On Teaching and Learning

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

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How I Could Have Done Much Better

John Kenneth Galbraith

My own history of teaching began at the University of California some 45 years ago where I taught at what was then the Davis campus. The Davis campus was devoted to agriculture, home economics, and veterinary medicine. I was the Chairman of the departments of Economics, Agricultural Economics, Farm Management, and Farm Accounting. I was the total faculty in all of those departments. My academic career has gone downhill ever since. I've been losing responsibility for the last half century.

I would like to suggest what I think I learned in teaching, and about the techniques of teaching — about the methodology, if I may put it in the most formal terms.

The first quality of teaching is reasonably careful articulation. If one has to practice it before a mirror, or if one has to practice it on a friend or spouse, one must do so. Students may not notice bad English of course, that is what they speak. However, teachers will communicate with them much more successfully if they speak in legitimate sentences.

Through most of my years of instruction — my forty-five years of university teaching — I am sorry to say that I never learned to fill up minutes, and one has to fill it up: There is a temptation to expand endlessly in order to fill the fifty-five minutes, rather than adhere to the more rigorous requirement of seeing how much one can
say in how few pointed words. Again, I have to say that this was a
terrible fault of my teaching, and again, something that I did not fully
realize until recently, when I fell under the discipline of the BBC.

One of the programs in the Economics series was on Marx. With
great pleasure I sat down and wrote a 5000 word treatment of Marx
and submitted it for the hour that we were to have on him. It was
received with great approval and enthusiasm. Then they asked if I
could cut it down to 2500 words so that they could accommodate
sound effects and other production concerns. So I cut it down and
managed to get it all into 2500 words.

We then had a trial run before the camera, and it lasted for two
hours. They then asked me to cut it down to 1200 words, half again.
I can only express my grief at having to do that. I managed to save it
all in 1200 words. That worked out just fine, except that they asked
me if I could get it down to 800. That was difficult, but nearly all of
what I had to say about Marx survived in that 800 words. This is an
example of the terrible thing that teaching had done to me over half
a century. I had been struggling all that time to fill in fifty-five minutes,
and suddenly late in life I had to discover that this ballooning effect
had become part of my life. I greatly hope it will not become part of
yours.

Third, I would plead with all to be scrupulously careful about the
use of technical jargon. There is no idea (certainly in the social sciences,
and even the physical sciences) that cannot be expressed in clear
English. When one resorts to jargon in economics, sociology, anthropology,
and any of the social sciences, one is engaged in an old habit
by which people in those fields seek to establish a priestly difference
from the common rod of mankind. It is not necessary. It is for
the purpose of lifting oneself up and saying, “I am a member of this
priestly caste that understands.” That exercise in vanity is what sepa-
rates teachers from students and what makes easy communication
impossible. One simply must not do it. With a little effort, one can
explain an idea in plain language and students will have some notion
of what is being said.

Fourth, one must always be careful, if one is improving on my
experience, to avoid personal reminiscence. As one has experiences
away from the university in which one teaches (e.g., a tour of duty
with the U.S. or State government) one is under the terrible temptation
to use personal reminiscence as a substitute for knowledge in one’s
teaching. That has been something which has always been my ten-
dency. My students never noticed it because, being of a generation of
economics professors who had been widely concerned with practical
affairs, they were getting the same thing from their other lecturers,
and so they assumed that that was what their education should be like.

Fifth, if I were urging one reform more important than any other,
it would be that professors, at all levels, mark the papers of the students
for whom they are responsible. There is nothing in my life that I have
disliked as much as reading students’ papers. The only exception to that is
reading their examinations. I have done it only when I have been short
of teaching assistants. Yet, I have learned more about teaching, more
about the shortcomings of my own teaching, from reading and
marking papers and examinations than anything else. The examination
paper is an examination of the students, but it is also an extremely
valuable examination of the instructor.

Sixth, there should be no question, no doubt in anyone’s mind,
that a good lecture requires good preparation. I have been marvelously
deficient in this area. Good preparation requires a rehearsal. One
should put one’s mind on the whole development of the subject matter
for the hour and, not necessarily repeat it out loud, but at least mumble
it to oneself. This is extremely important. I have never in my life given
what I thought was a good lecture without having, in effect, said it to
myself for about the equivalent length of time beforehand.

Related to this is the fact that one should always be aware that
when one invites discussion, very likely one is covering for one’s own
inadequacy. There should never be any doubt that discussion in a
university is the vacuum that fills the vacuum. When one runs out of
material one can always fill in the gap by inviting questions and having
an interchange. One can always then leave the classroom saying, “We
had a good interchange of ideas.” It is impossible to have a discussion
of which it cannot be said that there was a good interchange of ideas.

Also, I would urge very strongly that instructors come to class
with a self-confident commitment to their own beliefs, and that they
not feel impelled to both sides of every question. Firstly, truth is
not an average between right and wrong, and secondly, there are going
to be enough people who will take the opposite position. Instructors
are not being faithful to their own personal beliefs, to the idea of
education itself, unless they are there as the instrument and agent of
their own convictions.

Finally, I would urge everyone to engage in the absolute maximum
of agitation regarding the methods of promotion. These are not very
good. The standards for promotion in a university should weigh
heavily on the quality of teaching. This is what a university is all about.
The faculty discussions should focus extensively on the quality of instruction of the individual. There should be careful consideration of the kind of reports that the instructor has gotten from students and colleagues. This kind of concern may occasionally extend to dropping in on classes to find out how well he or she is doing.

As a form of escapism, I think that we have gone over to the verbiage test — how many words has the individual had printed in some journal or another. Nobody reads these articles, they just weigh them. This is particularly so in the social sciences. It is very hard to determine whether a person is a competent teacher. There is perhaps some sense of invasion of privacy when one attempts to do so. As a substitute, then, we weigh these papers.

In sum, if I had to do it over again I would do better. Because my writing was so demanding, I might again fall short of being an ideal teacher, but I would most definitely give more time to reading student papers and examinations, preparing lectures, and certainly learn to speak clear and effective English at an earlier age.

How Students Learn

Ellen J. Langer

In this paper, I would like to discuss an aspect of psychology as it relates to the teaching and learning experience. I hope to be able to impart a little knowledge, and in this instance hope that a little knowledge is a helpful thing. I am going to begin by talking about ways of structuring information that we present to students, and the possible consequences of structuring it in one way or another. Specifically, I will discuss three areas of my own research — the importance of perceived control, the deleterious consequences of helping, and some of the causes of mindlessness. I will take these up in turn.

We are all aware that it is very important as a teacher to be enthusiastic and engaging. One way to engage people is to encourage them to take control over various aspects of a course. While people believe this to be true, I do not think they have any sense that it is quite as important as it is. Indeed, if one looks at courses that are prepared, especially by new assistant professors and graduate students, one finds that there is not nearly as much choice as it seems there should be.

Let me persuade you of the importance of this variable by way of illustration. A colleague and I conducted a study of the effects of choice on the mental health of elderly people. Essentially, we did three things. We gave one group of residents a pep talk in which we stressed the importance of making their own decisions. We then gave them simple kinds of decisions to make, such as whether they wanted to see a movie on a Tuesday or a Thursday. Finally, we gave them a plant to take care of. They selected the plant and it was their responsibility to make all of the decisions that were related to its care.

We compared this group with another group that was also given a pep talk, but this talk stressed staff support rather than self support, i.e. how the staff was going to care for them and help them with decisions they had to make. Their decisions were essentially made for them. For example, they may have been told that they were going to see the movie on the Thursday. Also, they were given a plant that the staff was going to care for.
The Contributors

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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.

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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.