

Turning Good Teaching on Its Head: Part II

IHE insidehighered.com/advice/2018/03/20/why-professors-need-learn-their-students-opinion

Last week, I [described](#) how what some observers might see as a bad approach to teaching -- focusing on our weakest students -- can, in fact, have good results. Continuing with that theme, let us take a look at a second aspect of good teaching -- promoting student learning -- and consider its inverse. In award letters, students regularly talk about how much they learned from award-winning professors and how new worlds were opened to them. It is hard to argue that learning is not fundamental to effective instruction.

Indeed, that is central to my own teaching philosophy. I start with the query "How does this enhance student learning?" I am able to apply that test to almost everything at a university from the micro to the macro: classroom exercises, exams, curricular changes or any new programs. Yet let's look at a variation or opposite of this test. Namely, what if we looked not at how much students learned from us, but how much we as instructors learned from students?

Having spent all my three-plus-decade career at public universities, I've had some nightmares about defending this idea in a legislative hearing at the state level. I could envision the comments and questions directed at me by a state government official. "We don't pay you that big salary to let the students teach you -- you are supposed to teach them." "You only work six hours a week as it is -- can't you spend that time having your students learn?" "Aren't you supposed to be the expert in this subject matter? What are the students supposed to teach you?"

The idea that we should learn things from students may seem crazy to some people, and especially those in certain segments of the tax-paying public. From our doctoral students, teaching us and other people new aspects of our discipline is a standard expectation. At the undergraduate level, however, it is less clear what we can expect to learn. Still, I would argue that learning from our students is a desirable standard for what constitutes good teaching.

Think about what's happening in our classes if indeed we learn from our undergraduates. First, we are creating an environment in which it is safe for students to question existing thought and knowledge in an appropriate, rigorous fashion rather than as a battle of uninformed opinions. Students also have the freedom to explore original ideas. Dialogue, discussion and the like are not unidirectional, from teacher to student, but bidirectional in a pedagogical strategy that is student centered. The norm is created that everyone, even the instructor, can learn from every other member of the class.

We are also creating assignments and experiences, such as undergraduate research, that permit the kind of exploration from which students can make original contributions. Instructors are also modeling the commitment to lifelong learning that we hope to foster among our students. In general, it means that we are encouraging the kinds of critical thinking and autonomy skills that are the standard claims in teaching philosophy statements, but ones that I

am never sure whether faculty members really fulfill.

Furthermore, if you learned something from students, chances are that they learned something, too, and probably more than from conventional methods of instruction. Consider the following different processes of student learning:

- “I believe it because I already believed it.” There is no learning in this instance.
- “I believe it because I want to believe it.” This is perhaps only slightly better and suggests that students only learn what fits into their existing worldview.
- “I believe it because the teacher told me.” This is a lower stage of intellectual development and not one to which we typically aspire, even for college freshmen.

In none of those instances does much, if any, learning occur for the students or the faculty member. Contrast that with “I believe it because I discovered it.” That is the kind of deeper learning that we wish for our students, lessons more likely to stick with them and expand to others.

How do we learn more from our students? Paradoxically, by adopting a less instructor-centered and more of a student-centered approach. The focus becomes not on what we do but on what we have the students do. As a start, students need to understand where knowledge comes from in your field and how to evaluate that; this is as important in studies of literature as in mechanical engineering. They need the tools to create knowledge, and we shouldn't assume that they inherently have those. Imagine freshmen taking five classes in different disciplines with different languages and ways of thinking. Unless they understand their own fields of study, they are likely to be confused and won't have the groundwork for advanced analysis.

With this basis, faculty members need to create the opportunities for student innovation: assignments, class exercises and curricular experiences that promote student innovation. That will require additional work, even though it may be easier to just lecture and give standard multiple-choice exams taken from a textbook's test bank.

For years, parents and others have asked students what they learned in school that day. We ought to ask the reverse: What did I as an instructor learn? If you can't answer anything in the affirmative, you might look in the mirror and ask why not and how you might change.

Good teaching is still what we thought it was, especially in terms of promoting learning among our best students. But sometimes turning that good teaching on its head can be good teaching, as well, and perhaps we should recognize and reward that, too.