On Teaching and Learning

Editors:
JANINE BEMPECHAT
DEAN K. WHITLA

On Teaching and Learning publishes articles and essays on aspects of pedagogical practice and on research that has implications for teaching.

Letters and suggestions for articles or essays should be addressed to the Editors, 7 Shannon Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138.

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Dean K. Whitla, Director.

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if one is thinking of a major university which is involved in testing, challenging, and creating knowledge in the best sense of the term.

Teaching is an applied art and to that extent it is secondary, at least for the purposes of some universities. Part of the difficulty is that some colleges want to be really good teaching colleges, but they also want the prestige of being like "the big boys". As a result, they will only award tenure to individuals who have published articles in obscure journals, on the ground that this can be shown to an accreditation committee. That, I think, is quite wrong. I think there is a very honorable craft of teaching, and many good colleges should really devote themselves to teaching. Not, however, if they try to imitate what a university does. It seems to me that there is a distinction between what a great university does and what a great college does.

Helen Vendler

Tenure at research universities is based almost exclusively on writing. For better or worse, writing — which can be judged more easily — is an easier criterion to use. It is lucky for the students that some good writers also have some pedagogical abilities.

Stephen Jay Gould

Writing is the currency of prestige and promotion. To be perfectly honest, though lip service is given to teaching, I have never seriously heard teaching considered in any meeting for promotion. I do not subscribe to any overly romanticized notion that teaching is primary or that tenure should be awarded only on teaching. I would love to see different attitudes toward publication that would lead to smaller numbers of significant publications. I would make a plea for some strong, genuine, and explicit consideration of the person's teaching skills, even at major universities. The pressures on writing are so great in academia that I think very few people write for joy. Also, there are monetary rewards for writing, especially textbooks.

The Stresses of Beginning Teaching

Carola Eisenberg

Teaching and learning are universal human attributes. Each of us learns an enormous amount in the process of being socialized. In the course of interacting with others, we teach — our children, our peers and our elders, though most of the teaching is inadvertent rather than deliberate. Most of what we learn and teach is learned and taught outside of the classroom. Yet, the latter is the context to which we limit our discussions of teaching. Once we recognize the ubiquity of teaching and learning in everyday life, classroom teaching ceases to be so mysterious a process.

Because all of us have been pupils and have been both the beneficiaries and the victims of teachers, we behave rather like the visitor to the art gallery in the cartoon who remarks: "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." We know what we liked when we were students; we all have images of the good teacher and, even more forcefully, of the bad teacher. The trouble is that the images are not the same from one person to the next, except at the extremes. In part, the differences stem from the fact that not all of us learn the same way and, in part, from the fit or lack of it between the personal style and values of a given teacher and those of a given student. Even more important is the fact that few of us have ever seriously studied or read about education as a formal process. Like the naive visitor to the art gallery, we may be convinced that we know what we like, but we are not very good at specifying what that "what" is.

If I may coin an aphorism, ignorance breeds contempt. Having read little and understood less of the literature on education, most faculty members start with the assumption that knowing the content of one's own field suffices to make one a competent teacher. This belief persists although everyone of us has had to endure lectures which were painful to sit through despite the expertise of the speaker in her or his field. Others believe that skill in teaching is a matter of skill as a "great communicator," even when the communicator is no scholar. The absurdity of that proposition was made clear a few years ago in a pedagogic experiment. A gifted and entertaining actor appeared in the
guise of an expert. The content of his lecture was deliberately based
upon meaningless (but fashionable) jargon with a smattering of cliches
and truisms thrown in. His deliberately content-free talk was given a
top rating by the class, a remarkable tribute to the way judgement
about a teacher can be swayed by the teacher’s personal charm and
ability to make the class “feel good.”

Content without style and style without content are the Scylla and
Charybdis of teaching. One may not need to be the world’s greatest
expert on a subject to present it well to students, but one does need to
understand the subject matter thoroughly in order to present it accu-
rately; that is, with a careful exposition of its logic and the premises
on which it is based and with explicit acknowledgement of its uncertain-
ties. At the same time, one must care enough for the student and
for the process of teaching to invest the topic with the energy and
enthusiasm needed to bring it to life. After all, the relationship between
teacher and students is different than that between books and readers.
In terms of content, there is little a lecturer can say which she or he
cannot write more concisely. What makes a course more than the sum
of the readings on which it is based is the social experience: the sets of
relationships between teacher and students and students with one
another. The quality of that experience does not flow automatically
from the subject matter; it is created by the teacher.

Obviously, the demands on the teacher and the qualities which
result in superior performance are a function of the type of teaching:
a lecture to a large class, a presentation at a small seminar, leadership
of a discussion group, tutoring one or two students. What makes for
a skillful performance in the one can be quite counter-productive in
another. Because of the logistics of a large class and the tradition of
the lecture as an art form, communication goes from speaker to audi-
ence; verbal fluency, histrionic ability, timing and sensitivity to the
“feel” of the audience (through deciphering facial expression and body
tone) are among the requisite talents. The superb lecturer will be a flop
as a leader of a discussion group if she or he cannot shift into a radically
new mode: encouraging others to speak, listening attentively to what
they say, encouraging contrary opinions, and keeping one’s mouth
firmly shut except to raise questions. The lecturer should put a good
deal of herself or himself into the lecture; what gives it style is that it
is a personal expression of enthusiasm for the topic (mind you, I do
not refer to display for the sake of exhibiting the self but using the self
to illuminate the material). To be sure, the discussion leader is much
more than a reflecting mirror, but the expression of self in this context
is the ability to evoke active participation by respecting what each
student has to say. In the following comments on the anxiety of the
beginning teacher, I will be concerned primarily with the teacher as
lecturer.

For anyone who takes teaching seriously, her or his response to an
initial teaching assignment is inevitably one of anxiety. If there are
some who have not been anxious, I have not met them. Anxiety is a
factor in every life, though not all respond to it in the same way.
Anxiety is often discussed as though it were pathological. To the
contrary, it is a common ingredient in superior performance. A
number of studies in different contexts indicate that the relationship
between anxiety and performance is curvilinear; that is, in the absence
of any anxiety or in the presence of severe anxiety, performance is
worse than it is under conditions of mild to moderate anxiety.

The actors and actresses I have known as friends and as patients,
and the accounts such individuals have given in their autobiographies,
commonly report that veteran performers, even when they are
repeating a part played many times during the course of a long run,
experience anxiety before they go on stage. What makes for a con-
summate performer is that the anxiety rapidly remits as the role is assumed.
It appears to be the case that outstanding professionals, whether they
be athletes, academics or politicians, are buoyed up by the tensions
generated by being in the public eye. Contrariwise, a number of my
colleagues have reported giving a talk well below their own standard
when they “felt flat” — which can be translated as not being anxious
at all.

Past some level of anxiety, the physiological responses it induces
can impair performance, either by inducing a visible or audible tremor
(say, in a musician or a speaker) or by so occupying the center of
consciousness as to make it difficult to focus on the task at hand.
Further, the process is self-reinforcing; the tremor itself becomes a
new reason for anxiety. Under such circumstances, beta-blocker drugs,
which block the peripheral actions of norepinephrine (the physiologic
hormone which accompanies anxiety) may have striking effects. By
much reducing or abolishing the tremor, they mask the visible expres-
sions of anxiety and thus diminish reactive anxiety.

There are many reasons, both external and internal, why people
feel so anxious when they begin teaching. The external reasons begin
with the newness of the role. Beginnings are almost always anxiety
provoking. No matter how much one is certain of the mastery of the
material and how much one understand the needs of the audience, the
first address to a large group is disconcerting. Then, of course, there are the questions one asks oneself: Is what I have to say important enough? Do they already know everything I plan to tell them? Can I hold their attention? Will I look like a fool? Will I be able to answer their questions?

Every beginner is concerned with such issues, even those who will prove to be gifted at teaching. The doubts are more common among those who are somewhat obsessional and perfectionistic — the very traits that are associated with success in academia. We tend to set unrealistically high standards for ourselves. Browning's line: "a man's reach should exceed his grasp" may be inspirational but it is more practical than pedestrian to add the modifier: but not by too much. When to perfectionism is added difficulty in acknowledging ignorance, then a serious difficulty looms ahead. Students have no constitutional right to an all-knowing teacher, but they can properly demand intellectual honesty. Being straightforward about what you do not know — even when it is something you should know — is not only morally preferable to a dismissive or obfuscating response to a question you cannot answer, but it is likely to increase students' respect for the teacher. It is absurd to place upon yourself the burden of knowing all the (knowable) answers. The appropriate response to an unanticipated question engages the students and the teacher together in finding answers.

To an important degree, the pressures on the beginning teacher are greater for women than for men. Until recently, women were not socialized to take charge — and "taking charge" is one element in the challenge to a lecturer facing a class. Most of us were raised to listen respectfully to what we were told and to volunteer very little. Thus, to stand before a class as an "expert" is an unaccustomed and thus anxiety-producing role. Indeed, some women add to their burden by regarding themselves as representative of their sex rather than of themselves. If they do not perform well, they are dismayed, not only at having done a poor job, but at having betrayed half of humankind!

In addition to adjusting to the newness of the role, many beginning teachers are also grappling with issues of their own personal development. This is a time of life when they are in the process of forming enduring relationships. It is also a time when career decisions must be made. In following their intellectual interest, some worry that they are acquiring knowledge they may not be able to apply because jobs may not be available. The stress engendered by this concern becomes more acute when they see peers seeking out lucrative niches. The question of dual career relationships becomes central. How can two people continue their education, manage to get jobs in the same location and satisfy the career interests of both? The stresses of adjusting to new jobs, new relationships and raising a family are multiplicative rather than additive. The solutions to those problems will require the efforts of all of us in working toward a more egalitarian society.

What do we do about the anxiety of the first teaching assignment? What is the therapy? There is simply no substitute for experience. Painful or not, it is crucial to go ahead and start. Beginning teachers must seize any opportunity they have to teach. The ability to teach, no matter what the initial level of skill, will improve with practice, at least if that practice is accompanied by constructive feedback. It is helpful to have experienced colleagues observe one's initial attempts, provided that those colleagues are honest enough to offer constructive and supportive criticism. If one has enough rapport with one's students, they can be a source of helpful suggestions. Having oneself videotaped and viewing the tape together with a sensitive and thoughtful colleague is perhaps the most useful way to learn how to improve one's teaching methods. Finally, when a colleague tells you, "If you were nervous, it didn't show," the struggle is well on its way to completion.

In sum, there is no better cure for the stresses of being a beginning teacher than to do more teaching, so that one will no longer be a beginner.
The Contributors

Daniel Bell is Henry Ford II Professor of Social Sciences at Harvard University. A gifted scholar, Mr. Bell teaches courses on political sociology and on the impact of technology on society.

Carola Eisenberg, a psychiatrist, is the Dean for Student Affairs in the Faculty of Medicine at Harvard University and a Lecturer on Psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School. A native of Argentina, educated there and in the United States, her students benefit from her experience, born of several cultures and many years of teaching.

John Kenneth Galbraith is Paul M. Walburg Professor of Economics, Emeritus, at Harvard University. Widely recognized for his writings, Mr. Galbraith has also had an impact as a teacher to generations of undergraduate and graduate students.

Andrew Garrod is Assistant Professor of Education at Dartmouth College. Born in India, educated in Great Britain and in the United States, Mr. Garrod teaches adolescent development.

Stephen Jay Gould is Professor of Geology and Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. Mr. Gould is a gifted teacher as well as a scientist. His extremely popular course on geology and paleontology is offered as part of Harvard’s undergraduate CORE program.

Ellen Langer is Professor of Psychology at Harvard University. A noted personality theorist, Ms. Langer’s courses on social psychology and on the psychology of control are outstanding offerings in the Harvard curriculum.

David Riesman is Henry Ford II Professor of Social Sciences, Emeritus, at Harvard University. Mr. Riesman’s widely acclaimed career began with the publication of The Lonely Crowd, now an American classic. Mr. Riesman for years taught an immensely popular undergraduate course on the American culture.

Helen Vendler is William R. Kenan Professor of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University. Recognized as one of the nation’s leading literary critics, she is also a gifted teacher, offering courses on American poetry.

Editors’ Comment: The papers authored by Professors Galbraith, Langer, Riesman, Bell, Gould and Eisenberg were presented originally as lectures in the Harvard-Danforth Center’s Professional Training Series.