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Combining Undergraduate Research and Learning: A Three-Step Approach

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Today's undergraduate is typically accustomed to traditional learning methods—taking information in through textbooks and lectures, memorizing that information, and reproducing it on an exam. Relying solely on such methods of teaching and learning may undermine the unique learning needs of students (Kaplan & Kies, 1995), and hence provide a less than optimal learning situation. In addition to the development of intellectual and critical thinking skills, student needs include learning about the process as well as the content in their disciplines. And underpinning all their needs, students have a basic need to feel and actually have ownership in their education. In light of that, we conceptualize the optimal teaching and learning experience as requiring three steps: *stimulation, application, and integration*. Further, we believe that faculty-student collaborative research and other scholarly activity offer an excellent means of incorporating these steps into students' learning experiences, thus more fully meeting their educational needs.

The Three-Step Approach Stimulation

As it applies to learning, stimulation means a more active engagement with the material to be learned, as well as growth and development of student interest in the material and in their abilities to work with it. Often times, students may experience participation in their classes as a daunting situation where the potential for ridicule or embarrassment reinforces well-rehearsed silence. To remedy this situation and really engage students, faculty must play the role of facilitator, developing a climate of trust in which students can openly risk examining their personal thoughts, confusions, and opinions (Barkham & Elender, 1995). Students require an environment in which they can go beyond merely memorizing facts in order to grow as intellectuals.

Several methods of stimulation help create such an environment. For example, asking specific controversial questions relevant to course material helps draw students out. Having students debate various positions on current topics or issues further stimulates students' critical thinking skills. The method for stimulating learning we advocate is student involvement in research and scholarly activity. For maximum effectiveness, this involvement should include every aspect of the activity, from the initial conception

of the research plan to the final research product. But more on this in a moment.

Application

Is the smartest person in the class the person who can remember the most information at the time of the exam? Or is it the person who can take that information and correctly apply it to a novel situation? Studies have shown that when given two identical exams on different occasions, undergraduate students do significantly worse on the second exam (Harrison, 1995). Part of the problem may stem from the students' lack of broader application of the material they have studied. In other words, the exam was the only opportunity students had to apply the material. Long-term retention of information calls for a broader application or use of the information students study.

Integration

The final phase of learning—and of our model for improved teaching—comes when students are able to integrate material into a broader knowledge base. Fostering integrative learning requires that faculty encourage students to analyze and interpret class literature, as well as indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the author's perspective. Thus—harking back to the importance of establishing an environment of trust—integration not only requires that students include the rationale behind their perspective, but also that their rationale include an understanding of additional literature supporting their position.

While it requires rigor, integrative teaching reaps exponential benefits. Not only does integration serve as a culmination of earlier steps in learning, it also propels students toward higher levels of critical thinking. In fostering a keen sense of appreciation and understanding for explanatory information, integrative learning ultimately enhances students' ability to assimilate and utilize content (Olatunji, 1999).

The Model In Operation

Faculty-Student Collaborative Research

Research involves the active pursuit of knowledge, and it is this process of pursuit that is often overlooked in undergraduate teaching in favor of covering content. But in general, undergraduates want to be more actively involved in the process of their disciplines (Long, 1994). Thus, one means of accomplishing the three steps to improving the student learning experience is through faculty-student collaborative research.

As we said earlier, to fulfill the stimulation step, students should be involved in each step of the process. One way that we have done this is to start each semester with a small set of readings with a common focus. Facilitated by a faculty member, student researchers work collaboratively to generate hypotheses and the means to test the hypotheses. Obviously, this process enhances students' sense of ownership in their education.

The application step involves applying the information students have learned through readings and discussions to the task of creating a novel way to test their hypotheses. It also involves the actual testing of one or more hypotheses through the methods students have generated. In this process, students learn to think critically about published works' hypotheses and the adequacy of tests, results, and conclusions. This critical awareness prepares them to apply that same process to the original work they are creating.

The integration step begins with the process of analyzing and interpreting the data collected from students' research. Students are encouraged to interpret and explain the rationale behind the acceptance or rejection of their hypotheses. After that, students have to integrate their findings into the appropriate knowledge base that already exists. Not surprisingly, this often generates more questions that students want to answer, which

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Editor's Note:

Perspective, point of view, attitude. Mental preconditions control a great deal in the teaching-learning dynamic. The more faculty become aware of them, the more quickly they become allies rather than obstacles in teaching. Indeed, the more calls to greater awareness we hear—most of them apt in some way or other—the more danger I often feel that I will become deaf to them, sinking firmly into “the good old ways,” that always worked before. Perhaps that’s because many such appeals appear not to value what we already know. They seem to ask us to take on a whole new way of looking at things. The appeals to greater or different awareness in this issue of the *Forum* don’t make that mistake. These appeals only ask us to shift in our chair or walk across the room or realize that, often without realizing it, we already understand better than we knew.

Jim Curtis’s article on the value of adding an anthropological perspective to pedagogical thinking (alongside the psychological, currently dominant) doesn’t ask much, just that we more fully utilize the realities we see around us in student lives in order to teach them more effectively. Similarly, **Bunmi Olatunji** and **Donna Desforjes**’s advocacy of collaborative faculty-student research at the undergraduate level may seem counter-intuitive and even reductive at first blush, but the authors know what they’re describing isn’t as easy as one-two-three. But their approach addresses some important learning needs we do know students have which often aren’t being met. Researching *with* undergraduate students is a new perspective for most of us, but it offers possibilities.

Last year the *Forum* ran two supplements devoted to the new projects being undertaken by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Having shown the interrelatedness of those programs and the questions being asked, we must wait a bit to see how the answers develop. While we wait, the *Forum* will track and report on developments of special interest to our readers. **Brian Coppola**’s essay on “the rigged game” of promotion and tenure and how present and future faculty may prevail in it by fostering an “unrigged” understanding of the rules is the first of these smaller CARNEGIE CHRONICLES.

Laura Border’s DEVELOPER’S DIARY seems to be about the difference between students talking with each other online and talking in a “real” classroom, and in a way it is. On a different level, however, she’s talking about considering the relevance of a very different perspective on student (and faculty) behavior. Are students silent and passive because they’re stubborn, stupid, willfully obstinate? Or could they somehow have “learned” to act helpless in the presence of someone else who’s supposed to have all the answers and carry the ball in these face-to-face situations? If there’s some “learned helplessness” at play, Border has some suggestions for overcoming it.

Do we have enough people focused on the importance of such insights? Probably not, which is why the video “Faculty Development: Who Needs It?” deserves a brief review. As producer **Lynn Sorenson** says, the video isn’t intended for home-alone viewing; it’s a tool for helping those who understand explain to those who may not, how beneficial, how deserving of attention and respect instructional and faculty development can be.

Finally, last, but never least, **Linc. Fisch** offers another of his practical approaches to some of the vexing problems that ever enter a teacher’s life. This time he focuses on getting the group back together. He makes it sound easy, but we know the truth. Nothing is, but many good things are possible...as all the authors in this issue affirm.

— James Rhem

often prompts follow-up studies of some sort.

Conclusion

In practice it isn’t as easy as “one, two, three,” but our three-step model encourages faculty and students to take “one step beyond” the usual, ordinary and expected right from the start. The payoffs from thinking beyond the current horizon of most undergraduate teaching are tremendous. We know that undergraduates have learning needs that go beyond taking in information and repeating it back at exam time, and we believe that faculty-student collaborative research goes a long way toward meeting those needs. Certainly, research within the proper atmosphere unquestionably promotes creativity, synthetic thinking, and the appreciation of knowledge (Seligman, 1999). Thus, even though an undergraduate research project may focus on a particular area, the processes and the educational benefits of doing the research extend well beyond that project or that subject area. Going one step beyond enhances all of the undergraduate’s learning experience. ■■

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