



HOW TO TEACH KEEPS CHANGING

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It was suggested that I start this article where I started in my personal statement that accompanied the nomination materials for the Teaching Excellence Award last year. So, I love to teach.

But none of what I wrote about last year is on my mind now (I still love to teach, though). Always there are new issues to ponder when you want to do what you can to help students learn. My students differ from those of even a year or a few years ago. I do not yet have answers about what I need to do in light of these changes. It is why I have agreed to co-chair the OU Student Readiness subcommittee of the First Year Council.

Greater numbers of my students enter my science classes with the inbred belief that they cannot master the course material. Anxiety levels are higher and more students “know” they are “no good” at science.

Fear of anything that requires numeracy skills has become almost ubiquitous.

Students seem to me to have fewer coping skills. More often, I see students become so frustrated when faced with a task they cannot accomplish easily at the first try that they quit.

More of my students do not learn course content from textbooks as well as did previous students. Before, students who lacked reading skills appeared to be the less well accom-

plished students. Now some of my brightest students lack the ability to read for content.

Larger fractions of the students in my classes do not write well. I teach one writing intensive course and have writing assignments in all my courses. Part of the grading depends on the quality of the writing. An increasing percentage of my students do not use proper attributions, know the mechanic or display good writing styles.

Recently, I read that cursive writing is no longer being taught in schools. Perhaps that is ok because people mostly type on keyboards rather than write. But, students can take fewer notes in class if they print instead. And few of my students bring a laptop to class to type notes. (Most of us type slower than we write anyway.) What really concerns me about this issue is that if you are not taught cursive writing, you also will not be able to read someone else's cursive writing. So, I have asked my students if they can read cursive writing (I have to define what that means). About 15% raise their hands to say they cannot. So, I either continue to write cursive on the board, disenfranchising some of my students, begin printing (and I print poorly and very slowly) or use PowerPoint prepared material exclusively, which robs any spontaneity from the classroom setting. This problem will solve itself with time when the generations of people who can write and read cursive text are gone, but we need to deal with the transition period.

The reason for the changes in my students at Oakland University is not because admission standards have changed. These observations are statewide and nationwide. I like to think the observations are not because I have become an old grouchy curmudgeon either. There are data that support my observations.

Since teaching must start from where a student starts, we must change the way we teach to make it possible for the majority (I strive for *all*) of our students to learn what we intend to teach.

I recently noted a textbook that advertised as part of the student supplemental materials an oral version of the text.

That might seem like a solution for someone who does not learn by reading. But it takes too long to listen to a text rather than read it (compare your own time to read a book compared to listening to it on tape). So, urging the textbook publishers to tape all textbooks does not strike me as a solution.

Will commercial and industrial companies change their expectations of their employees so that they no longer hire based on writing skills, reading skills, numeracy skills, group interaction skills, etc.? I suspect they cannot and remain competitive in the global marketplace.

So, what am I to do, what are we faculty to do, and what is the University to do? We first need to know what learning skills each student has and does not have. Then we need to provide mechanisms for students to improve the skills they lack. We need to redefine our expectations of students to the reality of their collective learning skills. And, finally, we need to change the way we teach to take that knowledge into account.

All the above is part of why I love to teach. There is a constant but changing set of challenges. It is why I find this work so stimulating.