



## Need to Get Your Students Talking? Try *Speed Dating!*

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We have long known that students learn best when they are enthused, yet so often we settle for having just a few students dominate discussions while the rest remain either disengaged or intimidated by those who make frequent contributions. After the class, we assure ourselves that robust debate occurred—that the quiet students have learned something even though they did not actively participate. But is this really the best we can hope for? Perhaps we could apply some of the lessons drawn from the currently popular *speed-dating* model, where interested parties meet and briefly engage with a variety of potential “dates.” Here are a few suggestions.

### Speed dating and “getting to know you” scenarios in newly formed groups

When new groups form, discussion often cranks up slowly. Consider this alternative: Create an inner and outer circle of students, with each inner circle student paired with an outer circle student. Write a few conversation guidelines on the board: name, major, hometown, and current courses, for example. Call out for them to move on to their next “date” every three or so minutes—I recommend keeping the time limit short. The sense of urgency seems to encourage quicker engagement, and also appears to allay the fears of students who can find social interactions intimidating. This activity fills the classroom with a buzz of conversation and creates a friendly, interactive atmosphere that still exists next time the groups meet.

### Sharing reflections

Ask students to independently reflect on a lecture, a newspaper article, a key reading, video, or other stimulus material. Prompt them with a question: “What most stood out for you?” or “What message will you take home?” Ask them to quickly and briefly write those reflections. This helps them to shape their thoughts before participating in a conversation with their peers. Now use the speed-dating approach to get students discussing the issues in pairs, again rotating them between pairs so that they have the opportunity to share reflections more than once. This approach gives everyone the opportunity to exchange ideas without scrutiny from the whole group. Less-confident or very introverted students tend to shine in this atmosphere.

### Making students form an opinion

If it is often difficult to get students to think critically and to take a stand on issues. The speed-dating method can be used to encourage students to think deeply about issues and to take a stand. I have students start with their own independent reflections, jotting notes that summarize their views. Before beginning this exercise, I challenge them to work on being persuasive rather than aggressive when presenting their ideas and opinions to others. I also make the point that active listening involves genuinely hearing and openly reflecting on the opinions of others before dismissing them. In a variation, students can be instructed to integrate any views that impress them and pass those on when they rotate to a new partner. This way, as they progress around the circle their own views should become more sophisticated and expansive as they are persuaded by the views of others. To check for the larger

understanding, finish the exercise by having them jot down the key points that represent their views and then check that list against what was initially written. Some students will still hold the same views, while others will have made a significant shift. A brief discussion of how their views have changed can be used to point out how college can change thinking and perspectives.

### Building knowledge and understanding

Divide the students into even-numbered teams of around six. Provide the team with a set of the *knowledge* they must all acquire. Typically this will consist of six pieces of paper, with each piece containing just one part of the knowledge. For instance, one page might be a conceptual model, the second a list of facts, the third an illustration of the ideas through narrative, the fourth a picture or graph which visually represents the ideas, the fifth a brief explanation of relevant research findings, and the sixth a series of questions and answers about this issue. Each student

PAGE 4

### *In This Issue*

Active Learning: Some Interesting Results	.2
Learning From Dandelions	.3
Student Success after the First Year	.4
Compulsive Teaching Syndrome	.5
Teaching Professor Conference 2006:	
Call for Proposals	.6
Can You Make a Lecture Too Interesting?	.6
Using the Syllabus to Lay Down the Law	.7
What's Bad about Good Practices?	.8

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- 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.
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## Active Learning: Some Interesting Results

Conventional wisdom and considerable research support the contention that full-time students, especially those who live on campus, experience more and faster intellectual development than those students who only attend college part time and commute. A survey of full- and part-time students, recently graduated from a variety of professional programs in engineering, construction, business, health sciences, textiles, and design at a university in Hong Kong, contained some results that seemed to dispute this widely held belief.

Three months after graduation, more than 2,500 of these students completed a survey designed to provide program-level feedback. They reported perceptions of the development of their intellectual capabilities across nine different areas, including critical thinking, creative thinking, problem-solving, knowledge of the discipline, and communication skills, among others. They also offered feedback on four aspects of the teaching and learning environment, including measures of how active the learning environment was, the extent to which teachers were committed to student understanding, and the kind of interaction that occurred between students and teachers.

When analyzing the data, researchers found statistically significant differences in the mean scores between the full- and part-time students. All of the scale scores in the capabilities domain favored the part-time students, as did all the scores in the teaching and learning domain. Ten scores were significantly different enough to be in the medium effects range, a remarkable result for educational research results.

How could this be? Part-time students in this sample mostly worked during the day and attended evening classes. Compared with the full-time students, they had spent much less time on campus. Typical evening classes met once or twice a week for three-hour sessions, after which students went home. In addition to spending less time on campus than their full-time counterparts, they also tended to

spend much less time in the company of fellow students.

The researchers considered several different possibilities to explain these unexpected results, and decided one made the most sense. Full- and part-time students in these programs experienced different forms of instruction. Full-time students enrolled in these programs straight out of a high school system in which they had experienced mostly large classes. Partly because of cultural tradition and partly because of a highly selective educational system, most of the instruction they experienced and had come to expect was didactic. They listened and learned from teachers who lectured. Part-time students, on the other hand, came to class after a full day of work. Their teachers had discovered that these students could not stay awake and focused for three-hour lectures. Necessity forced them to move to more interactive teaching modes. Moreover, part-time students tended to have work experience. They could draw on these experiences and more easily interact when teachers tried to involve them in discussion.

But rather than just hypothesizing about what might explain the differences in results, the researchers decided to test their theory. They used a complicated structural equation modeling methodology that "makes it possible to test whether theoretically plausible models provide a good fit to collected data." (p. 163) The results suggest "that the variables subsumed under the teaching and relationship latent variable have an effect on the development of graduate capabilities." (p. 166) Moreover, this relationship was not linear or singular in effect but is described by the researchers as a "mutually reinforcing effect. Utilizing active teaching and learning approaches helps in the development of good teacher-student relationships. Well-developed relationships make it more comfortable for teachers to introduce

# Learning from Dandelions

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*"We sow with all the art we know and not a plant appears; A single seed from any weed a thousand children rears."*

—An anonymous gardener-poet

I pulled the first of many dandelions from my front yard today. For once I took a closer look at this pernicious weed that consumes so much of my scant gardening time and was struck by a number of lessons I could apply to my work as a teaching professor:

- 1) Observed closely, the delicate fuzz on a dandelion is actually a cloud of minute barbs. When that cloud of spikes takes flight, the fuzz—containing the promise of more dandelions—can anchor just about anywhere. Wouldn't it be great if I could develop just as many "hooks" in my work with students so that memories of the content we explore would fly beyond their latest exam or paper and anchor someplace where they could take root? It's hard to predict where dandelion fuzz will land. This means that I must create multiple entry points in more of the lessons I teach. I could also work harder to get students to stop and create their own hooks—inviting them to craft quick-writes, single-sentence summaries of class sessions, metaphors, and sensory images to elaborate on challenging course material.
- 2) Over several seasons of pulling dandelions, I have learned that they are opportunistic and will grow wherever there is the smallest opening. They don't seem to care about soil composition, the aesthetics of where they happened to have landed, or whether the sun shines on them from the south or the north. They look for any tiny fissure and seize the space, be it a crack in cement, a dry patch of lawn, or my

already full window boxes. What kind of learning would my students experience if I seized upon openings in their minds and hearts with something like a dandelion's tenacity? Maybe I need to spend more time talking with my students in those minutes before and after class, or invite e-mail dialogues through which I might discover what captures their imagination and fuels their passion. Even if I can't work those interests into teaching the material, perhaps my students will catch a glimpse of how invested I am in their mastery of the material and development as professionals. Someone once said, "Students will not care how much you know until they know how much you care." Seeking those receptive openings while laughing at the deterrents is one way to exercise the care I wish to communicate.

- 3) Truth be told, I love the vibrant yellow of dandelions. When it feels impossible to conquer the waves of saffron invaders, I can persuade myself that they are flowers, not weeds. Maybe some of the students who drive me craziest with their unwillingness to acquiesce to my particular vision of how learning should transpire need to be looked at with changed eyes. There have been moments in my teaching when I have worked hard to present the Revealed Truth from my discipline only to have a student respond with a pithier, more straightforward rendering—one that captured the thought in a way that made it more accessible and memorable for everyone in the room. I should reframe the way I respond to those students and celebrate what philosopher Maxine Greene has called "the disruptions of the taken-for-granted" rather than grinding my teeth. And here's an even more radical notion: perhaps I should work on seeing some of my colleagues from a more positive perspective as well.

4) Despite being subjected to tough environmental conditions and outright hostility from me, the foliage on the dandelions maintains its robust green hue even as the grass around it withers to the color and texture of straw. That capacity hints at deep, efficient reserves of energy and mechanisms of resiliency that I could do well to emulate myself and nurture in my students.

- 5) I get a fresh chance every spring to start over in my lawn and garden, and each spring I pledge "this year will be different." "I will treat the yard earlier, tend it more carefully, and surely face fewer weeds." It occurs to me that I say approximately the same thing each semester: "I will seek more resources, organize better, find out more about the students, give them more and earlier feedback, be less frazzled at term's end. . ." the list goes on. One wonderful thing worth celebrating about teaching: unlike many other professions, I do truly get a fresh start every 14 weeks.

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## ACTIVE LEARNING FROM PAGE 2

forms of teaching involving active student participation." (p. 167)

Perhaps most interesting of all, these interactive teaching methods were able to overcome the potentially negative impact of these students not spending much time on campus or interacting with fellow students. These surprising results end up being yet another affirmation of the powerful effects of active engagement on learning outcomes.

**Reference:** Kember, D. and Leung, D. Y. P. (2005). The influence of active learning experiences on the development of graduate capabilities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30 (2), 155–170.

## Student Success after the First Year

As college educators, we have been slow to recognize those developmental issues that have been linked to success in college. To our credit, mostly at the behest of our administrators, we have come to realize the importance of the first year, the first semester, even the first few weeks in those decisions beginning students make about staying at or leaving college. Most of our institutions, with the support and involvement of faculty, now have special programs for beginning students—programs that help them make the transition from high school; that work to create accurate expectations about work in college and protocol in classrooms; and that seek to establish personal connections between new students, their faculty, and the rest of the academic community. Accumulating data attest to the success of these efforts.

But what about the developmental issues unique to sophomores, juniors, and seniors? The literature of research and practice is mostly silent on these student groups—probably because more attrition happens during the first year than at other times in the college career. However, attrition isn't the only reason for considering issues that may impact students' academic and personal development in college. This point is made ably in a study (reference below) that seeks to enlarge our understanding of sophomore students. A review of existing literature convinced these researchers that "sophomores may have needs that differ from students at other levels, and those needs are being largely overlooked by institutions of higher education." (p. 369)

They used a descriptive study to explore the viability of these premises, analyzing survey data from 1,093 sophomores using a set of issues, some known to be important in the success of first-year students and some extrapolated from theory and literature relevant to sophomores. These included faculty/student interactions, involvement in activities, commitment to an academic major, and institutional commitment. They used GPA as the depen-

dent variable.

When considering what they discovered, consider first those issues not found to be predictors of sophomore success. First, contrary to what has been found for first-year students, **involvement in activities** was not an important predictor of academic success for these sophomores. Involvement in student activities was not related to GPA for either of the two semesters for which GPA was reviewed. **Institutional commitment** was also not a predictor of success. "Whether sophomores were clear in their intentions to return to the institution and complete their degree was not a significant predictor of the grades they made." (p. 374)

Two factors did make a difference for these sophomores: **certainty in choice of major** and **faculty interactions**. If these sophomores expressed higher levels of certainty about their majors, they also achieved higher grades. Researchers hypothesize that having this focus and sense of direction may increase student motivation. They recommend that institutions consider having programs for sophomores that help those students make or solidify their choice of majors and career paths. And, like their first-year counterparts, interaction with faculty made a difference for these sophomores. "The extent to which sophomores were satisfied with their opportunities to interact with faculty and the extent to which sophomores felt that faculty were concerned with their academic success had an impact on sophomores' academic performance." (p. 374)

In sum, this study did document differences between first- and second-year college students. What helps sophomores do well in college is not the same as the ingredients known to impact the success of first-year students. That's important for faculty and institutions to know. This study verifies that we do need to know more about sophomores! And then we need to move to identify and explore issues relevant to juniors and seniors. Students do develop academically and personally in

college. If we better understood the details, we might be able to more constructively intervene in the process, and not just during the first year.

**Reference:** Graunke, S. S., and Woosley, S. A. (2005). An exploration of the factors that affect the academic success of college sophomores. *College Student Journal*, Spring, 367–376. ♥

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### SPEED DATING

FROM PAGE 1

must take responsibility for *one piece of the knowledge puzzle*. Give them adequate time to review it and consider how best to share that information/knowledge with the others in their team. Encourage them to be creative in this regard. I expedite this aspect of the assignment by providing them with resources such as *colored paper, texts, and post-it notes* to facilitate innovative approaches to knowledge exchange. Once all team members are ready, create a speed-dating scenario in which each pair within the group must share their knowledge. By the time they have completed the five rotations, all students will have developed a stronger understanding of the content and will have actively been engaged in their own learning as well as that of their team members. I have found this method provides an excellent exam review activity. It gives students the chance to ask questions and practice explaining concepts, adding depth to their understanding.

There are all sorts of ways to apply the speed-dating model to classroom interactions and all the ones I've tried have resulted in many more students engaged and involved in classroom discussions. I encourage you to try adapting this flexible strategy to accomplish discussion objectives in your course. ♥

# Compulsive Teaching Syndrome

By Gary Poole, University of British Columbia, [gpoole@ubc.ca](mailto:gpoole@ubc.ca)

I am a compulsive teacher. This might sound admirable, but it has its pros and cons. For example, if I am visiting a totally unfamiliar city and am approached by someone for directions, I will take out my map and direct the person. I don't even want to think about some of the places I have sent people.

On the positive side, I have infinite patience as a teacher. When working with students, I can virtually guarantee that their patience will run out before mine does. In fact, I have made that promise to students.

This might all be fine and noble, but my compulsiveness has made it difficult at times for me to simply get out of the way and let people learn. Phrases like "let me explain" or "let me show you how to do that" can be the bane of my teaching existence.

People have let me be a compulsive teacher. Like being a compulsive dishwasher, no one complains. Indeed, students have enabled my compulsion. They have thanked me for my explanations and demonstrations. They have returned for more of them, or for the same ones repeated because they were so passive the first time that they didn't actually learn anything. Because of this, when I have taught large classes, there has been a line of students outside my door during office hours. Colleagues were impressed. People were happy.

I was jarred out of this educational euphoria when I was introduced to the concepts of transformative learning. Ironically, it was a student who made the introduction. During a directed-studies course, she brought in the work of Jack Mezirow. Most specifically, I was very taken by a two-by-two table that combines challenge and support. The theoretical claim is that the optimal combination for learning and growth is high challenge and high support. My compulsiveness ensured that I was providing high levels of support, but was I providing the challenge?

According to transformative theory, high support and low challenge yields dependence. This was the last thing I wanted to engender in my students.

Clearly I had to make changes or accept the reality that I was satisfying my teaching compulsion without optimizing student learning. So now I have a life project. I ask more questions, I tolerate silence better, I pontificate less. As anyone who has tried to control a compulsion will tell you, it takes time. But I'm getting there. However, if you see me walking down a street carrying a map, don't ask me for directions.

*Editor's note:* This essay is reprinted with permission from a new and somewhat unusual book, *Making a Difference/Toute La Différence: A Celebration of the 3M Teaching Fellowship/Hommage Au Prix D'Enseignement 3M*, edited by Marilyn Lerch. The book is copyrighted by the Council of 3M Teaching Fellows. It was introduced and featured at the recent Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) conference on Prince Edward Island in Canada.

The book is a collection of essays authored by recipients of the 3M Teaching Fellows Award, sponsored by 3M Canada. This award goes to up to 10 Canadian faculty members annually. They are recognized for their teaching excellence and commitment to advancing teaching and learning causes throughout Canada. This book celebrates the 20th anniversary of the award. In addition to essays that cover a wide range of instructional topics, the book is interspersed with the testimonials of students who have written in support of various of the 3M award recipients (who are not identified). Many of the statements of support powerfully describe the impact teachers have on students. A few of the essays in the book are written in French, reflecting Canada's bilingual status. Some contain new ideas and interesting strategies. More important, the collection is a marvelous affirmation of how teaching

inspires, enriches, and satisfies both teachers and students. If you need a shot in your teaching arm, this book will supply it.

The 3M Teaching Fellows Award itself merits mentioning. It is a national award which may be applied for by any full-time teaching faculty member at any college or university in Canada. Applicants prepare a dossier which is then reviewed by an evaluation committee. The award does not come with a monetary stipend. Each year recipients are introduced at a national conference and participate in a three-day retreat paid for entirely by 3M. The goal of the retreat is to share past teaching experiences, discuss new ideas and foster relationships. Out of the now almost 200 recipients of the award, a council of 3M Teaching Fellows has been formed. This group serves as a national voice on teaching and learning issues.

The 3M Teaching Fellows Award is part of the Canadian Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE). This association of well over 500 faculty and faculty developers meets annually for a conference at a Canadian university. Additionally, it offers members and others a variety of resources and services. Non-Canadians are welcome at this annual conference event, during which the 3M Teaching fellowships for that year are named. For information on the 2006 conference hosted by the University of Toronto (to which program proposals may be submitted), see [www.utoronto.ca/ota/stlhe\\_sapes06](http://www.utoronto.ca/ota/stlhe_sapes06).

The book of essays by 3M Teaching Fellows, *Making a Difference*, is available for purchase for \$39.95 CDN, \$34.95 U.S. (includes tax, shipping and handling), \$29.95 CDN, \$24.95 U.S. for more than 10 copies. Payment by Visa or Mastercard. It is being distributed on behalf of STLHE by McMaster University. It may be ordered by calling 905-525-9140, ext. 24540, or writing the Centre for Leadership in Learning, McMaster University, 1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8S 4K1. ♥

## Teaching Professor Conference 2006: Call for Proposals

In May 2005, more than 600 faculty gathered near Chicago for the second annual *Teaching Professor Conference*. Like the first conference, the centerpiece activities of this two-and-a-half-day event were the many programs presented by faculty participants in the conference. These participants come from a range of academic disciplines and institutions. In their sessions, many shared firsthand experiences implementing a variety of different instructional techniques, strategies, and approaches. They raised issues, advocated for instructional causes, and otherwise explored important teaching and learning issues. Both years I have been impressed by the energy and vibrancy of the exchange. To me, it vividly demonstrates all that makes collegial exchange such a powerful learning tool.

The conference for 2006 is set for May 19–21 in Nashville, Tenn., at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center. For more conference details, see [www.teachingprofessor.com](http://www.teachingprofessor.com).

The point of this brief article is to invite, indeed encourage you to propose a session for the 2006 conference. So often in my visits with faculty at various places, I hear a really good idea, or a particularly

interesting adaptation of a tried-and-true strategy, or an especially well-articulated view on an important instructional issue. I say “You need to share that!” All too often the response is minimal or self-deprecating: “Oh, it’s really nothing special.” I think responses like that indicate how even those of us committed to teaching devalue our work, failing to see it as something of merit and worthy of sharing with others. It rarely crosses our minds that others might learn from what we have come to know.

Rather than devaluing the lessons learned in your practice and study of teaching, consider sharing them at the next *Teaching Professor Conference*. Appropriate topics address those aspects of teaching and learning relevant in many contexts: things like grading, academic integrity, writing assignments for large courses, classroom management techniques, ways of involving undergraduates in research projects, dealing with students who aren’t motivated or won’t come to class prepared, problem-based learning approaches, cooperative and collaborative learning activities, and service learning, to name but a few. Also appropriate at the *Teaching Professor Conference* are topics relating to instructional health and well-

being; departmental policies and practices conducive to teaching; innovative teaching awards; ways to keep teaching fresh and invigorated; scholarship on the subject of teaching; and even the thoughtful reflections that have been used to explore and understand an individual aspect of teaching like the development of a particular style, the evolution of a teaching philosophy, or the recognition of the importance of teaching for understanding.

The conference website contains all the information needed to submit a program proposal. We’ve worked to avoid an onerous program proposal process. That doesn’t mean that the conference program can accommodate all submissions. We seek a range of topics presented in a manner that engages and involves listeners. Don’t decide what may be of interest before submitting a proposal. We may be a better judge of that than you, and you may end up contributing to the substantive dialogue about teaching and learning that is fast becoming the hallmark of these *Teaching Professor Conferences*. Please check out the conference website. We’ll be looking for a program proposal from you!

## Can You Make a Lecture Too Interesting?

Most teachers work to add interest to lecture material in an attempt to gain student attention. If they aren’t attending, they aren’t listening, and if they aren’t listening, it’s pretty hard to imagine them learning anything from a lecture. But is there a point at which the interesting details are more arresting than the content? And if that’s so, do those kinds of details get in the way of attempts to learn and apply content?

Shannon Harp and Amy Maslich (reference below) decided to test the effects of what they call “seductive details” in a short recorded lecture on lightning. They define seductive details precisely: “interesting,

tangentially related adjuncts that are irrelevant to the lesson.” (p. 100) So, for example, in the lecture of lightning, which focused on the steps in the causal chain that result in a flash of lightning, the lecturer mentioned that lightning kills approximately 150 Americans a year. The lecture also included details that explained why swimmers are sitting ducks for lightning strikes (because water conducts electricity well) but metal planes in flight escape damage because they offer no resistance and the lightning passes right through them.

One group of subjects listened and took notes to the lecture that included seductive

details like these and the other group attended a lecture with these details omitted. At the conclusion both groups were given six minutes to write down everything they could remember from the lecture. Then they tackled four problem-solving questions, sequentially, in two-minute time frames.

The researchers discovered that students who heard the lecture with the seductive details recalled significantly fewer of the main ideas and provided significantly fewer acceptable solutions than students who were not exposed to the

## Using the Syllabus to Lay Down the Law

“You will submit three projects.” “I expect regular participation.” “You must attend class.” “Students bear sole responsibility for ensuring that papers...submitted electronically to the professor are received in a timely manner.” The “arrogant tone” and “imperial commands” (p. 51) are an all-too-familiar part of syllabi for college courses, writes Mano Singham in the article cited below. Edits like these even appear in the course outlines of gentle, kindly faculty members.

He also notes the lack of objection raised by students to these harshly stated demands. Could this be because they don’t read course syllabi?

Troubled by the rude tone and detailed legalism apparent in so many syllabi, Singham searches for the cause and concludes that “it is likely that the authoritarian syllabus is just the visible symptom of a deeper underlying problem, the breakdown of trust in the student-teacher relationship.” (p. 52)

Among the likely causes of the breakdown, he credits the creeping intrusion of local and national legislation into the classroom—things like the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act as well as many institutional policies and rules. He recognizes the need for both but believes that common sense and judgment should be the driving force behind making classrooms civil places conducive to learning.

His analysis leads him to another likely culprit: the amount of power a faculty

member typically wields. No one questions their right to set the rules for every aspect of classroom decorum and everyone expects students to live by those rules. Unfortunately, many faculty use their power not for the benefit of students, but to protect themselves against any and all potential challenges to that authority. Singham looks at the syllabus for his large 200-student physics course and recounts how the list of rules grew year by year, driven by their own internal logic. A student violated an unstated rule (by not proofreading written work, for example) and the next year a rule demanding careful editing was added to the syllabus.

Singham describes where this process took him: “I began to think that I could create a rule to achieve whatever I wanted.” (p. 54) But his analysis led him to quite a different conclusion. “I discovered that there were important things that I just could not do with my syllabus. I could not make students care about the work, be creative and original, be considerate of others, or write or speak well. All I could do was force them to do very specific things.” (p. 54) And from this discovery, he made his way to the most important insight: “I realized what I should have known all along, that learning is an inherently voluntary act that you can no more force than you can force someone to love you. Authoritarianism and fostering a love of learning just don’t go together. If they did, the best learning should occur in prison education programs, where the ‘stu-

dents’ can be coerced to do almost anything.” (p. 55)

So when the opportunity to teach a small seminar course for sophomores presented itself, Singham decided to try teaching it without a syllabus. He recounts how he and the class jointly created a kind of de-facto syllabus several weeks after the course began, and how well it worked. He acknowledges when colleagues query him about how he would handle students who consistently turned in late papers (no one in the class did) that he has to face those problems individually, resolving them on an ad hoc, case-by-case basis. The approach he took with this class does not produce a fail-safe system.

But Singham believes it creates a better climate for learning—one that prevents faculty and students from becoming adversaries. This is the relationship he proposes instead: “...good neighbors in a small community. The classroom works best when students and teachers perceive it as a place where there is a continuing conversation among interested people...A sense of community is not created by rules and laws but by a sense of mutual respect and tolerance. Good neighborliness cannot be legislated—it can only be learned by example and experience, and it flourishes in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance of difference.” (p. 57)

What makes this article so good is

PAGE 8

### LECTURE

FROM PAGE 6

interesting but extraneous details.

The researchers point out, “these results do not mean that lectures should be uninteresting. Although teachers should avoid using seductive details, they should not hesitate to use interesting details such as examples that clearly support the learning objectives. Seductive details, by definition, are irrelevant in terms of supporting

the intended learning objectives: they are fluff.” (p. 102)

To safeguard against interesting details that sidetrack students, the lecturer must know clearly what it is students are supposed to learn from the material. The best way to find out what students are taking from the material is to solicit feedback about what they are learning. If they are repeating the details but missing the main point, then those details are getting in the way of learning. As these researchers point

out, the best source of intriguing details is the material itself. Look there first for interesting facts that will corral student attention and make their learning of what they should be learning easier.

**Reference:** Harp, S. F., and Maslich, A. A. (2005). The consequences of including seductive details during lecture. *Teaching of Psychology*, 32 (2), 100–103.

## What's Bad about Good Practices?

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The Socratic questioning strategy described in the article appealed to me. I could see how it would cut down on quizzes, grading, and the whole sad enterprise of writing multiple-guess questions that dulled students' thinking. I made some adaptations and expectantly implemented it in my introduction to political theory course.

Those expectations quickly dissolved. At her desk, one of my best students stood fighting back tears. She couldn't look at me and wouldn't answer my questions. An uncomfortable quiet had settled over the class. I had a disaster on my hands. I asked the distressed student to sit down as I paced across the front of the room. Then I announced that was the end of Socratic questioning. Relief spread like a long-held breath released. "That wasn't such a good idea," I admitted, thinking desperately of some way to get the class on my side. "It seemed like something that might work when I read it. I think we might do better just discussing the study questions I assigned."

Slowly the discussion built and normalcy returned. The students liked discussing the questions. After class I stopped Julia and apologized for her Socratic ordeal. She still wouldn't look at me and she dropped the course that afternoon.

I wish I could report that this was the first disaster I've faced when trying out recommended instructional practices—some called best practices and touted by experts. Truth be known, I've had about as much luck picking race horses as I have new techniques and strategies. A few became successful additions to my teaching repertoire, but only after much tinkering and adjustment. Why the lousy track record? In the face of authoritative endorsement, it took me time to discover that the problems weren't all mine.

Highly touted practices that work for

other instructors, in other subjects, with other students, in other curricula often disappoint because they don't work when the context changes. To recommend a practice requires stripping away the myriad details that contribute to its achievement or failure. Those details can trip and derail the best ideas. To employ such practices requires so much trial and error that what started out as a shortcut ends up being an extensive revision project.

The principles that form the bases of best practices are even more abstract. They are really proverbs. They don't state any causal relationships in forms that can be tested. Indeed, most can't be wrong under any circumstances. They just aren't specific enough to fail. That's their seduction and their risk. If the practice can't fail, then its truth is merely formal.

Let me see if I can use an example to make the point. The sixth principle of the famous *Seven Principles of Good Practice in Teaching and Learning* states that a competent teacher communicates high expectations. It reads:

"Expect more and you will get more. High expectations are important for everyone—for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations for themselves and make extra efforts."

If I raise my expectations and students still memorize and barf back, what has gone wrong? Since the principle doesn't say how high to raise expectations or from what baseline and since it doesn't state how much performance will improve, then I can't know. How much extra effort does it take? These proverbs are shackles of unlimited demands. Maybe I haven't worked on weekends or my students have remained unwilling to exert themselves. How can I tell? The principle won't translate into specific design practices that would help us find out.

More fatal is a second problem. To try to improve a process by applying best practices is to run a race backwards. If we examine only what works, we see only a small sample of the educational practices that we might explore. We know from the works of Larry Cuban that bureaucracy, architecture, and tradition determine standard instructional practices. Thus best practices reflect the limitations of those structures and obscure the possibilities of novel approaches. They are the cream of the crap.

In contrast, if we think about possible practices based on what we have discovered about brains, learning, and cognitive development, we can think beyond the manacles of the past to propose innovations worth testing. Such innovations would make far better use of new technologies; most of the proverbs rule out technology. I think it makes much more sense to try the most novel and challenging ideas to make some real improvements and let the proverbs of the past rest in peace.

Why didn't the Socratic questioning work in my class? I could blame it on the confounding variables, but it failed because I substituted bad mimicry for the work of finding out what students needed in order to learn. ♥

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### SYLLABUS FROM PAGE 7

Singham's honest appraisal of the all the issues. Are his students ready for this much freedom and responsibility? Will they take advantage of the situation and avoid doing serious work? "The possibility that my students may not be ready for democracy worries me a little, but the thought that they should be ready for and accepting of authoritarianism troubles me a great deal more." (p. 57)

**Reference:** Singham, M. (2005). Moving away from the authoritarian classroom. *Change*, May/June, pp. 51–57. ♥