



Living for the Lightbulb

By Aaron J. Nurick and David H. Carhart,
Bentley College, Mass.
Anurick@bentley.edu
dcarhart@bentley.edu

We have all experienced it—that moment in the classroom when a student “gets it” and the lightbulb goes on. It’s that knowing smile or a look of surprise when the student’s entire body says “Aha! Now I see it!” It’s a response that delights teachers. We know that we have participated in a special moment and wish for more. But the lightbulb doesn’t go on as often as we would like; epiphanies do not happen on a daily basis. So we would like to explore the ways that teachers can create the conditions and remove the barriers so that more lightbulbs go on more often.

In a presentation to the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations, French and Simpson observe that “learning comes from working at the edge between knowing and not-knowing.” As teachers we work comfortably in the realm of the known. Our knowledge, amassed through education and research, is codified in textbooks, notes, slides, cases—all of the tools of our trade. Frequently our orientation to teaching is the *transfer* of that knowledge. We come up with problems to solve, cases to analyze, PowerPoint presentations, and plain old-fashioned lectures to get our ideas *across* to students. This model implies that the teacher “knows” and the job is to make the students “know” in the same ways. This model engages students externally. They seek right answers from the text, or memorize the answer or inter-

pretation that the teacher prefers. Several writers have pointed that this process tends to reinforce William Perry’s ideas about the dualistic thinking typical of undergraduate students and does not entice them to engage in more complex and creative thinking.

How then might we productively include “not-knowing” in the learning experience? Not-knowing is an uncomfortable experience for both teacher and students. Teachers fear losing control or being rejected as an incompetent teacher or, worse, a bad person. Students fear failing, having their prejudices and ideas challenged, and appearing foolish in front of their peers. Not knowing feels risky and places teachers and students in a position of uncertainty and ambiguity, all of which can serve as a barrier to the lightbulb experience. Yet, it is in this very space of not-knowing that the most important and insightful learning can occur.

Setting the stage

Drawing upon the work of the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, French writes in the *Journal of Management Education* that the teacher’s role is to create and maintain an environment that enables learning by serving as a “container” for the anxiety associated with seeking new and unfamiliar knowledge. Such a contained environment facilitates lightbulb moments by enabling the teacher and learners to “play” with ideas, to engage in collaborative learning, and to improvise in the moment. Here are some suggestions on creating those kinds of environments.

1. Being a well-informed, well-prepared

source in the chosen subject area. Although the goal is to generate new and heretofore un-thought ideas, the students need to have confidence in the teacher’s command of the content and preparation for class. New ideas are generated from a sound foundation, just as jazz musicians “riff” and improvise within a defined musical structure.

2. Creating and maintaining proper boundaries for learning. Paradoxically, students are freer to explore when the boundaries are well defined. The teacher creates boundaries with a detailed syllabus that contains clear learning objectives, requirements for evaluation, rules of engagement, and a comfortable and appropriate physical setting. Class activities such as free writing and small group discussions can also encourage

PAGE 3

In This Issue

Berating Students for What They Don't Know	2
Librarians as Partners	3
What Influences Student Attitudes toward a Course?	4
Teaching as an Amateur: Playing for the Love of Game	4
An Easier Solution to a Thorny Problem: Trusting Students	5
Understanding the Role of Intuition in Teaching	6
Not Just for Kicks: Discipline Pitfalls in the College Classroom	7
Cracking Tough Texts with Metaphor . . .	7
Should Students Have a Role in Setting Course Goals?	8



**Editor**

Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.

Penn State Berks Campus
P.O. Box 7009, Reading, PA 19610-7009
Phone: 610-396-6170
E-mail: grg@psu.edu

Magna Editor

Rob Kelly
robkelly@magnapubs.com

President

William Haight
whaight@magnapubs.com

Publisher

David Burns
dburns@magnapubs.com

Editorial Content Director

Bob Bogda
bbogda@magnapubs.com

Creative Services Manager

Mark Manghera

Customer Service Manager

Mark Beyer

For subscription information, contact:

Customer Service: 800-433-0499
E-mail: custserv@magnapubs.com
Website: www.magnapubs.com

Submissions to *The Teaching Professor* are welcome. When submitting, please keep these guidelines in mind:

- 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.

The *Teaching Professor* (ISSN 0892-2209) is published monthly, except July and September, by Magna Publications, Inc., 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Phone: 608-246-3580 or 800-433-0499. Fax: 608-246-3597. E-mail: custserv@magnapubs.com.

One-year subscription: (U.S.) \$79. Outside the U.S.: \$89. Discounts available for multiple subscriptions (please call for price quotes). Periodicals postage paid at Madison, WI. POSTMASTER: send change of address to *The Teaching Professor*, 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Copyright © 2006, Magna Publications, Inc.

Back issues cost \$20.00 each. A specially-priced collection of previous year's issues with index and official *Teaching Professor* 3-ring binder is available for \$59.00 plus shipping and handling within the U.S. We accept MasterCard, VISA, Discover, or American Express. To order, contact Customer Service at 1-800-433-0499.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by *The Teaching Professor* for users registered with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) Transactional Reporting Service, provided that 50 cents per page is paid directly to CCC, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923. Phone: 978-750-8400; www.copyright.com. For organizations that have been granted a photocopy license by CCC, a separate system of payment has been arranged.

Berating Students for What They Don't Know

I recently observed in a class in which the instructor returned a quiz. One of the questions indicated that an employee had just received a 10 percent raise. The employee was now making \$25,000. The question asked what the employee's previous salary was. There were 63 students in this entry-level economics course. The instructor announced that only three students got the answer correct. Then the instructor laid into the students: "Come on people, this is eighth-grade math. This is simple, simple, simple. I can't take class time to review what you should have learned in grade school. If you missed this problem, you are going to struggle in this class and the rest of college. You need to review math and get these basics down. Start thinking! This is college. We expect you to use your minds here!"

And then there was the page of a student paper copied and hung in the mail-room, with a large note written in the margin: "Should this student be in college?" The paper was riddled with grammatical errors, including a lengthy discussion of professors who use big words when "Lehman's terms" would do just as well.

There is no question that the intellectual distance between faculty and students continues to widen. And there is equally no question that some college students today are missing fundamental knowledge and skills that will jeopardize their success in college and in life. The question is how do we show students where they are as compared with where they will be expected to be with a college degree? And how do we get them motivated to make that long journey? Is berating them the best way to get them going?

Avoiding discussion of missing skills and knowledge is certainly not the solution. If faculty don't provide those benchmarks, students are left to make these determinations on their own. Most of my beginning students happily conclude that spelling is not important (it certainly doesn't matter to any of their friends). But facing inadequacies is tough enough for mature, seasoned adults, let alone an 18-

year-old in a brand-new environment. Sugarcoating the truth seems equally unethical. If a student can't do simple math or write a coherent sentence, this is not the time to hint around that there may be a bit of a problem but that the student should feel so good that he or she has made it to college. Finally it seems less than professional to pass the buck: "You need to go to the Learning Center and see about math tutoring." Messages like that make folks in the Learning Center the bad guys, and that makes it even tougher for them to successfully interact with students.

So we're back to whether a faculty member bluntly laying it on the line gets students moving in the direction of the help they need. I've seen a technique used in both math and psychology courses that offered an interesting alternative. It was a kind of diagnostic, not-for-credit assessment (although students were not told this up front). They got a quiz the first day in math—10 problems. In psychology, it was a two-page list of terms and concepts. In math, students did the quiz individually; in psych, they were free to consult with students sitting nearby. The math quiz was corrected, and when returned, students were told these were the kinds of problems they needed to be able to do now. Attached to each quiz was a list of resources students could review, names of available math tutors, and Web links to other problem sets that could be used for practice. In psych, the worksheet was returned with incorrect, incomplete, or inadequate answers marked but not corrected. Attached was a list of references (very specific, concrete referrals to chapters and pages, not whole books). Students were told in no uncertain terms that success in the course depended on mastery of this prerequisite knowledge.

It's good to remember that teachers can't force a student to learn what they need to know. But it's also good to remember that teachers can be a source of motivation. The question is how best to get students moving in those directions that close the gaps between what they need to know and don't know. 🍀

Librarians as Partners

By Marilyn H. Steinberg, MA College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences and Kari Mofford, Wentworth Institute of Technology, Mass.
Marilyn.steinberg@mcphs.edu or moffordk@wit.edu

You are a librarian's dream! You bring your students for research instruction sessions every semester. You schedule that session so that the librarian has time to plan a well-rounded lesson that your follow-up assignment reinforces. You say thank you, wish us well, and say that you'll see us next semester...done. Done? Did you know that the librarian can also be a partner throughout the semester to not only plan and update research assignments but also to help you assess them upon completion?

Librarian as partner is a relationship that may not have occurred to you, but we (and here we admit to being librarians) think it's one you ought to explore. Librarians are required to have a master's degree in library science, and many have additional graduate degrees and certifi-

cates in other subject areas. We may have faculty status as well, depending on the institution. This means that we are qualified to help you with pedagogical issues that go way beyond how to find a book or search a database. Take a close look at your research project topic. Aside from checking to see when resources were last updated—you know, some of those venerable print indexes may not even exist in the library anymore—does it reinforce information literacy skills that go beyond learning how to do the one assignment to how to apply information-seeking skills for life? Librarians can work with you to update and add these critical elements to your projects. You'll see the dividends this pays when you grade your students' work.

The research session your librarian does for your students helps them tremendously. Are there multiple sections of the same course being taught by other faculty? Are they scheduling library sessions as well? By helping to organize an information literacy program within your department you can ensure that all the students in a major are getting consistent instruction. That

will prevent classes with mixed research abilities in later years. For example, if all the first-year students in your department receive instruction on those source types used in the discipline and how to search for them, then your sophomores will be able to focus on evaluation and critical analysis of those sources, thereby building on the knowledge they learned during the first year.

After the research project is done, the librarian can also be a great partner in assessing the final papers or projects. That doesn't mean we'll do your grading for you, but librarians can provide feedback about how the students did their research and what issues they may have come up against, such as not enough books available on the topic given the number of students interested in it, or, if students all worked on different topics, whether some of those topics were harder than others when it came to locating relevant resources.

You can also talk to a librarian about

PAGE 5

LIVING FOR THE LIGHTBULB

FROM PAGE 1

brainstorming and other forms of associative thinking.

- Being an open and responsive listener. Learning at the intersection of knowing and not-knowing releases some powerful emotions even beyond the anxiety discussed above. Through the psychological process of transference, both students and the teacher are subject to projections, fantasies, and a range of feelings associated with the teacher-student authority relationship. Being aware and willing to be empathic and not defensive in relation to the students' (and the teacher's) emotional reactions can deepen the learning experience for all concerned.

How to respond when the

lightbulb goes on

So conditions are conducive, lightbulbs go on—then what? How should a professor respond? Generally it is easy for an instructor to recognize when student A understands the concept. In an ideal world, the entire class will *get it* along with student A and the instructor can move on. But classes are seldom ideal. What if A is the only student who *gets it*? The professor quickly tries to take advantage of this situation. Perhaps he asks student A to explain the concept to the rest of the class, possibly by drawing a picture on the board. Then, as the lightbulbs go on for students B and C, the professor asks them to continue leading the discussion.

Once it appears that the entire class has a relatively good grasp of the model, the instructor can incorporate additional levels of knowledge. Clearly the goal is to reach

a stage where students are explaining the larger, more realistic applications to other students. In this case the wise instructor lets the "light-bulbers" lead the class, literally "lighting the path" to interactive learning.

The lightbulb is an apt metaphor for this kind of sudden understanding and subsequent knowledge building. Lightbulb moments occur in those spaces created to be both open yet bounded. They are managed by an active and responsive co-learner, the teacher who operates at the edge between knowing and not-knowing.

Authors' note: A variety of resources have informed our thinking on this topic. If you would like a list of those references, please contact us at the email listed below the byline.

What Influences Student Attitudes toward a Course?

Drawing from work in their discipline, services marketing and management, they extrapolated seven factors that might be significant determinants of student attitudes. Using a complex statistical model, two researchers tested the seven factors and found that four of them explained 77 percent of the variations in attitude toward the course: instructor, course topic, course execution, and the room (physical environment).

They write of these findings: “An important result is that there are significant factors, in addition to the instructor, at work shaping a student’s attitude toward a class that he or she may take. The model shows that course topic has just as strong an influence on attitudes as does the instructor.” (p. 144) Only required courses were included in the study. They covered topics about which students had a range of interests, from not being interested at all to the course topic being introductory to a major. The researchers point out that if the subject matter of a course influences how students relate to a course, then their level

of interest ought to be acknowledged as a contributing factor on course evaluations. At this time most course evaluations focus exclusively on instructor-related variables.

Equally interesting in this work are those other factors **not** found to influence student attitudes toward courses. For example, the student him- or herself was not found to significantly contribute toward attitude about the course. The researchers explain why they were surprised by this finding. “Given the emphasis some educators place on encouraging students to take ownership of their education, it was surprising to find that, overall, this group of students did not see themselves as being instrumental in shaping their own education experience.” (p. 146) What the findings confirm is that students (at least those in this cohort) do not understand that they are at least partially responsible for what happens to them in courses. It seems to reconfirm the extremely passive orientation many students take toward knowledge acquisition.

Also surprising was that fact that other

students were not seen as a factor influencing student attitudes.

Finally, in a follow-up analysis that explored some of the factors related to course execution (which these researchers defined as overall design and conduct of the course), there was confirmation for some facts about participation many of us have observed in our individual classrooms. “Students in classes where participation was expected and graded were significantly more likely to prepare for class, attend class, and commit to excellence. Students in those classes where participation was emphasized were also significantly more likely to value the contributions that other students make to their learning experiences.” (p. 146)

Reference: Curran, J. M. and Rosen, D. E. (2006). Student attitudes toward college courses: An examination of influences and intentions. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 28 (2), 135-148. ♥

Teaching as an Amateur: Playing for the Love of Game

Amateurs play their sport for the sheer love of the game. Loui (reference below) thinks that’s an apt description of what teachers do. It is true that most of us don’t teach for the money. And what is it about the teaching game that we love? Loui says we need to love our content and love our students.

Most of our love affairs with content are longstanding. “When we discover a new protein altered by a genetic mutation, when we elucidate the structure of a string quartet by Hayden, when we devise a convincing interpretation of an East African ritual, our ecstasy is a manifestation of profound love.” (p. 285) In the classroom sometimes these connections with content are more difficult to express. “When we teach pure facts, such as the definition of

marginal cost or the taxonomy of soil types, it is hard to be enthusiastic, but we can still be passionate about these ideas and the importance of this knowledge in our lives.” (p. 285)

Loui’s short article includes an impressive list of the many ways teachers express care and concern for students. “We care for students when we structure course assignments not for our convenience but for their benefit.” (p. 285) Care is expressed when we work through difficulties with students and when we are there to celebrate their successes. We care when we listen, even to their personal problems, and when we connect them with those resources that can help with their issues. Students deserve “kindly” explanation of grades, even failing ones. When students

are doing poorly, most do not need accusation and anger. They do need the truth, honest appraisals of their work, and lots of concrete suggestions for improvement. We care when we are concerned about student performance and work to constructively communicate about it.

As amateurs we work hard to play well at teaching. It’s an important game with high stakes—both for the content we teach and students we help to learn. “We teach because we are intensely, profoundly, passionately in love.” (p. 285)

Reference: Loui, M. C. (2006). Commentary: Love, passion, and the amateur teacher. *College Teaching*, 54 (3), 285. ♥

Ed's note: We encourage responses to articles that appear in the newsletter. Sometimes you write directly to the author and sometimes you share reactions with us. An article last spring by Karen Eifler, professor at the University of Portland, Ore., describing how she responds to the "thorny problem" of students who miss class and deadlines because of deaths in their families engendered the reaction below. We invited Eifler to respond. Her reaction appears at the end of the article.

An Easier Solution to a Thorny Problem: Trusting Students

By Hedwig Lee, *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*
Hedy Lee <hedylee@email.unc.edu>

An article in a previous issue of the *Teaching Professor* proposed a strategy to curb illegitimate student excuses concerning a death in their families. When students have missed a class or want extensions on papers and offer the excuse that a family member has died, Karen Eifler immediately sends a condolence card to a student's family. She argued that if students are telling the truth, then the family is touched by her gesture of kindness; if students are lying, they have to explain things to their family members.

This seems like a clever solution to a thorny problem: liars are "outed" and serve as an example to other students considering this fabrication, whereas truth tellers are provided with extra compassion from their professor in the form of a card. I'm not so sure about this strategy, even when students are telling the truth. Let me share an example that shows how a truly bereaved college student and his/her family could get hurt.

Recently my grandmother and great aunt passed away. My grandmother and great aunt's older brother is still alive. He is very ill and has told the family numerous times that he wants to die but will only allow himself to so after his sisters are gone. He feels that he has to take care of them. His immediate family has chosen

not to tell him of the deaths of his sisters because they fear the consequences. He lives with my cousin, who is in college. Imagine that my cousin told his professor that his great aunt had died and he needed to go to the funeral to serve as a pallbearer. What if the condolence letter reached my grandmother's brother, who had been kept unaware that his sisters had died? The consequences could be fatal.

I will grant that this is an extreme example, but we pay a price for not trusting our students. Trusting students and giving them time to grieve is more respectful and compassionate than simply mailing them a condolence card. In any case, students who use "fake" excuses to delay writing a paper or to skip class are usually not the top students anyway. Over the course of a semester, they can only offer such "dire" excuses a few times before they run out.

I think the proper solution is simply to believe students. This avoids hurting families and protects students' dignity by taking them at their word.

Eifler's Response (eifler@up.edu)

Professor Lee makes an absolutely fair and important point. We are never able to be 100 percent certain of the impact of *any* action we take, no matter how rational or well-intentioned or even *unintentional*. A perfectionist student who earns a "B" on an assignment cuts her wrists in despair. Another student is brought back from the

brink of self-harm after receiving an unexpected smile on the quad. A gunman wreaks havoc upon innocents in a classroom to exact retribution for a personal drama that transpired 20 years ago—there is probably not a seasoned teacher anywhere without stories of the ripple effects—good and bad—of their actions over the years.

When I send a sympathy card to a student and their family, it is a genuine act of courtesy, and it starts with respecting the gravity of a death in the family, which, in my opinion, deserves not to be co-opted. In this RateYourProfessor.com era where students paint vivid portraits of professors that contribute enormously to initial impressions and lasting reputations on campus and beyond, I want to contribute to a truthful image of who I am in my relationships with my students and colleagues. A gullible, easy mark for a sad but false tale is not a reputation I am willing to cultivate.

A wonderful truth about the teaching ideas in the *Teaching Professor* is the sense of ongoing conversation we can cultivate with our colleagues across the nation. In that conversation, I treasure the chance to weigh what I read and measure it against my own context, personality, and values and make a decision that will fit those three areas effectively. I thank Professor Lee for furthering that conversation. 🍀

LIBRARIANS AS PARTNERS

FROM PAGE 3

the best way to integrate information literacy into your class without assigning a research project, such as recommending to students literature in the field that you use regularly to stay current, or having students read a professional or trade journal each week or month and discuss the read-

ing in class together. What authors and publishers do you trust and why—this helps students build their evaluation skills. In short, information literacy skills can be seamlessly integrated into courses, so that students move from thinking about information skills as sometimes painful classroom assignments to "get through" to thinking of them as an integral part of becoming an educated adult and profes-

sional.

So consider an even bigger and better partnership with your librarian. See how you both can make a difference for students in the classroom and beyond.

Author's note: We have a short reading that further explores aspects of this collaborative relationship. Send us an email note and we'd be happy to share it with you. 🍀

Understanding the Role of Intuition in Teaching

What is intuition? It's one of those terms that is hard to get a handle on. And yet teachers rely on their intuition every day. A situation unfolds in class: some kid in the back moves restlessly and takes an iPod out of his back pack. Those sitting near by look at what he's doing. A couple of them start whispering as the kid continues to fuss with his iPod. Some students in the next row glance backward. The teacher continues to present information. She pauses to ask a question, and all the while she's sees what's happening in the back of the room. She rightly assumes that she's lost the attention of students back there. She opts for an abrupt break in the instructional action. She stops talking, turns to the board and, without speaking, writes a question there. Then she faces the class. "Stand up. Everybody stand up." Students shuffle to their feet. "Now look at this question. Spend the next couple of minutes talking with the persons around you. In two minutes I want answers and examples."

She had planned to ask this question: but not in this way. It wasn't part of the day's script, but something told her that students needed to do something different, and from her repertoire of instructional strategies she summoned this one.

The anecdote illustrates many of the features inherent in formal definitions of intuition. In the educational context intuition might be described this way: "a process in which instructors efficiently code, sort and access experientially conceived mental models for use in making instructional decisions. Put another way, instructors have cognitive schemas or mental models born of experience that they can overlay on particular instructional problems to detect a timely solution." (p. 172)

One of the features of intuition, as it operates in the classroom and elsewhere, is the easy and effortless way in which faculty implement solutions to problems that present on the spot. It's one of the reasons intuition is frequently described as a "mystical sixth sense or paranormal power." (p.172) In reality, intuition is born

of experience. After years of doing something, "a skilled craftsman develops a wealth of readily available expertise so entrenched that it tends to be taken for granted...." (p. 172)

Even though teachers are regularly called upon to use their intuition, the knowledge it embodies is rarely articulated, and as a result even very skilled teachers are often at a loss to explain what they are doing and why. The fact that academic cultures prize reason and rationality compromises the perceived value of intuition even further. If knowledge cannot be explicated, does it in fact exist?

But intuition does exist. In fact, authors of the article cited below identify a set of factors that reliably predict when an instructor is most likely to call on intuitive knowledge. For example, intuition is summoned in those situations when explicit guidelines are missing. Most teachers follow rules that prescribe actions for instances of cheating. But what about when a student is unexpectedly hostile or a class makes accusations? Here teachers craft a response at the moment. Likewise, intuition is called upon in those situations without precedents for action—as when something totally unexpected happens in a class. Most teachers do not abruptly end the class and head to the library to search for solutions others have used in similar situations.

Teachers also rely on intuitive knowledge when time is of the essence. The example here relates to how experienced faculty make course planning decisions much more quickly and easily than new teachers do. Faculty are stretched so thin nowadays that time is always of the essence, leaving faculty little time for reflection and much motivation to go with their gut. And, finally, experienced teachers use intuition when a rational analysis needs to be checked. "Do those ratings make sense? Do they confirm my sense about how this class went?"

Intuitive knowledge is complex. It should not be taken for granted or otherwise discounted. In fact, teachers should

devote more time and energy to understanding and improving this knowledge base. All teachers learn from experience, but that doesn't guarantee that what they've learned is correct. To learn more about that intuitive knowledge, these authors suggest that instructors need to become more reflective and more aware of their responses, especially those responses not particularly effective. Then they need to talk with colleagues, finding out how others respond to a particular kind of situation. And sometimes busy instructors just need to be still. They need to stop those busy minds that would like to force intuition into the rational mold. "Quiet contemplation rather than intense concentration may be more likely to yield up a novel solution to an instructional dilemma." (p. 176)

Reference: Burke, L. A., and Sadler-Smith, E. (2006). Instructor intuition in the educational setting. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 5 (2), 169-181. ♥

SHOULD STUDENTS HAVE A ROLE FROM PAGE 8

this, Benjamin has discovered that most often this does not involve changing course content. "More commonly...meeting student goals is about making specific linkages between what you teach and how it relates to student goals." (p. 149)

Could it be that students take courses for poor reasons because their goals have been ignored or thoroughly sublimated to those more important instructor goals? It's an interesting question and one that can be pursued pragmatically by using (or revising) the list of course goals contained in this article. It might at least be worth a conversation with students...

Reference: Benjamin, Jr., L. T. (2005). Setting course goals: Privileges and responsibilities in a world of ideas. *Teaching of Psychology*, 32 (3), 149. ♥

Not Just for Kicks: Discipline Pitfalls in the College Classroom

By Amy Getty, Grand View College, Iowa
 agetty@gvc.edu

Although endless volumes about classroom discipline proliferate in the professional libraries of K–12 instructors, as college professors we seldom think we need advice on the issue. After all, our students choose to be in classes at our institutions. Many, if not most, are placing themselves and their families in huge financial debt to attend. Besides, we'll just kick them out of class if they display those behaviors not tolerated in civilized societies.

It is true that we don't need detentions, "good behavior dragons," or other tricks to coerce good behavior from college students. Nonetheless, classroom discipline is an issue for us. My colleagues and I routinely exchange stories about students who talk in class inappropriately, sleep through most of the period, attend infrequently, refuse to complete work, do assignments haphazardly, and answer cell phones in class. Some of these behaviors are carry-overs from high school; some are the direct result of students reveling in their newfound sense of freedom. Regrettably, some develop in "good" students when they are provoked by professor responses to these less than mature behaviors. That makes me think of the "Wizard of Oz."

We all know the story. When Dorothy, Toto, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the

Cowardly Lion seek advice and wisdom from the Wizard, they are instead confronted by a giant head and pyrotechnics. When challenged, slightly, by Dorothy, the Great and Powerful Oz sets an impossible task to perform. When, against all odds, the group achieves this task and the Wizard is unmasked, they discover that behind the bluster of the giant head is really just a goofy-looking man in a bad suit.

In some college classrooms professors attempt to employ a similar godlike authority. Haven't we studied our field for years? Aren't we experts? Shouldn't students respect both our knowledge and authority? Of course. However, empowered by these beliefs, some professors adapt and cultivate an appearance of authority and expertise that looks too much like the charlatan Oz. Needless to say, this strategy rarely garners the respect intended.

I have succumbed to the appeal of the Great and Powerful Oz persona in my own classrooms. Why don't my students readily jump to do their assignment without question? I knew what I was doing when I put it together. If the task seems impossible, it is the students' job to figure it out. However, after a few hundred times of being exposed when my curtain was pulled aside, I have learned to avoid this model.

We do have knowledge that our students do not have. They will need to perform tasks to gain knowledge for them-

selves. Dorothy and her pals do return to discover that the answers they sought were within them all the time. However, teaching should be more than just throwing our students into the deep end and watching the strongest ones swim. That ignores the fact that the giant head imperiled all their lives trying to maintain the façade of supreme knowledge.

Whenever I am tempted to slip back into the persona of the giant head, I think back to how many times my parents told me to do something "because they said so." Almost never did that rationale make me want to spring right up to accomplish the task at hand. I would respond passively-aggressively by performing the task badly, or I would ignore the order or withdraw. Often my students respond by talking in class, sleeping through most of the period, attending infrequently, refusing to complete work, doing assignments haphazardly, and answering cell phones in class.

It is comforting, though, that just like in Oz, all is not lost. By showing students the goofy man in the bad suit from the beginning of class, I believe we can solve many of these discipline problems before they develop. No matter how well read and intelligent the giant head is, no one wants to take orders from it in order to gain knowledge. We need to let students behind the curtain, asking rather than telling them to share in our expertise. ♥

Cracking Tough Texts with Metaphor

By James R. Keating,
 Butler University, Ind.
 jkeating@butler.edu

There are excellent reasons to have students write about assigned readings. They need practice writing and should be challenged to explore and express their views by developing them in writing. As an instructor, I like to read student papers when their writers are engaged with an

idea—energetic, emphatic, and fluent. But what about times when students have nothing to say and fill out several pages of lifeless prose to prove it? There is no joy in writing or reading work like that. Recently I've tried a new approach that aims to prepare students to write more compellingly about texts.

When working with an idea and trying to express it on paper, students often discover something brand new in the original

text or in their thinking about it. We want that to happen, and it's wonderful when it does. But when it doesn't, there is often a very good reason. *The student simply doesn't have any idea about what the author intended to say.*

When I suspect that students are struggling with a text, I ask them to do a particular kind of writing. I ask them try to

PAGE 8 ♥

Should Students Have a Role in Setting Course Goals?

Maybe. . . but then if you ask students what they want to get out of a course, most give the same depressing answer: an A (never mind if learning accompanies the grade). If you rephrase and ask why students are taking your course, those answers are just as enervating: nothing else was open at the time; it's in the same room as my previous course; my fraternity has copies of your exams on file; my boyfriend's in this class; I heard you were easy; I heard you were funny; your textbook's the cheapest one; or, my favorite on Ludy Benjamin's list, "because my mother took this class from you 24 years ago and she said I could use her notes." (p. 147)

Do answers like these make those who would give students a role in setting course goals dreamy optimists? Perhaps, but maybe there's another kind of question that we should ask: how did students arrive at this dismal approach to selecting courses? Surely they were not born wanting so little from their education. What experiences could have so disconnected them from classroom learning? Has the educational enterprise somehow disenfranchised them?

Those are large questions, and Benjamin's article does not answer them...at least not directly. Benjamin's

interest is in course goals and the disconnect that exists between the goals of faculty and those of students. Moreover, the goals focused in the article are not the bogus ones students frequently voice, but rather 17 possible goals for an introductory psychology course (some are relevant to that discipline, most are broadly applicable, and all are listed in the article). Across the years, Benjamin has given the list to faculty and students, asking each group to identify the three most important ones for an introductory course in psychology. "For college teachers, the most frequently mentioned goal is 11 (content). No other goal achieves anything near the consistency of that selection." (p.147) Not surprising, this number one goal for faculty rarely showed up in the students' top three. They rank highest a goal relating to self-knowledge and understanding, followed by one focusing on the development of study and learning skills, and a third highlighting social and interpersonal skills.

Benjamin's uses the list of goals on the first day of class. At that time a discussion about teacher goals occurs, as well as some discussion about this research documenting that teachers and students frequently do not share the same goals. This is why students are asked to identify their top three goals. The results are shared in the

following class session.

Benjamin discusses three ways of responding to student goals: take a totally student-centered approach and adopt those goals for the course. This approach is not recommended. Second possibility: compare student and faculty goals and then show students why/how faculty goals are superior. No recommendation here either—why seek input if you have no intention of responding to it?

Benjamin's choice is the third option, in which faculty and student goals are integrated. "Do not misunderstand this compromise strategy. It is not meant to undermine the professor's goals, nor is it meant to give students the impression that their goals will become part of the course when there is no intention on the part of the instructor to do so.... The purpose of involving students in the process is to create a course that is more meaningful to students and professor, to increase the satisfaction of all involved in the class on both sides of the lectern, and to show students how important it is to become involved in their learning." (p. 148) The rest of the article then explains how Benjamin incorporates student goals into the course. From work attempting to do

PAGE 6

TEXTS WITH METAPHOR

FROM PAGE 7

paraphrase what they read. Their paraphrase should retain the central core of meaning and specific details from the text, but it can use more accessible language. Additionally, I require students to use their own metaphor or simile to clarify what the author of the text intended. That's the key to the assignment—*students have to find their own metaphorical expressions to restate the author's ideas.*

Writers use metaphor and simile to bring together two unrelated ideas. These figures of speech help the reader understand one unknown idea by relating it to

something the reader already knows. Those images frame how the idea is understood. Let me explain how that works. I might say, "My new sofa is as soft as a cloud." This simile determines what the reader understands about my new sofa. The sofa is soft, *very* soft; it is heavenly to sit on it. On the other hand, because of what the simile emphasizes, the reader does not know about its size, color, style, durability, or brand name. The reader's understanding is framed by the metaphor.

That's the reason I require students to paraphrase what they cannot understand. To do this they have to dig into the author's and their own metaphoric structures. Then, when they translate into their

own words, their own metaphors help them understand what the author intended. Students who re-express the initial text in metaphor have to probe much more deeply into the text to find out what imagery is relevant. *When they find the right metaphor, they usually have found the right meaning as well.*

This strategy has been helpful to my students, and I've found they are often better prepared to write lively response papers and forceful essays after they "translated" confusing texts into more understandable metaphor and simile. They write better, and I enjoy reading more. 🍀