

# *Reinventing the Wheel*

## *The Role of Class Discussion in the Learning-Centered Classroom*

by Patricia Cross, Cross Papers No 6., League for Innovation in the  
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*Reviewed by Thomas P. Gardner*

**A**t the end of the spring semester last year, a stack of Patricia Cross's *The Role of Class Discussion in the Learning-Centered Classroom* appeared in the mail room at my community college. Dutifully my colleagues and I picked up our copies, and when time permitted, we not only read—or at least glanced through—our copies, but began to comment on what we had read. Initially, these comments were politely non-committal, but when I finally finished reading this booklet more carefully for the second time, I decided that a more detailed response might be appropriate. After all, Cross represents a well-funded and highly visible movement in community college education, one that is only just starting to receive the serious criticism it deserves.

That this is a well-funded movement is demonstrated by the fact that these Cross Papers are distributed “. . . to thousands of community college leaders around the world.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is worth noting that this publication's corporate sponsor, Educational Testing Service (ETS), produces a broad range of high-stakes standardized tests, most notably the SAT. It is also a former employer of this publication's author.<sup>2</sup>

To what extent then do Patricia Cross and the League for Innovation in the Community College share the philosophy of their corporate sponsor, ETS? Can learning, or the potential to learn, be represented numerically by standardized tests? Clearly, ETS thinks so, or it would have no business. But it is equally clear that an increasing number of colleges have their doubts about the value of such tests.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps ETS recognizes that its future will lie more and more with community colleges. After all, community colleges, by not having a selective admissions policy, must have large numbers of more marginal students who can be difficult to educate. What if those community colleges adopt a philosophy that really emphasizes the extent to which learning is the responsibility of the student? And what if they also define learning as that which can be measured by standardized tests, one given before the “learning” takes place, and one given afterwards?

In between these two tests, the community colleges, assisted by learning technology firms, will provide a lot of learning technology, with a “guide on the side” to keep the machinery oiled—and to be blamed, along with the student, if the machinery does not produce the test score that it was supposed to produce at the end of the learning interval.

This sounds like a business plan for ETS, doesn’t it? It also sounds like a good reason for ETS to be “. . . a key partner in League projects and activities for well over a decade.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, this partnership seems to be so mutually beneficial from a business perspective that it would be no surprise to learn that one partner has shaped the other to fit in its pocket.

Of course, standardized tests can—in combination with other indicators that are not quantifiable—offer an insight into an individual’s learning accomplishments or potential. I was an indifferent and poorly motivated student in high school some 40 years ago. My SAT test scores were fairly high, though, and so it was possible for me to attend the college of my choice. Many of my high school teachers could have told you I was reasonably bright but not well motivated. When I graduated from college, near the top of my class, my Graduate Record Exam scores helped me to obtain a fellowship at the University of Michigan. This time, my grades helped as well, though, and the recommendations of my teachers were probably even more influential.

But it is time we returned to our real subject, Patricia Cross’s *The Role of Class Discussion in the Learning-Centered Classroom*. A fair amount of what Dr. Cross writes in this booklet no one with any sort of teaching experience could quarrel with. She reiterates, for instance, Chickering and Gamson’s seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education, which were hardly earth-shattering revelations when Chickering and Gamson articulated them in 1987: encourage student-faculty contact, encourage cooperation among students, encourage active learning, give prompt feedback, emphasize time on task, communicate high expectations, respect diverse talents and ways of learning.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, these seven principles were widely perceived as what better small undergraduate colleges were already doing. It has been large universities, like those that Dr. Cross has been associated throughout her academic career, that have found it difficult to maintain these principles of

good practice, at least in their undergraduate curricula.

More specifically, no one would quarrel with the idea that actively engaging students in discussion can be an effective teaching method. Furthermore, no experienced teacher would quarrel with the idea that achieving such a discussion requires the kind of flexible planning that Dr. Cross mentions on page 9 and then returns to on page 11. Unfortunately, she fills the space in between with an analogy that is limited in its applicability and with an illustration that is downright chilling.

The limited analogy compares a successful class discussion with a successful sports team. There is, of course, a kind of trite validity to this analogy, often overlooked because of its familiarity. Cooperative learning of the sort that can take place through teamwork can be truly valuable to the class's individual students. However, sports teams work together to achieve success for the team, but the most important aspect of an individual student's success in learning is determined by what that individual student has after the class or course is over.

**T**he illustration concerns a faculty seminar at Harvard that was led by Professor C.R. Christensen of the Harvard Business School. Dr. Cross writes. . .

So we were considerably surprised one day--and some of us a bit upset--when he [Professor Christensen] ignored a young history professor who had had his hand up for some period of time. Others had been immediately called on. It was certainly not that Professor Christensen did not see the young man, nor was he being disregarded because he talked too much or made irrelevant comments. Why then did the instructor not call on him? After everyone had a chance to become thoroughly puzzled, Professor Christensen addressed our concern. "Yes," he said, "I saw his hand go up early on, and it remained up through four or five comments. This was the clue to me that his comment pertained to points made four or five comments back and was unlikely to build on the current direction and move it forward."<sup>6</sup>

Well, Professor Christensen has his assumptions—so easily confused with prejudices!—and I have mine. I assume that the *young* history professor (italics mine) raised his hand because he had something to say that he thought was worth saying and relevant to the discussion. He kept his hand in the air because he thought that what he had to say continued to be worth saying and relevant. You see, this is why I would raise my hand and keep it in the air and why, I assume, Professor Christensen would raise his hand and keep it in the air if he weren't leading the discussion.

Professor Christensen has an interesting test of relevancy, one that is reminiscent, at least, of the tests once used in Salem, Massachusetts, to determine if someone were a witch. He knew that the *young* history professor had nothing relevant to say because the *young* history professor

believed that he did have something relevant to say. If the *young* history professor, properly intimidated by not being called on, had lowered his hand, then the professor would also have had proof that he was right. Let's face it, that *young* history professor was a witch no matter what he did, and Professor Christensen presented his subsequent explanation as "proof" that he was right, with the likely result that the *young* history professor would be sufficiently humiliated to not raise his hand again.

And why have I kept italicizing the word *young*? It is because this word is the only clue that Dr. Cross provides regarding Professor Christensen's real reason for not calling on the history professor. Had he said too much already? No. Had what he had said so far been irrelevant? No. But he was young, and it is easy to infer that he must have been much younger than either Professor Christensen or Dr. Cross. Ask yourself how Dr. Cross's narrative would be understood if, between the words "young" and "history," one were to insert the word "female" or "Asian" or "Baptist."

Dr. Cross's enthusiastic introduction of Professor Christensen as "the kindly, sensitive master teacher" who "subtly and skillfully" directs the discussion, combined with her momentary puzzlement (if not chagrin) at his treatment of the young history professor,<sup>7</sup> reveals just how completely she has accepted a system wherein reason and even courtesy are subordinated to academic authority. Ironically, she has already pointed out how "research shows that even when they think they are not lecturing, but rather conducting class discussion, teachers are doing 80 percent of the talking!"<sup>8</sup> She might want to give a bit more thought to what the discussion leader says and how the other participants in the discussion respond to it.

Furthermore, it might be worth considering how a discussion among faculty at Harvard University might differ from a classroom discussion at a typical community college. Can the teacher leading the discussion at the community college count on the discussion participants to have the same high level of academic experience? Can this teacher even count on all participants to have read the relevant assignments? My experience as a teacher of undergraduates at both community colleges and universities for over 30 years now causes me to think that the real difficulty is getting more than just a few students to speak up in a discussion, especially to the extent where one student is responding to what another student is saying. Believe me, I treasure those students who raise their hands, and if a few of them occasionally seek to dominate a discussion, then I try my very best to use that as a basis for including still others, recognizing how much better this is than those times when I can hardly get anyone to answer a question.

Dr. Cross has a lot of experience, too. She is a professor of higher edu-

education emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, and has been the assistant dean of women at the University of Illinois as well as the dean of students at Cornell University. She has been a distinguished research scientist at Educational Testing Service and a research educator at The Center for Research and Development in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley. She has been a professor and chair of the Department of Administration, Planning and Social Policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a Professor of Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>9</sup> I could go on, as page 32 does for another four paragraphs, but in none of it is there any indication that Dr. Cross has had any experience teaching undergraduates, especially in a community college.

Finally, there is one element of Dr. Cross's booklet that should be noted in passing, even though it is little more than the continued contemplation of an insight that became trite shortly after it was first articulated as the central tenet of the educational movement with which such notables as Patricia Cross, Terry O'Banion, Robert Barr and John Tagg are identified. That insight is "that colleges exist not solely to 'provide instruction,' but to 'produce learning.'"<sup>10</sup>

Yes, it is possible to distinguish between teaching, which is what teachers do, and learning, which is what students do, and we might even want to refer to those students as learners if we need to emphasize their learning more than their studying. We can even distinguish between the learner, as an individual, and learning, which is a process that always involves a learner and often, but not always, involves a teacher.

Making all these distinctions may even be a pleasant exercise for a basic education course, but they are hardly the basis for a serious educational reform movement. Indeed, this supposed insight reminds me of that familiar conundrum first heard in elementary school: "If a tree falls in a forest, but no one is there, does it make a sound?" Perhaps, too, that old familiar question regarding how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Now, I am not the first person to wonder whether this insight is as valuable as those who are prominently associated with the League for Innovation in the Community College seem to think it is. Dr. Cross points out that "they [i.e., Robert Barr and John Tagg, the proponents of this insight] inadvertently led some to believe that teaching is diminished in favor of learning—which only goes to show how no good deed goes unpunished."<sup>11</sup> This weak refutation asks you to accept without question the assertion that Barr and Tagg's deed is good while characterizing those who question the validity or the importance of this insight as punishers rather than critics.

For the record, I am a critic who sees Barr and Tagg's insight as too

obvious to be of much importance—nor do I think it possesses any real originality. I suspect that Barr and Tagg made their “profound impression” mainly on those who have been associated with large institutions of higher education and who may have been remembering unsatisfactory elements of their own undergraduate education at those institutions. Furthermore, I suspect that emphasizing this insight encourages the kind of misinterpretation that Dr. Cross deprecates and the kind of misapplication by some college administrators that I deplore.

Good teachers will teach using all of the resources at their command. This means that they will, as the occasion demands, lead discussions, lecture, conduct labs, and have conferences with individual students. They will make appropriate use, but not excessive use, of both old and new technologies. They will be curious, independent learners who encourage their students to be curious, independent learners, too. They will be authorities in their classrooms who sometimes speak authoritatively from the front of the room, ideally with sufficient skill and enthusiasm to make what they say memorable, and sometimes speak while beside a student, tailoring what they say to the student’s individual and specific learning needs. And in both settings they will welcome what their students say, hoping for originality while recognizing that even familiar ideas can be fresh and original in each student. This means that they will try to be patient, too, especially if they are teaching a skill that prizes freshness and originality, like writing, drawing, singing—or computer software design. <sup>nea</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cross, 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Cross, 32.
- <sup>3</sup> Bollinger, B11.
- <sup>4</sup> Cross, 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Chickering and Gamson quoted in Cross, 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Cross, 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Cross, 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Cross, 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Cross, 32.
- <sup>10</sup> Cross, 5.
- <sup>11</sup> Cross, 5.

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- Bollinger, Lee. “Debate Over the SAT Masks Perilous Trends in College Admissions.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 12 Jul. 2002: B11-B12.
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