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Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

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Assessing Quality of Teaching in Higher Education

What follows is the Introduction for a paper by K.P. Mohanan for the Centre for Development of Teaching & Learning. To read the complete document follow the link at the end of this article.

EDUCATIONAL policy in many parts of the world has witnessed in the recent years a growing tendency to recognize teaching and research as equally important missions of a university, moving away from the one sided emphasis on research. John O'Leary's Good University Guide 1999, reports even a tendency to assign greater importance to teaching.

The increased emphasis on teaching has led to a more widespread use of a number of strategies aimed at improving and evaluating the quality of teaching, such as teaching excellence awards, student feedback, peer review reports on teaching, and teacher appraisals for promotions. These activities call for making informed judgments on the quality of teaching. In order to meet this challenge in a principled way, it is essential to develop a clearly articulated vision of excellence in university teaching.

If we ask university students to identify their best teacher, there is a high chance that they will pick out the most popular teacher. A popular teacher may very well be what Jacob Neusner calls a "grade C professor" in his article "Grading Your Professors", popular simply because (s)he gives the students what they want and has an attractive charismatic personality. It is important, therefore, that the guidelines for teaching excellence awards and the design of student feedback questionnaire be based on a value system that allows us to distinguish between popular teaching and excellent teaching. Once we have forged such a shared value system, it is equally important to communicate our conception of teaching excellence to the students, and help them modify their own value system and expectations.

Who is an excellent teacher? What is excellent teaching? How do we distinguish excellent teaching from competent or merely satisfactory teaching? When does teaching

become unsatisfactory? What follows is an attempt to address these issues in a systematic fashion. The focus of our inquiry will be on undergraduate teaching, graduate teaching being more integrated with research and supervision.

A note of clarification before we begin. There exists a certain degree of skepticism in certain quarters about the attempt to articulate a shared conception of excellence in teaching. The rationale for the skepticism appears to be the recognition that teachers can be excellent in many different ways, and the resultant reluctance to prescribe a single style of teaching to all. The responses to the skepticism are as follows.

It is true that if we focus on what the teacher does in the classroom, excellence can result from many diverse activities. There is no single definition of excellent teaching in terms of what the teacher does. The teaching activities that teachers employ are dependent partly on the discipline and partly on the personality of the teacher. What works for one may not work for the other. Having acknowledged the diversity of strategies, is there a corresponding diversity of views when it comes to the question of the global qualities of the learning outcome? If we characterize teaching excellence in terms of the quality of learning that the teaching strategies are likely to trigger, it is indeed possible to have considerable convergence of views.

It is also the case that even though there is no single teaching strategy that can be prescribed for all teachers, it is still possible to make statements of the form "All things being equal, X is better than Y." For instance, it is doubtful if anyone would disagree on statements like, "All else being equal, interactive teaching is likely to trigger better learning than non-interactive teaching.", "All else being equal, clear speech in lectures is

likely to trigger better learning than unclear speech.", and "All else being equal, tasks that involve the exercise of critical thinking are likely to trigger better learning than the absence of such tasks." It is indeed possible to identify a collection of ingredients that contribute towards better learning, though there is no need to prescribe any given subset from this collection.

If we truly believe that teaching is facilitating learning, evaluation of teaching quality shifts its focus from the teacher to the process of learning. In the body of this paper, K.P. Mohanan explores in detail the consequences of this shift of focus. Teaching evaluation should include a careful consideration of module objectives and syllabuses, handouts, selection of readings, classroom activities, feedback to students, choice of assessment modes, and design of exercises, assignments, projects, quizzes, and final examinations. The quality of these ingredients must be assessed in the context of a reasonable estimate of the quality of learning outcome that they facilitate, in terms of knowledge, application, thinking, independent learning, communication, mind set and values, and interpersonal skills. In particular, it is important to estimate how well a teacher empowers students to become self-directed independent life-long learners.

[Link: Assessing Quality of Teaching](#)

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March 2	September 7
April 6	October 5
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Stimulating critical and independent thinking

AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL, IT IS CRUCIAL THAT STUDENTS LEARN TO THINK FOR THEMSELVES

Guard against spoon-feeding

Students must be encouraged and trained to fend for themselves. Instead of providing them with copious notes, teach library skills and guide them with a reference list to obtain information for themselves. Handouts have their uses, but ensure that they are used judiciously and not to perpetuate spoon-feeding. Consequently, summaries/outlines, diagrams, problems, questions and reading lists, are pedagogically more defensible than a copy of the full text of the lecture.

Do not condone low-level responses

Make clear to students that they cannot get by with regurgitating factual information (e.g. by setting challenging tasks; by announcing that an assignment that merely catalogues facts will get a low grade).

Demand demonstration of deep understanding

Use teaching activities that require students to engage in deep-level processing of what is learnt.

- Raise pertinent questions and present problems rather than provide all the answers.
- Set assignments that demand investigation, correlation and application rather than a 'repackaging' of lecture notes and recommended readings.

Prioritise understanding

Spend time helping students to grasp fundamental principles and concepts.

- Keep the factual load that has to be memorised to a minimum. This will, of course, vary among disciplines.
- Get students habituated to seeking/giving

explanations for answers that are given by others or made by themselves; this will discourage 'stock'/rote-learned answers.

De-emphasise didactic teaching

Allocate more time to interactive group work and self-directed learning.

Review assessment procedures

Ensure that procedures are consistent with encouraging deep processing and understanding:

- While multiple-choice questions are effective in checking knowledge of facts, they are less effective than essay-type questions in testing for critical thinking and understanding.
- Excessive weightage given to summative assessment may discourage risk-taking and independent thinking.

Daphne Pan, Director, Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, National University of Singapore, July 2008, [http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/handbook/learn/issues.htm], June 18, 2009

Praise, Advice and Reminders of the Sour Economy for Graduates

DELIVERING THE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS last month at the University of Notre Dame, in Indiana, President Obama told graduates they were a generation who must "find a path back to prosperity."

Graduates heard a similar message at hundreds of colleges this spring, as commencement orators — including actors, executives, poets and heads of state — leavened their congratulatory messages with acknowledgment of the bleak marketplace outside campus.

"We are living in the most difficult economic environment since the Great Depression," Bud Selig, the commissioner of Major League Baseball, said at the University of Wisconsin.

Some speakers, though, found time to wisecrack.

At Wagner College on Staten Island, for instance, Gov. David A. Paterson of New York said the country was experiencing the worst recession in 80 years, but he also reminisced about his commencement decades earlier.

Some students graduated magna cum laude, Mr. Paterson said, and others summa cum

laude. "And then there were people like me who found everything to do but study," he said. "And we graduated thank you laude."

Besides the president, the first lady, Michelle Obama, and at least 10 of the 15 cabinet secretaries addressed commencement ceremonies this spring.

The White House chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, told graduates of Sarah Lawrence College, in Westchester County, N.Y., that as a high school senior he had by accident nearly sliced off a finger, yet had foolishly followed up with a nighttime swim that left him with gangrene, battling for his life.

His point? "Don't be reckless," Mr. Emanuel said. "Take what you do and how you live your life seriously."

Perhaps the most somber admonishment came from Energy Secretary Steven Chu, who warned graduates at Harvard University that if the world pursued business as usual, climate change could be "so rapid that many species will have trouble adapting, including humans."

Sam Dillon, New York Times, June 13, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/06/14/education/0614-commencement.html?ref=education], June 16, 2009

"Welcome to the American working class."

- Barbara Ehrenreich, author



"Sometimes it is important to wake up and stop dreaming."

- Larry Page, co-founder, Google

Excerpt from David McCullough, University of Oklahoma, address:

"There is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. Never was, never will be. We are all, as were those in whose footsteps we follow, shaped by the influence and examples of countless others — parents, grandparents, friends, rivals. And by those who wrote the music that moves us to our souls, those whose performance on stage or on the playing field took our breaths away, those who wrote the great charters which are the bedrock of our system of self-government. And so many who, to our benefit, struggled and suffered through times of trouble and grave uncertainty. And by teachers. ... I want to stress as emphatically as I can the immeasurable importance of teachers."