

Designing Courses

Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses

by L. Dee Fink
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003

Reviewed by D. Lynn Sorenson

When I first met L. Dee Fink of the University of Oklahoma (OU) in the 1980s, he had already been actively helping college faculty with their teaching and their students' learning for over a decade. After a stint in the Peace Corps and earning master's and doctoral degrees at the University of Chicago, Fink came to OU in the late seventies. By the time I served an internship in his Instructional Development Program in the early nineties, he had become practically a legend on campus.

My first day on the job I asked him if his Instructional Development Program had a mission statement or a "charge" or some such guiding mandate, to help me get a handle on what he did, what the program was all about, and how I might fit in. Characteristically—and always the master teacher—he said, "No, we don't really have a mission statement but why don't you create one?"

Later that month, I told him I wasn't sure yet what the exact wording of the mission statement would be, but I knew the secret to the program's success: "FF of E."

"FF of E," he said. "What the heck is that?"

I replied, "Fink, Friend of Faculty."

He chuckled.

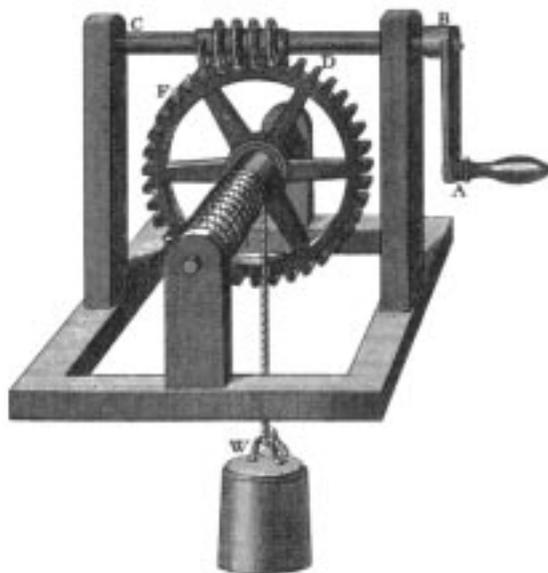
It was obvious to me that his influence and credibility were maintained—not through mandate, persuasion, or pressure—but by teachers' strong belief that he genuinely cared about them, their students and their learning.

While I have long since fled the Oklahoma Plains to my own “Rocky Mountain High,” Fink still supports OU faculty—and others—as he frequently consults on campuses across North America. He currently serves as president of a major national association of faculty/staff developers, the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education.

Now, based on three decades of research and practice, “Fink, Friend of Faculty” has distilled the crucial issues of college teaching and learning, as he sees them, into one comprehensive volume, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*, making available to college teachers and administrators his perspectives, based on decades of research and experience.

He begins the book by identifying two pervasive problems he has observed in North American faculty: “College teachers do not seem to have learning goals [for their courses or students] that go much beyond an understand-and-remember type of learning”—an “information dump,” Fink calls it. And, “Most [college] teachers seem to have difficulty figuring out what teaching activities they might use besides the two traditional standbys: lecturing and leading discussions.”

Fink uses this book—a compendium of his life’s work—to show the following: a) There are ways of teaching that are significantly different from what college teachers are doing now; b) Innovative ways of teaching can result in good things happening, both for students and for teachers; c) Teachers can receive guidance in figuring out how to teach in more effective ways; and d) Colleges, universities, and other related institutions in higher education need to recognize the worth of this effort and provide appropriate support.



To supplement the half-century monopoly of Bloom's and Krothwall's taxonomies of learning, Fink has devised a new taxonomy that may soon rival the old—at least in higher education. Educators familiar with the “ladder paradigm”—climbing step-by-step from the lowest level (remember) to the highest level (evaluate)—will be interested in Fink's non-hierarchical paradigm. In Fink's model, the six elements of significant learning are splayed out in a circle like petals of a daisy, with the petals overlapping as they converge at the center (www.significantlearning.org).

The following elements are the six major categories of Fink's taxonomy of significant learning:

1. **Learning How to Learn.** This element of significant learning includes aspects of becoming a better student, inquiring about a subject, and producing/motivating self-directed learners.

2. **Foundational Knowledge.** Acquiring and maintaining a foundational knowledge requires understanding and remembering both the information and the ideas that are discussed.

3. **Application.** This element involves applying skills that are gained in class, as well as thinking critically, being creative, and practicing practical thinking, and also being able to manage projects effectively.

4. **Integration.** This tenet of significant learning involves connecting ideas, people, and realms of life.

5. **Human Dimension.** Maintaining a human dimension as part of significant learning entail learning about oneself and about others.

6. **Caring.** To show true caring, instructors and faculty should help students develop new feelings, interests, and values.

Not unlike Kolb's “learning cycle,” Fink's taxonomy of significant learning can be entered at any point; it does not require entering at a particular point and ascending “steps” one at a time.

Having laid the foundation for Significant Learning in chapters one and two, Fink then provides two sequential chapters on course design, walking the reader step-by-step through the process in a mode of “workbook *cum* rationale.” Borrowing liberally from Wiggins, Gagne' and other course-design gurus, Fink seems more squarely “to hit the mark,” in my opinion—neither talking down to readers, nor burying them in “educationist jargon.”

Fink's 12-step program (yes, really!) for “Integrated Course Design” includes 12 questions for the instructor to ask herself as she proceeds through the planning process. Her answers provide the basis for the course a learning goals, teaching and learning activities, feedback, and assessment. These chapters include charts to fill in, graphs, suggestions, illustrations, and examples. This section is the practical heart of the book, placed between the two more philosophical chapters at the beginning and the three passionate ones at the end.

In the fifth chapter, through a series of explanations and examples, Fink drives home these principles: 1) It truly is possible to design courses in ways that support significant learning; 2) It matters what teachers do to promote this more ambitious learning agenda; 3) It makes an important difference if teachers set significant learning goals and use active learning and educative assessment.

Chapter six is aimed at current and future administrators. Fink suggests what faculty need to teach for significant learning and how administrators and institutions can help support innovations for improvement. He outlines major changes, not all of which cost money. Some are imminently doable, and while others seem beyond the scope or capabilities of some campuses, all are worthy ideals.

In the final chapter “The Human Significance of Good Teaching and Learning,” Fink waxes eloquent, with metaphors and a reference to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Along with this “call to arms,” he summarizes the previous sections and ends the book with “This is my hope and my dream.” His passion is contagious.

Although Fink’s book is accessible to almost anyone in higher education, in its entirety it might be a bit daunting for a brand new teacher. After all, there are four components of teaching, six elements of significant learning, four recommendations for administrators, 12 steps of course design, and a partridge in a pear tree (!?). My guess is that this is not a book most people will read cover to cover in one sitting; for one thing, with appendices, it’s nearly 300 pages long. Nevertheless the first two chapters, “Creating Significant Learning Experiences” and “A Taxonomy of Significant Learning” create a strong foundation for what follows; they are also well worth reading in and of themselves.

Chapters three and four offer a well-thought-out plan of course design. They provide any college teacher—first-year or veteran—with a systematic guide for designing a course. Given that course planning/design in higher education is sometimes willy-nilly—or even non-existent—this guide offers a common-sense, easy-to-follow-and-implement way to plan a new course or update an old one.

Chapter five gives courage to teachers to make the change to teaching for significant learning, and chapter six provides administrators with ideas and strategies to make good on their commitment to teaching and learning. Chapter seven brings Fink’s idealism full circle, from his youthful Peace Corps days to his maturing hopes for better teaching and learning—and more enduring outcomes from higher education.

In *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, Fink has created an appropriate balance of theory and practice, the ideal and the practical. For this reason alone, this is a valuable book. This volume serves well many purposes and many readers; where more eloquent writers like Parker

Palmer and Stephen Brookfield may be more entertaining or “inspiring,” Fink alone address the hard questions of implementing lofty goals and aspirations. *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* is a valuable reference for faculty, administrators, and institutions. It certainly belongs in any faculty/staff development office, and it is useful for thoughtful, pro-active teachers and administrators who want to make a difference in their teaching, their students’ learning and their institutions’ impact. 

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