

***SOME THOUGHTS ON EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN
HIGHER EDUCATION***

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a number of challenges which faculty members face in their individual and collective quests for achieving teaching effectiveness in higher education. The paper is based on the premise that teaching in higher education settings demands a range of skills and expertise far beyond a knowledge of subject matter and the use of various instructional technologies. The following major issues are examined: Developing a philosophy of practice, having empathy for the learner, avoiding a dependence upon standardization of procedure and technique, expecting and accepting ambiguity, avoiding tendencies of perfection, researching the learner's background, observing how students learn, communicating ideas with colleagues, trusting one's instincts, creating meaningful diversity, taking prudent risk, recognizing the emotions of learning, acknowledging and accepting one's personality, balancing support and challenge, recognizing the significance of teacher behavior, and viewing oneself as a facilitator of learning.

Introduction

Effectiveness as a concept has enormous appeal (Beidler, 1986; Brown and Atkins, 1987; Hoadley and Vik, 1989). It suggests that there are standardized practices that apply with equal relevance to every context within which teaching occurs. Were this true, then the world of college teaching would be much cleaner and simpler than it is in reality. All that teachers would need to do would be to learn the simple rules of effective practice, acquire the necessary techniques, and then practice these in college classrooms. This would produce a cadre of practitioners, all doing the same things in the same way, and all of whom would be regarded as exemplars of effectiveness. The clarity, simplicity, and order of such a world is what many administrators and teachers yearn for, and were it to exist in reality, it would mirror perfectly the assumptions under which many colleges function.

Seeing effectiveness in this way, however, ignores the inchoate messiness of college teaching. The concept is decontextualized, thereby rendering it remote and irrelevant to teachers who are grappling with the dilemmas, distortions, and ambiguities of practice. Effectiveness is irrevocably contextual (Pratt, 1988). What is effective in one context, with one student or group of students, or for one purpose may be severely dysfunctional in another context, with different people, or for another purpose (Cervero, 1989).

Effectiveness is also irredeemably value-laden. The decision concerning what constitutes effectiveness rests on certain judgments and interpretations.

Whenever one concept of effectiveness gains ascendancy over others, the power struggles between groups that are seeking to define this concept in their own ways are clearly evident. What are effective behaviors for one group of teachers may be examples of psychological bludgeoning for another. What one teacher may consider an effective teaching effort a student may see as a demeaning experience. So talking about effectiveness as if it were an objective concept whose features can be easily agreed on by all reasonable people is mistaken. We always have to ask: Effectiveness for what? Effectiveness for whom?

In a sense, effectiveness is also a phenomenologically derived concept, one grounded in students' perceptions of what is happening to them and in the meanings they attach to these experiences. Equating effective teaching with how well teachers perform a previously defined set of behaviors risks neglecting entirely the effect these behaviors have on students, thus rendering the student's experience irrelevant.

To determine whether teaching is effective, we must, ultimately, see whether students are learning. Anything that helps students learn is good, effective teaching (Ericksen, 1984; Hayes, 1989). Anything that hinders their learning is ineffective teaching. Sometimes what most hinders students' learning is a teacher's determination to behave according to some well-defined notion of effectiveness.

The following thoughts are applicable to the varied contexts in which college teachers teach and college

students learn.

Be Clear About the Purpose of Your Teaching

Develop a philosophy of practice, a critical rationale for why you're doing what you're doing. Possessing such an organizing vision will help you withstand those inevitable episodes when the puzzlement or opposition expressed at your efforts by students, colleagues, and administrators cause you to wonder whether you should continue teaching. Your vision will also help your students feel that they are under the influence of someone who is moved by well-thought-out convictions and commitments. Without a personal organizing vision we are rudderless vessels tossed around on the waves and currents of whatever political whims and fashions are prevalent at the time. Our practice may win us career advancement, but it will be lacking in the innate meaning that transforms teaching from a function into a passion.

Effective teachers are critically responsive teachers. Although they are sensitive to contextual factors such as organizational necessities, students' experiences, and political climates, they have a clear rationale for their practice. The organizing vision for college teaching proposed in this paper is the fostering of the critical thinking necessary for students to be able to reflect on the habitual assumptions underlying their actions and ideas.

Reflect on Your Own Learning

One of the best ways to improve your teaching is to experience, and to remember, what it feels like to learn something, especially something new and difficult. Reflecting on the experience of learning has some very powerful implications for your teaching. It will make you aware of the behaviors that affirm and encourage students and those that intimidate and hinder them. It will help you temper your criticism so that it is not interpreted as a personal assault on students. It will sensitize you to some of the typical rhythms of learning – such as incremental fluctuations and the attainment of learning plateaus – which will, in turn, prevent you from making needless and possibly harmful interventions. It will give you new insight into why and how people resist learning and what some useful responses to this resistance might be.

So, resolve to spend some time each term, or even annually, in the role of a learner. Keep a learning journal of the highs and lows you experienced and what you think occasioned these. Then reflect on what these experiences mean for your teaching practice.

Be Wary of Standardized Models and Approaches

Teaching and learning are such complex processes, and teachers and learners are such complex beings, that no model of practice or andragogical approach will apply in all settings. A lot of fruitless time and energy can be spent trying to find the holy grail of

andragogy, the one way to enlightenment for college teaching. No philosophy, theory, or theorist can possibly capture the idiosyncratic reality of your own experience as a teacher. Don't think that Freire, Dewey, Tyler, Rogers, or anyone else possesses the truth that fits your situation exactly.

You can draw much that is useful from the different models of practice that are available. But you should feel no compunction about rejecting elements of these, changing other parts of them before applying them in your practice, or abandoning them entirely when they don't fit. These models can be useful starting points, particularly when you're working in an unfamiliar context. But don't expect them to relieve you of the necessity to make endless judgments and choices about what works best and why. Making these judgments – sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly – is the essence of teaching, and no generic model of practice will allow you to abdicate this responsibility.

Expect Ambiguity

Participating in staff development programs or reading textbooks of practice can give you the idea that teaching is a rational, ordered process in which previously designed methods and curricula are put into practice to achieve expected outcomes. But teachers quickly realize that teaching is often a journey into uncertainty in which they unlearn their reliance on standardized models and curricula.

As teachers we cross the borders of chaos to inhabit zones of ambiguity. For every event in which we feel things

are working out as we anticipated they would, there is an event that totally confounds our expectations. It is difficult enough to predict what one person's response to a particular event will be, let alone to predict the responses of a group of students to the series of events we have planned in just one lesson unit. Contextual factors will distort the most perfectly planned curriculum or classroom project.

The one thing we can rely on with some certainty is that events will alter our neatly conceived plans. These events will sometimes be serendipitous, sometimes disastrous. But inevitably they will occur, so we need to learn not be thrown off track by them.

Perfection is Impossible

Expecting perfection in one's performance as a teacher will have one of three consequences: (1) You will develop an ulcer in short order; (2) You will become so demoralized at your inability to achieve perfection that you will leave teaching entirely; or (3) You'll develop a cynical belief that your actions don't matter because nothing works anyway. Perfection in terms of one's personal performance is a fantasy. You will never achieve it, and in pursuing it too unrealistically you will become so obsessed with your own actions that you'll forget the real reason for teaching – to help students learn.

In terms of students' reactions to your efforts, you will rarely find that everyone with whom you are dealing thinks that what has transpired is somehow inspirationally transformative. Indeed, for every student who embraces change

there will be one, or maybe more than one, whose energies will be wholly devoted to resistance. It is easy to become obsessed with these students who seem, stubbornly, to “refuse to grow” (Daloz, 1988) despite all your best efforts. But be wary of becoming obsessed with proving to yourself that you can be the perfect teacher by making even the most recalcitrant students become passionate advocates for your subject. No action you take will produce universally felicitous consequences. Every teaching choice is essentially a trade-off, entailing advantages and disadvantages. Try to learn to accept that if the overall advantages of one course of action outweigh its disadvantages, it is worth pursuing.

Research Your Students’ Backgrounds

Before beginning any educational effort involving a group of 30 or fewer students, try and do as much research as you can on your students’ backgrounds – their cultural values and allegiances; their experiences; their expectations; their language; and their most pressing concerns, problems, and dilemmas. If you can’t do this before the educational activity begins, try your best to carve out some time in the first one or two sessions to explore these characteristics.

To teachers impatient to get cracking on the important work of teaching, this research effort can seem like an indulgent waste of time. But, if you are impatient about starting teaching, the chances are that this impatience grows out of a conviction that what

you’re teaching is important for students to know. And if you believe that something is important for students to know, then you’re going to want them to take as much notice of it as possible and to see their learning as relevant and connected to their lives. If you neglect researching your students’ backgrounds and cultures, however, you run several major risks. You risk spending a lot of time preparing lectures that are delivered at an inappropriate level or which fail to show any connections between your subject and your students’ concerns. You risk producing materials and exercises that neither motivate nor illuminate. You also risk creating at the outset a level of learner resentment and resistance that will take a long time to dismantle.

Observe How Students Experience Learning

A constant feature of your teaching should be a concerned effort to understand how students are experiencing learning. You can watch for nonverbal reactions, but these can be misinterpreted and there is a limit to how much they can convey. So take the time to include regular formative evaluation sessions in your classes, in which you ask for opinions on how things have seemed so far, what might be changed, what has failed to work, and so on. Try to get students to document their perceptions of learning in journals.

When you have some understanding of the most typical rhythms of learning and of how your actions are being perceived, try and think

how you might make your practice more responsive to these features. It won't always be possible, or desirable, to make major adjustments. Not only will contextual constraints prevent this, but there will also be times when you have to make the judgment that while something appears problematic or puzzling to students as it is being experienced, it's your belief that its relevance will eventually become clear. But there will be other times when it is quite right to adjust what you're doing or to abandon it entirely in favor of something that connects more directly to students' experiences.

Talk to Your Colleagues

Because college teachers spend so much of their time in classrooms, they can easily develop a sense of isolation and a distorted perception of their own dilemmas, problems, and failings. When teachers do talk to each other, their conversations often concern administrative necessities and procedures. Yet private and informal talks about varying responses they generate to crises and dilemmas can be enormously helpful.

The revelation that you are not the only person who sometimes feels that things are moving beyond your control can be enormously reassuring. It can help you avoid the emotional self-flagellation characteristic of those who engage in the quest for perfectibility discussed earlier. The realization that your perceptions of your ineptitude and inadequacy are felt by other teachers about themselves generates a sense of relief.

On a specific level, you can learn

a great deal from listening to descriptions of how other teachers working in context similar to yours deal with the dilemmas, crises, and problems you yourself are facing. You can probably adapt some of their responses directly to your situation, as well as experimenting with variants on their strategies and tactics.

Trust Your Instincts

Many teachers are socialized into believing that the knowledge and insights contained within textbooks have a greater legitimacy than the knowledge and insights they themselves generate in response to the particular crises and dilemmas of their own situations. Although textbooks contain much that is useful, teachers are the greatest experts in their own situations. No one is inside a crisis in exactly the way you are.

Very often teachers feel instinctively that a particular action is called for in a particular situation, but they refrain from following this instinct because it contradicts some commonly accepted theory. If you feel strongly that something is right, even though it goes against conventional wisdom, acknowledge your instincts and act upon them.

Sometimes you will find that your instincts are completely wrong and that you have seriously miscalculated the consequences of following them. If this happens, then you will probably have learned how to recognize when your instincts are well grounded in reality. But don't automatically shut them off the first time they make themselves felt in the belief that if they don't match theory then they must, by definition, be wrong.

Create Diversity

Given the bewildering complexity of teaching and learning, a good rule of thumb is to use a diversity of materials and methods in your practice. This is important for two reasons. First, if you try out a range of materials and methods, there is a good chance that at some point in the activity the majority of students will find that their preferred learning style is being addressed. They will experience this as reassuring and affirming. Second, by introducing students to styles with which they are unfamiliar, you will be preparing them to flourish in a greater range of situations than would otherwise have been the case.

So, as you create diversity, try and mix visual with oral modes. Alternate small-group exercises with large-group plenaries. Provide options within assignments for independent study and for group projects. Try out experiential learning techniques such as simulation.

Be particularly careful not to fall into habitual teaching patterns that grow out of your preferred learning style. For example, my instinctive text dependence as a learner means that as a teacher I tend to under emphasize the use of visual aids and to forget the importance of depicting ideas graphically for students. Again, because I have a tendency to work independently on projects, I forget that many people much prefer working in teams and enjoy the interchange that sometimes seems a waste of time to me. So I have to make a conscious effort to remind myself to curb my tendency to

hasten group processes that are time-consuming.

Of course, the diversity you employ as a teacher will be constrained by organizational variables, by students' levels of learning readiness, and by your own familiarity with the methods and materials involved. You can't be expected to change your style at the drop of a hat, particularly if it involves doing things with which you have no experience or training or which contradict fundamental aspects of your personality.

Take Risks

Good teachers take risks in the full knowledge that the risks will not always yield positive dividends. They are ready to depart from planned curricula and methods if the moment seems to dictate this. The more you take risks, the more adept you become at recognizing when they are justified and likely to pay off. In particular, the better you become at responding to true teachable moments – those times when an unexpected event excites the interest and energy of a group in a way that had not been planned.

When these moments occur, it is important to build on them and use them to greatest effect. Often what you thought would be supremely exciting activities will draw responses of studied indifference from students, so you cannot afford to let a true teachable moment slip away. Risking the exploration of unplanned and uncharted intellectual waters is often remembered by teachers and students as significant and exciting.

In this regard it is helpful to think of a good educational experience as being like a good conversation. Good conversations, by definition, cannot be predicted in advance. They are characterized by risk and spontaneity. If I knew what you were going to say before you said it, and if I could predict beforehand the turns my conversation with you would take, there would be no point in talking. Conversations characterized by this degree of predictability are experienced as forced and boring, and so is education.

Recognize the Emotionality of Learning

Many textbooks and research reports use language and terminology that depict learning as an ascetic activity distinguished by rational inquiry. There are a few recognizable flesh-and-blood human beings and little indication of the visceral ebbs and flows that accompany, and are intermingled with, the activity of learning. Yet, as students themselves report, learning is emotional. It involves threats to students' self-esteem, especially when they are exploring new and difficult knowledge and skill domains. Even when they experience forward movement, there is likely to be an emotional resistance for giving up old assumptions. The emotional sustenance students receive from a supportive learning community is crucial to their survival and success in undergraduate school.

Being aware of the emotionality of learning is important for your practice. This awareness will help prepare you for the inevitable outpouring of anger and

resentment that for some students accompanies the exploration of new intellectual areas. The study of the principles of aircrew resource management is an example of a relatively new intellectual area. You will also be less likely to experience an angst-ridden scrutiny of your own apparent shortcomings, just because a student greets your activities with hostility rather than love. You will not rush to stem the process of grieving for old assumptions and identities but will see this as a natural accompaniment to change. You will also allow time for the expression of emotions that, if repressed, would fester until they represented a much larger block to learning than need be the case.

Acknowledge Your Personality

One of the characteristics that students value most in teachers is authenticity. If you teach in a way that belies fundamental aspects of your personality, you will come across as stilted and unauthentic. In particular, if you are introverted, quiet, and reflective, you should not try to pass yourself off as the andragogic equivalent of Groucho Marx. Many students will feel much more comfortable with you than with an outgoing, broadly gesturing extrovert. Also, the most charismatic of teachers can sometimes inhibit students as well as inspire them.

If you feel uncomfortable about behaving in a certain way, you should probably acknowledge to students and colleagues that this is the case. Be wary of becoming obsessed with exemplifying idealized behaviors that don't come naturally. For example, I find listening

to students' questions and responding fully to these to be very hard work requiring great concentration. To answer a complex question clearly, I need to focus on my internal mental processes, almost to the exclusion of everything else. This means that I have no energy or inclination left to spend on making eye contact with people around the room. So when I'm listening to a question, I tend to look only at the questioner. When I answer a question, I will stare at the floor or look out a window.

I recognize that in terms of "proper" classroom communication this is a terrible thing to do. But I also know that if I'm to give a clear, articulate response to a question, it is crucial for me to stop worrying about making eye contact with all the students in the room. Were I to become obsessed with constantly rotating my head from left to right, right to left, around the room, I would likely give a confused response. So I will begin sessions with new groups by saying that I find it difficult to think and look at the same time, so they should not interpret my staring into space as implying ignorance of their existence. In fact, it implies serious recognition of their existence, since it means I am struggling to understand their questions as fully as possible and to give the clearest answers I can.

Don't Evaluate Only by Students' Satisfaction

Most of us go into teaching inspired by a desire to help others. We often expect to be respected or admired by our students for our altruism. We

may not always be aware of this expectation, but for many people it constitutes a powerful assumption that is implicit in much of their practice. One consequence of this assumption is that when students greet our efforts with anger and resentment, we immediately conclude that we have somehow failed.

Hostile student evaluations of our practice are often granted a credibility far greater than is actually merited. Please recall that students report many significant learning episodes involve pain, anxiety, and challenge. While these episodes are being experienced they may inspire resentment in students against the apparent cause of these emotions, that is, against you, the teacher. Knowing that the expression of such hostility might be interpreted as a sign of your andragogic competence as much as a sign of your inadequacy is an important defense against the debilitating depression that often accompanies receiving a poor evaluation.

Balance Support and Challenge

Of all the intractable dilemmas college teachers face in their practice, balancing support and challenge is one of the most problematic. Striving to achieve an equilibrium (ever-changing though this may be) between these two forces is crucial. The fundamental underpinning of all your actions as a teacher should be a respect for and affirmation of your students. If students feel they are in a hostile or indifferent environment, their commitment to learning will be seriously weakened. They may be

physically present, but they will be mentally absent. Also, receiving only criticism from teachers is experienced as psychologically devastating.

Keep in mind the fragile egos of your students and acknowledge the effort they have made, even if this effort has not produced the quality of work you would hope for. Remember that in their eyes your pronouncements carry enormous weight, and that a critical side from you may be recalled for months, even years, as a wounding experience. Leaven every oral and written criticism with praise, if at all possible.

But if students experience only affirmation and never challenge, then their encounter with you is not truly educational. Affirmation may be an important precondition of challenge, but it can never be considered the sum total of teaching. Without challenge, some students will never explore alternative perspectives, venture into new skill areas, or appraise critically the accuracy and validity of the habitual assumptions underlying their reasoning. Yet all these activities are central to developing the critical thinking that is the fundamental purpose of college teaching across disciplines and contexts.

Achieving the right balance between challenge and support is difficult enough with one person in one task, let alone with a group of students pursuing multifarious activities. If you have to err on one side of the support-challenge equilibrium, err on the supportive side. When students receive affirmation from teachers whom they perceive as authority figures, the effect is astonishing. It is unfortunate, but true,

that many students will only take their own ideas seriously after a teacher has validated them. By listening to and acknowledging students' voices, teachers can strengthen the shaky self-confidence of diffident learners.

As Daloz (1988) remarks, to encourage learning means, literally, to encourage, to nurture in learners the strengths and fortitude to confront what, to many, is a perilous and threatening journey. Since critical thinking represents such a journey for many students, they need to muster beforehand a formidable degree of courage, conviction, and strength. A period of support often provides the confidence that allows students to embark on this journey. Challenging conventional wisdom and questioning previously accepted givens are intimidating prospects to students who have internalized the belief that their insights, skills, and experiences are not as valuable as the "official," "proper" knowledge contained in books and teachers' heads. So, your affirmation of students can lay the psychological groundwork for subsequent critical thinking episodes.

Recognize the Significance of Your Actions

Your actions are imbued with enormous symbolic significance by students. When it comes to the most crucial emotional interaction of all between teachers and students – that of building trust – teachers' actions count more than anything else. If your words and actions are seriously discrepant, then an air of artificiality will permeate the

encounter.

Don't fool yourself into believing that merely by saying to students that you are all equal will make them view you as one of them. You can never escape the fact that your actions will be closely scrutinized for the messages students think they contain. Initiating a discussion and then staying silent, for example, will be perceived as a significant action by students. They will ascribe all kinds of purposes to your silence and worry about the critical judgments that inform it. As Freire says, "education is above all the giving of examples through actions" (Shor and Friere, 1987, p. 160). Knowing this, you can make a virtue of necessity and ensure that your actions model the kinds of intellectually demanding yet respectful behaviors you are seeking to encourage in students.

View Yourself as a Helper of Learning

The fundamental reason for teaching is to help someone learn something. Anything you do that contributes to this purpose is skillful teaching, no matter how much it may depart from your traditional expectations how teachers are supposed to behave. Anything you do that inhibits learning, no matter how much it exemplifies traditional expectations, should be diminished or stopped. You have to make a judgment concerning what is realistic in this regard. For example, even if you feel that examinations inhibit rather than enhance learning, you generally can't avoid giving them. But,

when you reflect on your skill as a teacher, there is only one fundamental question you need to ask: Are my actions helping students learn?

Knowing that this is the fundamental criterion by which your efforts should be judged means that you can regard as skillful teaching many activities that fall well outside the traditional model of the teacher as a charismatic performer. Being able to help students diagnose their difficulties within an area of study can be a very skillful teaching act, since understanding accurately the nature of these difficulties is crucial to addressing them. A teacher who arranges individual counseling with students to enhance their self-esteem or one who puts students in touch with others who have similar enthusiasm is also teaching effectively.

Conclusion

Don't trust what you've just read. What for me are truths of skillful teaching may, for you, be partially or entirely inappropriate. Keep in mind that in the time between writing this paper and its publication I may have amended some of these truths, deleted others, and added still more. My continuing journey as a teacher through diverse contexts and dilemmas is bound to generate new insights. For me to end this paper claiming to offer a decontextualized, standardized package of teaching truths would be to contradict the critically reflective skepticism about such injunctions that I have been urging throughout the paper.

In conclusion, listen to your

nagging, inner voice. Be prepared to admit the possibility that your inner voice is right, even when all professional wisdom runs to the contrary. Be ready to act on what your inner voice tells you, all the time knowing that periodically making mistakes is endemic to good teaching.

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