

AUTHOR: JOE HOYLE

TITLE: Still Thinking About Teaching After All These Years

SOURCE: Proteus 25 no1 39-43 Spr 2008

COPYRIGHT: The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher: <http://webspaces.ship.edu/proteus>

The Quote

Richard Nixon was serving his first term as president of the United States on the day I began teaching in college. When I pass along this piece of trivia to my current students, they ask whether I knew Abe Lincoln personally or went to school with Teddy Roosevelt.

My career has been a long journey, an ongoing challenge to engage students and engineer learning. Over the years, a few of the days have been truly astounding; the education process hummed along like a well-oiled machine. Probably an equal number of classes proved to be unmitigated disasters; utter confusion wiped out every hint of comprehension. In truth, a vast majority of my teaching has been on the margin--we could have accomplished more but we could have also done worse. When dealing with human beings rather than mechanical robots, definable success is often elusive. Progress is made, but in steps so tiny they can rarely be seen by the naked eye. However, through good days and bad, the journey has been an absolute thrill. I only wish I could continue for another thirty-seven years.

What is the true role of the college teacher?

Potential responses resemble the available answers to a complicated multiple-choice question: to challenge students to think for themselves, to open their minds to alternative possibilities, to guide them in making complex connections, to mentor as they begin their initial steps into the world, to create excitement about learning so they will continue the quest throughout their years, to introduce the infinite beauty of our world, to stir up indignation over the wrongs that plague our planet, to ignite a passion that will light their lives, to console and motivate, to encourage and empathize. This list has no end--a daunting array of assignments for three 50-minute sessions each week spread over a mere fourteen weeks. Overwhelmed by so many lofty aspirations, even Mother Teresa might have been tempted to focus exclusively on conveying facts, figures, rules, and equations. When all else fails, teaching "stuff" is an easy out.

Some teachers do not settle for that most basic level of education. Over the decades, I have had the honor of working with a number of superb teachers--individuals who pushed well beyond the mere conveyance of information. Without much apparent effort, almost by intuition, they seemed capable of providing exactly what each of their charges needed in the way of guidance and inspiration. Whether a student was at the top of the class or the bottom, they could individualize their attention to meet that person's specific needs. Moreover, they practically radiated a contagious joy for learning.

For me, observing such master teachers always raises fundamental questions about the core aspects of this profession, questions which can be summed up as "how do they manage to do it so well?" What attributes enable a teacher to be truly outstanding? How

does one educator bring material roaring to life while many others make it appear incredibly boring? Is success simply a result of years of practice? Is there a common thread of excellence that can be uncovered whenever learning actually occurs?

During the summer of 2006, I posted a series of random thoughts about education on the Internet. A few weeks later, e-mail arrived from a professor in England who stated rather succinctly: "I am not sure who said it but here is a quote about teaching that I think you will appreciate." I have lost the correspondent's name but that person provided me with a true epiphany about my profession:

"Teaching does not come from years of doing it. Teaching comes from thinking about it."

The words were simple but the meaning profound.

Suddenly, I better understood those teachers whom I had admired. Their talents had not been developed purely as a result of years of repetition. For them, the education process was not viewed as a series of isolated events occurring over time. Rather, the students and their intellectual development reverberated in the teachers' thoughts, night and day, weekday and weekend. Almost like background music, a litany of mental questions was constantly being turned over and examined. How can I make the connection clearer between these two events? Why has the quality of a particular student's work fallen in the last few weeks? How can I relate the upcoming topic to the real world? Why do so many of my students consistently miss the same specific concept?

Since receiving that e-mail, more of my time has been allocated to thinking about teaching, my students, and the education process in general. Like a chess player plotting ten moves in advance, I find myself walking through specific questions over and over--considering the various options and their consequences. This is a representative sample of what has circled through my head almost ceaselessly over the past year. Opinions are provided but few facts. Teaching does not come from seeking pat answers; teaching comes from thinking about it.

Questions Seeking Answers

For me as well as many others, Dr. Ken Bain is a true hero. His book, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Harvard University Press, 2004) is a wonderful celebration of educational excellence. The ideas and actions of outstanding teachers at schools across the country are analyzed based on extensive observation and discussion. Chapters such as: "How Do They Prepare to Teach?" and "How Do They Conduct Class?" should be required reading for every person involved in the education of college students.

In April 2007, Dr. Bain visited the University of Richmond--where I teach--for two days to lead a series of programs culminating in an open discussion of students and learning. Midway through this final session, one faculty member cut right to the chase by raising the question probably utmost on the mind of every member of the audience; "How does a person really become a great college teacher?" Dr. Bain's response was swift: "Oh, that is easy. I can tell you how to become a great teacher in a single sentence."

The room fell silent. The professors leaned forward with anticipation to hear the ultimate truth from the master. The veil was about to be lifted. "You will always be a great teacher when you can convince your students to care about the material you are teaching."

Dr. Bain's revelation was both simple and obvious. But, I wager I have pondered that

one sentence every day for the past eighteen months.

Why should any student ever care about what I am teaching? In the "olden days" (perhaps the period before the radical era of the Sixties), college teachers seemed to serve as parental authority figures more than they do today. At that time, the scope of *in loco parentis* was widely discussed. Perhaps it is merely an urban legend created by the passage of many semesters but I suspect--in some bygone era--if a professor stared intently at the students and demanded "I expect you to learn this material because I say so" it was sufficient motivation for many. As in the military, the carrying out of orders often went without question. Contrast that attitude to the words of a recent student of mine (now working on a Ph.D.): "College students are very busy people. They will always allocate their time to tasks where they perceive the most potential benefit. If the purpose of a class assignment is not readily apparent, there is always something else that is putting incredible demands on their time," This quick peek into student thinking provides a world of enlightenment for all of us in the education profession today.

In earlier times, the students' position of acquiescence was accentuated even further by a genuine fear of failure. It is no secret the quantity of poor grades was significantly higher at most colleges only a couple of decades ago. More than a few students got Fs; some were sent home. I remember quite vividly laboring for hours to memorize complex calculus and physics equations so I might satisfy my professors. By passing their courses, I hoped to avoid being shipped to Vietnam. The darkness at the end of that tunnel made many of us "care" deeply about the subject matter being presented in every course regardless of our personal inclinations.

Teaching dynamics have changed radically. The incentives are also different. I cannot even imagine the amount of eye-rolling that would occur if I walked into class tomorrow and informed my students "I expect you to learn this material because I say so."

Every campus is filled with busy, distracted students. The entire generation seems to suffer from acute hyperactivity. Can college teachers adapt to this new world especially when grade inflation has significantly reduced the "stick" aspect of motivation?

One remediation that invariably pops up in any conversation about the difficulties of teaching in college today is the eradication of grade inflation. Without question, this phenomenon is an embarrassment and faculties need to clean up their own mess. The grade A means excellent and should never be awarded for anything less. Students who work to achieve outstanding performance are punished when equally good grades are given for mediocre efforts. Unfortunately, the desire for a high grade point average is a fundamentally different concept than wanting to gain understanding and appreciation of subject matter. The all-time favorite student question ("Is this going to be on the test?") is proof that concern about doing well on an examination is not the same as thirsting to attain knowledge. Grades can be a supplemental motivator of student effort but that fails to address the essence of Dr. Bain's admonition: "You will always be a great teacher when you can convince your students to care about the material you are teaching."

What leads students to care about a subject? Periodically, I ask my students to write a paragraph about their best college teacher. Each selects one professor and describes the characteristics that made this individual stand out above the rest. The ostensible justification for this request is to focus attention, on the inherent qualities of a successful leader. Although it does satisfy that stated goal, the real purpose is more personal.

I am always intrigued by student attitudes toward their own education. Frustrated

professors sometimes complain today's students only desire good grades and entertainment. Perhaps the assertion is true but--in all the years I have given this assignment--I have never once encountered a response proclaiming "Dr. X is the best college teacher I have had because I got an easy A" or "Dr. Y is such a wonderful educator because he is incredibly funny."

Instead, I invariably receive page after page of glowing descriptions of teachers who have impacted the students' lives in some immeasurable fashion. Although the words and phrases vary extensively, three sentiments form the vast majority of all comments:

"Dr. X challenged and pushed me to reach my full potential,"

"Dr. Y genuinely cared about me as a person and helped me to grow and mature."

"Dr. Z was able to engage me in the subject matter; I had expected the class to be boring but it was extremely interesting."

If this informal survey has any validity, students are most likely to care about the material being discussed if (a) they feel they are being challenged in a productive (and fair) way, (b) they sense the teacher cares about them as unique individuals, and (c) the subject is presented in an engaging manner so it stimulates their interest. This list is hardly shocking. Entire books can--and have--been written about each of the three.

However, the list does raise a fundamental question: In 2008, why do many college teachers continue to lecture? To me, this is the ultimate question in any crusade for better college education. This one-directional approach is hardly challenging or engaging and is rarely used to communicate a genuine caring attitude toward the students. Research shows lecturing to be a rather ineffective style of presentation. Yes, facts and figures can be conveyed from teacher to student but the development of appreciation and understanding is severely limited. Lecturing might possibly have been adequate for 1957 but times have changed. (Interestingly in 1781, Samuel Johnson asserted, "Lectures were once useful; but now, when all can read, and books are so numerous, lectures are unnecessary," Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson) Today, professors simply tend to talk too much. Alter that delivery system and the world of education changes rather rapidly.

In my own musings, I define a lecture as any class session where roughly 75 percent or more of the talking is done by the teacher. My suspicion is that in many college classes at least 90 percent of the words actually come from the instructor. There are many reasons why this method remains popular but one is rather obvious: Lecturing is the one approach that requires absolutely nothing from the students. Student buy-in is not necessary. Neither enthusiasm nor preparation is important. They sit and, maybe, listen. The professor's work is not held hostage by the need for students to get emotionally involved in their own education. Professors feel secure because they have complete control over the class. The focus can be exclusively on the conveyance of material.

Professors who do seek more interactivity must be prepared to deal with frustration. They may spend hours getting ready for an important session only to find sleepy students who have failed to invest even five seconds preparing for an in-depth conversation of complex material. Appeals to contemplate and debate a troubling topic in class are resisted. Ideas are shallow and poorly thought out. Legitimate discussions are impossible unless students have worked in advance to attain a minimum degree of knowledge.

I once began a teaching seminar by discussing student attitudes toward learning and

then read Matthew 26, verse 41 in the Bible (Oxford Annotated Bible, Rev. standard ed.,: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." All of the professors in the room nodded their heads in agreement. Education can be like dieting and exercise--the significant benefits that await are obvious but many still prefer to avoid as much of the effort as possible. Under such conditions, lecturing has a wonderful appeal.

Students claim to want challenging, caring, and engaging teachers but often wind up as stenographers. When that happens who is to blame? Are students lethargic and uninterested because of the method by which they are taught or do professors revert to lectures because students are lethargic and uninterested?

Lecturing is not universal but virtually no one will deny its popularity. Teachers need to be encouraged to venture beyond this approach so their students will, ultimately, care about the material being taught.

There must be fifty alternatives worth trying: I want to propose one for consideration.

In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain quotes a renown educator who describes teaching as an attempt to create puzzles for students using material taken from his discipline: "Those puzzles and knots generate questions for students, he went on to say, and then you begin to help them untie the knots," This statement presents a truly beautiful picture of educational enlightenment.

For example, the three days on which the Battle of Gettysburg was fought is a fact. The same is true for the names of the generals involved in the conflict, the number of casualties, and the eventual winning side. As Samuel Johnson points out, all of that information can be learned by reading a book. However, a history teacher can use "puzzling questions" to challenge and engage the students in order to help them develop deeper insight.

"What are the three most likely events that could have changed the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg?" (a puzzle involving judgment and evaluation)

"Why did each of the three events you selected in the first question fail to transpire?" (a puzzle involving analysis)

"How might the world have been different during the subsequent ten years if the Confederacy had won that one battle?" (a puzzle involving educated speculation)

"What lessons from that battle can be applied to later wars?" (a puzzle involving connections)

Although not a history teacher, I can easily envision a group of students having an intense discussion over each of these questions with the "teacher" serving more as a guide or moderator. In college, the concept of the professor as a guide is quite appealing.

At each of my class meetings, I distribute a list of approximately four to eight puzzling questions (which I refer to as "conversation starters") that the students are to discuss at the next session. To make the point clear, the first set is e-mailed to the students one week before the first class along with detailed instructions and my expectations.

Uncertainty is eliminated; all are aware they will be called on to address one or more of those puzzles--either through a direct response to a written question or the assessment of another student's comments. They quickly discover the puzzles require more than rote memorization. They are being asked to consider specified situations (often containing seemingly random details) and then be prepared to identify and analyze the pertinent

information as the group gradually unties the knots. Students are challenged to present logical, considered responses they can actually support. They do not have to be smart but they do have to be prepared. (A Yale professor e-mailed me a letter written by an angry Yale student to the school newspaper that challenged professors to "call students out on their bull." This astute suggestion might actually improve student learning significantly.)

As the discussion progresses, students become engaged by necessity. More importantly, if the puzzles are well constructed, the students find the investigation to be interesting. Learning actually is fun. Hopefully, they recognize the entire process is solely for their intellectual development and, thus, understand I do care about their growth and maturity.

During the first weeks of each semester, student answers tend to be sloppy and ill-conceived. I probe their responses and try to show the holes in their logic; other students point out where a different thought pattern might have led to a better resolution. Developing a foundation of understanding is similar to filling a bathtub one teaspoon of water at a time; it takes much work and patience. With perseverance, by the end of the semester, the level of conversation will have improved dramatically. Most students do seem to adapt quickly to the give-and-take nature of the conversation. The most common remark I receive from students is "I am always amazed by how fast the time goes by in this class."

Can every subject be taught by using puzzling questions? Socrates certainly seemed successful. "How did the brush strokes used by Van Gogh differ from those of other artists of the time and why did that make a difference in his development as an artist?" "How would the world be different today if Al Gore had been elected in 2000?" "Why does the Gospel according to St. John in the New Testament have a different beginning than the Gospel according to St. Luke?" "In Othello, what do you believe was the underlying reason for Iago's actions and provide at least three lines from the play to support your conclusion?"

When I talk with younger faculty members, I always suggest they toss out their lecture notes and start to create puzzling questions for their students. The process is not simple; those puzzles must be carefully crafted and constantly revised. They have to be sequenced to guide the students' thinking logically through complex concepts so they can arrive at their own understanding. Eventually, though, this approach to education can be used to encourage students to care about the material being examined. Once that battle has been won, the professor's job becomes considerably easier.

The Payoff

Thinking about teaching for long periods of time can give any person a headache. Challenging students and pushing them constantly to do their best will strain even the most patient teacher. Keeping them engaged in the study of complex material is a difficult goal to attain regardless of the approach being employed in class. Truly-caring for each of the scores of individuals sitting in class every semester is a job more suited for a saint than a mere mortal. Teaching in college can quickly become a profession with extraordinary (virtually unlimited) demands. Over three decades ago, I developed a formula to help remind me of the sacrifice needed for success. It is not exact science but it provides a reasonable benchmark for the type of effort required.

If I can be an average teacher with X hours of work, then I can be a good teacher with 2X hours of work and a great teacher with 3X hours of work.

The question teachers face each day is: How good do I really want to be and how many hours of work am I willing and able to invest to achieve that level of quality?

This decision is complicated because the psychological reward system for teachers can be virtually invisible. Novels and movies tend to present college teaching in a glorified and unrealistic fashion. The wise professor speaks and all of the students hang on each word--the guru and the disciples. The transformation of young minds takes place right before the professor's own eyes. Accolades pour in from admirers. Daily reality, though, can be quite a different story. Rewards for a job well done are elusive. Professors do not fix cars or construct furniture or bake cakes or heal the sick. At the end of the day, the warm glow of specific accomplishments is rarely present.

Whether, the teacher lectures or engages in animated classroom debates, students look the same walking out of class as they did upon entering. Immediate gratification for spending additional time to develop a thoughtful and effective educational experience rarely exists. Even to the trained eye, average exertion often seems to produce the same results as great effort. Students do not always express their deepest appreciation for being challenged to think. Teaching is like planting apple seeds. The person who sows those seeds is unlikely to be around to enjoy the grown tree or the fruit it yields.

The teacher's work is performed almost on faith that good results will come eventually from the effort being expended. Over time, faith can wear thin. Teachers are not human if they have never wondered why they work so hard. There is the assumption apple trees will grow from their efforts but those results are rarely glimpsed. Teachers do the work purely on hope.

Shortly after President Nixon resigned from office, I had a student named Donnie. I remember Donnie as an average student who had average skills and did average work. He was a nice young man who did not stand out in a class of twenty-five juniors. Until June 2007, I had not heard from--or even thought of--him for over thirty-one years. Then, I received the following e-mail late one Saturday evening:

"I'm one of your old students just wanting to say thanks. I'm sure you get many e-mails like this; something from someone in your past you couldn't possibly remember. But that's okay--we remember you. I was a Gardner-Webb student in the mid-70s. I had you for both introductory and intermediate accounting and somehow survived. I was a young kid/student who didn't have a clue about accounting, studying, thinking--you get the picture. But I have to say: you taught me (us) so much. I left Gardner-Webb with a degree but, more importantly, with a philosophy and strategy about thinking that came directly from you. Today I'm a Senior Vice President and Chief Risk Officer for Retail Banking for one of the country's top 4 banks with responsibility for a \$65 billion credit portfolio. I would not be here without your guidance. Your approach to teaching, asking so many questions (putting us constantly on the spot), was perfect for so many of your students. So perfect, that when I got my first job it was easy because all I had to do was analyze business financial statements, calculate ratios, review trends, etc. That is what I did for most of my weekends for two years under you. But it was so valuable. My wife and I were talking tonight about major influences in our lives and you came to my mind. Congratulations on your outstanding career and the many, many lives that you've influenced. Thanks especially for influencing mine."

I am lucky. After so many years, I get the thrill of seeing a few of the apple trees in blossom. That makes this job so much easier. As an older professor, I do not have to prepare for class each new day purely on the hope that some benefit is accruing to the students. I know, from experience, the extra effort required to do this job is worth the time and energy that must be invested.

College teachers plant seeds every day--people who move on to live happy, productive, and successful lives much like Donnie.

That is what this profession is all about.

ADDED MATERIAL

Professor Hoyle has been teaching college for nearly four decades but in the last eighteen months was named one of Business Week's 22 Favorite Undergraduate Professors in the United States and the 2007 Virginia Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. Additional essays on teaching are available at <http://oncampus.richmond.edu/~jhoyle/>