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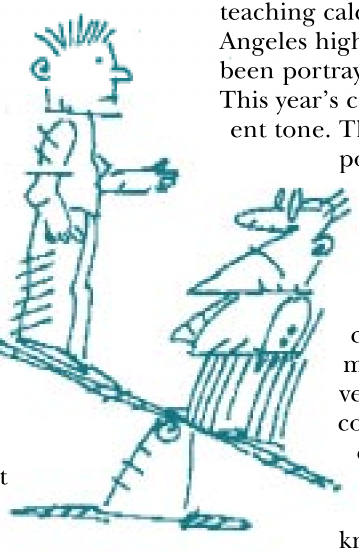
From Saw to See: AAHE's Focus on Learning in Atlanta

James Rhem, Executive Editor

Careful speakers at AAHE's National Conference in Atlanta last month celebrated the theme "Taking Learning Seriously" and recalled that ten years ago the conference theme had been "Taking Teaching Seriously," but without suggesting that teaching was now "old hat" and learning all we need consider. Rather, they agreed, the current emphasis on learning reveals progress in our understanding of the dynamic, the unending dance of these participles—teaching and learning—that only pauses in moments of new knowledge. Formerly, one could joke about teachers who taught well, but whose students didn't learn. Today, one could argue (and expect significantly weaker objection) that if learning does not occur, whatever else went on in a class, it wasn't teaching, at least for that student. We understand learning as primary, now—the unarguable proof and goal of effective teaching—and so the emphasis naturally has turned from the performance of teaching to the producing of results.



Inspiration and Problem Sets

Ten years ago, as I remember it, the "Taking Teaching Seriously" meeting offered an inspirational feast. Speeches merged into a general, hopeful call to action, to bear down at our work and wake up in the importance of what we were about. The next year's meeting—titled "Stand and Deliver"—carried the call farther with an appearance by Jaime Escalante, whose success in teaching calculus in an east Los Angeles high school had recently been portrayed in a popular movie. This year's conference had a different tone. The feeling was no less positive and the call to action no less strong, but now one had the sense of being in the middle of an ongoing exploration. Some coastlines had been mapped, others remained veiled in the fog of conflicting reports and contradictory evidence. Still, overall one had the sense that much is known about learning and teaching and that some significant syntheses are forming about the dynamic as a whole. In a sense, speakers posed "problem sets" and invited listeners to join in the search for solutions more than they defined "issues" and rallied support for causes.

Profession and Pathology

Lee Shulman's witty keynote Sunday evening unfolded as a series of big questions, simple answers and engaging explanations.

Shulman asked:

1) What does it mean to take anything seriously?
2) What do we mean by "learning"?
3) What does learning look like when it's **not** going well?
4) What do you have when what you take seriously is learning?
5) And (drawing attention to the new alliance between AAHE and the Carnegie Foundation), he asked what that alliance might mean for the future.

As short-form answers, Shulman offered:

1) We profess it.
2) A simple interplay of two processes: getting what's inside out and getting what's outside in.
3) Amnesia, fantasia, inertia, and nostalgia.
4) The scholarship of teaching.
5) The AAHE/CFTA Teaching Academy.

To take something seriously, said Shulman, "is to profess it." Tracing the word's history from its early association with taking religious orders and expressing one's love of something, Shulman suggested that more current usage—which emphasizes giving voice to one's "understanding"—clears a path to the second question about what we mean by "learning." The old model of teaching and learning conceived of "the inside"—students' minds—as empty. "The object was to get 'the outside' in, and to look in to observe what got in and to test it," he said. The "outside," of course, was the understanding, the knowledge, professors professed.

More current ideas about teaching and learning see student minds not as empty, but as already containing a lot of prior learning that must be gotten out into the open in order to facilitate meaningful new learning. The meeting and exchange of prior learning and new knowledge (inside and outside), said Shulman, is the place where learners construct meaning out of what they already know and believe. Echoing the constructivist David Ausubel, Shulman advised: "Find out what the student already knows and teach accordingly." But Shulman went on to emphasize the newly understood importance of social constructivist ideas as well. "How people wrestle with the outside stuff [foundational knowledge, accepted wisdom] before it gets inside," he said, "is vital because collaboration works with and on ideas even after students feel they've 'got it.' … Learning is least useful when private and most useful when public and changeable," he said.

A core of uncertainty lies at the heart of all professions. Design and chance collide in the realm where the teacher-professor works.

Harking back to his years spent studying medical education, Shulman suggested that the common pathologies—what learning looks like when it's not going well—offer insights into what in teaching and learning needs our care. ***Amnesia*** he defined as "what you don't remember," and cited some familiar (and disheartening) studies on how quickly medical students forgot what they learned in gross anatomy classes taught via a conventional emphasis on nomenclature and memorization. ***Fantasia*** he called "illusory understanding and misunderstandings that persist because new learning lies on top of old learning and if the old learning has been faulty, the new learning is apt to be. … This kind of thing is very dangerous," he said. ***Inertia*** Shulman described as students' inability to apply what they know. "They have the ideas, but they're inert ideas." Finally, he described a pathology he finds more common among faculty than students, ***nostalgia***: "The idea that old ways are

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Editor's Note:

Perhaps we can "see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower," as Blake once wrote, but as an anonymous sage said (probably long before Blake), "sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees." Many of the articles in this issue engage these quite different ideas about point of view, how we know, and what knowledge boils down to wisdom and what doesn't. We live in an "information age," where data come at us in undifferentiated streams. As it was left to Adam to name the plants and animals, it still falls to us to make sense of things.

In different ways **K. Patricia Cross** and **Lee Shulman**, speaking at AAHE's annual conference, "Taking Learning Seriously," in Atlanta last month, both suggested we already know a lot about what we've tried to foster—learning. We haven't seen the forest of it, however, because we've loved the trees so much. The "trees," of course, are the rigors of traditional research methods, the levers that have long meant status, tenure, advancement. Shulman, in a neo-rabbinical style, and Cross, speaking like the no-nonsense head of a powerful woman's caucus, said maybe we've learned enough that way to begin to grow up a little. Can we begin to mature in our knowledge about learning and begin to see, not the assembly line structure beneath it—there isn't one—but the marvelously individuated, yet systemic ecology of it?

Laura Border's DEVELOPER'S DIARY will seem as though it's going in a different direction, away from cognition and toward affect. That's only because of those trees again: We've known affect and cognition went together, just as teaching and learning do, but we've remained bewildered by the knowledge. How should, how could, that knowledge influence effective teaching? Harking back to research by Timothy Leary from the 1950s and a diagnostic instrument he developed, Border describes a practical approach to harnessing affect for teaching purposes. (Ambitious readers may also want to look at the second volume of Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy* for other neglected insights from the 1950s on affect and learning.)

On the sensory level, a diagnostic instrument called VARK, developed in New Zealand by **Neil Fleming**, offers students a chance to see how they *prefer* to learn. Don't confuse preferences with "learning styles" or personality or with strengths. They're not the same. Becoming conscious of the fact that you like to see things diagrammed or spoken out loud or demonstrated with solid objects can have immediate implications for study habits, however, and may help you perform better in school right now.

As my early jump from sand and flowers to forests and trees suggests, we operate in a world of lumbering, provisional judgments more than in a realm of poetry. At the very least we can hope those judgments will try to be fair. **David Anderson** and **Harry Landreth**, economists who teach at Kentucky's Centre College, discuss seven problems to consider in trying to create an ideal mechanism for evaluating teaching.

Let us not forget evil in our forest. It's there. As the Internet creates a new Web of information, it's also enhanced the old tangled one of deception. Student plagiarism of material taken from the Internet has grown as the Web has, but **Carolyn Johnson** and **Connie Ury**, librarians from Northwest Missouri State, outline techniques for locating material plagiarized from the Internet.

If the Net poses problems, it also offers opportunities for new modes of learning and new models of learning communities. Explore some of these riches in resources compiled by **Vincent Tinto**.

As the "wrap" around this issue of the *Forum* suggests, we see the Web as a wonderful way to bring more people together in the long, noble struggle of teaching and learning.

— James Rhem

best, the sense that group work, problem-based learning and all the rest are just 'fads.'"

The Scholarship of Teaching

In amplifying what his short answer, "the scholarship of teaching," means, Shulman asked "What do we *do* about learning? There will never be a hard and fast set of rules, and that takes us back to the idea of 'professing.' A core of uncertainty lies at the heart of all professions. Design and chance collide in the realm where the teacher-professor works. Let us make that the center of investigation; let's at least get *wiser* about it. That's the scholarship of teaching. All acts of intelligence are scholarship if they become public so that they can become verified by others, amplified and extended by peers, and offer an influence. Acts of mind must become public to be called scholarship. They must be subject to criticism." Hence teaching well is not enough. Letting one's peers in on what questions and answers are being explored in one's teaching, letting that teaching not be fugitive, lost, and anonymous, is an obligation of the teaching scholar.

After describing the plans for Carnegie's Teaching Academy, Shulman closed with a bonus question: Why education? His answer: "Because we are a democratic society and a democratic society is inherently uncertain. That uncertainty reflects the paradox at the heart of professing as a matter both of faith and love and understanding," he said. "On the one hand, understanding demands evidence, argument, proof; on the other, love and faith require the suspension of argument in order to move forward."

A New Science of Knowing?

In a very real way, K. Patricia Cross's plenary on Tuesday echoed Shulman's notion of ***the wisdom of practice***, but expanded it and drove home the point in a series of argumentative brass tacks as provocative as they were comprehensively informed. Like Shulman, Cross staked out her territory with questions. Extolled for her address from ten years ago called "Taking Teaching Seriously," she began by expressing discomfort with the pendant title she'd been assigned: "Taking Learning Seriously." Instead, she proclaimed a new title, "What do we know about student learning and how do we know it?" Halfway through her address, Cross returned to her retitling, saying: "The first question is designed to give me the opportunity to give a few right answers, and the second … is intended to raise questions about authoritative knowledge." Indeed, by this point, through a comprehensive review of what research has found and reported both in synoptic overviews such as Feldman and Newcomb's *The Impact of College on Students* (1969) and Pascarella and Terenzini's *How College Affects Students* (1991), as well as in such popular short-form distillations as the "Seven Principles of Good Practice" and others, Cross had already created quite a climate of informed wariness around the citadel of traditional research.

"If I were to give you a metaprinciple," she said, "it would go something like this: Students actively engaged in learning for deeper understanding are likely to learn more than students not so engaged." And then she added, "But we already knew that … from our own experience." In critiquing the fruits and methods of traditional research into student learning, Cross took pains to make plain that her aim lay in describing the next phase of learning about learning, a phase in which she envisions traditional research used not to formulate conclusions or objectivist building blocks of knowledge, but as a source of well-targeted questions that teaching and learning communities need to take up and answer in the varying contexts of their experience.

She grounded her call for such a partnership first in a review of the contending epistemologies of cooperative and collaborative learning theories—the first, traditional, foundational, objectivist and the second, radical, contextual, social constructivist—and second in a daringly speculative analogy between William Perry's well-known schema of cognitive development and a parallel series of developmental stages in society at large. The late twentieth century, she asserted, has been caught up in a debate about knowledge: Is it "out there" to be discovered and nailed down via experiment or is knowledge primarily a social construct, a deep compact to look at things in a certain way in the light of collective experience? Without attempting to settle that debate, Cross endorsed the notion of MIT's Donald Schon that "technological rationality" may be running away from rich sources of knowledge embedded in the experience of expert practitioners. It may be time, she suggested, for a shift from scientific rigor to "other ways of knowing."

> Cross likened our over-dependence on research to Perry's first developmental stage where students look for "right answers" from "experts."

Conclusions as a Beginning

Cross likened our over-dependence on answers and conclusions derived from research to Perry's first developmental stage where students look for "right answers" from "experts." Society's current obsession with discussion groups, listservs, and talk shows, she suggested, has something of an undisciplined social constructivist air about it and perhaps parallels Perry's middle or relativist level of development in which students feel everyone is entitled to an opinion and that all opinions are equally valid.

Since the highest levels of cognitive development are seldom reached, Cross said, experts remain unclear about what they look like. "We haven't seen much of them," she said, "and so it's hard to imagine just what a society functioning at that third level might look like." But she suggested it might look something like the society Socrates envisioned, a society which saw truth as relative and did not expect single, "right" answers, but which also was wise enough to know that any answer or opinion was not necessarily as good as any other answer. In short, she suggested, with some irony, it might be a society where education might corrupt the young by encouraging them to think for themselves.

Her larger point, however, was that we might offer ourselves the same corruption and learn more about learning by adding to the nuggets research has mined, the fine, old ore lying silent in the veins of our experience and our very particularized practice as teachers and learners. ▮

Submitting Manuscripts

Join your peers in answering the call for a scholarship of teaching. Use part of the summer to put together your thoughts and findings on teaching. We encourage subscribers to consider drafting a manuscript for the *Forum.*

Articles may address any aspect of college teaching and learning, and may be discipline-specific or general in nature.

Submissions should not exceed 1500 words (six ordinary typed pages), except in extremely unusual circumstances, and should be shorter whenever possible. Submissions in electronic form are highly encouraged. Indeed, submissions through E-mail are welcome.

Editorial submissions should be sent directly to

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