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.

Published by the Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning.
Dean K. Whitla, Director.

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Cover design: Evan Goldstein

The Journal of the Harvard-Danforth Center

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Balancing Teaching and Writing

David Riesman, Daniel Bell, Helen Vendler, and Stephen Jay Gould

Universities have long had the dual responsibility of teaching and advancing knowledge. Ideally, each member of the scholarly community balances these demands effectively. But, choices must be made. We invited our panelists to explain how they, as gifted scholars and teachers, manage to strike the balance in their own professional lives.

How Does One Achieve a Balance Between Teaching and Writing? Do You Find That, For Yourself, There is a Tension in Trying to Balance Both Responsibilities?

David Riesman

I have never achieved a balance between teaching and writing when trying to do both simultaneously. I could do so only sequentially. I could afford to devote myself conscientiously, even a bit obsessively, to teaching (and helping the Teaching Fellows in my course to become somewhat less awkward teachers) because I could use my summers and sabbatical leaves for research and writing. Like the career women with a family trying to "have it all," I experience tension in balancing responsibilities even now when I am emeritus, because I am still serving on doctoral committees and supervising individual student work (not only in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences but also in the Graduate School of Education).

Alert, evocative teaching is something I find so intricate and demanding, especially if one is trying to involve in discussion nearly all — and not only the more assertive and articulate — that I concluded that I could not do effective teaching for more than two, or at most three, hours a day; and to prepare thirty lectures with the appropriate mixture of subtlety and lucidity drew me up to, if not beyond, the margin of my capacities. For good teaching, "more is less."

Interstitially while I am teaching, I of course read, think, and worry about research, and write bits and pieces related to my teaching and research. But any substantial piece of work requires summers, semesters, or full year sabbaticals.

Daniel Bell

Having pursued a double career in journalism and in the academy, I believe that one of the secrets of balancing teaching and writing is in the allocation of time. An example from my experience will illustrate:

When I was an editor at Fortune I wanted to be in academia, and I began lecturing at Columbia. In 1958 I left Fortune and began teaching full time at Columbia. Mr. Luce was a little puzzled as to the reasons for my decision. He invited me to lunch and asked, "Why are you going to Columbia? Is there something that could induce you to stay?"

I said, "Mr. Luce, there are four good reasons for going to Columbia. If you can match them, I might stay."

He asked, "What are those four good reasons?"

I replied, "June, July, August, and September."

Those were the four good reasons, and those months are the time that I write.

I believe teaching and writing, at least for myself, are not things one can do simultaneously. Each of these is a highly divergent activity — each one is only done at the expense of the other. I am not the kind of person who can write from eight to eleven in the morning, and then go in to school to teach in the afternoon. I have to have a large block of time for writing, and I try when I am in residence to spend my energies preparing for class and teaching.

Helen Vendler

I can only write books in the summer. Sustained thinking cannot take place during the school year. I can write, on weekends, occasional reviews.

Stephen Jay Gould

I do not see any tension between teaching and writing, nor do I see these activities as mutually exclusive at one point in time. This may be because scientific writing, of course, tends to come in small packages.

When it comes to writing and teaching, these for me are joys — they are on one side of the coin. The tension is committee work, writing letters of recommendation, and being asked by so many people for five or ten minutes of time which you do not have. That is the frustration and the tension.

I have one capacity that allows me to turn off what I am doing in a second, pick up something else and start it right away, and then
What Interaction is There Between Your Teaching and Writing? Do You Find That One Activity is Either a Help or a Hindrance in the Execution of the Other?

David Riesman

Most of my teaching has been in one large General Education course on American culture and in recent years on the sociology of higher education. Even in the latter field, the area of my research for much of the last three decades, the overlap between my teaching and my research and writing is small. This is because the research moves from one specialized arena to another, whereas the teaching, although I hope it is probing, is an introduction to larger territories. That means reading books that are worth reading, and in that sense my teaching is part of my intellectual life, hence in the end part of my scholarly life as well. That is, my teaching is not drawn from current research, but rather from distilling reflections on that research and on the work of others.

Daniel Bell

Teaching is a dialectic in the sense in which Plato uses the term: It is a questioning of teacher and pupil in which one is scraping away appearances, or challenging that which is received, or challenging that which is given. One is forcing someone to justify the ideas he or she remember where I was when I come back to my previous task. I end up being able to juxtapose doing many things at once. However, I do not know how one can deal with this in any successful way. The tragedy is that, ambitious academics as we all are, we deal with it in a variety of ways. Some sacrifice their families, some sacrifice their psyches, some sacrifice their intellectual life by becoming narrower and narrower. I suppose that I have mainly sacrificed sleep.

I see the pressures not so much on me, but on me as a type, almost as the ecologist would see an organism. Working under the optimality assumptions of evolutionary theory, ecologists have an almost pan-glossian view of the organism. They do not say that organisms are optimally adapted to feed or to run away or do other things. Rather, they realize that organisms have to do many things simultaneously. Thus, the optimal creature is the best possible trade-off of all those things at once. I see myself in this way, and I do battle and struggle to try and maintain doing all that I like to do at once.

Helen Vendler

I always, when I am preparing a book, teach (at least two or three times) a course in that author. (I generally only write about individual authors). I consider the teaching an invaluable preparation for writing.

Stephen Jay Gould

Writing is sequential and linear. Therefore, this means that writing is the style in which people think and do other things that we call intellectual. In addition, writing is the currency of prestige and certainly of promotion. As such, we have a tendency to see it as a surrogate for all intellectual processes. I think that we are subtly trained to value the written word over other forms of communication — to see what we see written as having a harder currency.

I certainly see writing and teaching as different activities. I have twice tried to teach a course prior to writing a book about the subject in the hope (somewhat cynical) that my task in writing the book would then be easier. The courses were fine, but they were utter failures in terms of leading into the book. In order to write the book, I had to sit down for a month and think about it. That was also the only way I
could plan the course. One cannot program writing or course outlines. They are different complementary activities which, if I only had more time to devote to them, would be even more of a joy to me.

What are your Thoughts on the Relative Weight Ascribed to the Quality of One's Teaching vs. The Quality of One's Publications in The Tenure Process?

David Riesman

For a variety of reasons, including a sense of obligation, the student marketplace, and administrative and public preoccupation, there appears to be a heightened emphasis on teaching in the last decade or so. Contrary to legend, even when departmental faculty are completely in charge, teaching in my experience has not been a negligible factor, although I recognize that there are immense differences among major Ivy League universities and within them by field. Whenever I have sat on committees, here or earlier at the University of Chicago, teaching was in some measure always taken into account. If one is a mathematical or some other kind of genius who cannot or prefers not to communicate except in print, one may find subsidy for one's scholarly accomplishments at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, or in one of the many research universities, in spite of embryonic gifts as teacher and colleague. Only very rarely has inability to teach been taken as proof of one's profundity.

People talk a lot about "publish or perish." I want to suggest something about "teach or perish." In the great majority of American academic institutions, teaching is the first determinant of one's fate. In a job interview at entry level, and often later as well, one is likely to be asked to teach a class or make a presentation attended by students. Once in a position, the teaching one does the very first day may seal one's fate. In most of academia, departmental budgets are much more enrollment-driven than prestige-driven, although, of course, in fields where there is high demand and few available faculty members, departments will perform put up with inadequate teaching.

On the whole, only quite secure faculty can risk experiments in teaching. If one fails at it, the failure will turn students away and the student evaluations will be negative. This can do irreparable damage to one's reputation, whereas if one publishes something which is not very good (or if what one tries to publish is turned down by one's preferred journal), such defeats can always be redeemed by later work.
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 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.