Like birthdays, anniversaries are occasions for reflection, and as I approach the fifth anniversary of my teaching career, I find that my thoughts are drawn to the things that I did badly. Here's a list of five teaching mistakes I have made. I share them in the hope that they will cause others to reflect, and perhaps help new professors will avoid making these same mistakes.

1. Not taking advantage of research on pedagogy. It’s curious: as a graduate student in history, I was trained to maintain the highest evidentiary standards in my scholarship, to situate my research in a body of existing literature, and to scrutinize every claim I made for any possible error. And yet, when it came to teaching, I went entirely on instinct, teaching the way I was taught, assuming that was good enough. It wasn’t. Nearly a year passed before it occurred to me that there might be scholars in the field of pedagogy, too, and that maybe they’d written useful material about how to teach! Was I in for a surprise. Keeping up with that field is a major scholarly undertaking. So I limit myself to two journals specific to teaching in my field, and over the years, I’ve attended workshops and compiled a modest collection of books on teaching. I’m glad to say that my instincts weren’t entirely off, but I also know that I’m a much better professor now for having learned from the pedagogical literature.

2. Chastising the whole class. We all get exasperated at times, and the temptation to let a whole class have it is sometimes hard to resist. In my third year as a professor, though, I had a “eureka” moment in the midst of bawling out a class for its poor attendance. It suddenly occurred to me, “I’m talking to the people who are here.” I was making them resentful—and doing nothing to reach the people who were the source of the problem. Ever since then, I’ve dealt with problems on a one-on-one basis, except in cases where nearly everyone is doing something wrong.

3. Being defensive about student complaints. Yes, there is something presumptuous about undergraduates, who often are still teenagers, griping about their professors. Have they taught? Studied pedagogy? Don’t they realize how good they have it? More and more, however, I remind myself that, since I’m training them to critically assess every reading and, indeed, every truth claim placed before them, I can hardly object when students turn those very faculties of critical inquiry on me. Instead, I’ve moved toward greater transparency in my teaching methods. I also took the advice in Gerald Graff’s book Clueless in Academe and made my own pedagogy part of the discussion.

4. Answering student e-mail at all hours. I’m considered a student-friendly professor, one who is always willing to lend a hand. Last year, however, I inserted a passage in my course outlines stating that I would answer student e-mail during regular business hours only: Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. I think one of the damaging ideas conveyed by various inspirational books and movies about teachers who make a difference is that teachers are not entitled to private lives, that they must be on call for their students at all times. If the purpose of education is, as the ancients believed, to help us lead “the good life,” what kind of example am I setting if I live entirely to serve my students? A corollary: I no longer answer e-mails that ask me questions that students can answer for themselves using the course outline and other resources.
Learning methods are not being measured on student rating forms. That’s the conclusion drawn from a study done within the field of accounting. The researcher asked a random sample of 267 accounting departments for copies of the instruments they use to assess instruction. The request garnered 53 course evaluation instruments that contained 978 different statements and questions.

The faculty researcher, Smith, (reference below) used a software program to qualitatively analyze the content of items on the instruments. He was interested in how many statements on the rating forms analyzed learning methods supportive of particular learning theories. He opted to consider two learning theories: constructivism and behaviorism. The two theories are very different: constructivism “is based around the actions a learner takes to reorganize new information and beliefs into a format understandable to them” (p. 5), while behaviorism “views the learner as a passive recipient of information sent by the expert.” (p. 5) Because the theories are so different, they rely on very different classroom activities and assessment strategies.

Smith used 11 areas, identified in other research, in which students can assess their learning activities. He then tied the activities to either a constructivist or behaviorist approach. For example, in the area of course focus, a sample item representing the constructivist theory might be “The orientation of the course was centered on real-world accounting problems.” In the area of course understandings, a sample item representing the behaviorist theory might be “The textbook was our most important resource for discovering what we needed to know.” From sample items like these, Smith identified key words and phrases that were then used in the software analysis of the 978 different items on the evaluation instruments.

What did he find? Only 39 of the 978 statements assessed instructors’ teaching methods in terms of whether they were based on constructivist or behaviorist learning theories. Those 39 statements were almost evenly divided between constructivist and behaviorist. Some items could be either.

Smith points out that various national reports on accounting education continually note “accounting students do not have the critical thinking skills required by the business community. The teaching practices of constructivism and its compatible approaches have been highly recommended in the accounting literature as a method to develop critical thinking skills in accounting students.” (p. 24) Are those methods being used in accounting classrooms? That question cannot be answered with data gathered by end-of-course rating instruments.

Although the case in point here is specific to a discipline, the issue uncovered is relevant across disciplines. End-of-course rating forms usually are standardized across an institution. They are used to assess instruction across a wide range of courses and disciplines. As noted previously in the newsletter, a rating instrument provides a kind of functional definition of good teaching. If that definition doesn’t include information relevant to student learning experiences, how viable is it? Is teaching being defined in ways too tied to teaching and teachers and not reflective enough of students and learning? Even a quick read of this article makes it easy to eyeball an instrument and see just how many of the items on it have anything to do with the methods the teacher is using to promote learning. Doing so might be worthwhile for anyone interested in the kinds of learning experiences being promoted by the methods a teacher is using.

Those Long Years in the Middle

“Mid-career faculty can easily reach a plateau where professional goals are less clear, even while an array of attractive personal and professional options may be available. The absence of motivating professional goals can cause professors to settle into a dull routine or begin to invest their energies in activities outside of their professional lives.” (p. 49) So conclude the authors of a recent interview study that looked for answers to a number of questions that pertain to faculty in their mid-career years. The authors wondered about expectations for mid-career faculty and what they experienced, especially in the way of challenges. They asked about professional support—what mid-career faculty received as well as what they might wish to receive.

Very little attention has been paid to this particular career span, even though it’s the longest, which means it contains the largest cohort in the academic workforce. There’s expansive (and still-growing) literature on new faculty and some on seniors, but almost nothing on the middle years. One of the challenges frequently cited by interviewees in this study (all faculty at a research university) was this lack of attention. One interviewee said, “Once you’ve gotten tenure, you are sort of in charge of your own fate. You’ve achieved a certain level of professional maturity that indicates the department doesn’t need to oversee or nurture your next promotion. That’s kind of up to you.” (p. 50) Those sentiments were reflected in some comments by department chairs who were also interviewed and asked about the challenges they encountered in supporting mid-career faculty. Although not all department chairs interviewed agreed, some were of the opinion that mid-career faculty got less because they deserved less.

This particular study looked at all aspects of academic careers during the middle years, not just teaching. However, a lot of what came out of the interviews related to teaching or emerged from it. There is much about teaching that can contribute to “dull routines.” The same courses are taught with the same foundational content semester after semester. Every class is different, but students still ask the same questions, many use the same poor study routines, and too many accomplish way less than they could. Yes, every semester and every course is different, but after a few years of teaching, they’re not all that different. It’s easy for teachers to find their way into comfortable routines that, before long, become deep ruts.

Those interviewed for the study also regularly reported that more work was added to an already-full workload. Mid-career faculty teach the same number of courses and are expected (if they want to be promoted) to maintain the same level of scholarly output. In addition to that, during the mid-career period, they are often asked to assume administrative tasks, be it chairing the department or accepting some major committee assignment. This additional work can be a source of renewal, but the faculty interviewed often described it as something else to be done, something additional that required energy from already-depleted reserves.

Once teachers get more comfortable with the content, develop structures that guide their way through courses, and come up with activities and assignments that work reasonably well, teaching becomes an easy target for cutting corners. Students new to the course for a certain semester don’t know what’s missing from last semester. Colleagues who see each other’s teaching only on rare occasions have no reason to suspect any changes. And for the faculty member who has stopped doing one thing and is cutting back on another, a host of reasons can be summoned to justify what, taken separately, are small changes.

It doesn’t help that, in addition to being left to their own devices during mid-career, teachers encounter few mechanisms that mandate accountability. Annual performance reviews happen in most departments, but will the evidence submitted show any signs of change? Teaching grows tiring gradually, not all at once, even though everybody’s pretty well used up by the end of the semester. That tiredness is transitory, cured by a brief break. The kind of tired teaching that really erodes classroom experiences for students (and teachers) happens when the content stays the same course after course and when the teacher cuts corners here and there, gradually decreasing the time and energy devoted to the course. Pretty soon, the magic is gone. All that teaching has the potential to be vanishes. What’s left is a job, a steady paycheck, and a retirement plan (that will hopefully have enough time to recover).

Most faculty find the autonomy of academic positions highly attractive. But being left alone also means that faculty assume the responsibility of taking care of their instructional health and well-being. As with other health issues, prevention and early detection are the best remedies. The time to make instructional health a priority is during those mid-career years. If you’re a regular reader, you know that we work hard to fill the newsletter with lots of “healthy” ideas. The challenge is to make sure they get acted on.


Correction

Written Feedback: What’s Most and Least Helpful

When graded papers get a quick glance before being shoved into a backpack or deposited into the trash can on the way out of class, it’s often hard for teachers to summon the motivation to write lots of comments on papers. That’s why I was pleased to find evidence in two studies that students do value written comments on their work.

The Weaver study (reference below) surveyed business and design students, seeking answers to four questions: Do students understand the feedback? What are their perceptions of the feedback? What kind of comments do they find helpful versus not helpful? And how can the value of the feedback provided be increased? The Smith study (reference below) surveyed business students in their junior year and was motivated by similar questions, such as what types of comments students find most useful in improving their writing and what form those comments should take. (p. 325)

Students in both studies reported that they did read written comments. In the Smith study, an average of 4.73 (out of 5.0) was generated in response to the statement “I read the comments that my professor makes in the body of my paper.” A 1.54 mean (with 1 being “strongly disagree”) resulted in response to the statement “I just look at the paper’s grade, not the comments.”

Both studies contain useful details. For example, in the Weaver study, students were asked to respond to a series of words and phrases commonly written on papers and then indicate how confident they were that they understood what the instructor meant. Here are a few examples: “Logical and coherent structure”: 42 percent were very confident they understood what that meant and 58 percent were fairly confident; “Lacks application of theory”: 50 percent were very confident and 29 percent fairly confident; and “Superficial analysis”: only 5 percent were very confident and 54 percent fairly confident. In this last case, don’t forget about the group of more than 40 percent who said they did not understand what the comment meant.

Smith gave students examples of different grading methods, and then asked them to identify their preferences and, in response to an open query, say why they preferred the one picked. Method 1 used a matrix or rubric that identified several different areas, assigned points to each, and included some brief comments. Method 2 offered a paragraph that identified the problems with the paper. Method 3 also offered feedback in a paragraph, but in this case, three positive features of the essay were identified, and then the same problems were discussed. Sixty percent of the respondents preferred the Method 1 rubric, with the Method 3 paragraph being second favorite, preferred by 36.4 percent of the students. In comments explaining their preference for the rubric, students said they liked its visual features and felt that the method helped instructors be objective and fair.

Both studies also contained clear indications of what compromises the effectiveness of comments on papers. Students in the two studies wanted both positive and negative feedback. In the Weaver survey, 80 percent of the business students and 75 percent of the design students strongly or slightly agreed with the statement “Tutors [teachers] should give more positive feedback.” On the Smith survey, “I want to know what I did correctly on my papers, not just what I did wrong” generated a mean response of 4.49 (out of 5.0).

Weaver’s study also included a qualitative component in which students were asked to bring samples of papers with commentary to a group discussion to talk about the comments. Out of the discussions emerged four characteristics of comments that students did not find helpful when they tried to improve their writing on subsequent papers. First were comments identified as being too general or too vague, such as “A sound answer, generally” or “You’ve got the important stuff right.” One is tempted to point out that if students wrote comments like those, most teachers would ask them to be more explicit.

Second, students found it difficult to improve when the commentary provided no guidance. They wanted to know specifically and concretely what they needed to do better on the next paper. Laudatory comments on one paper included a list of the four things the student most needed to work on in the next paper.

Reaffirming what was found in other data were objections to commentary that focused entirely on the negative. An analysis of the comments revealed that negative feedback tended to be more specific than positive feedback. When offered, positive comments tended to be vague, such as the word “good” scrawled down the side of a paper. And finally, students struggled with disconnect between feedback and assessment criteria. Students commented that they did not know what criteria were being used to grade the paper. They also pointed out when the feedback and the assessment (the grade) disagreed. I was reminded of a paper that one of my students shared. There were three or four negative comments on every page but the last one, where the grade appeared. It was an A. The student wondered if she should ask the professor if he had made a mistake.

Some students do ignore instructor feedback, whether it’s written comments on papers or face-to-face feedback, but maybe not as many as instructors are inclined to think. Perhaps that number could be reduced further still if instructors attended to this feedback on their own feedback.


The Use of Reading Lists

After more than 20 years of publication, you’d think every aspect of teaching and learning had been covered in some issue or another of this newsletter. That’s what I keep thinking, and just when I do, I discover an article or receive a submission on a topic never before covered in the newsletter. The case in point this time: reading lists.

Given the difficulty most faculty have getting students to read for courses, even assigned reading in required textbooks, I’m thinking that reading lists may not be used as extensively now as they were 20 years ago. Nonetheless, they still figure prominently in the delivery of independent studies, special topics courses, and senior and graduate seminars.

One recently discovered article from a British journal describes an interview project in which tutors (faculty members) and students were interviewed about experiences with reading lists. Courses are not designed and delivered in North America as they are in the British educational system, so some of the findings and issues are not the same, but reading the article raised a number of questions that are relevant to faculty in North America who use reading lists.

How are they constructed? Among those interviewed, most faculty reported that they create reading lists out of their own favorite sources—readings that were especially helpful in their initial explorations of a topic. The article expresses some legitimate concerns over the currency of reading lists and whether faculty regularly update them to reflect emerging ideas, theories, and research results.

What role do they play in the learning process? The faculty interviewed saw reading lists as guides, helpful to students as they began exploration of an unfamiliar subject area. Rather than having to find their own way through a forest of potential sources, the reading list allows students to follow a path through unfamiliar territory. Faculty also hoped their reading lists served motivational purposes—that students would discover the inherent intrigue of the area and be inspired to read further on their own.

How do students use reading lists? There was a good deal of divergence between faculty perceptions of the role of reading lists and the practices students reported in relation to them. Uniformly, students reported looking at the “main” or “most important” texts on the lists. Some instructors indicate those priorities by listing materials in categories. Others do so by mentioning sources in class, either using material from them or making statements about their importance. Students reported reading less as opposed to more from their course reading lists, and many had little interest in discussing what they read with the instructor or in class. That’s something that most faculty will not find surprising.

How might students be motivated to explore readings beyond those “required” for the course? This has become such a conundrum for faculty. If reading is not required, there is virtually no chance that students will read at all. But as soon as reading material is required, students tackle it because they have to, and that definitely affects their attitudes toward the material. The ideal is for students to discover for themselves how much can be learned from reading. Perhaps instructors can help to make that happen by raising questions (interesting, relevant ones) in class that are answered in the reading. It might also help if instructors share with students the role of a particular reading in their own intellectual development.

The best way around that problem is to take whatever time can be allotted to start developing those all-important reading skills.

How should reading lists be incorporated into a course? The question here relates to whether some discussion of readings should occur and how students might participate in such an exchange. Should they be able to answer or ask questions about the readings? Should they be asked to write as a means of preparing for discussion? Should they do follow-up reading and writing after a discussion?

Many faculty fondly remember reading lists from their favorite courses. They were the way in to new, unexplored, and extremely interesting areas. Most faculty can still name individual readings that captured their imagination, changed the way they thought, or opened whole new vistas of understanding. The readings that accomplished these results haven’t changed (maybe students have), but the power of a set of reading materials is still there. The questions, more challenging now than they once were, are how faculty can get students connected with these powerful intellectual stimuli and how reading experiences in a course can be used to develop a lifelong commitment to reading.


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www.magnapubs.com/newsletters/2008index.html
The Benefits of Using Classroom Assistants

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I work in a department that regularly enrolls 250 students in first-year classes, as do many other departments in colleges and universities. In my case, the situation is complicated by a small graduate program, too few teaching assistants, and an inability to break the larger classes into smaller sections for discussion. This makes for a very challenging teaching situation. I use groups in the large class one day per week, using activities I described previously in The Teaching Professor (March 2003). Since then, I have worked on solving the staff problem with senior undergraduate students. I call them classroom assistants (CAs).

The CAs are drawn from a competitive pool of applicants at the beginning of the term. They must be top academic students, seniors, and interested in helping first-year students develop an understanding of our discipline. They go through a competitive application and interview process. Usually I have around 15 applicants for two positions. After selection, the new CAs sign a contract that contains a list of roles and responsibilities. I expect CAs to respect the objectives of the course and positively reflect on the faculty, department, and institution when dealing with students.

The CAs work 50 hours over a 13-week term and are paid $10 per hour, roughly one-third of what their TA counterparts are making. They are provided with all the reading materials for the course and attend class on the days when I have students working in groups. I let them know in advance what tasks the students will face on those days. Along with the TAs and me, they circulate among the students, keeping them focused, helping them with their work, and asking and answering questions about the course materials. They are invited to participate in the plenary discussion during the final 15 minutes of class. Much of their work is completed behind the scenes. They assess and record the results of the group work and random reading quizzes.

My use of CAs significantly improves the instructor-student ratio, which is especially important on days when students work in groups. Students in the class accept the presence of the CAs without question. To first-year students, seniors look quite advanced, and they give beginning students a glimmer of hope about the kind of students they may one day become. The CAs have also taken a number of relevant courses in the department, and their appraisal of these courses sometimes seems more honest to students. In contrast, the instructor and TAs are removed from the students by age, education, and vocation, making it more difficult for them to relate to student concerns.

The CAs free up valuable hours of senior course staff time; while the instructor and TAs remain responsible for delivering lectures and doing the bulk of the grading for the course, the administrative work of the CAs makes it considerably easier to accomplish these tasks. CAs also provide useful feedback to me about how well the material is getting through, which has encouraged me to change the pace, order, and content of the lectures. I appreciate getting the feedback during the course as opposed to getting ratings results after the course has concluded.

There have been some challenges. Because nobody else in my department uses CAs, securing funding, modest as it is, is an annual hat-in-hand ritual that depends entirely on the current budget and the department head’s support. When I began this program a few years ago, there was excited talk of developing a senior seminar on university teaching, in which students in their final year would work as CAs; read literature on pedagogy; discuss what they learned with one another in weekly meetings; and receive course credit based on written work, participation, and feedback from the instructors with whom they worked. This had the advantage of making the CAs far more cost effective while also giving the program some official sanction and pedagogical merit. Within a few months, the idea fizzled, as so many ideas do.

Some colleagues see the program as pragmatic and innovative, while others have expressed concern that it might reduce the quality of education in the department. Having seen the benefits of using CAs firsthand, I am convinced that the program has the potential to ease strained teaching and financial resources, provide senior students with valuable and relevant experience, and offer beginning students a key link to the senior course staff.