

The National Teaching & Learning FORUM



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CONTENTS

- **INTRODUCING THE ISSUE: *Dedication to Data & Other Inspiring Tales***, p. 3. A theme for this issue? Ongoing questions, earnestly pressed.
- ***The Mainstreaming College Mathematics Project***, Harry P. Allen, Ohio State University, p. 1. What really works in remedial math at a large university?
- **TECHPED: *What's My Line?*** Tom Rocklin, University of Iowa, p. 5. Does creative pedagogy get lost when faculty lose control of the technology?
- **RESEARCH WATCH: *The Role of Group Process & Shame in Fostering Deep Learning***, Al McLeod, California State University – Fresno, p. 7. Thirty years of classroom research and the latest findings in brain science combine to reveal the chemical importance of group process and its snake in the garden—shame.
- **VIEWPOINT: *Antique Learning***, James Rhem, Executive Editor, p. 9. Could the most popular program on PBS offer inspiration, perhaps even a new model, for college teaching?
- **AD REM . . . : *Priming Students***, Linc. Fisch, p. 12.

VIEWPOINT

Antique Learning

James Rhem, Executive Editor

My daughter (now nine years old) finds the “Antiques Roadshow” on public television entralling. She hollers for me to watch with her whenever it’s on. I think that’s because one evening when we were watching it together (just the two of us), I said, “My father would have loved this show.” Sophia wants to know all about my father. He died before she was born. He’s her personal dinosaur, a mysterious, almost mythic being that once roamed the earth, but who’s now gone—a creature who had a lot of influence (on her dad anyway), and who lives on, projecting strange shadows from the past onto the life unfolding before her. He’s her missing antique, an emotional analog for the objects the people on “Antiques Roadshow” bring in for appraising by the travelling cadre of experts from Sotheby’s and Christie’s and similar companies.

It’s All T&L

Whenever I’m putting the final touches on an issue of the *Forum*, everything has to fight its way into my notice through my preoccupation with teaching and learning. Perhaps that’s why I was thinking yesterday how wonderful it would

be if we could somehow model a pedagogy after the dynamics of the “Antiques Roadshow.” On the show, people come bearing their treasures, things they already think are, or might be, valuable, things they’re already curious about, things they’re already committed to in some way or other. They come with hope and openness and respect. They want to know what an expert can tell them about their treasure. On this week’s program a woman discovers that the odd little silver spoon her grandmother said was “pretty old” dates from the 1300s and is worth around \$20,000. Another woman whose father saved California from hoof and mouth disease in the last century and then received a handsome catalogue of the plants in Princess Josephine’s garden from the French for doing the

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same for them, finds that this family heirloom is worth \$75,000. Smiles spread over Sophia’s face and mine as the little red chests beside the

appraised value come scooting across the screen accompanied by a twinkling sound and some dancing stars.

Past, Present . . .

What's wonderful about the show is not just the openness of the people to the experts, it's also the kind and respectful delight the experts take not only in sharing what they know, but also in the people who've brought them both their antiques and their stories. Sometimes those stories form a provenance; at others they're merely pages of personal biography. But one way or another, each item connects to a vast history of human activity, and learning about the objects places the owners in continuums of knowledge and inquiry. The people with their antiques bring something to the story—their object, its history in their family—and they come away with the larger story which is now, somehow, also theirs.

The price tags add tension and thrills to the drama—the bauble you bought for \$20 because you liked it turns out to be worth thousands. But the show's not really about money, it's about appraisal. After all, sometimes the objects turn out to be fakes worth very little, but the owners value them just the same and learn just as much as they would if they'd had the real thing. Finding a fake is like getting the facts straight, while finding an undervalued treasure is like making a new discovery. It's all education, all necessary, and, in its way, all interesting.

Object Lessons and Seminars

Consider the Keno brothers for a moment, Leigh and Leslie, twins, appraisers for Sotheby's whose expertise in furniture is matched like French veneer by their personal charm and genuine enthusiasm. When they take a highboy apart showing the owner how the different woods used on the bottoms of the drawers tell one story, how the cut of the dovetails

tells another, how the finish, the odd notches, holes and marks each bear witness not just to the object's origins, but also to its passage through centuries of shifting taste and style, the experience is a seminar with implications that go far beyond furniture.

Perhaps, like me, all your life you've been uninterested in Civil War relics—old pistols and swords whose brute metal feels like the weight of regret itself. When the "Roadshow's" Civil War expert Russ Pritchard takes up a sword, you won't lose that feeling, but you will no longer be trapped in it. You will learn about makers in Memphis and Charleston and Great Britain, about craftsmanship and the kind of timeless pride that is not vainglorious.

Once, when the program visited Atlanta, a white-headed woman with an accent so musical you wanted to sing along brought in an old flag in a crumpled paper bag. When Pritchard put on cotton gloves to handle it, you knew something was up. From the stitching and from the eleven stars and three stripes, he could tell her that this Confederate relic was a First National Pattern Flag hand sewn by ladies in North Carolina in 1861. He could almost pinpoint the month. You can imagine the woman's amazement and delight.

The Rope Trick

How could such moments of connection be fostered in teaching? Surely the antiques and the feelings the owners have about them form some kind of rough analogy with Ausubel's "prior knowledge." Surely the process of appraising parallels open learning, the modeling of expert practice that can unlatch the door for novices who want out of their ignorance.

It's true the "students" on the "Roadshow" have motivation that college students, especially in required courses, usually don't have. It's true that here, "coverage" isn't an issue: the students set the curriculum with the specific

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INTRODUCING THE ISSUE

It's nice to have data on your side. It isn't the whole answer to anything, but it can narrow the scope of error and improve the odds of doing the next thing you do better than the last. **Harry Allen** and his colleagues at Ohio State have been doggedly thorough and persistent in tracking the quantifiable effects of their special course for remedial math students. Allen is the first to say they've more to learn, but in the meantime his example has much to teach everyone who cares about making a difference through teaching. The courage to look closely and keep on trying for a positive result isn't as easily come by as one might suppose. Whatever else Allen's data show, they are a model of a scientific dedication to teaching.

Tom Rocklin's TECHPED suggests that faculty may *want* to learn HTML and Web page design for the same reasons they finally learned word processing—control and the creative opportunities it affords. **Al McLeod**, in his third major article for the *Forum*, maintains that group process can affect "learning readiness." The rub is that its influence swings both ways. The negatives of group dynamics center on shame, says McLeod, and shame turns out to be a much more subtle and unintentional matter than we suppose.

To round out this mix of concrete, practical and speculative articles, I've included a sort of "blue sky" speculation on what might be called the pedagogy of delight. The PBS series "Antiques Roadshow" (now one of the most popular programs on television) raises some interesting questions about how and why and what we learn. Could the model of learning seen each week on that program, as participants learn the history and "value" of their treasured possessions be applied in college classrooms? What would it take? What might it mean? It's a show I'd like to see.

—James Rhem

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questions that interest them. And it's also true that, despite what I think, for some, the money may in fact be what the show is about, not the appraisal process that justifies its place on "educational television."

Faculty face analogs of these elements every day—in careerist ambitions, in motivations that run the gamut of possibility, in learners so "concrete" they remain conceptual blockheads. Granting that the "Roadshow" doesn't have these problems, what does it have that's instructive? How would the positive dynamics of the "Roadshow" translate in the classroom? I confess that I'm not sure, but I think the key might lie in the fact that the "Roadshow" depends on the recognition that each side—owners and appraisers or, in the classroom, students and teacher—has something of value to bring to the table.

The usefulness of an analogy between expert appraisal and teaching and learning depends on the ways both are like braiding rope. The appraisers work with three strands: 1) their expert knowledge of antiques, including the history surrounding them; 2) the tale the owner has to tell, which is often a provenance; 3) knowledge of the marketplace, what price similar objects have fetched. The middle strand can't connect with the third without the first. The outer strands hang empty without the middle.

Where Does Value Lie?

A fully successful college experience has the same structure. Student experience—both prior and present—forms the essential middle strand. Recognizing and revaluing that fact is the first step in tapping into the quality of delight in learning that suffuses the "Antiques Roadshow." What's brought in (to class or for appraisal) remains mute or a hunch, mere sentiment or a machine that's likely jury-rigged until it's married with what the expert knows. And the combination of what's brought in and what the expert knows

stands inert until it moves out into the wider realm of action which the marketplace and students' futures represent.

Perhaps these analogies go no farther than their own cleverness. I hope not. For students everywhere, I want the delight in learning one sees over and over on the "Roadshow." Is it too saccharine to suppose that we might see it more often if we believed as much in the value of what students bring forward as we do in the value of what we have to offer? ■■■

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undervalued
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