

# *Insights & Ideas for Teaching & Learning*

a publication of the Oakland University Senate  
Teaching and Learning Committee

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**Ed. Note:** This issue features three contributions: 1) impact of teaching on both teachers and students based on mutual respect and trust by last year's TLC Educational Development Grants winner Mr. Toni Walters; 2) a student's viewpoint of instructor evaluation system by Student Congress Legislator Mr. Scott Pettigrew; 3) summary of last December's TLC meeting by Mr. Austin Murphy, Chair of TLC. Three articles on teaching and learning will certainly entice the reader's interest in the intricacy and significance of interplay of education between the teacher and the student.

The deadline of 1998 Educational Development Grants is March 10. We urge you to apply! To contact us, please see page 6 inside.

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## *Introspection*

### **Some Thoughts about Teaching and Learning**

by Toni Walters

Associate Professor of Education

Teaching and loving to teach is something I readily admit. It's the most important thing I do at this university! During the years when I was elementary, intermediate, early childhood and senior high teacher, teaching was the most important role I had in those schools, as well. When asked to write an article about

teaching and learning, I thought, "Why not?" I'm being handed a proverbial microphone and a few uninterrupted minutes to give my spiel about teaching and learning. So here it is.

### **Like it or leave it**

Whenever distant colleagues lament how teaching gets in the way of other *academy* endeavors, I tend to have little to say to continue a conversation. On rare occasions I've even witnessed heartless pedagogical comments and actions. I consider teaching, at any educational institution, serious business and I can be ambivalent toward any who think it's not. I often tell students in my education classes, "Don't mess up somebody's child.... Teach because you want to work at doing it well and you believe in today's students. If you can't,--go find another career!" It's no secret that parents send to teachers (which includes college professors) the best children they have. Today's students aren't "the-use-to-bes." You know those statements, "Kids use-to-be .... Students use-to-be ...." Oftentimes there seems to be some erroneous perceptions that those *differently use-to-bes* were better than today's students. I'll admit, that there are fleeting moments when my students have either surprised, baffled, or even ticked me off. Yet, overall I believe I respect students for who they are in the times they're living, and I hope they sense that respect! I know when I no longer have a passion for teaching, it will be time to either retire, seek other employment,

spend carefree days at a beach front home, or gasp a last breath. You will note that I present an array of personal alternatives.

### **Integrity is a given**

Expect respect. Upon first meeting my students I believe them to be trustworthy and interact with them accordingly. Basically, I believe new and long time acquaintances to be truthful individuals when I lack grounds to think differently. I'm often puzzled by anyone who prefaces commentary, "Let me be honest with you." Does such a declaration imply the person is generally dishonest? Honesty is an admirable quality; I practice it and believe most others do likewise, and I pity those who select to do otherwise.

Also, I work hard at respecting another's privacy. To me, a person's failure to reveal information is not necessarily indicative of a lie. Anyone has a right to retain personal information, that's not for public scrutiny. One's personal privacy warrants respect. Personal privacy must not be confused with one's deliberate attempt to conceal or distort information. Some spin doctors may regard my integrity thoughts as splitting semantic hairs, but--so be it!

### ***S-t-r-e-t-c-h* as a learned person**

A brief background becomes important here. My philosophy about teaching is simple. Students learn when the teacher accepts the responsibility to guide and lead to promote learning. Thus, for me, it is an insufficient pedagogical practice to merely stand and deliver. As a teacher, I must inform, instruct, nurture, and coach. With every class I teach, and this includes undergraduate, master's and doctoral level courses, I like to think that I approach each new group of students as potential achievers. My expectations are high, realistic and adjustable and the workload is rigorous. My pedagogical style combines lectures,

demonstrations, and cooperative learning. Grading in both undergraduate and master's level courses is based on performance/authentic assessment, comprehensive examination, and participation. For me, teaching is a learning experience.

Since most of my students are preparing to become teachers or they are teachers, I want them to cognitively stretch and so must I. As for students, I expect them to learn course content relevant to: learning to read, reading to learn, language arts, content subject learning, multicultural and multiethnic realities, writing for a multitude of literary purposes, literature for literacy, developmentally appropriate instruction, diagnosis, assessment, evaluation, and so forth. Aligned with the expectations of learning the content of a particular course, I also expect students to become aware of and learn metacognitive strategies that enhance their propensity to continue life long learning.

As for me, periodically I must reshape my teaching practices without compromising the integrity of content, a content which must undergo continuous substantiation and refinement. I know that some who *profess*, they don't believe, as I do, in the conceptual framework of pedagogy. I believe effectively teaching others is an artistic science requiring commitment and energy above and beyond one's content subject area expertise. When students do not "get-it" regardless of how well I think I've "delivered it" or "covered it," then I'm convinced I haven't really "taught it." I believe teachers have the responsibility to demonstrate, model, coach, and facilitate students' metacognitive processes so that students learn in the areas of instruction. Sure it's easy to categorize a particular student or group of students as either incompetent, talented, or bright, and once students are classified then it's easy to determine who may and cannot succeed academically. However, the validity of

using such predictive practices<sup>to</sup>, mentally or physically dismiss students from an educational institution undermines what it means to educate, as well as usurps the need for teachers at *any level*--elementary, middle and senior high, and college levels.

### **Respect the disciplines and keep a level head about intelligence**

Howard Gardner's seminal work *Frames of Mind: Theory of Multiple Intelligence* <sup>Serves</sup> as reminder that ability can't be narrowly defined or simplistically generalized into rhetoric. Most people I know who are respected for specific expertise in a cognitive area, oftentimes are *klutz* in another cognitive area. For example, any given rocket scientist, in all likelihood, may very well be an incompetent first grade reading teacher or a bumbling physical therapist. A hematologist could be an inept linguist. A chief executive officer might at best be a marginal historian. A European literature expert may very well be monolingual. An astute mathematician could lack entrepreneurial *je ne sais quois*. A Fulbright scholar in economics might be incapable of meeting the criteria used to award a Fulbright to a musicologist. Capability is neither exclusive nor unidimensional.

### **High Standards should not to be confused with standardization**

Finally, without question, I support high standards for students and advocate the idea of student accountability. I also champion teacher accountability. But I do believe that teachers within educational institutions must regard high standards as substantiveness above and beyond that which can be unilaterally defined by curricula and canons sanctioned by standardized exit and entrance exams. High standardized test scores have evolved to be interpreted as high educational standards, when the reality is that these measures create glass ceilings for

interpreting human intellect and promoting untapped human talent. While I know better than to think that standardized assessment will ever be eliminated (first and foremost, because it has too large a profit margin), I do believe that the educational community has a responsibility--to disseminate informed data as to what standardized testing programs can and cannot determine.

In closing, I can say this has been an interesting opportunity to use some of my fifteen minutes at this symbolic microphone to share some of my beliefs about teaching and learning. Introspection is often good for the mind and soul.

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## **Instructor Evaluations: A Student's Perspective**

Scott C. Pettigrew  
Legislator of Student Congress

Each year at Oakland University, as well as at many colleges and universities across the United States, students are given their one best chance to tell the University administration how their instructors and courses rate. This usually takes place by means of using a part of the final regular class period to fill out an anonymous survey in which the instructor's teaching methods, fairness, and even the class's subject matter and pace are rated. Some instructors view this with scorn, even trepidation; however, when used properly by both students, instructors, and administration, this feedback method can become an important tool for improving the overall university educational environment.

If we look at the college environment as a marketplace scenario, students become consumers, and the university a supplier. The university's job as a supplier, then, is to provide the students with a consistently high-quality educational product at a competitive price.

In a business scenario, if the supplier consistently provides an inferior product or ignores the input of their customers, the customers may well seek out other suppliers to handle their business. On top of that, most businesses and customers alike would consider these unhappy customers to be perfectly within their rights! So why should students be treated any differently in this manner? We have the right to take our money elsewhere. The opportunity to take student input into consideration is an important tool the university can use to make ensure they are keeping their customers happy through providing a high-quality product.

But this can only happen if the time spent in evaluating instructors and the methods used to do so are properly used. Although I have never been a witness, many of my friends tell me that instead of leaving the classroom as required, some instructors hover over students during the evaluation period. Yet no one asks the teacher to leave so that anonymity can be preserved. In doing this, the instructor destroys the validity of the session, because there are few students willing to give poor marks to an instructor who is looking over their shoulder. These professors' attitudes may stem from the fact that many students and teachers alike view the evaluation period as a time where only negative comments are conveyed. Of course, students who have disagreements with an instructor should take the time to note them on the survey sheet. I think, however, that too many times, students with positive comments feel as if they have nothing to say. I urge them to speak out!

Conscientious instructors can also benefit from the comments included in these surveys. Because the surveys are anonymous, students can give impartial views of teaching styles—views that might not normally come out in the classroom. By monitoring these, a professor might be

made aware of the strong points as well as the weak points to his or her teaching style. Through this awareness, improvements can be made.

Students view instructor evaluations as an important issue. The professors at our college or university grade us semester after semester, and it seems only just that we are able to pass a small form of return judgement. Because of this perceived importance, university student governments are picking up the ball. Through the efforts of these student governments, many colleges now compile the ratings received through the student surveys and publish them in a course and instructor information packet. These impartial guides can greatly help the decision-making process for students choosing instructors with whom they are unfamiliar. It is for this reason that Oakland University's Student Congress has been preparing to start this very project.

But does using a single sheet of paper one time a semester create problems? I think so. The method usually used for these evaluations is a scantron form with additional space for student comments. The very nature of the scantron method is to quantify the instructors' performance. Many times I have found this to be inconsistent with my views of my instructors' actual performance. Also, this method does tend to dehumanize any feedback process. Instead of talking directly with the instructor or department head, the students may just wait until the form comes around.

Student evaluations of instructors a somewhat new concept in the realm of higher education. Although somewhat viewed with skepticism by instructors, I think that this method of feedback is both important and valuable ... but only when used correctly by students, instructors, and administrators.

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# The Outcome of the December 1 Meeting to Improve the Evaluation of Teaching

by  
Austin Murphy  
Chair, TLC  
Associate Professor of Finance

At the Teaching & Learning Committee's luncheon on "Better Methods of Evaluating Teaching," some of the problems of the current inadequate methods of using student evaluations almost exclusively to evaluate teaching were further discussed. Several commented that it would be helpful to determine what the goal(s) of teaching are in order to construct a good method of evaluating teaching, and there was some consensus that the primary goal of teaching is student learning. Ideas for improving the evaluation of teaching included:

1. alumni evaluations (solicited by mail, perhaps with an offer of a choice of a free OU pen, mug, or mouse pad for filling out the form). Alumni evaluations can provide useful feedback on students' longer-term perceptions on the value, importance, and relevance of what they have learned and retained, after having had some opportunity to use and reflect upon what they have retained (and their opinions here might be somewhat more independent of the short-term effect that grades, work difficulty, and pressure can have in biasing student evaluations).

2. classroom visits by peers (who, if the extra time expended were significant, might need to be freed from other responsibilities, such as through reduced service or research expectations or a reduced teaching load). Although a visit to just one day's class can provide some information for evaluating teaching (and some departments already do that), more frequent visits would be more valuable (such as over an entire semester). The peer faculty visitors themselves could

either be from the same discipline or from another discipline (and there might be some productive interactive learning between the teacher and the visitor--someone suggested education faculty might be especially well-disposed to give feed back on teaching effectiveness, although any excessive use of one particular group of faculty members would require acquisition of additional faculty resources).

3. classroom visits by outsiders. Although the outsiders could consist of graduates in the field, who might be interested in conducting an unbiased evaluations in return for a free refresher course (and satisfaction in having performed a community service), the outsiders could also consist of people who have not yet taken such courses but who might like to visit a course for a semester for free (the courses might even motivate the visitors to pursue further studies).

4. evaluation of teaching materials (syllabi, text, tests, projects, etc.) by faculty external to the university. Such evaluations can provide a wider and perhaps more objective perspective on faculty teaching.

It was universally agreed that student evaluations themselves are useful for feed back purposes to the individual faculty members. On the other hand, there was a suggestion to eliminate their use as a method of evaluating teaching. Regardless, it might be productive to have the student evaluation forms ask the students how much they learned from the class (as well as what type of knowledge they learned, such as memorization, analytical skills, communication skills, etc.), as opposed to judging the teacher. If student evaluations continue to be used for evaluation purposes, it was suggested that perhaps their use be restricted more to the faculty member indicating how s/he used the feedback to improve her/his teaching in a self-statement, deemphasizing scores or numbers and emphasizing the content and relevance of

the comments for purposes of improving learning.

One person at the luncheon suggested that faculty should set written goals of what they want students to learn from a course, and the success in meeting those goals can be evaluated by looking performance on tests that are designed to measure student achievement in meeting those learning goals. Such tests, which evaluate both students and teachers, could be independently made out and graded by other faculty. Although the person who made the original suggestion did not agree with having tests made out or graded by other faculty due to the frustration it might cause, such a process might provide a more objective measure of teaching effectiveness. In addition, it would put faculty and students on the same side with respect to seeking to maximize learning, and it would avoid the problems associated with teachers creating tests that essentially merely require regurgitation of material taught in class, or otherwise making the tests be too easy and require too little development of sometimes painful creative thinking (as a result, student abilities and skills in adapting to new situations in different environments might be enhanced by the process of having other faculty make out the tests).

A petition was also signed by most present at the luncheon requesting that some committee do a study on these issues and give its recommendations to the relevant CAPs and FRPC. The Teaching & Learning Committee is an obvious choice, and if a set of recommendations can be agreed upon by a majority of the committee members, that committee will issue such recommendations.

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**Apology:**

In the last issue of the TLC Newsletter, there were several mistakes in typing on the last page.

**Call For Proposals**

**1998 Educational Development Grants**

The Senate charge to the Teaching and Learning Committee is "to promote the teaching and the learning process." In accordance with this charge, the Committee invites the Oakland University faculty to apply for grants in educational development. Funding may be requested for projects whose primary purpose involves one or more of the following.

- Development and/or use of new teaching techniques.
- Development of a new instructional approach.
- Faculty development related to curricular responsibilities.
- Investigation of a teaching/learning problem.
- Evaluation of a method of teaching.

**The deadline for applications is March 10, 1998.**

**Please print or type proposal. Forms are available in the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, 205 Wilson Hall. To receive the form electronically, address e-mail to <fran@oakland.edu>; please specify if the form should be attached or copied to the e-mail message. Completed proposals will be accepted in hard copy only.**

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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.

- Seigo Nakao, Editor