

Turning Good Teaching on Its Head: Part I

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Among the most heartwarming experiences of my academic career has been serving on university committees. You don't often hear a faculty member say that, but in this instance, the committees involved awards for teaching at the college and university level.

Determining the best instructors on a campus involves reading through numerous files. In doing so, one learns about the wonderful accomplishments of colleagues and the innovative things they are doing in their classrooms. Perhaps most compelling are the letters from students who describe the life-changing experiences that come from a particular teacher.

As I read numerous student letters -- and files in general -- over the years, I began to notice several patterns on what things were cited and by whom as to what constituted exceptional teaching. That led me to consider a thought experiment: What about the opposite of those patterns? Are these aspects of teaching necessarily bad or undesirable?

Certainly, some are. Nevertheless, could we learn something by looking at the inverse of attributes of good teaching and still find merit in them -- even good teaching, as well? In considering this, I would like to share two such instances that I believe qualify. I'll describe the first instance in this essay and will explore the second in a follow-up.

Judging Teaching Excellence According to Our Worst Students

We regularly judge teachers by the accomplishments of their best students. Plato was a student of Socrates, and in turn, Aristotle was a student of Plato. Alfred Kleiner had a pretty good doctoral student named Albert Einstein. We take great pride, and rightly so, in how the stars of our classes do amazing things while they are students -- and, in many cases, for years afterward.

Typically, letters from students in support of award nominations come from A students. They are the ones who receive solicitations for letters because it is expected they will say wonderful things, and many have formed close relationships with the faculty member involved. Instructors benefit by basking in the reflected glory of such students' accomplishments, including how they were inspired to go to law, medical or graduate school because of particular teachers. Indeed, when I won the campus award for undergraduate teaching at the University of Illinois, one of my former students wrote that after taking my undergraduate international law course, he was able to skip the general course in international law at Harvard Law School and successfully take advanced courses in the subject.

Stories such as the one above leave you feeling pretty good about yourself and your teaching. In the cold light of the day, however, a more sobering assessment is warranted. It is likely that Harvard Law student would have been successful regardless of my teaching. I can't say that

my courses didn't add value, but he was already a great student in many different ways. He also took 37 other college classes beside the three with me and received A grades in all those as well. Running a venture capital firm today and blessed with a family, he is a tremendous success by most societal measures.

But what if we were judged not by our best students but our weakest ones? What would letters say about our teaching if they came from them?

I have yet to meet a colleague who has proudly introduced me to one of their C-minus students. Indeed, culling the weakest students is often considered a badge of honor in academe. Most famously, the former president of Mount St. Mary's University purportedly said this about struggling students when addressing his faculty: "You think of the students as cuddly bunnies, but you can't. You just have to drown the bunnies ... put a Glock to their heads." Most faculty members are more subtle. Some work to get students to drop their classes, taking pride in being "tough," and consider course withdrawals as indicators of success in upholding standards. Others impose grading curves that guarantee that a certain percentage will get D's or fail regardless of performance. Still others claim and are proud that they "teach to the best students" rather than the median. I haven't heard someone say that they aspire to teach to the lowest common denominator in the class, leaving aside the issue whether instructors should be teaching to *all* students.

We have a special obligation, especially those of us who teach at public universities, to help struggling students. Society is well served by the success of all its citizens in facilitating upward mobility. And for anyone unmoved or unconvinced by moral and social arguments, there are practical and pedagogical reasons for targeting weak students for assistance.

First, the assistance given to weak students will probably have a greater impact than attention devoted to the strongest students in the cohort. The former are more likely to be at the tipping point between success and failure -- sometimes the difference between staying in college and leaving. Effective assistance at the right juncture might make all the difference in students' lives and ultimately in their careers. Helping an A-minus student become an A one is desirable, but it won't have the same impact, immediately or throughout their educational pathway, that assisting struggling students will have.

As educators, we also might be making a serious mistake when we ignore or cull the weak students. Too often, we dismiss those students as lacking the necessary intelligence or skills to be successful. Yet student struggles might not be the result of intellectual limitations but rather a poor educational background in high school or personal problems (family conflicts, financial difficulties). Flunking such students does not deal with those problems, and if anything might cause them greater personal and psychological problems.

Weak students early on might actually turn out to be our best students in the long run. After all, students come to college at different levels of maturity, and even the most mature have significant room to grow personally and intellectually. We shouldn't write them off so early in

their lives. As an illustration, in his first year of seminary, Martin Luther King Jr. received a C in ... public speaking!

I had a student who received C and C-minus grades in two of my courses. She needed one more credit beyond regular course work in order to graduate, and I agreed to do an independent readings course with her to secure that credit. She had fallen behind during the semester and finally came to my office disheveled and in tears -- she had been a victim of sexual assault in the previous weeks and she had not received any help or counseling. With her permission, I contacted the intake officer in the dean of students' office.

Several years later, I saw her smiling picture in the business section of a local newspaper: she had just been promoted to a managerial position with a local company. I didn't do much, and the excellent staff in the dean's office and the counseling center deserve the credit. Nevertheless, this case illustrates what we do touches students' lives -- and maybe even saves them.

For which student did I make a greater impact, the A student who went to Harvard or the C student who went on to work for a local firm? I will let you judge.

What lessons can be drawn from these stories? At the most basic level, we need to notice that a student is struggling or failing. Students don't always come forward when they have problems. Some are embarrassed by their difficulties. Others wrongly think they can solve things on their own. Sadly, others don't approach faculty members because they don't expect to find a sympathetic ear. It is not uncommon, especially in a large class, for some students to "disappear" for extended periods during the semester.

The easiest thing to do is to ignore that and just award failing grades to those who miss assignments or never reappear before the end of the semester, even as they remain registered for the course. Faculty members sometimes email missing students, and they do deserve credit for noticing that the student is repeatedly absent. Yet there are risks in doing this incorrectly.

Once, one of my teaching assistants wanted to send an email to students who had missed the previous two weeks of classes and the first exam. The proposed text of the email emphasized the irresponsibility of the actions and the punishment and other consequences that were coming their way: "If you continue with this behavior, you will fail the class ..." Can you imagine sending that message to a student who is suicidal?

Better would be start out with "I noticed that you have missed the last few classes. Are you OK?" and then ask the students to contact you and express your willingness to help. A more proactive approach can be even better, and such actions are characteristic of award-winning teachers.

Organic chemistry is purportedly the most difficult class in college and one that is seen as a "weed-out" course for pre-med majors; it's so hard that I have seen bumper stickers that say "Honk If You Passed O-Chem." Rather than accepting the outcome of winners and losers in

some kind of Darwinian game, one of my former colleagues deliberately divided the class into small sections (for which he received no more teaching credit, by the way), held special weekend sessions for struggling students and instituted some elements of specification grading in which students were guaranteed to pass the course if they met a certain degree of mastery of course material. Some of my colleagues hold Saturday sessions for all students, but with an emphasis on those who are having difficulties as a way to address student concerns and problems throughout the semester, rather than as postmortems following poor exam performance.

I am not suggesting that we abandon our best students or ignore their accomplishments, but there is some value in asking ourselves what we have done for the weakest in the group.