

Welcome to the Learner-Centered Classroom

Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education

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According to a national survey conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 44 percent of faculty members reported that their students are not satisfactorily prepared for the demands of college-level work. Further, “70 percent of students who took at least one remedial course in college do not obtain a degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment.” With the number of students unprepared for university-level work increasing, these statistics are worrisome. Clearly there is a need for an accessible compendium of best practices for teaching students unprepared for the demands of higher education work.

With low to average high school grades, Kathleen F. Gabriel herself was ill-prepared for university-level work, when a local state college rejected her application for admission. Only after an appeal was she finally accepted in late July, one month before school started, under a “special admit” category. With perseverance and encouragement from teachers, Gabriel not only went on to graduate, but was accepted in a teacher-education certification program. Since then she has worked successively as a high school social science teacher, a resource specialist for students with learning disabilities, a developer of an academic support program for at-risk and unprepared college students, and a faculty development specialist.

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In other words, when Gabriel writes about teaching unprepared students, she really knows what she's talking about. In *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education*, she has prepared an extremely accessible, readable, and ultimately practical guide for teaching the growing numbers of students inadequately prepared for college work. In fact most of the classroom strategies she describes are effective for teaching all students, regardless of their level of prior academic preparation.

At 145 pages, *Teaching Unprepared Students* is a compact introduction to a learner-centered approach to teaching. Faculty members used to teacher-centered approaches—the delivery of content in well-structured lectures with little opportunity for student engagement, for example—but beginning to question the effectiveness of these approaches, may find this volume especially helpful. With its bright red cover, the volume amounts to a quiet manifesto for student-centered teaching: a set of guiding principles as well as a well-structured set of practices to create a total learning environment conducive to the learning of all students.

After briefly describing the phenomenon of unprepared and at-risk students in higher education, Gabriel proposes a remedy packaged in seven chapters: Philosophical Foundations, The First Week of Class, Begin with Consistent Contact, Learning Styles and The Science of Learning, Embracing Learner-Centered Education, Interweaving Assessment and Teaching, and Techniques for Promoting Academic Integrity and Discouraging Cheating. The volume closes with a brief epilogue, a helpful set of four appendices, and an extensive list of references.

An unspoken premise of Gabriel's book is the ultimate responsibility that instructors bear for the learning of all students, rather than passing on responsibility for the learning of the less well-prepared to academic support staff. (In fact academic support centers receive only fleeting mention in the volume.) Undergirding her comprehensive approach to the learner-centered classroom are five guiding principles that are the core of her teaching philosophy: a belief that all students can become lifelong learners, the necessity of commitment and time to bring about real change, the importance of struggle in learning and life, students' acceptance of responsibility for learning, and letting students do for themselves what they are able to do for themselves. Influenced strongly by Annie Sullivan's work with Helen Keller ("The room's a wreck, but her napkin is folded.") (p. 12), the three legs of accountability, high standards, and expectations of appropriate behavior ultimately support Gabriel's approach to teaching.

As her guiding principles and the chapter titles of the book suggest, Gabriel takes a comprehensive approach to creating a learner-centered environment. Insuring consistent attendance, preparing a detailed course syllabus that clearly spells out expectations, and helping students become more aware of how they learn and the kinds of behaviors that lead to academic success take equal footing with alternative forms of assessing students and teaching strategies that engage students

in their learning. Far from a random set of teaching tips and tricks, pulled out of the bag in response to a particular type of student or circumstance, Gabriel lays out a proactive and integrated program to increase the likelihood of success for all students from the very start, placing ultimate responsibility on students for their own learning and achievement.

Some readers may be surprised by the lack of emphasis on alternative teaching strategies per se. While Gabriel certainly advocates teaching approaches that promote active student engagement, she does not require a wholesale overhaul of instructors' teaching repertoire. In fact, faculty members who use the lecture as their dominant teaching strategy will be able to start by implementing many of the classroom practices recommended in the book without fundamentally altering their core teaching strategy. Gabriel points the way, however, to teaching approaches that engage students more actively in their own learning as a way of taking more responsibility for it. Over time, faculty members may wish to adopt these approaches as they ease into an increasingly learner-centered approach to teaching at their own pace.

Another surprise is the extensive list of references, current and far ranging, cited in the volume. And another plus, the book is extremely concise and readable, remarkably devoid of scholarly jargon. At the same time, all of the approaches described in the book are supported by current research and best practice as the many citations scattered throughout the volume attest. For those readers who want to delve more deeply into the literature, Gabriel has provided a wonderful set of core references for further study.

In short, *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education* is a compact introduction to the learner-centered classroom. Faculty members who implement the approaches Gabriel describes and justifies so well will certainly enhance the learning of their students and most probably their own enjoyment and satisfaction from teaching as well. 