

REFLECTIONS ON OUR PRACTICE

They Know My Name
New Dynamic Role of Faculty

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Abstract

Curriculum delivery is becoming increasingly restricted in an era of elevating expectations and declining budgets. As a result, innovative approaches to curriculum delivery are harder to implement though changing student dynamics make them ever more necessary. This article will discuss the differences between the collaborative style of teaching and the dusty old lecture notes by tracking one faculty member's evolution toward a new immersive experience for students. In discussing his evolving teaching philosophy and exploring how it came alive in the new curriculum, this article features how one "old, and distinguished dog" learned some new tricks.

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Leading a Horse to Water: An Evolving Teaching Philosophy

Let me start this chapter with you by sharing the evolution of my teaching philosophy. It reflects my evolution from a disseminator of information to a teacher of students, from a class leader to a partner, from a solitary faculty to a member of a collaborative team. Most of all it reflects a change from a focus on my teaching to students' learning.

During the early part of my academic career, I believed teaching meant giving students as much information as possible in the shortest amount of time available. I would prepare lectures, timed precisely to last 50 minutes, packed with facts, figures, lists, and lessons. During that reading I seldom looked up; in fact a student could have silently walked out of the room and as long as she returned before the 50 minutes ended I would in all likelihood have not even noticed, having rarely varied from the written notes and never straying from the podium.

After a few years of "teaching," I read an article about a local high school teacher who had won an award as the outstanding teacher in the school district. Included in that article was a quote from her: "I became a better teacher when I realized I taught people not subjects." At that moment I had my first teaching epiphany. I realized I had been teaching subjects and not really paying attention to the students. I came to change my perspective from believing what I did was about the teaching to belief it was about the learning. I had been regarding students as followers, and like any piper, they were to accept, uncritically, whatever I told them. After reading that article, I began to view the students in my class as participants in the learning process, which required a refocusing of my approach. What the students learned became more important than what subjects I taught. I changed from a giver of information to a provider of opportunities to learn. I came to expect more from myself and more from my students. I realized that I needed to provide the opportunity to learn but they had to do more of the heavy lifting.

The second epiphany in my teaching evolution was more recent and is based on my second interpretation of the word *subject*. Previously I had viewed myself as teaching subject matter and taught it in a traditional way: classes of 50 or 75 minutes built around a course defined by a series of objectives. I taught content, with each topic having a corresponding course designed to deliver the subject matter. However, my perspective has changed, and that change contributed to my belief that content only has meaning when intertwined with other related content and placed within a variety of contexts.

Welcome to the Feast: My Current Teaching Philosophy

Many students take the same approach to education as they take to preparing food. They live in a microwave oven world. You put your popcorn in the oven, follow a simple and specific set of directions, know immediately whether you succeed, all without not much preparation, planning, thought, engagement, or creativity involved. You are told the facts, cook on high for 30 seconds, and success is relatively easy. Contrast that with preparing a Thanksgiving meal. It is a multifaceted and complex process, and failure is not unheard of, you are likely to improve with guidance, it takes a great deal of planning, creativity, flexibility, coordination of multiple parts, effort

and commitment, you can succeed at some parts and fail at other parts, often some teamwork is required, and even when the meal is not perfect it is still more nutritious than popcorn and when you finally get it right you know YOU have done it not the microwave.

That is what my teaching approach has evolved into: doing whatever is necessary to help students think, collaborate, fail, critique, create, doubt, succeed, and ultimately learn. Doing that required skills in a variety of methods, new to me but well documented by others: small group techniques, incorporating active learning into the classroom, technology, service learning, small and large group work, learning portfolios, all requiring students be actively engaged in their own learning, with the goal to transition from classes where I did 100% of the talking to class where students had the floor more than I did. Regardless, my goal in every class is to lead the students to learning and give them the tools to do so. I start every class with the goal that every student will actively engage in the learning process, feel connected to the material in some way, and leave knowing they have learned. I warn them that when I teach I sweat, roam throughout the room, and occasionally spit on the students near me when I get particularly excited about the class. And, I warn them that I expect them to sweat, roam and occasionally spit. We all know by the end of a course that learning is an active process, often requiring heavy lifting from the entire class community and always their responsibility as much as mine. I can guide them but they must learn.

Jack Be Nimble: Lessons from the Immersion Semester

The evolution toward increasing personalization of my students' learning culminated in the development, with several colleagues in my department, of a new curriculum model: the immersion semester. The immersion semester provides learning as a holistic and organic experience rather than as a series of courses: schedules are fluid from week to week, lead teachers shift from experience to experience based on expertise, meeting places vary, teaching techniques evolve, and content and method are driven by desired outcomes rather than tradition. The integrated approach includes seamlessly incorporating skills such as collaboration, problem solving and critical thinking into all class activities. For example, group projects are used to not only teach the content related to the project topic but also to teach collaborative skills. Learning portfolios become a tool not only for deeper reflection on the meaning of the subject matter but also a means to refine critical thinking skills. Simply put students meet wherever, whenever, and with whomever is the most appropriate for the task, most likely to enhance learning and unencumbered by the traditional class structure. My approach to learning has become more nimble and organic shifting as needs and circumstances change.

I have learned a number of lessons as part of this new approach to teaching to a point where the type of education discussed in this issue not only makes sense but is a "no brainer."

Just Do It

Sometimes you have to "Just do it." After many years of teaching it was clear to me that a new approach to student learning was necessary. My discomfort with the curriculum reflected the thoughts of individuals such as Earnest Boyer who years

ago espoused the need for integration and connectivity as well as documents such as The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University's report entitled *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities*. The realization that teaching has to change if learning to be enhance continues to be as topic marked by urgency, as evidenced by nearly any issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. There is a prevailing sense that things need to change. However there are many reasons to not change, from accrediting body regulations to uncertainty of how to proceed. But eventually I realized that we, the faculty, are responsible for change. We have to take action. The Irish say, "If your messenger is slow, go out to meet him." Yogi Berra said pretty much the same thing when he told us, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it." As academics, we tend to crave data before making a change, waiting for the results of a pilot study before acting. We did not do that with the immersion semester. We certainly had hours of discussion. We certainly had data, with over 30 years of experience in the classroom among the faculty involved. The data, however, was certainly not complete, but we reached a point where we were ready to "just do it" and stepped into the abyss anyway.

Fill in Your Dance Card

Don't always "dance with the one that brung ya." The renowned University of Texas football coach Daryl Royal was one of those voluble coaches who reporters love to cover. He was always good for a quip or a quote. One of his most famous quotes (actually lifted from a song popular in the 1920s) was "dance with the one that bring ya." Interestingly, Royal did not follow his own advice early in his Texas career. He was the coach who integrated the Longhorn team. Just as interesting is the fact that his last team, in 1976, finished with a record of 5-5-1 and did not appear in a bowl game. That was his only non-winning season at Texas.

One lesson demonstrated by our immersion semester is that there comes a time when you need a variety of partners if you want to move forward. We had many partners, including practitioners throughout the state, colleagues from other universities, and a student advisory group. We continue to seek new partners. For example, we are discussing integrating general education, or parts of it, into the immersion semester. I expect we will seek conversations with folks in English, math, and communications to see how to do that. The apparent paradox of general education with a departmental program may seem insurmountable but that is because in academia we sometime believe in limited partnerships and do not want to seek new ones.

Be a Worry Wart

Sometimes you need to worry and be grouchy. Many of you remember the Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" with the lyric, "In every life we have some trouble. When you worry you make it double. Don't worry, be happy." Actually the phrase "Don't worry, be happy" originated with Indian mystic Meher Baba, who had a longer version that started with "Do your best, then don't worry, be happy." The change in our curriculum came about because we were worried about our students and their future success. Once in the curriculum, we were constantly "worrying" over questions such as, "Is this the best way to teach? Is this the best way for students to learn? Is this the best way to do this?" Our worrying catalyzed change and led to action. Perhaps new mantra from our experiences should be: Do worry, be grouchy, then do something about it.

Pause and Reflect

Don't just do something, sit there. This phrase is a favorite of yoga instructors everywhere. In a world of increasing expectations and decreasing resources, one of the challenges of being a faculty member is we never have time to just sit and think. We are always off to another meeting, another class, another conference, another manuscript. We have lost the opportunity to just pause, reflect, and argue with ourselves. Much of what led to my involvement in the immersion semester resulted from reflecting and arguing with myself. Change sometimes requires mulling, and I mulled over issues such as viewing learning as an act of collaboration, opening the classroom floor to students, and demystifying the teaching process by being transparent. My evolution as a teacher was furthered by reflecting on teaching-related challenges and by seeing problems in fresh ways. As Einstein said, "Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them." Before even tackling the problem, it may be helpful to think about a new way to solve it.

Be a Little Selfish

Based on lessons learned from developing the immersion semester, I am convinced that change works best when you want to participate in the change. It should be exciting, rejuvenating, enjoyable, challenging, and as much about you as it is about the change. Psychologist Geri Weitzman (Geri Weitzman quotes, n.d.) said, "Sometimes you gotta create what you want to be a part of." The immersion semester worked for me because I truly enjoy teaching and believe I owe my students the best possible opportunity to learn. I was seeking something that I wanted to help establish, something as much for me as for them. So perhaps the changes we seek should emanate from our passions, choices, likes, and commitment. If my chair asked me to revise our grant submission process, I doubt I would have been as committed to the change and possibly would not have continued in the face of failure and challenges. Selecting the things you want to change may be the most important step in the process.

Change Is Not a Spectator Sport

You cannot simply be a part of a larger change and stay the same yourself. Eventually change must take place in the first person, singular and plural. Change requires leadership, and leadership, for some of us, requires change. It is not easy to lead, and there are many reasons not to. Not everyone will accept change, some may reject it outright, and others may attempt to kill it by committee. But if you believe it is necessary, if there is something you worry about and it makes you grumpy, then it is worth the risk. Others may not follow, but as Yogi Berra said, "If they don't want to come, you can't stop them."

The Beauty of Imperfection

Do what you can. I once heard one of my children's soccer coaches tell a child who made one dribble too many and missed a goal-scoring opportunity that he shouldn't let "perfect" get in the way of "done." The coach was ripping off Voltaire, who said, "The perfect is the enemy of the good," which is a message beyond soccer. One of the challenges of launching the immersion semester, or any major curriculum change, is getting it just right. I now realize that if we waited until we were confident we had everything right, it would never have been launched. We had to at some point, as I said

previously, just do it. The final product was marked by compromise and a willingness to step back from my perception of perfect, and indeed, it was far from perfect. We had problems with almost everything we planned, from scheduling, to assignments, to grading, to leadership. But all those things have been improved but are still not perfect; had we not launched we would still be waiting for perfect. At times we succumb to the belief that change must wait on perfection. We made mistakes but at least we didn't make, in Yogi Berra's words, "wrong mistakes." Wrong mistakes are decisions to not move forward.

Sometimes ugly change is better than attractive sameness. In the book *Life, Death, and Bialys* (2006) Dylan Schaffer writes a moving narrative about his reconciliation with his dying father, Alan. In the book Dylan tells the story of the day his dad shaved his beard:

Around the time he turned seventy, Flip shaved the closely cropped beard he'd worn my whole life. He left only a mustache. The change did not suit him. His jowls had jowls. The beard hid the loose flesh. He had always said shaving was barbaric. The new look aged him. When I asked about it he said he just felt like a change.

Dylan relays his belief that the change was a part of Alan's bonding with his brother. The change may have been ugly but it was not without purpose. One of the lessons I learned during immersion was that change is frequently ugly and seldom smooth. It has all kinds of ugly angles and unanticipated jowls. But that is no reason not to pursue it. The first few weeks with our students were ugly. They were unhappy, we were uncertain, and the many potential adjustments demanded hours of deliberation. But we persevered, accepted that ugly was the way things were going to be. Much about the immersion semester is still ugly but its ugliness does not overwhelm its purpose.

Go Ahead and Give Up the Ship

We may need to change the thing you are most attached to. Sometimes the things we hold closest are the things most in need of change, which makes change more difficult. I drive a VW bug I have driven since 1983. It has no working radio or horn. The odometer and speedometer have not worked in a decade. There are no air bags. The heater only works in the summer. It will not go over 45 miles per hour except coming down the steepest of hills. As I reflect on the car and its continued utility I am reminded of the words of Gerhard Frost, a Lutheran theologian, philosopher, poet, and gerontologist. The last line in his poem entitled *Loose Leaf* (Revolution Church NYC, n.d.) allows us to shift from his theological context to our worldly context:

Hardcover catechisms
are a contradiction
to our loose-leaf lives.

My VW had become like a hardcover catechism, its importance cast in stone without any reevaluation or context. Perhaps it is time to realize this is a loose-leaf time, and everything needs to be seen as an option for change, a time for a new sheet, an opportunity to turn over a new leaf, or a new approach to teaching and learning.

Most of us remember the words James Lawrence captain of the USS Chesapeake, in 1883. After his ship was disabled by the HMS Shannon he ordered his officers, "Don't give up the ship." Unfortunately, Captain Lawrence died of his wounds a few days later, and the British captured his ship. Interestingly, Captain Oliver Perry, often mistakenly given credit for the saying, famously unfurled a banner emblazoned with the same phrase when his ship, named *The Lawrence* after Captain James Lawrence, came under attack by the British vessel *The Detroit*, commanded by Robert Barclay. Captain Perry did abandon his ship but ultimately won the battle on his new ship *The Niagara*, a victory including the sinking of *The Detroit*. The moral of all that is that sometimes you may have to abandon ship to move forward. The year of the immersion semester required frequent decisions whether to abandon ship or to stay and wage battle. The lesson learned is that going down with the ship typically means the battle is over.

All Roads Lead To... Final Thoughts

I have come to view learning as a process requiring participation by each individual rather than a product of my presentations. I start every class determined to actively engage every student in the learning process or make them feel connected to the material in some way, and to leave them knowing they have learned. We all know by the end of a course that learning is an active process, often requiring heavy lifting from the entire class community and it is as much their responsibility as it is mine. The immersion semester has helped me realize that old dogs can learn new tricks. These tricks are not limited by department, subject, or curriculum. They can be used to reinvigorate the way in which we as faculty supports learning in our students, regardless of subject. In doing so, even the most seasoned faculty members not only lead change for their colleagues but also embody changes themselves. Such change revives one's passion for the learning process, subject matter, and student engagement. This thinking is not how I started many years ago as a professor. The road to my new philosophy has not been smooth or simple. It has been dirty, bumpy, exciting, and refreshing and the view from where I am now has been worth it. The immersion semester has taken my new teaching philosophy and brought it, and me, to life.

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