


Your Students Learn by Doing, Not by Listening

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Advice



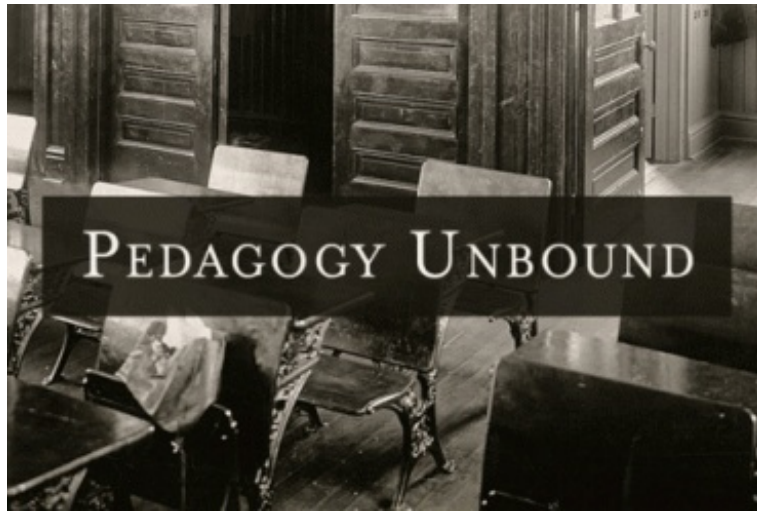
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By David Gooblar May 01, 2018

In February, *The New York Times* reported the impressive results of a new study showing that "diet quality, not quantity" was the key to weight loss. Focusing on eating plenty of vegetables and unprocessed foods was a better strategy than counting calories, according to the JAMA study, in which more than 600 people adopted one of two healthy diets for a year. Near the end of the article, however, was a strange caveat: People in both groups had consumed fewer calories than they normally would have. Suddenly, the article's claims about quality versus quantity seemed suspect.

In reading how the study was conducted, I began to realize: The takeaway here wasn't about diets; it was about teaching.

I sometimes worry that the word *teach* leads us astray in academe. The word suggests that our job as faculty members is to put new knowledge into our students' heads. But in my experience the best learning occurs when students teach themselves — when they discover something on their own. And that's what happened in this medical study.



Pedagogy Unbound

Looking for inspiration on teaching or some specific strategies? [David Gooblar](#), a lecturer in rhetoric at the University of Iowa and a blogger on teaching, writes about classroom issues in these pages. Here is a sampling of his recent columns.

After all, the basic science of nutrition hasn't changed: People who consume more calories than they burn tend to gain weight. But just telling people to cut down on calories isn't enough to change their behavior. (If it were, we'd all have our ideal BMI.) So what did the researchers behind the *JAMA* study do differently? They *taught* people how to adopt the sort of eating habits that naturally lead them to consume fewer calories.

Participants attended classes — once a week for the first two months, then less frequently throughout the year — to learn about healthy eating habits. Class size was small (with no more than 22 students), and the instructors focused on making "sustainable lifestyle changes, not simply following a temporary 'diet.'" Moreover, based on early feedback, the researchers modified their teaching to make it "less dense, less didactic, and more interactive." Instructors lectured less and began organizing classes around activities, including students cooking their own recipes.

Small class sizes? Fewer lectures? More active-learning activities? Does any of that sound familiar?

Students are most successful in our courses when they learn for themselves — much as the participants in this study did. They changed their minds about how to eat well, and changed their behavior. The trick for all of us in academe is designing courses that help students do that.

In the rhetoric course I teach, my students and I often talk about how difficult it is to change someone's mind, and how much resistance people put up to avoid admitting they might be wrong. When I work with my class on the art of persuasion, I'm often reminded of the challenges that I face as a teacher.

Teaching is not about changing students' minds — in the sense of persuading them to hold a different position on some issue. But successful teaching does change minds. I'm trying to help my students discover their own misconceptions and revise them accordingly. And that challenge comes up against the same roadblocks as persuasion does: It's hard to get students to change.

Although persuasion is central to rhetoric — the ostensible goal of writing and speaking is to persuade readers and audiences of our argument — we have to admit that even the best writers fail to persuade readers much of the time. It is a rare essay, book, or speech that gets people to think differently. This semester, I had my students do a speech assignment that I called "This Changed My Mind." Students had to write about something that changed their thinking significantly, and analyze how and why the change occurred. It proved surprisingly difficult for many students to even think of a relevant example.

But that doesn't mean that persuasion — or instruction — is impossible.

Persuasion and pedagogy come into play in my rhetoric class when I teach a short section from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*. Adichie writes of her difficulties convincing her friend Louis that sexism and gender inequality still exist. They have many conversations in which she lays out the problems she sees. He doesn't get it. "I don't know what you mean by things being different and harder for women," he tells her. "Maybe it was so in the past, but not now."

That changes one night when the two go out to dinner. Adichie tips the man who helped them find a parking spot, and the man turns to Louis and says, "Thank you, sir!" Suddenly, Louis sees the light. No amount of argument on Adichie's part had nearly the effect of Louis experiencing for himself the assumptions that women regularly face.

Often, I tell my students, the only thing that can change our minds is going through something ourselves, and learning the hard way. In the *JAMA* study, researchers were successful in changing participants' eating habits because they went far beyond telling them the principles that underlie healthy eating. The researchers employed the sort of active-learning strategies we all should be putting to use in the college classroom.

We have to go beyond the idea that the perfect presentation of the relevant facts will be enough to help the majority of our students learn. Such pedagogy (whether or not we call it lecturing) will work for some students. But for most students, we need to shift our focus from what it is we say to what it is they do.

Such pedagogy is no easy task. But as the *JAMA* study shows, with enough planning, expertise, and flexibility, it is achievable. It's not enough to tell our students to eat fewer calories; we need to put them in the kitchen and get them cooking.

David Gooblar is a lecturer in the rhetoric department at the University of Iowa. He writes a column on teaching for The Chronicle and runs Pedagogy Unbound, a website for college instructors who share teaching strategies. To find more advice on teaching, browse his previous columns [here](#).