

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

LEADING STUDENTS TO LEARNING; THE TEACHER'S OBLIGATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper expresses a concern that, in many universities, the critical subject of instructor excellence in the classroom is taken for granted, overlooked or even ignored. The author relates the role of the teacher to that of a leader in a contemporary environment whose task is to "get people to do things willingly." With this in mind, five basic principles for teaching effectiveness are proposed:

- The teacher is an expert;
- The teacher is a learner;
- The teacher is a leader;
- The teacher is a friend;
- The teacher is an entertainer.

Specific policies and initiatives to stimulate interest in instructor excellence in the classroom are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

College professors tend to be a ferociously independent and heterogeneous group for a variety of reasons. Despite their diversity of interests and objectives, they do share a function in common--they teach students. I am concerned that the quality of this critical activity, the teaching of students, tends to be taken for granted or overlooked--perhaps even ignored--in the normal course of activities at some universities. I have listened for hours to faculty discussions concerning what to teach, Bayley observed that "despite its heartache, curriculum revision is all that teachers can think of in order to respond to the pressures of the present"[2, p. 5911. It appears to me that far less time is allocated to the vital subject, how to teach. I was attracted to ABSEL primarily because of its commitment in this area--enhanced learning effectiveness through the development of innovative teaching methods. This paper is directed at improving and maintaining quality in the teaching process. The ideas presented are intentionally provocative. They reflect my personal biases and, as such, are not likely to win universal approval. However, if they provoke productive thought and introspection, they achieve a purpose worthy, in my opinion, of consideration. What follows are my five personal principles concerning the role of the professor/teacher in the learning process followed by thoughts concerning the maintenance of teaching excellence.

While perhaps the "package" is different, nothing that follows is truly unique. I would like to say that, in my role as a college professor, I achieve the ideal described in this paper. Sadly, I must admit that I do not. However, I do feel that I am committed to the principles which follow. I would encourage others who teach university students to share this commitment. If this is not possible, I would encourage them to reflect upon where they diverge from the principles discussed in this paper and to justify in their minds the reason for their "deviation."

I must admit that my thinking has been conditioned by my experience in the educational environment. I teach in a non-profit, privately owned Institution. Tuition rates are, to say the least, staggering. Local competition, some at considerably reduced rates, provides the student a logical and attractive alternative to our Institution. If we can't offer something special, something extra, where "the rubber meets the road"--in the classroom--there is no logical reason for our students not to, based

on a perfunctory cost-benefit analysis, cast their lots with the competition. Whitfield and Brammer expressed this concern as follows: "The time is at hand when our higher institutions must demonstrate that quality instruction is their business or anticipate that clients will go elsewhere" [22, p.1]. According to Peter Drucker, "the battle cry [in education] for the Eighties and Nineties will be the demand for performance and accountability" [8, p. 3]. The cutting edge of that performance and accountability is measured in the capabilities of graduates--a direct result of teaching performance in the classroom.

TEACHING PRINCIPLES

The Teacher Is an Expert

Few would disagree with the premise that the teacher must be an expert in his or her subject area. Expertise in a dynamic world where truth is transitory requires continual update. The professor who is satisfied with yesterday's facts may, indeed, be contributing to obsolete college graduates. Legitimacy and credibility regarding expertise can take many forms. Some can be based on research; for some subjects, the professor's credibility is enhanced by "living" the subject. For example, the professor who teaches leadership and has never led a living soul may be skating on thin ice. Here is where the professor's contact with the outside world--consulting, researching, writing-- can add a dimension of currency and expertise which is vital to the classroom. The teacher's presentation of facts and theory must be reinforced with a rich repertoire of examples taken from historical, contemporary, and, possibly, personal examples. Without this vital dimension, classroom presentations are relegated to sterile expositions of semi-dead theories lacking relevance to the student's value system.

Expertise in the subject area is not enough. If, indeed, learning is the "modification of behavior" [3, p. 362], the teacher should be an expert in the process which contributes to this modification. The teacher should be a master of teaching fully aware of what contributes to and detracts from the process. In the words of Pearson Hunt of Harvard, "We must learn how to teach we must learn how people learn" [12, p. 1]. According to my value system, a teacher who is an expert in his or her subject but does not understand the learning process is not ready for the classroom. Would you send a boxer into the ring with one arm tied behind his back? Is it fair to foist a "one-armed expert" on students?

The Teacher Is a Learner

Presumably, the modification of behavior is a lifelong process--at least until the onset of senility. With this in mind, the teacher must be a perpetual learner on two planes--his/her area of expertise and his/her teaching effectiveness. Every classroom experience should be a learning experience for all including the teacher.

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Those who have lost the taste for learning are unlikely to stimulate such taste in their youthful subjects. Barak Rosenshine noted that, "if I am committed to learning in my subject matter and if I can unambiguously display that commitment, I may become that inspiring powerful force for my students"[16, p. 1]. The teacher can keep current in a variety of ways from a review of student research efforts into contemporary issues to thoughtful reflection on the students' views of controversial issues. After all, in many cases, their views relate more to today's realities than the teacher's--their decisions, not the teacher's, will shape the world of tomorrow's realities. From the perspective of teaching effectiveness, the classroom can become a laboratory for lessons in what teaching innovations work or, more important, what innovations lack practical utility. The teacher who emerges from the classroom without a bit of reflection upon what was accomplished and what could have been better has closed a gate to personal learning and, hence, an avenue to enhanced teaching effectiveness.

The Teacher Is a Leader

Most would agree with the fact that there exists between the college professor and the student some sort of unwritten contractual arrangement. While perceptions of the contract may vary, obligations are implied for each party. The student pays money for a body of knowledge and, assuming success, a number of credits toward a degree. In turn, the teacher is obliged to organize and impart that knowledge in digestible form. Further, the teacher must play the role of judge and develop a system for the comparative evaluation of student performance. It is recognized that this evaluation might involve failure--a negative return on student involvement.

The teacher can view his/her role in this contractual arrangement rather passively with the "burden of proceedings" in the learning process placed upon the student. I disagree. Costs are too high; the consequence of lost educational opportunities are too severe in a knowledge-oriented society. After all, according to Peter Drucker, "education is the central capital investment ... of a 'knowledge society'" [8, p. 31]. Whereas many students are self-energized to learn, there exists a need for leadership--getting people to do things willingly--in the classroom. It is the role of the teacher to create an environment where people--almost all of them--actually want to expend energy to learn the subject no matter how dull or difficult. Those teachers who do not at least sense this obligation are, in my opinion, in violation of the "contract" and should be judged accordingly. If they are unwilling to "lead," they should be assigned no subordinates. Perhaps they should confine their activities to research.

Robert Cavalier concurs with this approach when he recognized that "the classroom is a dynamic interpersonal life situation which varies with different personalities....The most important determinant of success is each teacher's concern for his student's progress [concern for people] combined with the realization that one may improve in many areas [concern for the task]" [7, pp. 1,4] Further, according to Cavalier "the teacher's role, therefore, is threefold: he establishes needs (psychological tensions), he sets appropriate goals, and he facilitates behavior on the part of the student to achieve these goals" [7, p. 7]. While the responsibilities of the leadership role are evident, it must be recognized that the teacher's leadership challenge is unique. Unlike most business or government organizations where an employee has only one boss (Fayol's Unity of Command principle [17, p. 32], the teacher normally shares the students' time and attention with several other instructors who sense no obligation to coordinate their plans and demands with others. The student senses a bevy of masters with, in most cases, a variety of leadership styles. Under such complex and often confusing conditions, the question of leadership

effectiveness becomes significant.

The Teacher Is a Friend

If leadership is, indeed, a teacher's obligation, the question arises as to what style of leadership is most effective. Current research in the area of leadership indicates that, as subordinates become more sophisticated, authoritarian styles tend to become less effective [10; 13; 14]. Increasingly, managers and leaders are encouraged to reduce the psychological barriers which separate them from their subordinates and thus reduce the flow of information [1; 4; 20]. Obviously, the image of the dour teacher with the birch stick is no longer applicable to the modern classroom. However, for many teachers, the use of physical persuasion has been replaced by the more subtle but equally threatening application of threats of failure. Such an orientation might be appropriate for primary and secondary schools, but certainly not the college classroom. According to Cavalier, "it is the teacher who is deficient in his knowledge who uses authority incorrectly-- who rules rather than leads his class--who, in his insecurity, builds barriers to communication" [7, p. 1]. Bayley made the sad observation that "many teachers are certainly not models of intellectual skills in action but merely of perambulatory memories that have had the leisure to find out things others haven't. Since the classroom is an authoritarian place, they can demand that what they know should be what everybody should know. Their's is a cheap victory" [2, p. 596].

While the consequence of failure cannot be disregarded, the orientation should be on the satisfactions associated with success--learning and achievement. In such an environment--an environment created by the leader-- the teacher is an enthusiastic source of information, guidance, assistance, support, concern, and, if necessary, sympathy. In essence, the teacher serves the role of a "friend with standards" as opposed to a hostile or indifferent judge of unidentifiable subordinates. Cavalier supported this view with his observation that the teacher "must be seen as a friend to this students--someone who is concerned and willing to give of himself for them. ... this does not imply lack of leadership. On the contrary, if the teacher is perceived as being understanding, he will win his students' respect and will be able to lead more effectively" [7, p. 11].

Admittedly, such an approach places the leader very close to his/her "subordinates" whose performance must be evaluated objectively. Under such conditions, the teacher is under considerable pressure to achieve and maintain impeccable professional standards--in essence, to do his/her "homework" with great intensity. In the words of Myron Brenton, "the best teacher wears a large invisible button that reads 'I give a damn'" [5, p. 43].

The Teacher Is an Entertainer

If the teacher serves as an expert, a learner, a leader and a friend, a teacher/student relationship involving mutual respect and confidence can be achieved. Most students can be stimulated, based more on the expectation of success rather than the fear of failure, to apply themselves and realize the return on their investment--both the knowledge sought and credit hours associated therewith. To my mind, satisfaction of the first four principles constitutes the minimum requirements of a successful teacher. However, I suggest that far more is possible. While I refer to the teacher as an "entertainer," other

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terms such as “stimulator,” “energizer,” or “initiator” might be just as appropriate. The goal I seek energizes the students from a condition of attention and interest to total mental and emotional involvement. The imaginative, well-timed and sensitive use of humor can raise levels of consciousness and, thus, receptiveness to ideas. Even if the humor is somewhat crass (however, not asinine), most students sense that the teacher is attempting to stimulate and enrich the class through a form of amateur entertainment. From my admittedly limited perspective, students appreciate this, forgive possible imperfections, and respond in a productive manner. I believe that smiling students are, at least, absorbing the material being presented. My goal in class is to charm at least 80 percent of the students (hopefully more); irritate less than 20 percent (hopefully less); and bore no one. I sense complete failure if I hear that awful thud of a pair of eyelids squeezing shut in my classroom.

I would assume that many would object to what appears to be a “frivolous” approach to teaching. Each teacher has his or her own style; I wouldn’t presume to foist mine on others. However, I do disagree with those who sense that learning must always involve tedium and pain. There is enough pain in the world without making it an essential ingredient for education. The sociobiologist, David Campbell, observed that “in our schools, we have created the most artificial, rigid and unnatural of human settings.” He continued, “we must overcome our fear--fear of ourselves, of our playful, sexy, energetic nature which balks at being tied to unremitting toil and deferred gratification” [6, p. 5081. Jerry Harvey of George Washington University reflected “why aren’t management textbooks funny? It’s because they don’t have much realism in them. If they had much realism to them, they’d be funny as hell” [15, p. 58]. Perhaps this approach is a bit extreme, but it recognizes the point that, to a degree, everything and everyone can be ridiculous. The teacher who attempts to maintain a barrier of complete impersonality with students denies them a vital dimension of the learning process--unless, of course, the teacher is a completely worthless individual. Freda Reblsky of Boston University, recognized as an outstanding educator in the Nutshell 1981 Annual, observed, “if faculty don’t share who they are with students, students don’t see them as people” [18, p. 92]. Considering the advances in modern technology, totally impersonal faculty can presumably be replaced by equally impersonal computers.

The faculty member who is reasonably comfortable with his or her personality and is willing to share it with students can “afford” to reach out and “spark” student interest through a variety of forms of creative and innovative amateur “entertainment.” Of course, this requires involvement, extra work, and an acceptance of risk. However, I consider the rewards--intense student interest and participation--well worth the costs.

I recognize that attempts at classroom “entertainment” can take a wide variety of forms and must be suited to the individual teacher’s personality. It would be absurd for a normally introspective individual to try to imitate a revival preacher in the classroom. However, in my opinion, the teacher must ask the question, “what have I done to shift the students’ attention away from other concerns to intense interest and enthusiasm for the academic subject at hand?” Of course, once the student’s mind is “in gear,” genuine teaching effectiveness must follow interspersed with well-timed “shots” of enthusiasm-producing lubrication.

RELEVANCE OF PRINCIPLES TO RESEARCH

As I mentioned before, my principles are nothing new. While the “package” may be slightly different, research in the area reaches very similar conclusions. A major survey concerning the best and the worst university teachers, published in 1973, revealed general agreement between faculty and students. According to the survey, the “ideal” teacher is friendly, accessible, dynamic and capable of humor. Further, the conclusions listed five key qualities of an effective teacher/professor:

- Command of the subject material and the ability to relate the acquisition of the subject material to an “adventure.”
- Showmanship, clarity, ability to transmit material and “put it across.”
- Rapport with students as a group.
- Rapport with students individually.
- Dynamism, enthusiasm. [11, pp. 41-50]

IN SEARCH OF TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Almost every educational institution has developed techniques designed to establish and maintain standards of teaching excellence. Results vary. Listed below are my thoughts concerning a variety of approaches.

Identify Teaching as the Priority Criterion for Faculty Selection

Teachers must be experts in the discipline they teach. However, expertise in a particular area does not guarantee an effective teacher. Criteria for the selection of faculty members--previous experience, national prestige, research and writing skills, publication records, etc.--vary. If the ability to teach effectively is too far down the list, the students suffer. Sooner or later, so will the institution. Demonstrated ability to teach effectively must be a priority selection criterion.

Some research in this area reveals major problems. Whitfield and Brammer concluded that “institutional rewards confirm ... that good teaching is not critical” [22, p. 7] in many university environments and that “mediocre teaching exists because it has been tolerated and condoned” [22, p. 11). Paul Sawyer, noting that “most schools rely on an abysmally small quantity of data” concerning teaching effectiveness [19, p. 3791 recommended a “teach in” associated with the faculty selection process. I concur.

Evaluate Teaching Performance and Reward Accordingly

Teachers, just like all other groups of people, respond to opportunities, recognition, and rewards. Ideally, teaching excellence should result in greater rewards than teaching mediocrity. While this goal is desirable, fair and equitable systems for the comparative evaluation of teaching performance are difficult to develop. Many systems rely exclusively on student opinion which is inevitably influenced by the “halo effect” of popularity and course subject content. However, given no alternative, such a system does provide a degree, albeit inaccurate, of responsive feed-

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back which can be related to additional information from other sources.

I realize that the subject of faculty evaluation constitutes a “can of worms” to those in academic administration. As noted by Allan Tucker, “handled improperly, evaluation can destroy morale, decrease the chances for the department’s success in meeting objectives, and places the chairperson on the receiving end of a long succession of grievances” [21, p. 161]. However, some sort of evaluation is a must, and teaching ability must receive a significant focus. The system used, and there are many in use, should go beyond the objectives of evaluation and reward. The system should provide a vehicle for the improvement of future performance.

Set the Example

In my opinion, leaders of effective teachers should be super-effective teachers. The leader sets the standard. If such a standard does not exist, how can ineffective faculty members be influenced by their equally ineffective bosses? These leaders--deans, department chairmen, and the like--maintain their credibility in the classroom and, in turn, maintain a “feel” for the educational challenges confronting their “subordinates.”

Perhaps this approach asks too much. The widely diverse demands of academic administration certainly conflict with those of teaching excellence. Under such conditions, it is very difficult to match the classroom performance of those without non-teaching distractions. If this is the case, intense interest and support for high standards of teaching excellence and continued involvement in the teaching process, usually on a reduced scale, should suffice.

Teach the Teachers

Many highly educated experts have never been exposed to courses on effective teaching. Far too often, they are foisted upon unsuspecting “customers” (students) without adequate preparation. This is criminal. Even experienced teachers can benefit from updates on new pedagogic techniques. Some might object to such a “skills” approach for highly sophisticated intellectuals. However, if the alternative is students bored to stone, I say they should make the sacrifice for the good of their profession.

Share Teaching Experiences

Every day, dedicated teachers are innovating, experimenting and learning in the classroom. Some of this exploration leads to mistakes; some leads to a genuine enhancement of the teaching process. While each teacher is a unique individual with his or her own personal style, there is much in the way of pedagogy which is transferable. An organized system for sharing these experiences--both the successful and the unsuccessful--could contribute materially to both vital information interchange and giving teaching effectiveness priority attention. If the assembly of faculty for this purpose is impractical, a centralized repository for such information available to all faculty might serve the purpose. In the School of Government and Business Administration at the George Washington University, a “Golden Book of Teaching Innovation” has been developed. This large, loose-leaf notebook is a repository for faculty ideas, voluntarily submitted in pencil on simple forms, concerning effective teaching. Additionally, relatively recent periodical articles on the subject of teaching are placed in the book. Many references for this particular paper were found in the “Golden Book.” Faculty members are welcome to draw out the book at any time and review both the classroom experiences of

their peers and the writings of “experts” on the teaching process. Such a book could prove to be useful reading for the new faculty member.

To be perfectly candid, the “Golden Book” has not been a “best seller” since its origination a year ago. Whereas a number of the faculty have been willing to submit their entries for inclusion in the book, very few have bothered to review its contents. It seems that their minds are focused on “more important” things. Here is where it helps to identify innovation to improve teaching performance as a very high priority subject in the educational institution.

SUMMARY

Alvin Eurich observed in 1970 that “In terms of basic procedure, education has changed less and adapted itself less than any other human organization” [9, p. 141]. Perhaps this stimulated Peter Drucker’s statement that “what is going down, and fairly fast, is demand for traditional education in traditional schools” [8, p. 31]. While I perceive these views as somewhat extreme, I am concerned about the reluctance of some to focus upon the guts of the educational process. Perhaps part of the problem was identified by Whitfield and Brammer who observed that “the responsibility for instructional improvement has never been clearly pinpointed within the academic structure but remains a vaguely shared task finally delegated to no one” [22, p. 9]. I would hate to think that my chosen profession was “the last happy playground of the amateur where he is king, where he cannot be contradicted” [22, p. 4].

To my mind, the indictment above does not describe either my institution or the majority of others. However, I hope we all share a concern for imperfections and a commitment to genuine cost effectiveness. Business schools have enjoyed considerable growth over the past decade. With such a “seller’s market” and a focus on quantity, some might be inclined to tolerate imperfections in the basic product. Perhaps a parallel existed in the U.S. auto industry. Recognizing that educational institutions are highly complex with competing values and demands, I think it’s important that we focus on the basics--what occurs in the classroom. At costs which are often staggering, our students willingly register to be our subordinates in a quest for something very vital to their lives--knowledge and understanding. If ever effective leadership were needed, it is in the classroom. Dedicated leaders never shortchange their subordinates!

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