

Teaching and Learning Newsletter

Calibrating “Good Teaching” and Lancing Acceptance of the Axiomatic

“Good teaching” is a remarkably contentious subject. Despite universal desirability, opinion as to definition, consistency of provision, and remedies for apparent infrequency are chasmal. My remarks address but a sliver of these concerns and begin with a brief examination of competing views of education in general.

For some, teaching, good and bad, is reducible to matters of technique. This is especially germane to the furtherance of applied capacities, as in woodworking, accountancy, and healing. Here readily measurable skills are developed and sharpened. Since such abilities are also textured by layers of cognitive requisites more related to discernment than craft, this understanding is insufficiently encompassing. The aesthetic sensibilities of carpenters (as opposed to plumbing beam settings), the strategic analyses of accountants (as opposed to inerrant bookkeeping), and the bedside manner of physicians (as opposed to suturing wounds) are less easily transmitted by instruction and their progression not immediately gaugeable.

Teaching in these realms is held by others to be the essence of the profession; traditionally associated with liberal arts education. Its aim is to spark “love of mental adventure. . . . in

which some of the things that seem plainest grow more and more difficult the more they are considered; other things which might have been thought quite impossible to discover, have nevertheless been laid bare by genius and industry.” (Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, 1916, p. 114)

Defining teaching in this way is also overly constrictive, too easily ignoring the abundance of practicums necessarily part of much liberal arts training—not to mention that discovery and intellectual fulfillment also attend apprehension in applied disciplines. Archeology students striving, for example, to fathom the intricacies of ancient cultures may be required to learn the techniques of site excavation and relic reconstruction, while those studying theories of social antagonisms may as a matter of course undertake controlled simulations to better comprehend negotiation and conflict resolution competencies.

A more inclusive conceptualization of teaching, and “good teaching” in particular, might at least involve that which succeeds in not only conveying and fostering a complement of information, knowledge, skills, and dispositions relevant to a given field (or fields) of study. It would also incorporate that which inspires the idiosyncratic processing and internalization of what has been related. In this way, students are not merely

By 2005 Excellence in Teaching Award winner, Alan Epstein

Part I



recipients but participants in their own education, capable of utilizing lessons across a range of non-instructed matters, and able to elaborate, amend, or reject what is no longer—or what has never been—intellectually or morally compelling. “Good teaching”, in short, is known only through such genuine learning; surely a truism as old as the capacity for transmission through inculcation.

One issue of moment to this sort of quality teaching, or simply teaching worthy of the name, is how to better ensure that more than a minority of students are routinely so affected. Another, more elemental, concern regards the sustainability of such pedagogy. Test-directed teaching and other outcomes-based concomitants have potential to compromise what has been characterized here as the ideal interaction between teaching and learning. Given that teaching in both applied and liberal studies cultivates aptitudes that are not instantly measurable, and which may actually defy the homogenization on which meaningful metrics are premised, pressuring all instruct-

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tion to conform to the needs of quantifiable results needlessly risks eviscerating what is essential to “good teaching” and what, ironically, serves as its ultimate benchmark. Although sincere desire to aid student achievement propels much of this emphasis, its current prominence is attributable to interests more preoccupied with the production of functional hirelings than independent-minded citizens. (See Gatto, *The Underground History of American Education*, 2003, and Soley, *Leasing the Ivory Tower*, 1995. See also Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 1985).

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Senate Teaching and
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**Calibrating Good
Teaching, Pt. I** 1

**Foundations of
Excellence** 3

**Technological
Issues and News** 1

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Calibrating Good Teaching....and Lancing Acceptance of the Axiomatic
(Continued from First Page)

Assisting students in the generation of job and life skills need not be mutually exclusive enterprises. Nor is assessment of teacher and student performance undesirable or unnecessary per se. Rather, it is the centrality and purposes of appraisal that are debatable. Measurement-obsessed instruction may have merit, but its utility for nurturing less readily quantifiable facilities and self-referencing learning is arguably overstated if not misplaced. At a minimum, it does little to arrest the instrumentalism now commonplace among students, whose acute perceptions of the imperatives of career advancement seemingly drive their calculus for transiting a course of study.

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Denying this reality qualifies as naïve. Is it not more so to underestimate how students but respond to mysterious institutional forces not strictly subject to their control? This helps ensure that they are as apt to graduate accomplished at corner-shaving while stunted by post-examination information evaporation as they are to finish their studies adept at critical thinking while enriched by cumulative understanding, but likely not both.

Perhaps this is overstated and so much false alarm. Quality teaching and genuine learning certainly do occur amid currents militating against them. My own experiences inside and outside the classroom, however, suggest that the pressures inimical to such teaching and learning, and the resulting impediments to the consistent review of prevailing tenets, are not convincingly trivialized. Indeed, responding to them much informs my teaching at Oakland.

I teach courses in Political Science and International Studies. Each offering belongs to realms of inquiry whose constituent conclusions ordinarily lack the rigor and reliability attributed to consensus findings from the physical and

biological sciences. Relying instead on a lesser standard of disciplined knowledge necessarily reduces determinations typically reached in the social sciences and humanities to the category of judgment. Whether it be comparative politics (PS 131), international politics (formerly PS 314), collectivist political theory (PS 377), or Chinese civilization (IS 210), the courses I teach at Oakland thus involve subject matter whose conventions and received wisdom about human affairs are interpretative and eminently contestable.

What interests me and fundamentally colors my teaching less concerns reconciling such inexactitude with expectations for generalizable findings than coming to terms with the accompanying assumptions informing such estimations. These givens are not neutral. They make consequential claims and have non-uniform implications for individuals and their societies. That they are usually not articulated and escape routine scrutiny means they can also be insidious, veiling interests and the exercise of power.

My teaching endeavors to alert pupils to these political postulates, to explain their significance and effects, and assist students to both cultivate a sensitivity to their presence and develop the intellectual wherewithal to decode them. In this way, students will also be prepared to fashion their own more balanced understandings of these suppositions and to defend or challenge them as informed, constructively engaged citizens.

Some clarifying examples are in order. In Comparative Politics, we explore, inter alia, why for some two thousand years "democracy" was not the assumed unalloyed good it has become for contemporary opinion leaders. Instead, evidence is examined revealing it to have long been a source of bitter social conflict between privileged and constrained social orders. So too, the unquestioned litmus test for a modern democratic polity:

free, fair and regular elections, is discovered to be quite undemocratic by the standards of classical antiquity. In this light, present versions of democratic governance appear comparatively anemic and more akin to the tutelary republicanism the framers of the American constitution explicitly preferred. Having so interrogated these related assumptions, students might then be asked to re-examine the policy of "democracy promotion" and its service as rationale for civil and military interventions abroad. Or, more specifically, to analyze claims that free and fair polls require withdrawal of foreign military forces from, say, Lebanon but not from Afghanistan, Iraq, or the occupied Palestinian territories.

In International Politics, careful consideration is given to the various ways in which understanding such matters as economic development, inter-state conflict, global environmental stewardship, and the efficacy of international law reflect competing basic assumptions about the nature of human beings and the world of nation states. Through this focus, students are better able to critically analyze policy selections and institutional behaviors, and to anticipate international outcomes. By enhancing the intelligibility of personalities, events, and architectures of international influence, students are also positioned to order what may have seemed an unending stream of disconnected occurrences and characters. No longer overwhelmed, they may acquire an interest in regularly monitoring international affairs; a prerequisite for meaningful global citizenship.

Alan Epstein's article will be continued in the Spring Edition of the Teaching and Learning Committee Newsletter

Enhancing the First Year Experience:

To Enrich Undergraduate Experience and Retain Students

Oakland University has joined twenty-six other institutions in an exciting national project called the Foundations of Excellence (FOE) that focuses on the effectiveness of the first-year college experience. The purpose of the Foundations of Excellence project is to engage faculty and staff in a comprehensive look at the design and implementation of the first college year. The goal is to make programmatic improvements that will increase student learning and lead to student success.

Research supports the common sense notion that a successful first-year experience increases the likelihood that a college student will persist to graduation and a degree. But how can the effectiveness of a university's first-year experience be measured?

The Policy Center on the First Year of College developed a model of institutional excellence in the first year based on nine standards of excellence called Dimensions. The Center staff developed the model in collaboration with research partners from Penn State University and with input from over 200 colleges and universities regarding what constitutes excellence in the first year. Multiple performance indicators allow institutions to measure achievement on each of the nine Dimensions and to identify areas in which a change in policy or practice can yield improvement. The nine Dimensions are used to identify institutions that have a distinctive first-year experience that includes: 1) a *philosophy* that clearly communicates what is expected of first

year students and how students will be supported to meet expectations; 2) a university *organization* structure that encourages academic and student affairs to work together to effectively recruit, admit, orient, support, advise and teach new students; 3) *faculty* that are actively engaged with first year students; 4) a *learning* environment that identifies specific learning goals for freshmen, uses a variety of teaching formats to engage students, assesses the effectiveness of its programs, and integrates out-of-classroom experiences into student learning; 5) experiences that assist students with difficult *transitions* to college life; 6) an environment that teaches and models the value of *diversity*; 7) a process for helping students to understand what it means to be an educated person and the various *roles* that higher education plays in society and their lives; 8) programs to address special needs populations as well as the mainstream so that *all students* are served; 9) effective ongoing *assessment* that evaluates the success and adequacy of first year programs.

During the FOE year-long process, the institution undergoes a self-study of its effectiveness on the nine Foundational Dimensions. Oakland's approach to the process includes a First-Year Council made up of over 50 faculty and staff who have experience with particular dimensions, access to information and evidence regarding the dimensions, and

By
**Susan Awbrey, Vice
Provost for Under-
graduate Education**

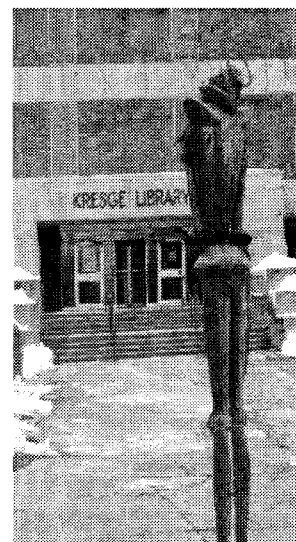
experience and knowledge of the first college year. The Council's membership was divided into nine subcommittees, one to study each of the dimensions. The chairs of these subcommittees constitute a task force to keep the project moving. Each of the subcommittees examines OU's progress on one of the nine dimensions gathering evidence and making recommendations for improvement. In addition to the evidence compiled by the subcommittees two campus-wide surveys, one of faculty/staff and the one of first year students, are being conducted to draw input from a wider audience.

After all of the subcommittees complete their evaluations, a final report will be discussed with the campus community and an action plan for improving the first year experience at Oakland will be developed. Improving the first year will benefit students by helping them to meet their educational goals and benefit the institution by helping to retain and graduate students.



Foundations of Excellence on the Web: <http://www.fyfoundations.org>

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Technology in the Classroom: Ethical Considerations

By Christopher R. Clason., Associate Professor of German

Teaching and Learning Committee

Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan
48309

Phone: 248-370-2063
Fax: 248-370-4208
E-mail: clason@oakland.edu

Members of the 2005- 2006 Senate Teaching & Learning Committee:

Susan Awbrey, Vice Provost for
Undergraduate Education

Charles Clark, Director, Academic
Skills Center

Elyce Cron, Education Counseling

Jennifer Heisler, Communications

László Lipták, Mathematics &
Statistics

Kay Palmer, Institutional Re-
search

Kasaundra Tomlin, School of
Business Administration

Catherine Tyler, School of Busi-
ness Administration

Christopher Clason, DMLL, chair

*If you wish to comment on any arti-
cle in this newsletter, please contact
Chris Clason at x2063 or email:
clason@oakland.edu*

In a large lecture hall a professor poses a question to the class. After a brief, reflective pause, a student recalls the answer she read last night while completing her assignment. But just before she is able to raise her hand to respond, her neighbor, having clicked madly on his wireless laptop, sings out the relevant factoid he has located through his lightning-quick Google-search - an answer he was able to determine not on the basis of any reading he has accomplished, but instead because he can "Google" faster than his neighbor. Does this scenario seem at all familiar?

At the 25th Annual Lilly Conference on Teaching held in Oxford, OH this past fall, many sessions addressed various aspects of technology in the classroom. Several spoke specifically to ethical issues, such as in-class "Googling," and indicated a growing awareness among faculty that such ethical considerations may lie at the heart of educational excellence in the future. Do some students have an unfair advantage over others because their "memory" is no longer "mind," but rather RAM - or the almost infinite databases of Google-accessible cyberspace? Is the constant clicking of keyboards in classrooms an intolerable annoyance to those who prefer the more traditional recording technologies of pen-and-paper, or is this the music of the twenty-first century learning environment? Are the startling

outbursts of myriad cell phone ringtones something we just need to get used to? Have traditional tests become obsolete in an age when students can employ phone cameras to photograph and fax an image of their test to a roommate, who can then reply with the correct answers via email to that same phone? Perhaps more importantly, are we instructors doing students a disservice by permitting computer skills to replace the hard work of what we have until now considered "learning?"

At Lilly, these questions arose often and were debated with a good deal of sophistication by concerned individuals from a broad range of perspectives, including administrators, technology experts, teachers and students. Some insisted that gadgetry use reflected actual life experiences of the "modern student," that it supported learning in countless ways, and that it was highly motivational, amusing and inevitable. Others focused on social inequalities, citing statistics that classroom technological innovation privileges a particular *status quo* of gender, class, color, ethnicity and economics over others possessing perhaps less familiarity with technology. A surprising number of attendees urged caution and awareness: technology's advantages

and disadvantages must be weighed carefully and responsibly before it is either embraced or rejected. On whichever side one comes down in debating these issues, it is clear that the ethical discussion is not a trivial one, and that it ought to be had before circumstances render it moot.

SRS Interest Group Forming

The SRS (Student Response System) is a technology tool designed to promote active learning in the classroom. Students respond to questions posed by their instructors with a hand held keypad that resembles a TV remote control - their responses are tabulated by a software system that displays the results on a monitor in graphical form

The potential uses for this system have become the topic of discussion by a group of professors on the Oakland University campus. If you are interested in joining this discussion, please contact Dagmar Cronn at cronn@oakland.edu or by phone at x4064. A webpage announcing one university's use of this system is available at: <http://www.citl.ohiou.edu/index.cfm?siteID=6&pageID=29>



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