

The Greatest Sin in Teaching

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At the 2003 Student Convocation, I asked the audience to complete a quote by German educator and philosopher, Johann Fiedrich Herbart. Herbart said, "In teaching, the greatest sin is...". The audience fulfilled my expectations because the room suddenly filled with conversation. It is natural for almost everyone to have opinions about teaching, learning, and effective teaching, often based on personal experiences. As a teacher, I have learned that these opinions, that are based on real experiences, do matter. Although I did not hear individual responses during the convocation speech, I knew that some of the responses were more profound, relevant, insightful, inspirational, or humorous than Herbart's original quote. Had the convocation ceremony been a session in a class I was teaching, I could have utilized these responses to help develop deeper understandings about effective teaching. I am certain that by utilizing these responses the conversation would have been much more stimulating, to the students and to me, than simply lecturing about Herbart and quoting his beliefs. Nonetheless, I believe Herbart's quote has particular merit when we think about effective teaching. He said, "In teaching, the greatest sin is to be boring" (Lincoln & Suid, 1986).

In reflecting on my own beliefs about exemplary teaching, it is clear to me that Herbart's words are valid. The idea that teachers should not be boring may appear

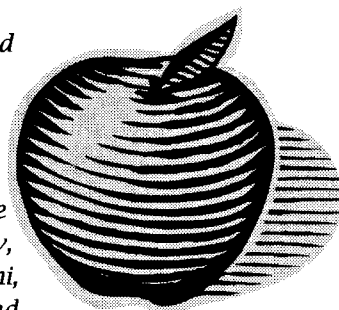
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to be "common sense" and "easier said than done." However, research on teaching effectiveness includes this same important notion. Studies of teaching at

the college level have found that exemplary teachers enjoy teaching, show enthusiasm, have excellent command of the language, inject humor, and introduce dramatic elements (Murray, 1997; Hativa, Barak, & Simhi, 2001). Simply stated,



exemplary teachers appear to enjoy teaching, in part because of the subject matter, but also because of the natural satisfaction that exists when learners begin to understand in new ways. It is important for teachers to understand that the notion of being "not boring" is really not about personality or factors that might seem to be out of the teacher's control. Rather exemplary teaching and learning experiences are often the result of hard work, attending to pedagogical strategies that are most likely to help learners, and careful planning and preparation. For example, studies of university teachers have also found that exemplary teachers are highly organized, plan carefully, set goals, have high student expectations, give students regular feedback, and make course content relevant to students (Horan, 1991). Through specific strategies, exemplary teachers are able to fully engage the learners in their classes and the teaching and learning process is made "not boring," both for the teacher and for the students.

I am probably more passionate about teaching, and helping students develop important understandings, than I have been at any other time during my career. This passion spills over into my courses and helps to make my teaching "not boring" for me, and for my students. I primarily teach science to elementary and middle level preservice teachers. Many of these students come to my courses without sufficient content knowledge or skills to effectively teach science to children. Additionally, unlike many other subject areas, a majority of elementary education majors often enter

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science education courses with a dislike and disinterest for the subject of science. I suspect that my university colleagues, even if teaching in completely different curricular areas or circumstances, may experience similar situations. It is often the case that students are in our courses because the course is required within a program of study or it simply fits best into a student's schedule. This creates a significant teaching challenge. It is this challenge, along with the personal knowledge that I can make a difference, that feeds my passion for teaching.

In order to engage learners, I try to integrate three important areas of science teacher development throughout each semester: knowledge, skills, and affect. These areas are not only important for future teachers, but for all learners. To address only one of these domains, without the others, may have short-term benefits but not the long-term impact that is so important in the teaching profession. For example, it is fairly easy for an instructor to structure a science course to be "fun" through engaging hands-on activities, lively debates, and science that "WOWs" and mystifies. However, it is often the case that students who leave this type of course now understand that science can be enjoyable, but have not developed personal confidence in their understandings of science content that would help them to become effective teachers. Thus, in my courses, my students are constantly doing and learning science while they learn methods to effectively teach science. While some in science education have worked to simply make science more enjoyable, I believe that developing true scientific understanding in a non-threatening environment is more likely to develop the science confidence and positive attitudes needed in these future teachers.

Engaging students and developing understanding in all students is not an easy task. I have found that I am much more likely to succeed, if I require my students to think about, and commit to, their own beliefs about a specific concept before trying to teach anything about it. That is, my students typically have to write or draw explanations, individually, before they are allowed to share them with others. In doing this, I also try to think of questions that are both relevant to them, especially as future teachers, and also challenging for students who have an extensive science background as well as those who have little or no science coursework. A few

examples might illustrate how I make my students "think hard" about the content of science through questions their future elementary students might ask. These are some of the questions I have asked as an entry point to teaching science: "If plants need light to grow, why do we plant seeds under the ground?"; "If the sun provides light for Earth, then why is space dark?"; "Can you light this bulb with one battery, one wire, and nothing else (no, you can't split the wire in half!)?"; "If the moon looks like this tonight [I show a picture], can you tell me what it will look like in two weeks?"

By requiring students to write or draw their ideas first, they become more interested in what other students think, what the scientifically accepted answers are, and are more aware of changes in their own beliefs. Students soon learn that the process of learning the answers to these questions is as important, or even more important, than the answers themselves. For example, knowing what the moon will look like in two weeks is not as important as understanding the relative positioning of the moon, earth, and sun and our view of the moon from earth. Understanding this will help one to know what the moon will look like at any date in the future - it helps to show the predictive power of science understanding.

The idea of listening to, as well as utilizing, students' ideas before instruction is not new. For me, adopting a more student-centered approach has helped to transform my teaching and helped my students to go beyond short-term gains in understanding. Using student-centered teaching strategies also involves some risk-taking on the part of the teacher. It is not possible to know what students will say or ask and the teacher is required to go beyond a prepared set of notes, or what is in the textbook. During the address at convocation, I was not sure that the audience would participate, talk to each other, and try to finish Herbart's quote. However, just as with students in my classroom, they were eager to share their ideas. For some teachers, it becomes a matter of giving up some "control" in order to gain enduring understanding. For me, it is what has helped to make my teaching "not boring" for my students, and especially for me.

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A University of Distinction

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Department of Linguistics

In the Department of Linguistics, the learning objectives for programs in general education are as follows: (1) misconceptions about language are addressed, (2) students must appreciate the nature of linguistic and cultural diversity, and (3) students must understand that the structure of language is not arbitrary. The assessment instrument measuring how well these objectives are met is a test given in all sections on the first day of classes and again just before the final exam. The test consists of 25 true/false questions scored by scantron. Since we began using this instrument, over 6500 students in ALS 176 have taken the pretest-posttest series, and the results have been remarkably consistent. For many years, the average on the pretest was never been better than chance; on the posttest, most students scored about 25% higher.

For this year's assessment report, which covered the period from fall 2001 to winter 2003, a disturbing pattern emerged which we had not seen before. In particular, the figures for the improvement on the posttest over the pretest vary much more from section to section than they had in the past. The most significant factor is whether the instructor is a member of the full-time faculty or not.

For full-time faculty, the average improvement in scores from pretest to posttest was 24.52% for the 4 semester period. For part-time and visiting faculty, the average improvement was 8.92%. This is a very significant difference (15.6%). During the period examined, 1089 students took the pretest and 856 students took the posttest, which is a 78.6% response rate; fifteen sections were offered, 5 taught by full-time faculty and 10 taught by part-time and visiting faculty. During the same period, the full-time faculty also taught 7 out of 8 sections of other general education courses; thus, overall, the full-time faculty taught 12 out of 23 sections of general education courses.

All faculty in Linguistics, including part-time and visiting faculty, are aware of our learning objectives. The kinds of questions that appear on the assessment instrument for ALS 176 are broad based, dealing with very general linguistic concepts, which all instructors might be expected to cover. Certainly, all the books approved for the course cover the concepts. In short, if an instructor is effective in communicating the fundamental principles of the discipline, then students should be able to perform fairly well on the posttest after a 14 week course.

A careful examination of the data reveals clearly that there is much greater uniformity in the teaching of full-time faculty than visiting and part-time faculty, at least as measured by student improvement between pretest and posttest. That finding correlates generally with the evaluations faculty receive: full-time faculty have more

consistent and favorable evaluations than visiting and part-time faculty. As enrollments and pressure to offer general education sections have increased and the number of full-time faculty has decreased, the Linguistics Department has had to rely more on visiting and part-time faculty than in the past. Unfortunately, we have been unable to maintain the same visitors and part-timers over successive years, especially in the last three years. It seems fairly clear that this turnover is having a negative impact on general education.

None of the above should be interpreted as a criticism of part-time and visiting faculty themselves, who are often unsung heroes, working very diligently in often large classes for a salary that is hardly minimum wage. There are a variety of factors that could account for the decline in student performance mentioned above. Part-time and visiting faculty are not as familiar with the student body and the academic culture at Oakland University as full time faculty. They frequently are hired on very short notice, and often have only a brief time to put together a syllabus. Sometimes, the book is not of their choosing, nor the time slot, nor the general schedule they have to follow. Under such conditions,

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CALL FOR NOMINATIONS 2004 TEACHING EXCELLENCE AWARDS

The Senate Teaching and Learning Committee is pleased to announce a call for nominations for the 2004 Teaching Excellence Awards. Two awards will be made for 2004: one to a tenured or tenure-track member of the faculty; another to a nontenure-track faculty at Oakland University. Each award includes a cash stipend and will be presented at the 9th Annual Faculty Recognition Luncheon, tentatively scheduled for mid April, 2004.

Nominations may be made by any member of the Oakland University community, including students, faculty, alumni, administrators, and staff. Faculty may not self-nominate for the Award. The letter of nomination should address the nominee's accomplishments based on the following criteria:

- Superior Teaching
- Innovative Instructional Practice
- High Educational Standards
- Productive Learning Environment
- Demonstrated Ability to Inspire and Motivate Students

Student nominations are a highly valued component of this process. Faculty are encouraged to announce this nomination process in all classes.

The Committee will contact the nominees and chairs of their departments to request additional information. Previous Teaching Excellence Award winners and current members of the Teaching and Learning Committee are not eligible for nomination. A plaque with the names of previous Teaching Excellence Award winners is on display in the lobby of Kresge Library.

Nominations will be accepted through November 24, 2003. Letters of nomination should be emailed to Professor Vijayan Sugumaran at sugumara@oakland.edu or sent by regular mail to:

Teaching and Learning Committee
Attention: Professor Vijayan Sugumaran
School of Business Administration
Oakland University
Rochester, MI 48309-4485

For procedures, questions, etc., contact Professor Vijayan Sugumaran at 248.370.2831 or sugumara@oakland.edu.

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one naturally would expect better results from experienced, full-time faculty.

To achieve our goal of becoming a university of distinction by 2010, we need to do a better job in general education. Currently, there are 31 undergraduate majors in Linguistics and a dozen more graduate students seeking the MA. Linguistics is responsible for implementing and monitoring the English Proficiency Policy on campus, coordinating all ESL efforts, and teaching all ESL classes. We run the Hispanic Outreach Program and will soon begin an ESL Endorsement Program to teacher certification. We do this with 5 full-time faculty members including the Chair, two associated faculty members, and several part-timers. Since full-time faculty already teach at least half of all general education sections, it is unreasonable to expect them to teach more and, at the same time, maintain our various programs at a high level of quality.

A university of distinction has degree programs of distinction, and distinctive degree programs have qualified faculty teaching the upper-division courses in the discipline. The more than 50 majors, minors and concentrators enrolled in our various undergraduate and graduate programs should be able to expect instructors of distinction in the core linguistics courses required for their degrees. True, these are hard times, and there are no quick solutions to the economic pressures that we face. One thing, however, does seem certain: we cannot be a university of distinction if the number of full-time faculty continues to dwindle.

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