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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College Teaching is a Funny Business

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College teaching is a funny business. Funny in that it is what we spend a great deal of our time doing, yet we have had little preparation for undertaking it. Although in completing our doctoral work we have all earned the proper club card for teaching, it is ironic that the Ph.D. degree itself has little to do with teaching abilities. Nor has teaching much to do with why we currently occupy our positions. All of us are aware that research and writing are the keys to success, and that the way to achieve tenure has little to do with grading student papers. Harvard has in its ranks many of the finest scholars in the world, but scholarship does not necessarily equate with excellence in teaching. We have all been trained to take libraries apart in our thirst for knowledge and in the creation of knowledge, but seldom does graduate training teach us how to communicate that knowledge to college students. Admittedly, most of us have done some teaching in graduate school, but it was usually considered a privilege, rather than a requirement. Considering that most of us now spend at least half of our time having this privilege, it is sad that the system did not prepare us for it when we ourselves were students.

In many ways I feel it is rather presumptuous of me to dictate what is the best way to teach. There is no best way. All I really can do is relate my own experiences. Over the last eight years I have experimented with teaching in many ways. Some of the experiments worked to my satisfaction, while others failed miserably. I focus here on the successes, though in many ways the failures might be just as informative. I employ a lot of “you shoulds” and the like below, but please keep in mind that I am really only saying how I do things.

Presenting the Course

I will start first with the design of a course. Every course should have a syllabus that is handed out on the first day of instruction. This document is very important, because the information contained within it is probably the most significant factor affecting the student’s decision to take your course. It is important to remember that the students are shopping in the first week or so of classes. They are attending your class, but they are also sitting in on a dozen others. You may be expecting a class of thirty and are thus astonished to find sixty students on your doorstep the first day. Following class you will rush around madly trying to find teaching assistants to take care of the masses, only to discover by your third session that your class has dwindled to twenty. Before you consider committing hari-kari, keep in mind that this happens to everyone. One way to keep the numbers high, so that you can get your message to as many people as possible, is to make sure that your very first sessions are organized (of course, it would not hurt to make sure that all your sessions are organized). You do not want to hit them with anything highly convoluted so that their heads are spinning, but you do need to let them know what topics are to be covered, what books/articles are to be read, and how they are to be graded, i.e., what is expected of them (term papers, exams, etc.). These three items: the course content, the reading assignments, and the graded tasks are those which the students are looking for. A syllabus is the best way to present this information, in addition to talking it out, because it is something the students can take with them and reflect upon later. It also demonstrates to them that you yourself are structured and did not just throw the course together in the previous hour. The syllabus should also have basic instructor/teaching assistant information (like office hours, phone numbers, and addresses) and a calendar which includes both lecture topics and required readings for those dates.

Make sure that your syllabus does not extend beyond three pages and if you can get the information on to two, so much the better. Keep in mind that the students have three courses in addition to your own, and although you may feel that your course obviously is of greatest importance, it is unfair to suppose that they feel the same way. When I was an undergraduate here umpteen years ago, I was given a syllabus for one course that listed 30 books. I thought the professor was joking, and he was in a way, but the joke turned out to be on me. Harvard is an experience, one in which the students will be exposed to fine music, wonderful drama, and dazzling hockey. Although classes are, or should be, the most important feature in the learning process, it is important to recognize that it is but one part of a student’s total experience.

I should emphasize that I am addressing undergraduate education at this point. Obviously, for graduate students it is a different matter. Your course should indeed be critical to graduate students and you should never feel any reluctance about pouring it on. With graduate stu-
students it is important to test their limits. If you have already predetermined that they are unable to match a certain expectation, then odds are they never will. Because lecture courses often have a mix of graduates and undergraduates, I have found it beneficial to provide the former with a beefier syllabus. Although it may complicate your schedule, I believe it is also important to set up an additional class a week with these graduate students to meet and discuss topics/reading. The time is well spent, because these same students generally end up being your teaching assistants the next time you teach the course.

**Reaching the Students**

- No matter how much you know, if you cannot communicate with students your knowledge will not be transmitted. To establish a rapport with students so that information is passed easily and comfortably is what we all hope to achieve. At one time or another all of us have had a teacher who is as much an entertainer as an instructor. Laden with a fine sense of humor and a barrelful of jokes, such teachers can make class a real pleasure. But if that is all there is, if there is no message to go with the wit, the instructor has failed at the job. Students are not naive. Media-wise they are, but naive. Media-wise they are, but all know when substance is lacking. I do not recommend that we study Bob Hope for the secret of teaching success, but it certainly does help to relax, be at ease, and enjoy yourself at your task. Students are aware of mood, and if you're bored with what you're doing, I guarantee that they will share this sentiment.

   How to feel at ease when a hundred eyeballs are staring through you is a bit of a challenge. As with anything, the more you do it, the easier it becomes, but keep in mind that Harvard students are an impatient lot. They have little tolerance with a mumbler, and will stand pregnant pause for only so long. The key is to speak up and know what it is that you want to say. All of us have given seminar talks and delivered papers at professional conferences. Because we usually are under strict time limits at such affairs, the standard practice is to read prepared speeches. To do so in the classroom is the kiss of death. The classroom, whether a seminar or a lecture, is the place to think out loud. Students want to hear what's going on in your head. Save your fully written lectures for required readings, because in class they want to see some mental gymnastics, how you wrestle with your topics. At the same time, they do not want to hear a rambling story which has no beginning and no end. You need to have style, but you also need to have structure.

   The best teachers start at point A, chat comfortably for an hour or so, and effortlessly arrive at point Z as the bell rings. I have always admired that, but few are so gifted. The rest of us must rely on other devices. If your lecture works well with visuals, by all means take advantage of the slide projector. Slides are perfect mnemonic devices. Basically they are notes on the wall. Because I have the unique distinction of having the smallest handwriting in existence, I am able to write reams of information on my slides. Lining them up on a light box prior to the lecture and reviewing them several times before heading off to class seems to work well.

   If visuals are inappropriate for your topic, however, I recommend making an outline of your talk and lecturing from the outline alone. Again, reading over the complete lecture a couple of times before class seems to be more than sufficient for memory recall. Yes you will forget a few items, but you will remember others that will spring to mind as the lecture proceeds. Whereas an outline gives you the freedom and flexibility to go off on certain tangents if the situation warrants it, a written lecture puts you in a straitjacket. First of all, you are afraid of losing your place; and secondly, the clock is your worst enemy. Nothing is more fearful than to come to the last page of your lecture, glance up at the clock, and realize there are 20 minutes left in your class. You either dismiss the class early, hope for a lot of questions, or put your tongue in slow motion. Any of the above options usually results in a disgruntled class.

   Style is important in a lecture, as is the overall rapport you establish with your students. No matter how dynamic you are in class, if you do not have the time to meet with students or address their questions when they approach you after class, you are not going to succeed at teaching. The undergraduate body here is sharp. If something bothers them or if they need further clarification, you can count on it that they are going to surround you after class. If your teaching does not go beyond the formal lecture, you might as well wrap it up. They either will abandon your course, or, worse yet, will damn you in the CUE Guide. (Do not ignore the Guide. It is extremely important because student evaluations provide an excellent opportunity to learn where improvements can be made in your courses.) When students do approach you after class, but you are in the process of rushing off to a meeting, make an appointment with them right then and there. Do not say, "Stop by later." To them that means, "You're not important to me so bug off!" I always try to bring my appointment book to class with me to prevent just such a situation from occurring.

   Somewhere along the line, especially if you are giving a seminar, the students are going to ask, "What should we call you?" If you are
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Some Teaching Techniques

The seminar is a prime experience for students in that it not only gives them a chance to tell others what they know, but it also gives them the opportunity to get some critical feedback on their thoughts. To be successful, however, it is fundamental that each student participates in every seminar session. If only one or two students are given the responsibility of giving formal presentations at each class, it is not in the best interests of the seminar overall. Although the other students may have been assigned certain background articles, if it is not their turn "to lecture," there is a tendency for them to slide. Few students purposefully set out to avoid readings, but if nothing is expected of them, I guarantee that this is what will happen.

One way to get around this problem is to start by establishing a set of readings for the topic to be addressed in a given week. For example, you may have ten articles that you want to have discussed and six students in your seminar. Depending on the nature of the articles, that could be a lot of reading for undergraduates. However, if you make four of the articles general ones that all the students must read, and divvy up the remaining six one to a student, the load is not overwhelming. In conducting the seminar you should come with a general idea of where you want the session to go, what topics you wish to have covered, and a set of questions to get things started. An introductory statement by you will set the theme, but you should refrain from talking too much. Remember, to be successful the seminar depends upon the active involvement of the students. Try posing some questions to get them thinking right off. If a deadly silence ensues, ask one of the students to review the article she just read. As she is presenting her case study, other students will start to chime in with their readings. Of course, it is fundamental that you also be fully aware of the substance of each reading, so that if the students do not make the expected connections, you are there to establish the links. Because each of the students has also done the general readings for the day, or should have, it is fair game to call on any one of them when general topics are addressed. You will be surprised how one or two calls without a response makes these same students experts by the next session.

Running a seminar in this fashion can be rather exhausting, because it not only requires that you yourself have all of the readings fresh in your mind, but you also have the responsibility to make sure that the discussion does not drift too far afield. When it works right though, and everyone is participating, the seminar can be the most satisfying of all teaching experiences.
There does need to be a time when the students in a seminar are put on the platform themselves. I usually set aside a couple of sessions a semester for oral reports on term paper research that the students are involved in. In this manner they get a chance to give at least one short lecture, in addition to their informal weekly presentations. These formal presentations are timed at about 15 minutes apiece with 5 additional minutes for discussion. It is amazing how much more difficult the students find it to present a concise, well-structured 15-minute lecture than a rambling one of an hour's duration.

Independent research is critical in any course, whether it be seminar or lecture. As many of my courses have dealt with material objects from the Peabody Museum, I have used weekly section meetings as labs. Museum objects are priceless markers of a time now gone, and it is important that they be handled in a sensitive, respectful manner. Some specimens are on show in various exhibits, but most are in storage, available only to the serious researcher. In my courses I have tried to bring students into direct contact with these materials, as these add a very different dimension to their studies. In teaching about Indians, which is my major field, nothing is more successful than to show the objects that they actually made and used. I can talk until I am blue in the face about culture change and continuity, but much more effective is to show the students a steel file that had been traded to the Indians. Unfamiliar with its function or finding it of little value in and of itself, an Indian hammered it into a different shape and fit it into a bone-handled chisel which once held a beaver-tooth incisor. Continuity in idea, continuity in form, but change in material as steel surpassed teeth in effectiveness. How can words do better?

Many students find material studies to be a springboard for research projects. Others decide to do term projects based on library research. Whatever the case, I have found that it is best to get students working on term papers soon after the course begins. For most courses the bulk of term paper research and writing occurs at the end of the semester. This is unfortunate for both the instructor and the students. First of all, the students will put off most of their work until the assignment is due, which could mean reading period or just before. Everyone has the best of intentions to start such projects early, but the great majority of us are procrastinators and we react more to deadlines than to guilt. Thus, as a result of hurried work, the papers often tend to be rather rough around the edges. Students seldom profit from the ordeal of writing term papers in such a manner. They may indeed get excited about the subject matter, but because they started so late and the course is now at an end, they must abandon this new found interest and tackle the requirements of a new semester.

Term papers can also be tough on teachers. Comments often tend more to be evaluative in nature rather than constructive (i.e., how to improve it), because the instructor knows that the student most likely will never get back to the paper. In fact, one is never quite sure that the comments will even be read. How frustrating it can be to write extensive notes on a paper and then watch the paper sit in a pile by the window because the student never stopped by to pick it up. In such cases the exercise probably was a trauma for the student too, yet it did not need to be that way.

I have gotten around this problem by starting the students off on their term papers by the third week of the semester. True, they do not have the nuts and bolts of the course under their belts so early, but that does not mean they cannot start thinking about subjects to investigate. The first things that are required of them are a paper topic, a short abstract as to how their research is to proceed, and a beginning bibliography of about a page of references. My teaching assistants and I comment on their chosen topics, dig up several additional pertinent references, and hand the lot back to them by the next class session. Speed is of the utmost importance, because if you take a couple of weeks to get this initial assignment back to them, you have defeated the overall purpose of getting them going on their paper. Approximately two-thirds into the course I require a first draft of their papers. My instructions are that this draft should be reasonably complete, including references. They are told that this draft will not be graded, but that it will be thoroughly critiqued.

The usual situation of receiving several dozen papers which require much critique only a week or so prior to the final exam can be a frustrating experience, especially if you are not all that convinced that the students are going to do anything with your comments. But let's say your first draft is due just before Thanksgiving. Despite your hard-fisted encouragement to get it in at that time, the students know the first draft is not being graded, so you will be lucky if 75% of the class makes the deadline. But that's okay, because your goal is to get the papers read, thoroughly critiqued, and back to the students quickly. If you take more than a week to return the papers, you yourself are doing the students a disservice. As the remainder of the papers trickle in over the next several weeks, you have the time to give considerable attention to each product without being bowled over by approaching exam deadlines.
You should emphasize to the students that handing in a first draft is to their advantage in producing a quality product. Teachers should not merely evaluate. We are also here to improve the quality of research and the manner of presentation, because if they don't get it here they won't get it anywhere. I try to give the students a sense that we are all in this thing together and that we are here to advance knowledge. To convince them of this, which I fully believe, they are informed that the best papers in the class will be published — that is to say, they will be bound in a volume and put in the Tozer Library. You will be amazed at what a challenge this is to the students to have their papers be one of those selected. Some of them will even hand in two drafts prior to the final one to make sure that they be included in the final volume. This is a sign of professionalism that I find very healthy. We all know that to improve the quality of a paper for publication, you first distribute it to your colleagues. They, in turn, break down your ego by tearing it apart. You pick up the pieces, separate the grist from the chaff, and submit a final product to the journal of your choice. Your paper profits from the attention given it, and what's more, you yourself learn what it is that makes a good paper. There is no reason why students should have to wait until they enter the professional community before they have this experience. In the five different times that I've taught Gen. Ed. 152, the Indians course, five volumes of 44 papers have been preserved for posterity. I always put these volumes on reserve for future offerings of the course and frequently assign certain articles as required readings.

If you do decide to adopt this plan for your term paper projects, you must make it quite clear to the students that you are loose up to a point. You do wish to get as many papers as possible by the first draft date, so be firm about them meeting the deadline. The fact that they know the papers will not be graded will reduce the numbers handed in, but, as stated above, it is really to your advantage not to have all the papers at once. It must be made clear to the students, however, that the final deadline is a true deadline, but no matter how stern you are about getting the final papers in by a certain date, you are always going to get some that are handed in late. Medical excuses are one thing, but what do you do with those students whose computers ate their paper, or who are just willing to suffer the consequences? Some of my colleagues set up final dates and that's it. Keep in mind though, that if you adopt this strategy you have to stick to your guns. If you falter, the word will get around that you're a good guy, but not one to be taken seriously, and that is a disaster to your credibility. It is also not wise to be so loose in your deadlines that the students do not abide by any rules. In such cases you will be correcting papers well into the next semester, and you can be sure that no one will be reading your golden comments by that time.

I have found that the best strategy is to give a deadline that has a built-in flexibility. The students are informed well ahead of time that the due date is such-and-such, and for every day late it is a letter grade down (B+, B, B-). That way it is up to them. They will know that if they wrote an A paper (which is rare; A students almost universally get their papers in on time), but handed it in two days late their grade will be a B+. In my eight years of teaching I have never had a complaint about this strategy, and rarely do I get papers in late.

But what do you do about the B+ paper from a B student that comes in five days late? In such cases I do risk credibility. Although keeping to schedules and meeting deadlines is important in the maturing process of a college student, we are also not in a military training situation where a slight slip-up could result in death. Seldom do I actually "punish" more than a letter grade, but as long as the students don't know this ahead of time, I'm safe. They normally think that it is a mistake on my part and keep quiet about it. Of course you may also have to deal with a situation in which the student is so delinquent that a passing grade is impossible. In such cases, never tell the student that it is too late. After all, you still want to make sure that the assignment is completed, in whatever form. For myself, I have found it most expedient to say, "Get it in anyway, let me take a look at it, and we'll see." That way you make no promises, but the student feels there may still be some hope.

In situations where there are valid medical reasons for missing deadlines, whether for term papers or other written assignments, I have found it best to ask the students to establish deadlines for themselves. If you leave it up in the air, that is usually where it will stay, and if you yourself establish the deadline, it really might not be fair to them if they are still recuperating from their illness and trying to get life in order. It is the rare and cocky student who will say, "I'll turn it in at the end of the semester." Most will give you a date one or two weeks hence, and it is then your job to keep them to their commitment. If you respect them and their ability to make decisions, they will respect you for doing so.
Parting Thoughts

I have touched on but a small part of teaching here. The mechanics as to what to do and what not to do are obviously based on personal experiences and are geared to my personality. I do feel, however, that knowing the options may be of some value to you in your work. The thing which I have failed to communicate is how little of all of this is actually work. As I look back through this paper, I am saddened to discover that I have not really revealed the joy of college teaching. I was trained to do research, trained to increase knowledge, but it means so little if I do not have the opportunity to communicate it. How often I have wanted to shake a student by the shoulders and blurt out the answer for what appears to me to be so obvious. That is the temptation of the teacher. But how much more satisfaction I have received when a student has slowly plodded through the reasoning process and discovered the solution for him or herself. Teaching is indeed a funny business. How often you seem to be wasting time when you could just as easily do the job yourself. But as the years pass by and you see those very same students accomplishing things that you never dreamed of doing, you know you must be in the right business.

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