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Reinventing Our Role as Teachers

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As a new semester rapidly approaches, and many of us look forward to returning to in-person classrooms with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation, this strikes me as an especially auspicious moment to reimagine what it means to be a teacher.

Like it or not, the roles and responsibilities of college instructors are undergoing a sea change. Expectations about how and what to teach and our relationships with students are escalating. In addition to our instructional role, professors are expected to be a learning facilitator, a mentor, an effective classroom manager, a talented user of instructional technologies and a learning architect.

Simply lecturing or leading discussions is no longer sufficient. We are expected to provide every student with a rich and meaningful learning experience [3] and to address the academic challenges, and to a certain extent, the nonacademic difficulties that students encounter.

We are under pressure to rethink:

- Our content, to make it more inclusive and diverse and to ensure that it addresses current controversies.
- Our pedagogies, to make learning more active and interactional.
- Our relationship with our students, to be more supportive and nurturing.
- Our assessments, to make them fairer and ensure that these better evaluate students' learning and their ability to apply knowledge and skills in diverse contexts.

Thinking of ourselves simply as purveyors of information Is not enough.

For years, accreditors, employers and a host of educational reformers have called for a more outcomes-oriented education with explicit learning objectives and rigorous assessments to evaluate and certify students' knowledge and proficiencies. Convinced that grade inflation and a diluted liberal arts curriculum have eroded the value of a traditional college degree, a growing body of thought began to favor an approach to teaching that emphasizes transparent, measurable learning outcomes and demonstrated mastery of essential knowledge and skills.

Nothing wrong with that. But teaching today demands much more of an instructor. Today's students -- 56 percent of whom are first-generation college students [4] -- require professors who do more than simply transmit content. In consequence, we need to broaden and reimagine our understanding of an instructor's role.

So, how, then, might we rethink what it means to be a college teacher? Let me briefly enumerate six principles that might guide us.

1. Teaching Is a Creative Art

Teaching, at its best, is a dynamic and creative act, and instructors need to think of themselves as catalysts for students' growth, development and transformation.

We can teach as we were taught, or we can draw upon our imagination and ingenuity to devise powerful and memorable learning experiences that go beyond lectures or discussions and that challenge our students; help them grow cognitively, socially and ethically; and leave a lasting imprint.

2. Teaching Is Performance

Teaching is, as Seymour Bernard Sarason has written, a performing art [5]. Even when instructors forsake lectures [6] and embrace a project-based approach or peer-to-peer learning, a teacher, like any other performer, must captivate and galvanize an audience, in this case, students. An instructor must improvise when necessary and engage and evoke a response, whether this is to inspire, provoke, challenge, excite, encourage or stimulate.

This does not mean that a teacher should be an entertainer or a comic. Nor does it imply that an instructor must feign emotions, be overly dramatic or put on an act. But it should lead a teacher to recognize that they are the intermediary through which the curriculum is brought to life. The most successful instructors convey emotion, stimulate thoughts and, at times, cause discomfort. They "serve as a vital conduit between the learner and subject matter [6]."

3. Teaching Is Mentoring

If all that teaching required was the transmission of knowledge and competencies, an instructor could be replaced by a video. But students need more: a guide, a tutor, an adviser, a counselor, a role model.

Mentoring rests on a caring relationship that involves guidance, advice, assistance and support and goes far beyond simply holding office hours. Instructors are the campus personnel most likely to detect a student who is struggling academically or personally. As a result, they need to truly be first responders, providing encouragement and assistance and directing students to the services they need.

Be the mentor that your students need.

4. Teaching Is a Craft

We've all encountered born teachers, whose ability to engross, enthrall, excite and inspire are astounding. Yet even these charismatic individuals must acquire a host of skills that no one is born with, such as the ability to effectively manage a classroom or to provide substantive feedback geared to a student's needs and sensitivities.

For most of us, teaching is a craft: a set of learned skills and experienced judgment [7]. Many of the attributes of effective teaching -- empathy, clarity, organization -- can be taught or refined, while the skills and techniques that work with particular students must be cultivated and acquired by observation, reading, training, reflection and practical classroom experience.

We owe it to our students to constantly polish our craft.

5. Teaching Is Science

In recent years, cognitive and developmental scientists and neuroscientists have uncovered a series of general principles that can improve teaching and learning. Each of us, I believe, has a responsibility to familiarize ourselves with the learning sciences and to draw upon its key insights in our course design and pedagogy.

Here are a number of those lessons:

(1) Durable learning requires effort on the students' part.

Students must process the information or skills and organize the material into a mental model or schema, for example by organizing and outlining the material, relating it to prior knowledge, summarizing the information, formulating a question about the material, and applying concepts and skills in new and varied contexts.

Instructors can promote durable learning with frequent quizzing and spacing or distributing exposure to content over time and encouraging students to repeatedly practice skills, retrieve information and mix or interleave multiple subjects when they study.

(2) Instructors must avoid overloading students' working memory.

Because students only have a limited amount of working memory, it's essential that it not be overloaded. So: break complex material into smaller chunks. Highlight essential material and avoid extraneous or irrelevant material. Consider using oral or written words and images in tandem to reinforce essential points.

In addition, build on students' prior knowledge. Provide students with a road map to the topics that you are going to cover and to your learning objectives. Familiarize your students with essential words and concepts prior to presenting complex material. Use casual, rather than formal, language in class. Present the course material in realistic contexts.

(3) Engagement, motivation and mind-set all play important roles in learning.

Techniques that engage students include organizing classes around an inquiry, a problem or a controversy; connecting the material to current, real-world issues or to your students' interests; and making the students participants in their own learning by having them, individually or in groups, research, discuss or debate an issue or make a presentation.

Without motivation there is no persistence or learning. Because intrinsic motivation, which comes from within, is more effective than extrinsic motivation, it's essential that an instructor convince students that mastering a particular topic is valuable.

Students' mind-set can expedite or impede learning. If students feel isolated and alone or believe that talent is innate or are convinced that people like them tend to perform poorly in a particular subject or on a high-stakes exam, they are likely to underperform. In contrast, when students feel a sense of belonging and believe that abilities can be improved through hard work, they are much more likely to succeed academically.

(4) Effective feedback plays a vital role in helping students master skills and content.

Effective feedback -- feedback that is timely, specific, clear, explanatory, improvement-focused and directed at the task rather than the student -- plays a pivotal role in improving the quality of student performance. The challenge is to help students internalize the rubrics that skilled teacher uses in evaluating their work and to make those standards their own.

(5) Metacognition -- the nurturing of self-awareness -- is essential to producing independent learners.

Developing students' metacognitive abilities -- the capacity to accurately assess what they know and don't know about a particular topic -- is essential if students ae to be reflective, self-aware, self-regulating learners who are able to learn on their own.

6. Teaching Is Engineering Learning.

Teaching and learning will improve when we consider these as a design challenge. A knowledgeable instructor must decide what a student needs to learn and then figure out how best to convey that knowledge and build needed skills, and how to assess the extent to which a student has attained mastery.

Becoming a learning engineer (or architect) requires instructors to think intentionally about their pedagogical strategies and consciously reflect on the learning challenges that students face. It also forces us to closely examine the reasons why students disengage or become confused and to devise creative solutions.

We sometimes hear that this is teaching and learning's golden age [8]. In one sense, this is obviously true. Not only have the number of teaching centers, teaching awards and teaching-focused journals, books and conferences proliferated, but many individual faculty members are experimenting with new techniques and technologies and deploying new pedagogical models -- discovery, inquiry, competency, mastery and project based, among others. At the same time, research in the learning sciences has swollen, and efforts to apply the findings of the learning sciences systematically have surged.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to doubt whether we are witnessing a true teaching and learning renaissance. After all, teaching remains an amateurish enterprise and an individual endeavor. Our classrooms remain as they were in the past, black boxes, where outside observers rarely intrude. Teacher-centered pedagogies continue to dominate instruction, and we have no idea at all how many faculty members have actually made new approaches to teaching an integral part of their classes.

Worse yet, our measures of teaching effectiveness and student learning -- which rest largely on student self-reports, course evaluations, grades and low- or no-stakes tests -- are far from the stuff that rigorous research is made of.

Of course, the fact that colleges and universities treat teaching as an individual undertaking is not entirely a bad thing. After all, we know that a variety of teaching styles can be effective with the right students. Teaching and learning

are often a matter of what specialists in learning fit call “regulatory fit” -- a match between an instructor’s style and an individual student’s needs.

In addition, there’s a danger that some current forms of pedagogical training might actually backfire. This is the case for several reasons:

- Too often, instruction in teaching is generic and doesn’t sufficiently account for disciplinary differences in methods and modes of argumentation and presentation.
- The constructivist model that has dominated learning theory since the 1970s reflects an overly narrow view of how students learn by understating the value of foundational knowledge and the teacher’s role in directing, guiding and scaffolding learning, and in providing critical feedback and evaluation.
- Today’s backward course design approach places excessive weight on measurable outcomes and discounts equally important learning goals that are not easily assessed.

When I was a graduate student at Yale in the 1970s, a group of us asked the department’s very best teacher to tell us what teaching meant to him. He responded with a quip: “It comes with the job.”

We were crestfallen. We expected him to tell us that teaching was a precious calling, a vocation invested with a special higher purpose that requires passion, dedication and a level of selflessness found in few other jobs -- and that it’s the one job that results in a lasting legacy, our students.

Today, no academic job applicant would dare dismiss teaching as merely as a job requirement, and not just out of political correctness.

To be an educator today requires us to recognize that our obligations have expanded, that along with instruction, we need to embrace our other roles as mentor, success coach, adviser and counselor. It’s not enough to be a presenter of information or a grader. We stand on the front lines, and student success largely hinges on how well we fulfill our multifaceted responsibilities.

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Links

[1] https://www.insidehighered.com/users/steven-mintz
[2] https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma
[3] https://www.edutopia.org/redefining-role-teacher
[4] https://firstgen.naspa.org/journal-and-research/national-data-fact-sheets-on-first-generation-college-students/national-data-fact-sheets
[5] https://www.amazon.com/Teaching-Performing-Seymour-Bernard-Sarason/dp/0807738905
[6] https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/01/what-classrooms-can-learn-from-magic/425100/
[7] https://www.stat.purdue.edu/~dsmoore/articles/Craft.pdf
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