@rmc.edu](mailto:bdavis@rmc.edu)

"Let's begin today where we stopped last class."

How many college classes start this way every day? Some students attend by searching their notes or books to discover where the prior class concluded. But, for most learners, this opening fails to capture their attention, and they struggle to find some connections to the topic.

Paying attention is a prerequisite to learning: much research documents this fact. Other research links attention to several general factors, including physical characteristics, novelty, incongruity, emotionality, and complexity. I would like to consider these characteristics and describe strategies illustrating how they can be used to gain and maintain student attention. I am hopeful that these ideas will generate still other ways to prevent disconnect at the beginning of class.

Physical characteristics are those that appeal to our senses. Instructional strategies to gain attention could be a demonstration, music, a large sign with information or a symbol, or a colorful display. A geology professor begins a presentation on caves by giving student teams rocks of various shapes and sizes. He then asks them to study the rocks and name some of their features. A history professor opens class on an era in 20th century America by playing popular songs from that time period.

Novel or incongruent attention-getters create an element of surprise. For example, novelty and incongruity are incorporated when I bring my Labrador retriever to an educational psychology class. She performs several tricks she has been taught using the behavioral learning principles of reinforcement and shaping. I follow up the demonstration by asking questions like,

"How did Lipstick (the dog) learn to dance; to fetch?"

A Spanish professor I know uses novelty and incongruity to begin an intermediate-level class. He comes in dressed as a bandit and "robs" several students. He later returns as a police officer and asks for a description of the bandit. He integrates this opening into a lesson that aims to help students distinguish between two different verb tenses.

Emotionality, such as humor, also can be used to capture attention. Though my joke-telling skills are limited, I have been successful in using an array of cartoons and comic strips to orient a class to a topic. Other strategies that depend on emotionality include those that personalize an opening by integrating student names into a story, question, or puzzle; current local media topics; or relevant campus issues. For example, the college's team budgets as well as the athletic participation statistics for men and women are posted as the introduction and attention-getter to Title IX discussions in a women's studies class.

Some strategies relate to physical traits, novelty or incongruity, and emotionality collectively. Children's literature or picture books are effective openers and often highlight principles relevant to various disciplines. The Junie B. Jones book series by Barbara Parker, provides entertaining examples to highlight cognitive, language, and moral development in young children.

So how can a professor gain and maintain attention? Complexity is an inherent and essential component in each of the suggested strategies. It promotes higher-level thinking and offers clear connections to the topics of the class and learning objectives. My dog captures attention, but she quickly becomes nothing more than entertainment if her actions cannot be connected to the topic and what students need to learn about it. 🍏

## Active Learning: Reviewing the Research

As regularly noted in this newsletter, scholarship that summarizes, distills, and integrates educational research for practitioners is woefully absent in the pedagogical literature. We enthusiastically greet work that fills this void. We also attempt to highlight these summaries intriguingly so as to motivate you to add articles like these to your collection of material essential to successful teaching and learning.

The case in point is a recently published summary of research on active learning (reference below). Numerous issues make reviewing the research on active learning no small task. As author Michael Prince explains, to begin there is the problem of defining active learning. Even though the term is widely used and commonly understood, that does not mean everyone defines it similarly, and when you are reviewing empirical findings, consistency matters. In the article, Prince opts for generally accepted definitions and seeks to add more precision by looking at three different types of active learning; collaborative learning, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning (PBL). But even this move does not entirely eliminate the problem because so many iterations of each of these three types of active learning exist. Prince points out that the distinctive “approaches to PBL [for example] can have as many differences as they have elements in common, making interpretation of the literature difficult.” To address the definitional differences at this level, Prince opts to identify the core elements of each type and then assess the literature in terms of these core elements.

Another set of problems relates to measuring what works. “Just as every instructional method consists of more than one element, it also affects more than one learning outcome.” (p. 224). Does active learning work when students’ knowledge is impacted? Does it work when students develop relevant skills? When their attitudes are changed? Does it work when they stay in (as opposed to drop out of) academic programs? Add to this problem, the difficulty of measuring some of the learning outcomes active learn-

ing approaches aim to influence, like the ability to solve open-ended problems or to engage in lifelong learning. And finally there is the problem of determining when an improvement is significant. Most of the positive effect sizes reported are small. They meet the statistical criteria of significant, but they are still small.

Working around and through these problems, Prince reviews the empirical literature for active learning, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning. The article includes a clear discussion of each, non-technical summaries of the relevant research and tables that list studies, learning outcomes affected, and the effect sizes. It is a well-organized and comprehensive review. Here we identify the core elements and the general conclusion Prince draws based on this systematic review of the research.

**Active Learning** — core elements: introducing activities into traditional lectures and promoting student engagement.

Summary: “Considerable support exists for the core elements of active learning. Introducing activity into lectures can significantly improve recall of information while extensive evidence supports the benefits of student engagement.” (p. 226)

**Collaborative Learning** — core elements: collaborative work vs. individual work, as when students work together in a small group toward a common goal.

Summary: “A number of meta-analyses support the premise that collaboration ‘works’ for promoting a broad range of student learning outcomes. In particular, collaboration enhances academic achievement, student attitudes and student retention.” (p. 227) Prince finds the magnitude, consistency, and relevance of the findings to be a strong mandate for the use of student collaboration in courses.

**Cooperative Learning** — core elements: cooperation used rather than competition, but individual assessment is retained.

Summary: “There is broad empirical support for the central premise of cooperative learning, that cooperation is more effective

than competition for promoting a range of positive learning outcomes. These results include enhanced academic achievement and a number of attitudinal outcomes. In addition, cooperative learning provides a natural environment in which to enhance interpersonal skills. . . .” (p. 227)

**Problem-Based Learning** — core elements: relevant problems are introduced at the beginning of an instruction cycle and are used to provide the context and motivation for learning. PBL is active, and usually it is collaborative and cooperative. Much of the learning is self-directed. Prince sees this as the most difficult area in which to analyze the literature because PBL does not have one or two consistent core elements that can be assessed in terms of their impact on learning outcomes.

Summary: “While no evidence proves that PBL enhances academic achievement as measured by exams, there is evidence to suggest that PBL ‘works’ for achieving other important learning outcomes. Studies suggest PBL develops more positive student attitudes, fosters a deeper approach to learning and helps students retain knowledge longer than traditional instruction.” (p. 229)

If you have colleagues who doubt the effectiveness of active-learning strategies, this article offers a compelling collection of data — thoughtfully structured and easily accessible. The author sums his findings this way: “Teaching cannot be reduced to formulaic methods and active learning is not the cure for all educational problems. However, there is broad support for the elements of active learning most commonly discussed in the educational literature and analyzed here.” That conclusion will come as no surprise to most readers of this newsletter, but it’s nice to have solid evidence standing behind what many of us have observed in our classrooms.

Reference: Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, (July), 223-231. ♥

## A Brief Statement of My Teaching Philosophy

*Ed.'s note: From time to time we publish teaching philosophy statements (usually shortened versions). Our goal is to encourage all of us to revisit the reasons why and the purposes behind our daily actions in the classroom. Michael Glaser shares his philosophy in a handout he distributes early in the course. He goes a step further when he spells out the implications of his philosophy for students.*

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I am committed to the liberal arts ideal that education should familiarize students with the intellectual, spiritual, artistic, and scientific traditions that women and men have turned to in order to better understand their lives and their world.

I believe it is important to be curious about and alert to the interrelationships among the various things we study, see, hear, and think about; the lives we lead; the

world we live in and; those who share this world with us. Doing so, as openly as possible, enables us to pursue together the questions that are evoked by Socrates' statement that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

I hope that my classes and interactions with students will serve to help each of us come closer to achieving a personally exciting connection with the kinds of knowledge, skills and habits of the mind that help one to meaningfully and joyfully live the "examined life."

I share with others the notion that "an educated human being is one who combines skepticism with reverence, who will question everything but the dignity and worth of others" and who recognizes the importance of serving the larger community.

[I have borrowed this quotation as well as some other phrases/ideas from the Sarah Lawrence College catalog, to which I am indebted.]

Thus, I encourage you. . .

- to be actively engaged in your learning by bringing to bear on your education your own interests, skills, passions, and potential as keys to your involvement with the subject matter of this course
- to take both intellectual and creative risks
- to actively engage with me and the other students in this course to create a classroom environment that promotes respect, meaningful dialogue and trust
- to keep in mind that what you gain from this course depends on your effort and involvement. As much as I wish for each of you to succeed, my role is necessarily limited to that of facilitator, encourager, guide and cheerleader.

I look forward to our time together. 🍀

## Providing Notes: A Research Update

Some previous research (highlighted at various time in the newsletter) has reported that providing students with instructor-prepared notes improves their performance in class. More specifically, research has documented the value of providing partial notes so that students still must record some of the material for themselves. Some of this research has been criticized because of its experimental context — students were not using the notes across an entire semester in a course they were taking for credit.

This study (reference below) attempted to verify previous findings by testing the impact of notes on grades and attendance in a bona fide course — in fact in 11 sections of the same course. The researchers tested notes under three different conditions: 1) where the student generated their

own notes, 2) where the instructor provided partial notes, and 3) where the instructor provided full notes.

Based on previous research, they hypothesized that students provided with partial notes would have the highest grades and those provided full notes would have the lowest attendance. Surprisingly, results failed to confirm either of these hypotheses. No statistically significant differences in grades or attendance emerged.

On a survey completed at the end of the semester, 72 percent of the students reported that they did download instructor-provided notes before the lecture, but about 60 percent of them failed to review them before hearing the in-class presentation. Between 23 percent and 40 percent of the students (the percentage ranged across the three conditions) reported not

studying until the night before the exam. On average these students missed between nine and 10 class sessions.

These less-than-positive results may in part be explained by the 54 different majors reported by students in this required, entry-level psychology course. But then required courses make up a significant part of the learning experience in college, which still leaves us to wonder and worry about the results.

Reference: Vandehey, M. A., Marsh, C. M., and Diekhoff, G. M. (2005). Providing students with instructors' notes: Problems with reading, studying, and attendance. *Teaching of Psychology*, 32 (1), 49-52. 🍀

# Cheating: Can We Be Part of the Solution?

## A Response to Johnson

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Johnson's analysis of the role instructors may play in both encouraging and preventing cheating prompted me to respond with perspectives that agree and disagree with some of the points made in his article which appears in the March 2005 issue of this newsletter.

Instructors are under great pressure, often through anonymous class evaluations, to grade (at worst) no harder and assign (at most) no more work than their colleagues. Departments and universities know that the money from a student looking for an easy degree is just as bankable as the tuition of the hard-working student who chooses small, advanced classes, and easier to earn.

There is a risk that this may extend a tolerance of cheating. If what the dean and chair most want from a junior instructor is good class evaluations, good grades, and no trouble, then the instructor can satisfy them most easily by turning a blind eye to cheating, if it's not too blatant, or by giving harmless warnings that don't affect the cheater's grade or academic record.

This is far from the "zero-sum relationship between the student and the teacher" that Johnson suggests is necessary for cheating. If the instructor perceives that there is as much to lose from cheating as the student has to gain, enlightened self-interest will probably win out. Cheating flourishes when the instructor has less motivation to prevent the offense than the student has to commit it.

This suggests a two-pronged strategy: prevent cheating by increasing the instructor's motivation to stop it, and at the same time decrease the student's motivation to do it. Academic leaders can aid this by supporting instructors who report cheating and taking decisive action. I have learned from my colleagues elsewhere that some report cheating only when absolutely necessary because making the case takes an inordinate

amount of time and penalties are so mild that they do not deter subsequent cheating.

In many courses, Johnson's recommendation of open-book exams is a good way to reduce cheating without sacrificing standards. It's usually easy to set an exam that will measure a student's understanding of the course while permitting the use of the textbook and other resources; and cheating in such conditions is much more difficult, simply because allowing the textbook makes most other written information sources irrelevant.

Under normal exam conditions, I agree with Johnson that it is harder for students to cheat on questions based on higher levels of learning. Unfortunately, many lower-level classes consist largely of students who are not accustomed to analysis, synthesis, or evaluation, and it is unrealistic to expect an instructor to take a group of such students to the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy in a semester. An exam set entirely at these higher levels would fail most of a typical first-year class, and it would be a bold (if not arrogant) instructor who would attempt to justify this by saying that students who expected to get by at the lower levels did not deserve to be in college.

Take-home exams, however — a strategy that Johnson pairs with open-book exams — cannot make cheating difficult in the same way unless the rules permit **all** forms of assistance, even the use of a paid assistant. Of course, such an exam would be completely invalid as a measure of the student's understanding. If such "resources" are forbidden when the rule cannot be enforced, then not only is cheating possible, it can be done easily. I believe that take-home exams can only be used legitimately for small classes in which the professor knows each individual to be trustworthy.

I do agree that most of the practices Johnson advocates constitute good teaching. However, not all are good evaluation practice, especially with larger, lower-level

courses. I agree (with some reservations) that open-book exams, non-exam-based assessment, and questions requiring real thought can do a lot to discourage cheating; but in general, there is more to good evaluation than good teaching. There will always be a place for old-fashioned vigilance and planning.

No matter how well we teach, if we make it easy for students to cheat, some will do so. We cannot treat the maintenance of academic standards as if it were somehow beneath our dignity as scholars, or an adversarial act setting us against our students. In the long run, they are the ones who gain most from the status associated with their degrees and that status depends on a public perception that the degree means something. 🍓

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### ATTENTION SPAN

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your-neighbor discussions, and hands-on activities randomly peppered throughout a lecture.) All of these change-up strategies could be used, and should be used, in conjunction with the Top-of-the-Hour Break. The difference is that the break is a scheduled and anticipated event during class. It is not more on the same topic just in a different format. The Top-of-the-Hour Break provides an opportunity for students to disengage for a few minutes and then to refocus.

Through this technique, I regain the last 10 minutes of class time and contravene those sounds of students tuning out and shutting down. I think it is a win-win situation. I get the full 50-minutes of my scheduled class time, and even though five minutes of it may be tangential to the topic of the day, it still is a full 50-minute teaching and learning opportunity for me and my students. 🍓

## A Less Structured, More Learning-Centered Environment

### **Traditional teaching:**

“doing something to students.”

### **Learner-centered teaching:**

“doing something with students.”

### **Learning-centered:**

“being with students.”

Do these differences seem semantic? To Jean Ramsey and Dale Fitzgibbons (reference below) they typify three modes of teaching, each located at a different place on a continuum. In the traditional mode, teachers pass on knowledge. Ramsey and Fitzgibbons note that most teachers have moved beyond this conception to a point on the continuum where they find themselves doing activities, exercises, leading discussions, and otherwise working to engage and involve students. But they observe that most learner-centered teaching still rests on teacher-initiated techniques. They see a place on the continuum beyond this, a place that simply puts the teacher among

the students. “We’re here to learn together and you (the students) are as much a source of our learning as I (the teacher).” (p. 337) This “being” with students creates a kind of ultimate learning community.

“Being classes,” as the authors refer to them, rest on the belief that students themselves control what they are learning. Teachers cannot learn content for students. But neither can teachers force students to learn. From any given learning experience, students will take vastly different things. They learn in different ways and filter all learning experiences through the unique set of past experiences. If you doubt these premises, the authors challenge you to take a learning experience that has occurred in your class, maybe a good student presentation, an exercise or an especially animated discussion, and immediately after its conclusion, ask students to write a paragraph about what they learned. “You may find yourself amazed at what some of them learn. What was

intended as the major learning may pass them by completely, whereas some of their learnings may be unexpected, and unintended.” (p. 339)

Applying these assumptions in a classroom changes the role of both teachers and students. For teachers, it introduces ambiguity and uncertainty in classroom. “Content emerges spontaneously, and often serendipitously, from the process. There is no way to anticipate the learning opportunities that may emerge.” (p. 341) This means teachers must be grounded well enough in a topic area that they can go with the flow — respond with the content when, where, and on what topic it is needed.

As for students, in these kinds of learning environments, compliance is not enough. Cooperation won’t carry the day, and students need to bring commitment — an enthusiastic involvement in their

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## The Power of Feedback

I finished writing a book in February, and last night the three external reviews commissioned by the publisher arrived — Friday night, the last week of the semester when I am tired all the way to my core. Waves of anxiety hit me hard. I pause, should I read them now, or wait until tomorrow, or next week? I decide to take a quick look. I feel my heart pounding. Reviewer one seems to have missed the book’s points completely. The comments focus on side issues, small details. That’s troubling. Reviewer two is positive, positive. My spirits soar. I am relieved and exhilarated. The changes proposed make sense. I can do them. Reviewer three is much more critical. The book needs major reorganization. Its tone is wrong; too argumentative and didactic. I feel myself falling. It hurts when I land.

I haven’t tried to re-read the comments this morning. I will wait until I am better

balanced. I’m not pleading for only positive feedback. Rather, I’ve just had a reminder of how enormously connected I am with my work. You can’t pour your heart and soul (to say nothing of almost every weekend) into something for three years and not be vulnerable when an anonymous someone renders judgments about it. And it is this vulnerability that gives the feedback its great power — to help, to hurt, to inspire hope, to raise questions, to prompt defense, and to deepen despair, even when the person on the receiving end has already known much praise and blame.

In the same e-mail download came a note from a student I’d met with earlier in the day. “I wanted to thank you so much for what you said to me in the conference we had in your office. Your words give me so much more confidence than what I thought I had. It makes me feel really great to think

that someone does see me as being able to be a good leader.”

John does have all sorts of leadership potential, but I offered that feedback somewhat casually. In my mind were thoughts about where he’s headed — the military — and my concern that in addition to all the technical aspects of leadership, which he will be taught well, he also needs an understanding of leadership grounded in humanness, ethical responsibility, and reverence for life. When I spoke the feedback, I was not thinking about its impact on him here and now. I underestimated its importance to him. His note surprised me. I had delivered a powerful punch without even knowing it. Now I’m fretting about things said in conferences with other students... as well I should be. Feedback can be a powerful source of learning. 🍀

## ‘Lone Wolves’ on Student Teams

Lone Wolves are folks who don't hold group process in high esteem. They don't think others are particularly capable. They frequently think that their ideas are the best, and they find it hard to trust others to deliver “goods” that meet their standards.

The lone wolf phenomenon can be observed among student groups as well. They are those really bright students that really hate group work. When forced to work in teams, they frequently cope by doing all the work for the group or controlling creation of the product so completely as to render the contributions of others pointless.

A study of 224 students at two different universities documented that the lone wolf can self-identify and can be identified by their group mates, and their presence on teams had a negative impact on group performance.

A large part of the article reporting this research (reference below) explores ways teachers can effectively deal with lone wolves. Some might take their existence and impact on groups as a sign against group work, but as these authors point out, work in teams continues to be a growing trend in business environments.

The authors begin by suggesting that

students must be given instruction in group dynamics. People are not born knowing how to work well in groups. And part of the instruction should include the fact that members bring to group work many different individual characteristics.

The lone wolf individual is often helped by getting to know others in their groups. They may discover some other members that care about success as much as they do. There may be someone else in the group they can trust.

Connections with even a few group members helps the lone wolf. Moreover, the group and the lone wolf need to recognize that the lone wolf possesses strengths that can be enormously helpful in the group. “Lone wolves are driven, self-confident, and energetic.” (p. 86) They often have leadership ability, and in that role they are frequently successful in motivating and challenging group mates.

What works especially well is when the lone wolf experiences a group performance that exceeds individual performance. When a group functions well, its collective decisions are frequently better than individual ones. And if everyone does part of the work, it is clearly more efficient than when one person must do it all. Moreover, the lone wolf also needs to learn that a lack of orga-

nizational commitment, an unwillingness to work with peers can be an obstacle to success in many professional contexts. They need to be confronted with the implications of findings from research like this — even though they may move in and do the work or control the process, their involvement does not make for a better product than the group collectively could have created.

Frequently the process of learning the value of group decision-making is a gradual one. The lone wolf may be moved toward the ultimate goal incrementally, starting with group involvement that is low-stakes, where most of the grade is still determined by individual work. Course work can occur along a continuum that begins with independent work and ends with collaboration. The objective here is not to expunge the preference to work alone, but rather to equip the lone wolves with strategies and skills that enable them to work in groups when the need arises. Might this be a viable approach for some faculty as well?

Reference: Barr, T. F., Dixon, A. L., and Gassenheimer, J. B. (2005). Exploring the “lone wolf” phenomenon in student teams. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 27 (1), 81-90. 🍎

### LESS STRUCTURED

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own learning and the learning of others. Students and teachers engage in an exploration of ideas. In these classrooms, questions are valued more than answers.

“Being in the classroom” is at the far end of the learning continuum — well beyond where even the learner-centered among us have ventured with our teaching. But this article offers lots of encouragement to push toward this place of diminished structure. The authors repeatedly point out that “being is not just non-doing. Being classes have purpose and a clearly visible process to them.” (p. 354) In

fact, the syllabus excerpt included in the article looks and sounds quite conventional. Students are doing written work, taking exams, and preparing projects. These two authors see course design as the creation of a “container,” the setting of boundaries within which students are given the freedom to self-organize their learning.

They also see viability for all three modes of teaching and see the possibility of all three being used in the same course. “What we advocate here is active and overt choice about where to operate on the doing-being continuum.” (p. 354) Those choices may depend on the nature of the content, the objectives of the course as well as where students are in their own devel-

opment. They use different amounts of each depending on the time trajectory of the course -- less of the being mode at the beginning; more at the end.

Reference: Ramsey, V. J. and Fitzgibbons, D. E. (2005). Being in the classroom. *Journal of Management Education*, 29 (2), 333-356. 🍎

## Book Review:

### *Professing and Pedagogy: Learning the Teaching of English*

We don't do a lot of book reviews in the *Teaching Professor*. As the years roll by the editor grows increasingly cynical about faculty reading books on teaching and learning. Most don't read any. Some read a few. But it's summer. . .so perhaps there's a bit more time and a need for the editor to light candles instead of cursing darkness.

It has always been our policy to review books we have read and can endorse for our diverse readership. The title of this book would seem to make a broad endorsement dubious: it is written by Shari J. Stenberg, an English professor, and it is about learning to teach English. And it may be that this book isn't for everyone, but its contents are relevant far beyond just this field. See if these excerpts spark your interest.

Here's the premise with which the book begins: "efforts to improve the status of teaching or teaching development do little good when they do not also challenge deeply entrenched conceptions of the research professor and the discipline, which contribute to utilitarian conceptions of teaching." (xvii) And why are these conceptions so problematic? Because they position pedagogy as one of two things: subject matter or practice. "Either way, the result is the same: teaching is understood as a set of skills, not as an epistemic activity central to professorial work. I contend, then, that even as 'pedagogy' has gained scholarly legitimacy and practical urgency, our conceptions of professing have not been sufficiently revised." (xvii)

The reconception proposed by this author involves thinking of pedagogy this way. First, "pedagogy is a knowledge-making activity that involves the interplay of visions and practices, both of which require reflection." (xviii) What she sees here is a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice with each feeding the other. Out of practice, knowledge can be

born. Out of theory, practice can be informed. In the second chapter, she examines critical pedagogy and the scholarship of teaching movements, seeing both as seeking to legitimize pedagogical inquiry. She believes they fail because they transform teachers into scholars and "reify the distinction between pedagogy (the subject) and teaching (the practice)." xxi

Second, "pedagogy is dependent on learners and is remade with each encounter, as the students and the teacher change." (xviii) The concern is that no teaching practice is inherently good or bad, despite our affinity to affix those labels: portfolios are "good;" lecturing is "bad." "But practices never function devoid of specific contexts. It is the interplay of practices and contexts that requires ongoing reflection, consideration." (p. 82)

Finally, "Pedagogy cannot be finished; we cannot 'finally' learn to teach. Rather it requires an ongoing commit[ment] to learning and reflexivity." (xvii) In other words, the development of teachers is never-ending. Teachers cannot be "trained" to teach or be expected to "pick" up all the skills they need in orientation sessions or professional development seminars.

The kind of teacher learning she proposes can be accomplished through something called reflexive pedagogical inquiry — her conception, but one that builds on the work of others. The idea here is to create a narrative from which one can learn about teaching, but not in the sense of definitive lessons. "Reflexive narratives... differ from other models in that they are not intended to offer final or complete renderings of the self as a subject. Instead, they provide opportunities to theorize a particular moment, to dialogue with it, and to examine possibilities for change." (p. 76)

The book contains examples, and they are fascinating. In one, Stenberg recounts an experience she had as a student. She has

written onto the narrative at various times using it now to raise questions about her current pedagogical practices. It shows how single learning-teaching experiences can be mined repeatedly for deep insights. All the narratives included in the book illustrate ways of thinking about teaching far richer than our common conceptions.

In the author's words, "Ultimately *Professing and Pedagogy* is not about critical answers but about critical processes: teaching, learning, questioning, collaborating, reflecting and revising. None of these are acts that can be finished. That is not the nature of pedagogy. It changes every moment, as students raise new questions, as a text causes discomfort, as silences or eruptions occur, as a learning moment fails (or succeeds) and we have to ask why, as a new group of students arrives and challenges what we thought we knew. This, to me, is what makes professing such a rich, rewarding, exciting task. . . ." (xxiii)

This is not an easy book — few books that provoke thought are. Moreover, the ideas in this book challenge current thinking about the whole process of learning to teaching — not just at the beginning of one's career but across it. If you opt to read this book, be prepared to carry it around, to read quotes to colleagues, and to examine your teaching from a very different perspective. It is a candle that will shed new light on your teaching.

Ordering information: This 170-page book, published by the National Council of Teachers of English in 2005, may be ordered from them online at [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org) for \$38.95 plus \$2.00 for shipping and handling (unless you are a member of this organization, then there is a discounted price). 🍎