

FORUM



Urgings and Cautions in Student-Centered Teaching

Its Exemplary Teacher's Forum in hiatus, AAHE's National Conference in Chicago in March seemed a quiet affair when it came to talk of teaching and learning. But there was a strong harmony and much good sense in the offerings of the few speakers addressing these topics. The strongest thread wove its way about the theme of student-centered and active learning. The strength of the thread was experience, not theory. Its lessons mixed the familiar with the new. Among the familiar rose the importance of forethought; among the new, the importance of letting go.

In a session called "Creative Pedagogy: A Spectrum of Strategies to Enhance Community Through Active Learning," three speakers reflected on their experiences with service learning, experiential learning, and simulations. In a way, the session almost took a sonata-allegro form with the first speaker laying out themes developed more fully by the second, themes recapitulated by the final speaker but with a coda-like twist that pointed toward the promise that might lie in further exploration.

A Service Learning Parable

Rick Battistoni, director of the Feinstein Institute for Public Service at Providence College, began the

session with a kind of parable. He briefly told the story of a group of students recently involved in a service learning project in which they would assist residents of a low-income housing project in running a day school for children. The students found problems at the site and weren't content merely to serve out their time there without trying to respond to what they found. Guided by faculty, they reported their experience to the class to which the service work was connected, and it became grist for a problem-solving situation.

Class discussions led to a meeting between students and their site supervisors, and in that dialogue students learned that their perceptions of the situation included many unsupported presumptions. But the students also made some good points that impressed the staff, leading to improvements at the site. "The point," said Battistoni, "is the classroom and the pedagogy we were using enhanced the community of the class because everybody was working to help this one group work on their problem. What [the students] learned about community, about working with people from different backgrounds, a whole host of things that we wanted students to get at, came through not only in the classroom discussions, but in

structured writing assignments and the like.

“Service alone I don’t think necessarily can cause people to learn anything,” he concluded. One hears “the power of the group” championed widely, but the discipline of clear goals, the wisdom of forethought, and the importance of a flexible and dynamic pedagogy remain essential in harnessing that power, Battistoni maintained.

Planning, Authority, and Group Dynamics in Active Learning

Zelda Gamson, now professor of education and director of the New England Research Center for Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, expanded on Battistoni’s parable. “I’ve always thought of people doing service learning and experiential

“The evidence is very strong that these social forms of learning are very effective in encouraging much more complex thinking . . .”

learning as first cousins,” she said. “The general rubric is active learning.”

All but three of the “Seven Principles of Good Practice” in college teaching that Gamson articulated several years ago with Arthur Chickering emphasize active or collaborative learning, she pointed out. “The evidence is very strong that these social forms of learning are very effective in increasing retention (administrators love to hear this; the evidence is very good for that), encouraging much more complex thinking about complex issues than we have come to expect from our students, and encouraging acceptance of different ways of learning on the part of

students and faculty. The motivation for learning goes up [when these approaches are used] as does the sense of connection among students, even (perhaps especially) when they are quite different in terms of background.”

Gamson, too, stressed that “these kinds of approaches don’t happen automatically; in fact, they need to be very carefully designed. It isn’t just a matter of getting people together and having them discuss,” she said. “It seems to me that the active creation of social community is a precondition for the intellectual impacts of these methods. Unless students are encouraged to learn how to work together, some students’ interpersonal difficulties may get in the way, such as issues of dominance in the group, issues that will always come up.”

If the power of the group has much to offer teaching and learning, participants need some orientation to the predictable dynamics of groups. “Students need to learn norms of conducting themselves effectively in groups,” Gamson insisted, “[norms] such as clearly defining what they are to do, selecting a coordinator or chair if they are engaged in a problem-solving situation, deciding on the way they will use their time to accomplish their purposes, giving everyone a chance to contribute, rotating roles such as spokesperson, recorder, and so on.

“All of these are basic group dynamic skills that I have to say most of us do not have, and so the first step is learning how to do these things ourselves.”

The rub, the real challenge to faculty in using groups, Gamson made clear, lies less in these basics that forethought can handle than in what she sees as the necessary challenge to traditional ideas of authority in knowledge that arise when these methods begin to take hold.

After briefly describing the epistemological differences between cooperative and collaborative learning (cf. Horace Rockwood’s articles in *The National Teaching and Learning Forum* vol. 4, no. 6 and vol. 5, no. 1), Gamson recalled her participation in a student-faculty

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Executive Editor:

James Rhem, Ph.D.
213 Potter St.
Madison, WI 53715-2050

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Editorial correspondence:

James Rhem
213 Potter St.
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Editor's Note

I've often asked, "If a teacher teaches and nobody learns, did the teacher really teach?" The question provokes less debate today than ever before. Concern with learning now leads discussions of teaching. Often now faculty support centers call themselves "learning and teaching" centers when only a few years ago teaching always came first. A great many little signs indicate not that teaching is winning some temporary attention, but that its vital place in the intellectual business of higher education is being more fully understood and explored.

Bob Diamond's recent national survey of attitudes toward the relative importance of teaching and research supports this conclusion. The experiences of **Rick Battistoni**, **Zelda Gamson**, **Cheryl Keen**, and **Maryellen Weimer**, speakers at the AAHE National Conference in Chicago, support it as well. All of them in one way or another focused on *student-centered*, *learner-centered*, or *active learning*—all terms that emphasize the importance of putting learning and the demands and possibilities of learning center stage.

The stage has always been a powerful place. In that arena of attention, we recognize different depths in the ordinary drama of our lives. **Lavon Gappa-Levi** writes in this issue how faculty and teaching assistants at Florida State University use drama to understand and improve their teaching.

Ironically, to get close and see clearly, we often need distance. Case studies, like drama, put us at this close remove. **Brenda Manning's** report on her experiences in case writing reminds skeptics that clear principles of good instructional design tumble out of vigorous engagement with the real as much as they evolve from the logic of theory or the leisure of reflection.

But if students rightfully command our attention as teachers, which students shall we teach and what shall we teach them? **Gail Platt** argues in her viewpoint piece on *remediation* that we must teach the students we have, and we must teach them first whatever it is they need to know.

Finally, instead of the periodic invitation to submit manuscripts, I've borrowed a few thoughts from **Pat Cross** on the value to one's own thinking of the discipline of writing. And I've borrowed from a forthcoming book by Cross and her colleague, Mimi Steadman, some questions to help you frame questions about your own teaching with your own students. I urge you to make the investigation of your own teaching an active part of your intellectual life. I am convinced that ultimately we teach ourselves the things we need to know through a strange amalgam of recognition, discovery, confession and practice. Writing assists and tempers all of these.

And before you hit the beach this summer, "surf the net" and visit the *Forum's* home page. Very soon **The National Teaching and Learning Forum** will appear in an online version in addition to its paper incarnation. Samples of one form of the new version—the full-graphic PDF files—are already there for viewing. We also plan an HTML version.

The National Teaching and Learning Forum home page, however, won't just be a place to pick up fresh copies of the newsletter. It will include a discussion forum where faculty—all of you—can carry on the discussions about teaching and learning you most want to have. We have a number of other exciting plans for this internet site; so I hope you'll visit and keep watching for what's coming.

To the many of you who've asked: Thankfully, my mother's health is much improved.

Have a wonderful summer.

— James Rhem

research community at Ann Arbor in which the two groups worked together to define and carry out a piece of original research. As a faculty leader in this context she said, "If I ever tried to assert my authority, I'd get shot down by the students who'd tell me: 'You're here to help us define a research problem, and if you tell us too much, we're not going to learn this, and so, you know, shut up.' There were several confrontations like this; so the issue of authority came up."

Gamson came to see such confrontations as necessary in some sense: "When students define the problem, it's a kind of collaborative learning in which authority does become an issue. And students . . . are not well served by pedagogies that [say] 'I'm going to tell you the story and what the truth is here.' Collaboration works best when there's a confrontation with the real world. That's really where the challenge lies in terms of coming to terms with realities that are messier than our classrooms normally allow students to confront."

Games, Simulations and the Risks of Learning

Cheryl Keen, dean of the faculty at Antioch College, picked up where Gamson and Battistoni left off in proposing the value of simulation games in teaching. The research on whether simulations promote learning, she acknowledged, remains divided. Once again forethought seemed the deciding factor: "It depends on whether you're savvy about why you are doing it," said Keen, "and if you take the time to work up to it and to debrief. The rule is to spend at least as much time debriefing as you spend playing the game; otherwise, what did you do it for?"

Adding to the ideas of authority Gamson brought up, Keen reported that among her most powerful experiences using simulations had been where she'd been able to have students write the game themselves. In this, she said, they come to like "critical systemic thinking." Simulations, Keen suggested, remain an open door, a largely unexplored territory with a high degree of perceived risk. As with service work

and other kinds of active learning, simulations demand a great deal of forethought and planning, and even then, “You can’t guarantee how it’s going to come out.”

All of these pedagogies risk more precisely because they aspire to more. As Gamson summarized it: “[They] become ways of illustrating theory and concepts, of applying them, and of synthesizing—I mean, the highest level or kind of thinking—for our students.”

Letting Go to Get Going

Maryellen Weimer’s session, “The Learner-Centered Classroom: Changes in Instructional Practices and Assumptions,” offered yet another report from the front. As with the speakers already mentioned, Weimer’s remarks sounded

“I won’t be able to get through the content,’ they say.”

cautionary tones within an encouraging, even enthusiastic, call for greater emphasis on student-centered learning. Girded by years of work and reading in instructional development, Weimer’s remarks now took life from fresh, personal experience. She has recently returned to active teaching at the Berks Campus of Penn State. That teaching has given her the challenge of practicing the best of what she’s been preaching, and it has underscored for her the wide gap between current conversations about teaching and current classroom realities.

Often her remarks had a compelling confessional power. For example: “In my own faculty development work for a lot of years I really resisted the emphasis on learning,” Weimer reported. “I thought it was my job to work with teachers, and that a repertoire of strategies and techniques really did focus on instruction. But at some point the logic of the emphasis on learning really just becomes overwhelming.” Teachers’ interest in *active learning* is “born of despera-

tion,” she said. “What we’ve discovered in the crucible of our classrooms is that the old ways of teaching—lecturing, term papers, objective midterms or essay finals—don’t result in very credible learning outcomes. So we’re considering alternatives.”

These alternatives tend to be relocations of focus to the student. While this new focus seems logical—overwhelmingly logical, as she puts it—it offers faculty (herself included) sharp challenges. Across the board, Weimer named four areas where classroom practice has not kept pace with the conversation about teaching: *content coverage*, *authority*, *standards*, and *roles*.

Content coverage: “The fundamental faculty assumption with respect to content remains intact: More is always better,” said Weimer. For faculty, it’s a major issue. “When I propose in-class discussions of learning processes like problem-solving and critical thinking, most faculty nod, smile and take notes, but tell me later they can’t do it because it takes too much time. ‘I won’t be able to get through the content,’ they say.” In Weimer’s opinion, “If a course is learner-centered, that implies content present at the service of the learners. It implies consideration of how much the learner can handle successfully and an honest assessment of what he or she will need to learn, defined not by how things have been done in the past, but by the likely needs of the future.”

Authority: Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has had a huge impact on Weimer’s thinking and made her more sensitive to how much power teachers wield and the effects of wielding it. “Traditionally, teachers exert enormous control over the learning process. Who decides the content, establishes how the material is to be learned, controls the pace and calendar, who speaks, for how long and whether they get credit for speaking? Who certifies that the quantity and quality of learning is enough or good enough?

“And what are the results?” she asks. “This is when the words get hard. I think what it results in is a collection of college students who sit before us pretty much totally dependent and submissive. ‘What do you want me to do this paper on? How many pages? What’s going to be on the exam?’ The questions irritate us, but we’ve had a hand in making them. They’re questions that come from learners who lack confidence in their ability to make decisions about what to learn, and how and when they learn it.”

Standards: While faculty seem ever in favor of raising standards, they remain habitually vague in defining standards, Weimer maintains. She argued for “conceptual flexibility” in defining standards. “My assertion is that when education is learner-centered, standards do what they’ve always done. They insure the integrity of the educational enterprise. But their credibility rests not with whether they are higher or lower, but in their relevance to the learning needs of the individual in



Illustrations: Michael David Brown

light of career and societal expectations.”

Roles: One of the dilemmas of the teacher in an active, student-centered classroom comes to a head, as Weimer sees it, in the metaphors used to describe the new attitudes needed to encourage learning. “For

expert and authority, we have coaches, guides, facilitators, designers of educational environments,” said Weimer. The problem lies in the fact that “a coach wants his players to win and wants it badly. A guide’s reputation depends on everyone making it in and out safely.” Teachers find themselves called upon to make judgments, give grades, and declare that some students haven’t won and may not have survived. How much power and authority can teachers let go of and still be teachers? Weimer described this as an area needing further intellectual exploration.

Despite these nagging questions, Weimer’s recent experience in her own classes has encouraged her belief that relocating power does enhance learning. Unhappy with the way class participation often becomes a “fudge factor” at grading time, last semester Weimer let her class define the criteria by which their participation in the class would be assessed. “They proposed criteria that really tested my commitment to the cause to the limit,” she confessed. “They decided that right and wrong answers would count equally. That made me very uncomfortable, and I expressed my concern to the class. And they offered a response that went something like this: ‘When you make a mistake in class and the teacher points that out, it takes a great deal of courage to make your next contribution. Besides, teachers are always telling students how much there is to be learned from mistakes.’ So right and wrong answers counted equally in that class, and people made mistakes and we learned from them.

“Even more persuasive to me though,” Weimer continued, “has been the change in both the quantity and quality of student participation when the policy that governs that contribution is of their own creation. I really believe that education has the power to transform lives when students participate in the process, and we need to be able to discuss these radical ideas with a little less emotion and a little more reason.” ■■■

— James Rhem, Executive Editor

CASE STUDIES

Four Principles for Case Design

Brenda Manning
Faculty Development Specialist
University of Pittsburgh

My adventures with case-writing really began last summer. My friend Helen, an anesthesiologist, was telling me about a young couple—Jehovah’s Witnesses—who refused to permit their baby to receive a life-saving blood transfusion. Helen, in her calm, dispassionate way, was able to see this dilemma from at least three different perspectives. I, on the other hand, was arguing passionately for what I thought was the obviously correct perspective—mine.

Later I thought: this would make a great case. It has a tough, if not irresolvable dilemma. It had something real at stake and room for interesting, different stakeholders—the parents, the nurses, the anesthesiologist, the chaplain, the hospital review board, among others—to give the case true-to-life, messy complexity. It would make a great case because it would start worthy arguments about teaching and learning.

I called Helen and asked her if she’d like to join a faculty case-writing group I wanted to organize. After she said yes to that, I recruited her to be my co-facilitator. (This turned out to be an important decision, because having an M.D. on the organizing team attracted three other physician case-writers to the group.)

Getting Going

Our first step was a little story (“Case-Writing Working Group to Hold Organizing Meeting on September 21”) in our faculty development newsletter, *Teaching Times*. Twelve people attended the organizing meeting, where our primary task was identifying a meeting day and time at which everyone could gather. One of the 12 volunteered a conference room and coffee. We handed out a short

set of case-writing guidelines and an even shorter case, and asked everyone to read it for next time. We were underway.

Helen and I decided that our goal for the second meeting was to illustrate the power of cases for quickly generating worthy discussion. We did this by dividing our group (now eleven) into three smaller sections, and asking each to design an “opening question” for discussion of the case. I could tell from the expressions on nine faces that each person **just knew** (as I had **just known** when I first did this exercise) that the answer was obvious, that everyone would have the same opinion about the central character in the case and her dilemma and so there would be nothing to discuss. When the first discussion leader stood up and wrote the first “opening question” on the flipchart, there was a deep, incredulous silence: **NOTHING WAS OBVIOUS**.

Then the discussion took off like a rocket. Helen and I had to pound the table to wrestle it to a halt. We were ready for some serious questions about case-writing. “Does the case have to be about a real incident, or can I make it up?” “What if there’s no dilemma?” “How do I start?” “Can my case have a ‘right’ answer?” Without ever having a discussion about case discussions, we had become a case-writing group.

Still, a number of our members were reluctant to bring their own work in and lay it on the table for others to read. So we agreed to use our third meeting to apply Pat Hutchings’ [Director of AAHE’s Teaching Initiative] case-writing “steps” (finding an idea, setting parameters, assessing the resulting choices, testing the case and revising it, packaging and using the case) to another published case, this time about medical ethics. Halfway through discussion of “An Uncooperative Leukemia Patient” (*A Casebook of Medical Ethics*) I could see that people were getting impatient; it seemed that the whole group suddenly wanted to get on

with writing. We swung as one body into discussion of how to begin talking about our own work. We agreed on a pattern that has worked well ever since: two people bring in case drafts, one person brings in bagels, and we spend about forty-five minutes discussing each case.

Coming Clean

The first discussion of our very own cases began tentatively. No one knew exactly what to say and no one wanted to appear to be “critical.” But the cases were so good! The writing was fresh, the characters were believable, the events were compelling. People spoke up with honest compliments. And from that moment it seemed that our group had found a “safe space”—a space in



which questions about case content, choices about sequencing and details and dialogue, and suggestions about improvements could be offered and received without embarrassment or defensiveness. We simply felt that although the case belonged to its author, we were all responsible for it.

That was the first day that I found myself making frantic notes during the case discussions. Notes about the cases and case-writing, but also—more and more, as the weeks went by—notes about the subtler dimensions involved in writing cases for specific disciplinary content, for specific students, in specific settings.

Case-writing was teaching us that case-teaching is a strategy: how well the strategy works in terms of learning depends upon how well the teacher understands content, learners, settings, circumstances. We had it backwards at first, in our early obsession with “writing”: we had to learn that even “sparkling” dialogue can’t float a case thrown to the wrong audience for the wrong reason at the wrong time.

Distilling the Learning

As I look back over the year I see clearly that my notes document our growing versatility, imagination and sureness in knowing how to *use* cases. As we turned these cases over and over, looking for and talking about teaching points, we kept coming back to four principles of case design: (1) identify clear learning objectives, (2) know your learners, (3) understand how the concepts in the case “fit into” the overall concept map for the course or unit, and (4) choose the best strategy for using the case materials (e.g., read the case, followed by brief writing; case written as a role play or simulation; case written as Part A and Part B, etc.) in instruction. Four conversations—about four cases—stand out in my notes as particularly good examples of these principles.

Principle #1: Identify clear learning objectives.

The “revolver” case (as we came to call it) was written by a faculty member in family medicine, a deeply dedicated teacher. Her case, *Lecturer or Entertainer?*, was an eye-opener for the non-physicians in the group who had no previous knowledge about the challenges, realities, and quirks of teaching in a medical school. The first paragraph:

I was astonished when I first saw the summary results, from the Office of Medical Education, reporting the students’ evaluations of the course *Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics*. I was one of the six faculty members who team-taught the course last fall. Jerry, who is as junior as I am as a faculty in the department, got the highest overall score among all of us (4.6 with the

top of 5). My immediate recall was the scene at one of Jerry’s lectures, where he shot a revolver towards the ceiling of the auditorium for introducing two concepts: *probability* and *rare event*.

The revolver got everybody’s attention in the case-writing group,

When the first discussion leader wrote the first “opening question” on the flipchart, there was a deep, incredulous silence: NOTHING WAS OBVIOUS.

just as it did in the class. And it set off an intense discussion about what the learning objectives really were in the class. Was the objective to cover as much material as possible? Or was it to help the students remember key points?

Principle #2: Know your learners.

This case about gender bias and communication was designed for undergraduate students in communications at one of our regional campuses. *Jill Colby* is written mostly in dialogue:

“Is this the first time that this kind of thing has happened?” Susan asked.

“No, it’s not. On a previous occasion, when a similar thing happened, I just assumed that I was wrong, since everyone else seemed to be in agreement. As I think back on it, that meeting was the day after they had all been golfing together. Then there were the inside jokes that referred to something or other that happened on the golf course, and so, of course, I felt left out on another level.”

Discussion of this case revealed an interesting division within the case-writing group between those who primarily teach undergraduates and those who teach graduate students.

The latter thought the gender bias and communications issues in this case were “too obvious.” But the former thought their freshmen and sophomores might not even see the gender bias. It became clear that the question “What do students know and when do they know it?” was a *teaching variable* that many of us had been treating as a *teaching constant*.

Principle #3: Understand how the concepts in the case fit into the overall concept map for the course or unit.

Charlene and Ed wrote a series of short cases for an intensive, one-week leadership training academy for new, or relatively new, school superintendents. The cases provide the real-world grist. Each case presents a classic “superintendent’s dilemma,” a problem that requires the superintendent to be alert to details, to rapidly scan the array of seemingly unrelated details in order to identify what is important, to make informed and sensitive decisions, and to take appropriate action—all in anticipation of community reaction.

And so the superintendent’s dilemma cases are bursting with little details. But Charlene and Ed explained that they had learned to “start simple” with details, that academy students aren’t able to handle too much sophistication early in the week. *The Unthinkable* was designed to be the first case, to be discussed Monday morning:

Not long after the call, midnight to be exact, Dr. Pitt sat in a private conference room in the hospital as she painfully learned from the state trooper, who first arrived at the scene, and later from the coroner, the details of that tragic accident on Highway 19. According to all reports, Mrs. Shakespeare, the middle school English teacher and drama coach, contrary to school policy, offered two seventh grade students who lived in her neighborhood a ride home after play practice. The drama club was working hard on their production of *Macbeth* to be presented to the entire middle school student body during closing exercises. As Mrs. Shakespeare’s car proceeded eastbound along Highway 19, she evidently lost control and veered into the westbound lane,

colliding with an oncoming tractor-trailer loaded with steel beams. This resulted in a fatal head-on collision. The driver and passengers were pronounced dead at the local hospital. After speaking with the state trooper and the coroner, Dr. Pitt had an emotional meeting with the families of Mrs. Shakespeare, Beth Lead, and John Director, the three victims, in the waiting area of the Emergency Room.

Our group discussed this case for over 30 minutes before stumbling onto the “simplification” Ed and Charlene had referred to: the tragic fact that all the injuries were fatal. If this case had been designed to be used later in the week, when students were more experienced, the outcome of the accident would have been more complex: some of the car’s occupants would have survived.

Principle #4: Choose the best strategy for using the case materials.

Louise’s case, *Jerome Nelson*, was written for graduate students in special education. The case describes an 18-month-old boy who has been determined, through a screening procedure, to be at risk for developmental delays. The learning objective is for the students to use the somewhat sketchy “screening report” information provided in the case to prepare a brief script for the initial call to Jerome’s parents. An additional learning objective is for undergraduate students to experience—under “safe” conditions—the fear, denial, or hostility that may come from the parent on the other end of the telephone line. To heighten the sense of reality conveyed by this simulation, Louise asked her students, one pair at a time, to come to the front of the room and sit back-to-back. Each student in the pair holds a telephone receiver. The students then take turns being the “parent” who will receive the scripted phone call.

In March, six of our case-writers took their cases for a “test drive” at the university’s *Teaching Excellence* conference. We experienced different successes. Some of the cases drew big, boisterous audiences;

some attracted smaller, more thoughtful groups. The cases all generated quality discussion—not just lots of words, but discussion that led toward the learning objectives of the authors. And we attracted new case-writers, people from psychiatry and communication disorders and social work.

As the first year of our case-writing group comes to a close, I am happy to say that our group has also experienced another kind of success, one so rare and precious at a big research university that it may be the most important success of all: the individuals in our group have become teaching colleagues and writerly friends. ■■■