Advice to New Teachers: Turn It Inside Out

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While I have won eight teaching awards—two of them national—the thought that I am capable of conveying pearls of wisdom about teaching seems as ridiculous today as it did when I started teaching 12 years ago. I do, however, feel comfortable sharing one "secret" of my success. My advice to new teachers is always as follows. Turn it inside out: Focus on the students as great learners, not on yourself as a great teacher.

I am happy to share with you the story of the evolution of my philosophy of teaching and learning. To do so I must take you back 15 years. Consider the following scenario from my Ph.D. experience at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University in the mid 1980s:

> *When public administration professor Richard Goldsmith (not his real name) entered the classroom, the students quivered. "There he is!" exclaimed a student in the back of the room. Goldsmith strutted confidently toward the blackboard and began to scribble furiously. Within five minutes, diagrams and formulas covered the board. In only minutes he had solved a problem that took the best students in the class three hours the night before to solve. One student could not maintain her decorum. "Professor!" she exclaimed. "I never could have solved that problem!"*
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> *Goldsmith regarded her with amusement. "Ha! Young woman," he replied, "if you could have solved it, you would be the professor and I the student."*

At one level there is nothing wrong with this view of the ideal teacher. I remember, for example, calling John Nalbandian, one of my favorite professors at the University of Kansas, "Ghandi" because he was so wise.

On another level, however, this view of the ideal teacher is troublesome. Subtle or not so subtle messages it conveys to me include:

- A focus on the teacher, as opposed to a focus on the student
- A focus on being or acting great, instead of a focus on learning
- The male teacher as omniscient sage and entertainer
- The view that to be a great teacher one needed to prepare a perfect lecture that kept the students spellbound, and
- A view of the student as a passive knowledge sponge.

This was the model I had been presented with as an undergraduate, in law school, in my master's program, and in my Ph.D. program—over 100 courses in higher education. I might add that out of those 100 professors of higher education only one was a woman. I call this phenomenon "the great man theory of teaching" (see O'Leary 1997).

When I completed my Ph.D. program in 1988 and moved to Indiana University to become an assistant professor, my dissertation advisor pulled me over and said very kindly, "The research part of the job will not be a problem for you, but you may have a problem with the teaching part." He was right. I am living proof that we can all learn and grow as teachers!

In my course evaluations that first semester were numerous comments to the effect that "her hands were shaking so badly the first day of class she could barely hand out the syllabus." But it was halfway into the semester that true disaster struck. I had spent hours preparing a brilliant great man lecture on the impact of courts on public administration, the subject of my award-winning dissertation, only to find most of the class asleep 15 minutes into my lecture. The crowning blow came when I realized that *all* the students in the front row were asleep.

I went home more depressed than I had ever been in my life. Clearly, teaching was not for me. Out of desperation I stayed up several nights trying to figure out how to engage the students. My intent at the time, honestly, was not to become a great teacher, or even a good teacher, but merely to survive in the classroom. This was war. I was desperate. I would try anything.

Instead of writing a lecture, I returned to the class the next week with 25 prepared Socratic method questions for the students. I saw a glimmer of hope as a handful of students tried to answer the questions. I found myself, however, giving away the answers when the silence between the questions and the answers grew too loud.

The number of questions I prepared for class dwindled from 25 to 20, then to 15 and even 10. On some days I came into the classroom ready to engage the students in a discussion of the three most important ideas of the day. As I experimented and tried new things, it finally hit me: *It's the students, stupid. It's not about me as a great teacher; it's about the students as great learners*. Once I figured that out, teaching became a wonderfully fun challenge.

Now my class preparation goes something like this. After rereading all the assigned text for the day, I give myself, in the privacy of my office, a "moment of silence." The purpose of the moment of silence is twofold: First, I ask, "What do these students really need to know from this material? What are the most important ideas for them to take from class today?" For undergraduates, I

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try to focus on three to five key ideas for a one-hour class period; for graduate students, about 10 key ideas for a one-hour class period.

Second, I ask myself, "What is the best way for these students to learn this material." Is it lecture? Discussion? Debate? Research? Or is there some other way of learning that would best fit here?

Some of the ways of engaging the students in active learning, particularly problem-based learning, that have worked for me include the following: a moment of silence at the beginning of class where I ask the students to focus on the most important points of the reading or to think about a pressing public policy problem; work groups; case studies; role playing; analyses of real world public organizations and real world public challenges; problem-solving essays; position papers; memos to themselves; simulations; and "elevator speeches." The elevator speech is the brainchild of John White, manager of Ross Perot's first presidential campaign. As a colleague at the Maxwell School after the election, he often lamented that the policy analysts he hired from the best schools of public policy and public administration could write 20-page papers, but were unable to brief him or Perot in three minutes, often in an elevator as they were running to a meeting. The elevator speech forces the students to brief the class in three minutes about a complex public policy or public management issue that the student has thoroughly researched, and to answer tough questions from an imaginary boss.

I now also put a warning label on the front page of my syllabus similar to a warning label you might see on a cigarette package. It reads something like this:

> *Warning!! This is a course with a unique blend of traditional readings and lectures, mixed with nontraditional role-playing, student participation, and discussion groups. Class sessions will be interactive with high quality, thoughtful, open-minded, and respectful class discussion expected. If you are interested in a safe lecture class where students are allowed to act as passive knowledge sponges, this class is not for you. I look forward to a great semester!*

My class sessions are now approximately 65% interactive analytical exercises and 35% lectures, where I pull together the ideas that have emerged in class discussions, emphasizing the most important points. It is my belief that my job is not only to impart knowledge, but more importantly to assist students in cultivating a critical thinking process that they may use throughout their lives. That is the goal of the interactive analytical exercises: critical thinking. Because I teach students who will have careers in government, other facets of my job include encouraging the students to think creatively about solutions to pressing public policy problems, instilling in them a belief that they *can* make a difference in today's society, and conveying to them an enthusiasm about public service.

So what? Who cares? What are the implications of the "secret" of my success? There are many implications, but let me highlight just three:

First, it is a wonderful relief to realize that no one has to be a great man to focus on learning. The "Inside Out" view of teaching accommodates all of us: every size, shape, background, color, gender, and a wide variety of talents.

Second, no one ever gets it right the first time they teach a course. No one. It is an immense challenge to figure out the best way for students to learn, and it is astonishingly liberating to realize that it is acceptable to think creatively and make mistakes in the classroom, as long as the students don't get the short end of the stick. I will confess that there have been a few times when I have returned to the classroom the day after an experiment, apologized to the students, and started over, addressing the same material, yet using another learning technique. Also, each semester is a clean slate and an opportunity to reconsider the learning environment.

Third, there is no excuse for poor teaching. We all have colleagues and friends who have been labeled as hopeless teachers, something that is heartbreaking to witness. However, by turning it inside out and focusing on learning, shifting away from the great man theory of teaching, we're sending the message that it is acceptable to ask for help. It is okay to borrow ideas from others. It is okay that you're not the perfect entertainer in the classroom. As beat poet William S. Burroughs once said, "a good poet borrows, a great poet steals." I would paraphrase that statement to read, "a good teacher borrows, a great teacher steals." After all, we all work for the same firm and our goal is to serve a common client. I have benefited from ideas stolen from several colleagues throughout the years, including Lisa Bingham, Jim Barnes, Larry Schroeder, Jim Perry, Patricia Ingraham, John White, Sally Selden, Jodi Sandfort, and David Rosenbloom, to name just a few.

It all boils down to four things: knowledge, critical thinking, creative thinking, and an enthusiasm about public service. These are the things I try to impart and cultivate in every class session. These goals may be met in a wide variety of ways.

My advice to new teachers: Turn it inside out. Begin your own movement away from a focus on teaching, toward a focus on learning. The great man theory of teaching is dead, something that all us who are mere mortals can celebrate. It is time to shift the limelight off ourselves and onto our students.

Reference

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