Insights & Ideas for Teaching & Learning

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Teaching and Learning Committee

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Ed. Note: I have always read the articles in this newsletter with great interest. I especially liked the emphasis often placed on enthusaism in teaching, which I agree is of enormous importance. However, I sometimes strongly disagreed with some of the assertions in the material, and, as a result, I wrote the following commentary (which culminated in my winning the honor of becoming editor of this newsletter):

Encouraging Good Teaching

by Austin Murphy (Oakland University)

I strongly disagree with a recent article advocating the U.S. Army's philosophy of "follow me" in teaching. I believe we should strive to educate leaders, not followers and robots (I would also rather have my students surpass me than follow me). According to some sources (such as reported in Walter Bowart's *Operation Mind Control*), the U.S. Army's teaching methods reflect an assumption that the students have very limited intelligence and that nothing complicated should be taught (and, as a result, nothing complicated is learned).

As a matter of fact, I would disagree with anything that resembles "monkey see, monkey do" approaches to learning, especially at upper levels. Our students are not monkeys, but instead thinking individuals. Students should be required to exercise and develop their thinking abilities (as painful as that may be) as opposed to just regurgitate information in spoonfeeding exercises fit only for beginning learners.

Although the actual teaching methods used by good, enthusiastic teachers can and should vary greatly, I personally believe that students should be challenged to develop their knowledge and abilities to the maximum. In this process, the teacher is there to provide direction, guidance, and goals, in my opinion.

I believe "Do it with my help, direction and guidance" is a far more preferable teaching philosophy for Oakland's students, for whose abilities I have a great deal of respect. This teaching philosophy encourages a wide range of intellectually challenging activites, including having exams (both oral and written) that require students to apply their knowledge and thinking abilities to somewhat new situations (as long as students are given sufficient direction and practice in dealing with new situations). It also encourages teaching students responsibility in learning by assigning long-term projects and cumulative tests on complex material (that invariably penalize students who wait to the last minute or who do not retain their knowledge beyond the first test), as long as students are provided with the necessary help and guidance. Although this philosophy is probably more consistent with that practiced at European universities, I do believe that the application of it by many Oakland faculty can enhance the education of our students.

Perhaps it is possible to expect too much

of our students, but I believe the far greater risk exists in expecting too little. Charles Sykes has written a number of interesting books on the problems of high school and college education in America that address just that subject (such as *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why America's Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write, or Add*). Flattering and entertaining students is not teaching (although compliments and making subjects as interesting as possible can certainly enhance the teaching process). Similarly, teaching only easy material does not represent effective teaching (although making complex concepts as simple as possible does enhance teaching).

"We should try to educate leaders, not followers and robots."

In summary, I agree that the concepts of enthusiasm and dedication in teaching are of great importance. However, although I believe that there is no one correct formula for being a good teacher, I also believe it is very important that students be sufficiently challanged in order to develop their knowledge and abilities to the maximum. This is true even if such challenging sometimes results in students experiencing short-term frustration and can result in student evaluations not being as good as with less rigorous teaching methods.

As a result, I feel that excessive reliance on student evaluations to evaluate teaching is counterproductive. As stated by Rouben Cholakian (in the Sept/Oct. 1994 *Academe*, p. 25), "By valuing so heavily the 'performance' of the teacher/entertainer, we encourage young colleagues to concentrate on manner rather than matter." Don Lehman has stated (in the Sept. 1995 *ACR News*, p. 3), "Yet if we only do that which is pleasing, we will never innovate. We should make students feel uncomfortable from time to time; that is our professional responsibility." James Newton (in the 1988 *Journal of Accounting Education,* p. 1-14) cites surveys indicating that, **as a result of having their teaching evaluated by students, a very large number of faculty have "substantially lowered their level of course difficulty and grading standards."** Professor Newton also concludes that **student evaluations are "responsive to manipulation"** and, after reviewing the research on student evaluations, repeated a conclusion reached by many others: **"The validity of student ratings, as evidenced by their association with learning criteria, has generally been found to be weak."**

I believe that alternative measures of evaluating teaching should be considered, such as peer evaluations, alumni evaluations, etc. For instance, some of the evidence on alumni evaluations indicates that there is a relatively low correlation between student evaluations and alumni evaluations in the professional schools (Braunstein and Benston, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1973, p. 248), and that alumni evaluations may provide additional information on the longer-term perceived effectiveness of teaching.

Note that this article is not an attempt to attack any particular teacher or teaching style. However, hopefully it will provide food for thought and help provide a defense against those who are trying to reduce the quality and rigor of teaching at Oakland.

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IMPROVING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

From the Desk of
the Oakland University Assessment Committee
{adapted from "Making Quality Count in Undergraduate Education," a report issued by the Education Commission of the States and its 1994-95 chair, Governor Roy Romer of Colorado}:

Research on American college students reveals several characteristics that can help create a high-quality undergraduate education.These characteristics are summarized below under three major headings: organizational culture, curriculum, and instructional practice.

Quality begins with an organization culture that values:

1. High expectations. Students learn more effectively when expectations for learning are placed at high but attainable levels, and when these expectations are communicated clearly from the onset. This principle is based on research indicating that when students are expected to take risks and perform at high levels, they make greater efforts to succeed. If this kind of encouragement is absent, students tend to choose "safe" learning alternatives that allow little room for developing their full potential.

Research indicates that students should not be left simply on their own to reach high standards. Instead, both the institution and its faculty members must set high expectations and make active efforts to help students meet them.

2. Respect for diverse talents and learning styles. Students come to college with vastly different backgrounds, levels of preparation, and previous experiences. It also is true that regardless of background, different students may learn most effectively in quite different ways. Good practice demands carefully designing curricula and instructional efforts to meet these diverse backgrounds and learning styles. Not only should individual ways of learning be respected and students allowed to capitalize on their strengths, but diversity itself should be harnessed for the insights it can provide on the subject matter taught. Instructional approaches that actively tap prior student and faculty experiences, and highlight the differences in those experiences, can be particularly helpful.

3. Emphasis on the early years of undergraduate study – A consensus is emerging that the first year of undergraduate study -- particularly the freshman year – is critical to student success. This idea partly reflects the fact that the transition from high school to postsecondary study represents a major discontinuity in both expectations and behavior for most students. Not only are standards higher, but students also are expected to work harder and make major choices about their course of study. For adult students returning to the unfamiliar world of postsecondary study after many absent years, the shock of transition can be particularly abrupt. Yet, the pattern of resource allocation at most colleges and universities strongly favors upper-division work. Comprehensive efforts to integrate first-year students into the mainstream of collegiate experience often are treated as auxiliary experiences.

A quality undergraduate curriculum requires:

4. Coherence in learning. Students succeed best in developing higher-order skills (e.g., critical thinking, effective written and oral communication, problem solving) when such skills are reinforced throughout their education program. This means, at a minimum, that students should be presented with a set of learning experiences that consist of more than merely a required number of courses or credit hours. Instead, the curriculum should be structured in a way that sequences individual courses to reinforce specific outcomes and consciously directs instruction toward meeting those ends.

5. Synthesizing experiences. Students also learn best when they are required to synthesize knowledge and skills learned in different places in the context of a single problem or setting. Such experiences can occur appropriately at multiple points in a student's career and should not be confined to upper-division or baccalaureate programs.

6. Ongoing practice of learned skills. A common research finding in K-12 and postsecondary education is that unpracticed skills atrophy quickly. This is particularly the case with such core skills as computation and writing, which if not reinforced, will inevitably deteriorate without use. Good practice consistent with this principle requires multiple opportunities to exercise higher-order communication (written and oral), critical thinking, problem solving, and basic quantitative skills. It also requires that students demonstrate such skills at appropriate levels as a condition for graduation.

7. Integrating education and experience. Classroom learning is both augmented and reinforced by multiple opportunities to apply what is learned. In professional curricula and programs, opportunities for this abound through formal practice, internships or cooperative education arrangements, but they generally are lacking for undergraduate education as a whole. These kinds of settings are those in which the greatest amount of learning often occurs and where student interest is highest.

Quality undergraduate instruction builds in:

8. Active learning. At all levels, students learn best when they are given multiple opportunities to actively exercise and demonstrate skills. For example, students learn more when they participate in frequent discussions of presented class material, produce considerable written work, and apply learned material to new settings or contexts, rather than when they simply listen to lectures. Rather than being based entirely on information recall, student assessment should require active demonstration of synthesis and application.

Assessment and prompt feedback. Frequent feedback to students on their performance also is a major contributor to learning. Typically in college classrooms, students receive little formal feedback on their work until

well in the term. Learning is enhanced when students are provided with information about their performance, both within courses and through advisement processes and integrative experiences that give them an opportunity to assess more broadly what they have learned. Early and frequent assessment at the classroom level also allows faculty to determine the different abilities and backgrounds that are present among students and may suggest strategies for dealing with this diversity.

10. Collaboration. Students learn better when engaged in a team effort rather than working on their own. Teamwork increases active involvement and provides multiple opportunities for feedback. At the same time, it actively reinforces communication and problem solving skills. Moreover, it is the way the world outside the academy works - a world that students eventually will face. Research also suggests that collaboration is a useful model for faculty/student interaction; rather than being judges of student performance, the best teachers act as coaches, working with students as joint participants in achieving learning goals.

11. Adequate time on task. Research also confirms that the more time devoted to learning, the greater the payoffs in terms of what and how much is learned. How an institution defines its expectations for the ways students and instructors use their time can powerfully influence the quality of learning that occurs. At the same time, visibly emphasizing time on task helps students learn how to plan and manage their time more effectively and how to focus their energy.

12. Out-of-class contact with faculty. Frequency of academic out-of-class contact between faculty members and students is a strong determinant of both program completion and effective learning. Knowing well a few faculty members enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans.

"Both the institution and its faculty members must set high expectations and make active efforts to meet them."

Conclusion

Multiple sources of research suggest these twelve factors are important individually and are mutually reinforcing. It is difficult for a college or university to be engaged seriously in one of these activities without being engaged in most of them.

Also highly correlated with such practices are "student-centered" faculty attitudes. It is important to note that the majority of these practices may be regarded highly by students themselves, and the institutions that engage in them tend to receive higher satisfaction ratings from their graduates than those that do not.

References

Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education. National Institute of Education (Washington, DC: 1984).

"Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" by Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson. *AAHE Bulletin*, March 1987.Copies available from Winona State University (Tel.: 507-457-5020).

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CALL FOR PROPOSALS
1997 EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANTS

The Senate Teaching and Learning Committee invites the Oakland University faculty to apply for grants in educational development. Individual awards will not normally exceed $750.00. Funding may be requested for projects whose primary purpose involves one or more of the following:

1. Development and/or use of new teaching techniques
2. Developing a new instructional approach
3. Faculty development related to curricular responsibilities
4. Investigation of a teaching/learning problem
5. Evaluation of a method of teaching

The committee will not fund preparation for accreditation or program reviews nor will it fund student or faculty salaries or travel costs. The deadline for applications is March 7, 1997. Forms may be picked up and dropped off at the Office of Academic Affairs in 205 Wilson Hall.

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Editorial Information:

***Insights & Ideas* is published twice a year by the Oakland University faculty Senate Teaching and Learning Committee, Office of Academic Affairs, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309-4401. The newsletter is distributed free of charge to Oakland University faculty. Letters, news and requests for additional copies should be sent to the address given above.**

-Austin Murphy, Editor