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Chapter Essays as a Teaching Tool

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A few years ago I added a simple assignment to my introductory sociology classes, and it has paid off in more ways than I expected. Each student writes an essay for each chapter we cover. In the essay, prepared outside of class, the student identifies what they consider the single most important concept from the chapter unit (anything in the textbook or class lecture and discussion) and then explains why they think it is important. Each student must give an example from their own life experiences that illustrates the idea and establishes its importance, and then relate it to the topic.

The idea behind the essays was to encourage students to think about the concepts as we discuss them and to apply them to the world outside the classroom. Preparing the essays forces students to actually sit down and reflect on the information, its ramifications, and its meaning. One of the unexpected payoffs has been how this process makes course content more interesting for students and for me. They take it seriously and frequently make connections that I would not have considered. Doing the assignment well requires that students not only know and understand the material, but that they also apply, analyze, and (in a really good essay) synthesize and evaluate the material.

This approach may not work for every kind of class, but I can imagine adapting a similar approach for any of the social sciences and several humanities courses as well. Some professors may be inclined to ask students to be broad rather than specific with the topic of the essays. I would

recommend against broad topics. My experience has shown that focusing the essay on one very specific concept makes for better essays and does not leave out the bigger picture. A student who writes about a specific term or concept almost always places that idea into a larger context, but those who try to write about too broad a topic invariably skim over important details.

Too often we expect our students to immediately and intuitively understand why the subject we teach is important to them. We expect them to automatically see how it applies to their own lives and the world around them. However, I have observed that students consistently do just the opposite: they compartmentalize, treating each unit as an isolated piece of information to be memorized for the next exam, then forgotten or filed away. I have also found that telling students that the things they are learning are important doesn't seem to make much of a difference to most of them. Writing the essays and engaging in the thinking required to write them well turns otherwise abstract ideas into concrete reality for the students. No one walks out of the classroom at the end of the semester thinking they didn't learn anything "real" or important.

Sometimes, completing this assignment gives students an entirely new perspective on themselves or their lives to the point where they actually take on a new level of determination and ambition. Every semester I receive a few essays that clearly stand out from all the rest. They tend to be longer than average and reveal a great deal of thought and attention. Often they begin with a phrase like "I never understood why I..." and usually end with a phrase similar to "now I know

how to..." One of my students last semester applied the concept of cultural capital to her own family and upbringing. She wrote for several pages, connecting the concept to specific aspects of her own past and her relationship with her family, and concluded by explaining that she now understood them better, understood herself better, and understood what it would really mean to "pull herself up" by being the first member of her family to get a university education.

These essays are the most interesting to read, of course, but even more exciting is how they document the process of a student realizing the connections between their own world and the world of higher learning. They discover what sociology has to offer and how to use their new knowledge to understand and maybe better their own lives. Through experiences like these, students discover that college is not just something you do in order to get a job, but that it can also be a place where real learning takes place. 🍀

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- 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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The Connection between Teaching and Research

For many years it's been teaching versus research—the relationship between the two being fundamentally adversarial. Many thought (and some still believe) that excellence in research meant lesser instructional effectiveness and that excellence in teaching often predicted little or no research productivity. Extensive research (much of it summarized in previous issues of this newsletter) disavows this negative correlation, establishing instead that excellence in research and excellence in teaching are not related.

To many of us, the absence of any relationship does not make good intuitive sense (even admitting that intuitive senses can sometimes be wrong). How can teaching and research be disconnected when they are so intertwined with the content and methods of the discipline? Perhaps the methods used to analyze the relationship do not capture what may be a unique configuration of influences. Historically, the view has been that research positively influences teaching by keeping faculty current and confronting unanswered questions. William Becker and Peter Kennedy were troubled by the failure to consider the relationship from the opposite direction: what are the prospects of teaching enhancing research?

Their interest in the question led them to survey 150 active researchers in their field, economics. They asked each if they could cite a specific instance in which their research had been influenced by their teaching. Fifty percent said yes and cited an example. Another 35 percent did not cite an example but without prompting responded that teaching did positively benefit their research. Becker and Kennedy summarize their results this way: “the main message is that teaching plays a far more important role in enhancing research than the literature suggests.”

When they more closely analyzed the examples offered by this cohort of researchers, they were able to identify 13 ways in which teaching supported the research work of the faculty surveyed. Some examples pointed to supports most would

probably not consider surprising. For example, some faculty identified examples illustrating how teaching hones understanding, meaning it develops a deeper and richer understanding of some aspect of content. Others pointed out things they had learned through teaching. In these cases the insights were new. Still others cited examples of how in the process of preparing for class, they discovered new information that stimulated new thinking. And others offered examples of how explaining things to students enabled them to see connections more clearly or revealed flaws in logical coherence.

Other supports for research provided by teaching are not as intuitive. Among the examples cited were some illustrating how classroom discussion was used as a testing ground for ideas under development. Some identified instances in which students asked questions that the faculty member could not answer or that led the faculty member to consider an issue from a very different perspective. Similarly, some pointed to examples of research questions that actually first began as exam questions.

And these supports for research provided by experiences in the classroom were not the only ones offered by faculty surveyed in this study—the remainder can be found in the article referenced below. However, even this sample challenges assumptions about the nature of the relationship between teaching and research. It suggests the presence of a relationship and a direction for the relationship that are quite the opposite of those most often proposed in the literature. Perhaps it is time to abandon the teaching-versus-research paradigm and think more seriously about how the teaching and research connection might work constructively.

Reference: Becker, W. E. & Kennedy, P. E. (2005). *Does teaching enhance research in economics? American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings*, 95(2), forthcoming. ♥

Student Projects: Working for Clients

The learning potential of hands-on, experience-based projects is enormous—as the increased use of service learning and internship programs attests. A bit less involved but equally promising is the learning afforded by projects that give students opportunities to do work for clients. But like all hands-on learning experiences, the logistics can be daunting for teachers, if not downright overwhelming. Many faculty decide not to include projects like these because they require too much time and effort to manage effectively.

Tara Lopez and Renee Gravois have used client-based projects in a wide range of marketing and advertising courses. They offer five principles, drawn from their experience, that can do much to make these projects workable for faculty, valuable learning experiences for students, and of significant benefit to the clients. Some of the advice offered for each principle is summarized here. Much more is contained in their article referenced below.

Select clients with care – Using literature to support their experience, Lopez and Gravois identify some of the characteristics of “bad” clients: they want either to be overinvolved or to be underinvolved in the project; they have unrealistic expectations as to what students can accomplish; or they take on the project for the wrong reasons (like one who aspired to be a professor and used the students to practice his teaching methods). “Good” clients understand that with students, the quality of the work is not controllable, but they still convey high expectations to students. They treat students with respect and are enthusiastic about what they believe students can accomplish in the project. A table in the article contains a list of questions that can be used to ascertain the potential viability of a client and project.

Design projects of varying scope – Successful projects need not always be large. In fact, smaller projects may fit better with the course’s learning benefits.

They are definitely easier to manage, and some clients like getting results delivered more quickly. The article contains lists of smaller projects, complete with the learning objectives that can be used to accomplish them, what the assignment/deliverables might include, and key ingredients that make projects like these successful.

Invest in advance planning – These authors have learned that advance planning is critical. They recommend that specific objectives for the project be identified up front and that the project be partitioned and deadlines established early on as a way of preventing students from becoming overwhelmed. They also recommend preparing written instructions for students, including samples and templates. These supportive materials prevent instructors from being deluged with questions and help students cope with unfamiliar, ambiguous situations. Advance planning should also include setting up grading rubrics and forms so that student work can be evaluated efficiently. One of the article’s appendices contains an excellent form that can be used to evaluate student presentations. Often the evaluation process includes feedback from clients, so there is a need to establish these mechanisms before students begin work on client projects.

Manage and set expectations – Projects like these are very motivational for students, but they can also be a bit intimidating. Professors play an important role in developing student confidence and calling on them to accomplish more than students may think they can. Expectations can also be set and managed by providing tools that help students prepare their projects. These might include lists of library and research resources, team action plans, tips for working in teams, and guidelines for preparing reports and presentations. A longer list of possible tools is included in the article.

Provide periodic and productive feedback – When completing projects for clients, students need feedback. Generally

they have no benchmarks against which to assess what they are doing. The authors recommend having students submit parts of the project in draft form so they have the opportunity to make revisions. The authors haven’t found that providing feedback on drafts adds to the time spent grading. Because professors are already familiar with the projects, final reports can be graded more quickly. If the project is being completed by a team, the authors recommend team feedback meetings during which the group receives verbal feedback on draft or preliminary versions of their deliverables.

Given the value of these kinds of experiences in developing students’ skills and understanding of professional expectations, it is difficult to write them off, despite the managerial difficulties they present. Resources like this article offer sanguine advice that can make handling the logistics both possible and productive. Before ruling out having students working for and with clients, interested faculty are well counseled to review and learn from the lessons these colleagues share in this very useful article.

Reference: Lopez, T. B., & Lee, R. G. (2005). Five principles for workable client-based projects: Lessons from the trenches. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 27(2), 172–188. ♥

First-Generation Student Persistence

Students whose parents have had no postsecondary educational experience disproportionately belong to races other than white, often come from low-income families, and are more likely to be female than male. Persistence to completion is important for any student in college, but for these students it can be a life-transforming experience. Research has documented that first-generation college graduates go on to occupy the same positions as and earn salaries comparable to their counterparts with college-educated parents.

A recent study (reference below) compared persistence among first-generation and continuing-generation students (those whose parents attended college). As might be suspected, there were significant differences among the variables that predicted whether a student would return to the same institution for a second year. This summary focuses on some of those variables that made a difference for first-generation students. The study itself contains a balanced analysis of the results for both student groups.

The source of the data analyzed in this study was a national sample of students who completed the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey. The cohort included 1,167 first-

generation students and 3,017 continuing-generation students.

In this group, more than 75 percent of the first-generation students continued on at the same institution for a second year. Fifteen different variables were found to be statistically significant predictors of that persistence. Marital status was among them. Married first-generation students were 52.8 percent less likely to persist from the first to second year. Males were 9.4 percent more likely to return for the second year.

Hispanic first-generation students were 34.5 percent less likely to persist than white first-generation students. And each \$10,000 increase in family income was associated with a 2 percent increase in the probability of persistence.

Some of the results were a bit surprising, given common beliefs about student retention. Almost 16 percent of these first-generation students who indicated that they chose their institution because of faculty reputation were more likely to persist, and those who chose an institution because they could live at home were 18.3 percent more likely to return for the second year. Those who attended private versus public institutions were 12.3 percent less likely to return for a second year, and for every 10,000 more students at an insti-

tution, first-generation students were 4.1 percent more likely to persist.

As in previous research, this study found that being a Hispanic first-generation student, a lower-income first-generation student, or a female “made first-to-second-year persistence more problematic.” (p. 418) None of these variables made a difference for continuing-generation students. This study contains many more details relevant to institutional and instructional policies with implications for this category of beginning students. Not all involve elements that college teachers can control, but understanding their relevance is still an important aspect of classroom practice. As the researchers note, findings like these can be used to better understand and achieve “the goal of transforming the higher education enterprise in ways that make opportunities to achieve educational goals more equitable for first-generation students.” (p. 423)

Reference: Lohfink, M. M., & Paulsen, M. B. (2005). Comparing the determinants of persistence for first-generation and continuing-generation students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(4), 409–428. ♥

Teaching and Everything Else in Those Mid-Career Years

Like much else, faculty careers are often divided into three phases: the beginning, the middle, and the end. New faculty have been studied in some detail—probably because of the great influx of them—and likewise, so have senior faculty, although they have been studied less than new faculty. But what about that expanse in the middle? Researchers Baldwin, Lunceford, and Vanderlinden (reference below) quote sources describing this career stage as “perhaps the least stud-

ied and most ill-defined period in life.”

It may be that analysis of the mid-career has been ignored because it is that time when faculty have “learned the ropes.” They have acquired tenure and may now carry on quietly teaching and doing scholarship. Perhaps the mid-career does not present issues that merit study. But the researchers who undertook this preliminary analysis of the middle years would disagree. They believe this career segment ought to be studied for several reasons. It

is the longest time segment of the career. It contains the largest cohort of faculty. And then there is the extensive research on midlife in general, which suggests that this is a dynamic and complex period of life. And finally, mid-career academics “are living through a period of unprecedented change in higher education.” (p. 99) These changes include increasing diversity of student populations, the infusion of new edu-

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Reduce Test Anxiety to Improve Student Performance

Test anxiety has been formally defined as “the set of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure on an exam or similar evaluative situation.” (p. 268) But most teachers don’t need a formal description: they’ve seen test anxiety firsthand.

That test anxiety compromises academic performance is a well-established empirical fact—for students all the way from grade school through college. The recent study referenced below confirmed its continued existence across a large cohort of undergraduate students (4,000) and graduate students (1,414). The study measured test anxiety with a widely used instrument and validated student reports of GPA in several ways.

In this sample, low-test-anxious female and male undergraduates had cumulative GPAs averaging 3.35 and 3.22, respectively, compared with GPAs of 3.12 and 2.97 for high-test-anxious females and males,

respectively. In practical terms this can be thought of as the difference between a B+ and a B. The relationship between GPA and test anxiety was also present in the graduate student population, although it was weaker.

The difference in GPA may seem small, but in the competitive academic environment, where GPA continues to be used as an important criterion for entrance to professional schools and to separate those who do and don’t get job interviews, the impact of test anxiety should not be underestimated. Students who experience test anxiety may be just as smart, may know just as much, and may be just as intellectually able as their colleagues, but their anxiety about performance prevents them from showing fully what they know and can do.

If there is good news, it is that teachers can do much to alleviate test anxiety, and students who experience it can learn strategies that help them manage their anxiety. Teachers can include in courses a

variety of ways for students to demonstrate their mastery of the material. They can offer multiple testing events, ways to retake or redo parts of exams, or extra credit opportunities that constitute substantive encounters with the content. Students who experience test anxiety can learn strategies that help alleviate the problem. Most campus learning centers offer workshops and other resources on test anxiety.

Reference: Chapell, M. S., Blanding, B. Z., & others (2005). Test anxiety and academic performance in undergraduate and graduate students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97(2), 268–274.

Excellent reference proposing strategies for dealing with test anxiety: Mealey, D. L., & Host, T. R. (1992). *Coping with test anxiety*. *College Teaching*, 40(4), 147–150.

MID-CAREER YEARS

FROM PAGE 4

cational technologies, a much more competitive higher-education marketplace, and the growing presence of faculty cohorts working part-time or on fixed-term contracts.

It was these justifications that motivated this research team to look at mid-career faculty and compare them with junior and senior faculty across three categories: work effort, productivity, and satisfaction. They used data collected in the 1999 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, narrowing the data so that they looked only at full-time faculty at four-year institutions—still a sizeable cohort of 10,315 faculty.

Some define midlife as those years from the age of 40 to 59; others use a window of 45 to 65 years old to define the group. And some break the midlife cate-

gory into subcategories—early midlife (40–49) and late midlife (50–59). These researchers used these subcategories, but they also considered the number of years teaching in higher education and career stages passed through while at a single institution.

The findings were not terribly surprising. In terms of faculty work effort, “at each successive stage, faculty spent fewer hours on their work.” (p.112) Early-life faculty reported spending 48.02 hours per week on paid activities at their institutions. By late life the average reported was 44.93 hours.

Particularly relevant to readers of a newsletter on teaching was the fact that midlife faculty reported spending the largest percentage of their time on teaching—50.6 percent. Late-life faculty reported spending 53.5 percent of their time on teaching. Teaching was the most

time-consuming activity for faculty at all career stages. As for productivity, faculty produced more articles in the middle stages of their careers. They produced more books and book chapters in the last stages of their careers.

Researchers looked at levels of dissatisfaction for such factors as time available to advise students, time available to keep current in the field, workload, and overall job satisfaction. More than 50 percent of faculty at the early midlife and late midlife stages were dissatisfied with the amount of time available to keep current in the field. Between 36 percent and 40 percent registered dissatisfaction with their workload, and almost 27 percent were not satisfied with the time available to advise students.

This preliminary analysis of mid-career faculty did differentiate this career stage

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What Do We Know about Where the Scholarship of Teaching's Being Done?

As has been regularly reported in this publication, scholarly work on teaching and learning continues to gain recognition and if the number of submissions received by this (and other pedagogical sources) is any indication, more faculty are doing this kind of work. (The article by Whittington in this issue chronicles how one faculty member got started and become convinced of the value of this kind of scholarship.) But what do we know about where the work's being done?

We can't answer that question for all disciplines but we can highlight the findings from an interesting analysis of articles published during the 1990s in Teaching Sociology (TS). Authors Jonathan Marx and Douglas Eckberg (reference below) asked three questions about teaching scholarship: 1) What types of degree programs most commonly foster publication in Teaching Sociology? 2) Are some institutions centers of teaching scholarship? And 3) Is the production of refereed works about teaching sociology limited to only a small number of faculty and a few departments?

A complete description of the methodology used to ascertain answers is included in the article. This particular descriptive approach is creative, thoughtful, and comprehensive. It offers a model that could be profitably replicated in other fields.

As for the findings, starting with the **type of degree program**: "overall, we conclude that publishing in TS is widely dispersed across the three categories of degree programs," (p. 256) In other words, it doesn't seem to matter if faculty doing the scholarly work on teaching and learning work in a department at offers BAs only, MAs, or Ph.D.s.

As for whether **some departments are centers for scholarship** on teaching and learning, the findings dispel a common assumption that those private institutions with strong commitments to teaching might be the most likely place to find faculty engaged in scholarly work on teaching and learning. "While variety in attributes

of universities and colleges is clearly shown, we find large public schools a more realistic characterization of colleges that successfully publish in this area." (p. 259) So these early findings would seem to debunk the idea that schools with teaching missions are the places where faculty might be most inclined and encouraged to do pedagogical scholarship.

As for the **number of faculty doing the scholarship**, 86 percent of those with articles in TS during the decade studied authored or co-authored a single piece of scholarship. Only 3.4 percent authored or co-authored more than two articles during the decade leading the authors to conclude, "authorship does not seem to be confined to a small cadre of sociologists." (p. 260) At least at this point and in this discipline, a class of discipline-based pedagogical scholars does not seem to have emerged. A limited amount of pedagogical work was completed by faculty who published in this journal during the decade studied.

The overall conclusion of this analysis: ". . .we find that a variety of sociology departments and faculty have been involved in integrative, innovative, student-centered teaching scholarship and that this scholarship is spread among programs with a wide variety of characteristics." (p. 260)

The authors describe their description review as "exploratory" and identify a number of relevant follow-up questions precipitated by these early findings. And beyond the implications of these findings for the field of sociology is the need for analyses like these in other disciplines and across fields. For example, it would be interesting to know if some disciplines are more supportive of this kind of scholarship; if it is more respected in some fields than others; if it is more widely read and referenced.

The authors note that when considering the impact of scholarship of teaching, citation indices do not tell the complete story. An individual faculty member may

read an article which significantly changes his or her practice but that effect remains unknown and is not captured by any measure of subsequent citations.

In addition to needing much more practitioner scholarship on teaching and learning, we have so much to learn about the work itself. Few fields have given thought to issues beyond reward and recognition. We need fields and faculty exploring the characteristics of scholarly work on teaching and learning being done now by practitioners.

As important as the reward and recognition issues are, there are also central questions about what kind of literature best serves this profession, and whether journal articles meet the needs of practitioners. And then there are questions about what kind of support faculty doing the work need and what departmental and institutional characteristics motivate faculty to pursue scholarship on teaching. This whole area is still one with many more questions than answers.

Reference: Marx, J., and Eckberg, D. (2005). Teaching scholarship during the 1990s: A study of authorship in Teaching Sociology. *Teaching Sociology*, 33 (July), 252-262. 🍓

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from others. Its broad overview hints at some intriguing factors relevant to teaching, but further analysis is needed to identify those specifics that contribute to the instructional health and well-being of faculty during that long mid-career period.

Reference: Baldwin, R. G., Lunceford, C. J., & Vanderlinden, K. E. (2005). Faculty in the middle years: Illuminating an overlooked phase of academic life. *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(1), 97-118. 🍓