

Thriving in Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobot@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ Paradox Power

So you see yourself as a learner-centered teacher. It's not about you; it's about the students. You get it. But still you have to grade; you have to cover the material. You feel conflicted a lot. How do you turn that troublesome conflict into something positive for both you and your students?

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Some college teachers see their work as knowing the content and delivering that content to students. Others see their responsibility as facilitating learning, not merely disseminating content. Still others—probably the most effective ones—see themselves as doing all of the above and, in addition, creating learning systems in which they are an important part. They see themselves and their students as unique, fully human individuals who occupy the social roles of teacher and student, who view the world (and the class) subjectively, and who interact intersubjectively. This perspective means that as a teacher, I accept that I have feelings, and that I am a complicated human being just like my students. For well over 20 years now, I have looked carefully at the data about how faculty see their work as teachers, and it seems clear to me that these three perspectives are part of a potential developmental sequence—teacher-centered (egocentrism), learner-centered (aliocentrism), and teacher/learner-centered (systemocentrism) (Robertson, 1996, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2001-2002, 2002, 2003, 2005). What I have also observed is that fundamental contradictions exist in the role of college teachers who see themselves as more than mere disseminators of knowledge. Here's how to make these contradictions work for you rather than against you.



Meet Douglas L. Robertson



Douglas L. Robertson is dean of Undergraduate Education and professor of Higher Education at Florida International University, the public, research university in Miami, Florida (56,000 students, 4th largest public nationally). Dr. Robertson has started or transformed five university teaching centers and has served as director of three. He has written or co-edited seven books on change and faculty development, most recently co-editing with Kay Gillespie, *A Guide to Faculty Development, 2nd ed.* He has served on editorial boards of numerous scholarly journals related to college teaching. He taught his first college course in 1971, and has received several teaching awards along the way.

Generative Paradox

When faced with a contradiction, we can treat it as a battle of opposites with winners and losers, or we can integrate the opposites to create a “generative paradox,” in which both sides are true simultaneously and feed each other synergistically. Let me illustrate how this works with the six contradictions that are fundamental to learner-centered teaching.

Control/Flow

Learning doesn’t always follow a direct route. You need to go with the flow. But a

semester has 16 weeks, and student financial aid and other bureaucratic necessities depend on timely grades. Future courses also depend on pre-requisite knowledge. Control and flow, both are necessary.

We have eight grandchildren, six under age 4. So I watch a lot of kid’s movies. When I think of this contradiction of control/flow, I think of “Polar Express,” and the conductor charged with getting a train of children to the North Pole for Christmas. Events occur that relate to each child solving their own special developmental kōan, or puzzle. The conductor always waits for the event to play out so the child reaps maximal learn-

ing, and ultimately, the train does arrive on time. Of course, magic is involved.

A similar magic occurs for learner-centered teachers who have the big picture locked in their heads—that is, they have a vision of what is truly important in the course and how those truly important things relate to each other. Chaos theory does not teach us that chaos prevails; it says order exists

■ TALES FROM REAL LIFE > WHAT I LEARNED OVER THE YEARS

I was fortunate to begin my college teaching career as an undergraduate with my very own discussion section of twenty students. I was terrified. It was 1970, when there wasn’t a whole lot of respect for authority going around, much less for college

professors, unless they were hip. I tried to be hip. Fast forward to 1978 after I earned my Ph.D.: I was still terrified that my students would ask me something I didn’t know. Eventually, I learned that my real job as a teacher was to help students to learn, not to

know everything. I got pretty good at that. But I did notice a pattern every semester that just seemed to take the wind out of my sails, and the students’ too. No matter how long I put it off, nor how deep and trusting my relationship with students, when I became a judge

of students, someone who represented external constituents (standards), rather than their developmental helper who took them as they were and worked with them to get better no matter where they started, when I graded them, when I turned on them,

the dynamics of the class and my relationships with the students changed in way that just felt sad. This article is about how I found a way to make these contradictory roles—developer and evaluator—work together and make the class sing.

ultimately even if it is difficult to see. Using chaos theory to manage a course is useful. I know where I need to get. But how I get there is another matter. With this flexibility comes the ability to integrate control and flow. If a particularly productive discussion develops that is not exactly on today's topic but is definitely contributing to my overall objectives for the course, I go with it. Voilà, generative paradox.

Facilitator/Evaluator

So you have a great relationship with a student, and then you give him a C- on a paper. Your relationship changes for the worse. If you are trying to facilitate insight in your students, something beyond just the facts, students need to trust that the disruption you introduce into their worldview is for something good. Trust is critical. Grades can interfere with that trust.

I talk about the elephant in the room from the start, as we discuss the syllabus. I point out the facilitator/evaluator contradiction, and invite comment on my solution, my grading system. The students find out how I think, which is a relief to them. Guessing what an evaluator values not only inhibits learning, it is annoying. My system also requires them to self-evaluate and give feedback to peers. Talking about the evaluation system and inviting them into it facilitates their development as self-directed learners. Voilà, generative paradox.

Loving the Subject/ Loving the Students

I decided to become a professor because I loved to learn, to create new knowledge, and to write and talk about it. Then when I began teaching, I realized I needed also to focus on helping my students to learn. Several ways to bring my learning and theirs together exist. Of course, I can work into my courses what I am learning. But I also can share my process of doing scholarship to further develop students' skills as

"HOW WONDERFUL THAT WE HAVE MET WITH A PARADOX. NOW WE HAVE SOME HOPE OF MAKING PROGRESS."

NIELS BOHR

lifelong, self-directed learners. Much has been made of Carol Dweck's "fixed mindset/growth mindset" research, and deservedly so. But it primarily points out that if people do not see themselves as capable of learning and getting better at it, they perform more poorly in learning than people who do see themselves as capable of learning and getting better at it. It is that simple. As the teacher, I can make improving at self-directed learning a course objective, and I can model how to do it as well as help students' find their own particular approach. Voilà, generative paradox.

Subject Expert/Teaching and Learning Expert

I received a Ph.D. because I could do competent, independent research in my scholarly specialty. I received no training in how to teach that subject to students. But as a teacher, I came to see myself as learner-centered. I became fascinated by the learning process and how to facilitate it. How do I simultaneously pursue my expertise in my subject and in teaching and learning? In other words, how do I add another subject expertise (essentially educational psychology) to my current subject expertise?

In the 1990s, Ernest Boyer, Patricia Cross, and Lee Shulman created the field of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, which invites college teachers to use their research expertise—no matter the discipline—to study teaching and learning in their courses and share that research. So every course enables me to practice my research expertise with students, with three positive outcomes. First, I get better at teaching my subject. Second, I produce scholarly results to share with my colleagues and possibly publish. And third, as I bring my students into what I am doing, they learn to do research and to become better self-directed learners. Voilà, generative paradox.

■ BEST PRACTICES > LEARN MORE ABOUT EMOTION IN TEACHING

I commend to you the work of Dr. Harriet Schwartz, associate professor in the department of Psychology and Counseling at Carlow University and lead scholar for Education as Relational Practice at the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute, and Dr. Jennifer Snyder-Duch, associate professor of Communication at Carlow University. Drs.

Schwartz and Snyder-Duch are currently preparing a new edited book in the New Directions in Teaching and Learning Series, edited by Catherine Wehlburg, that will explore emotion in college teaching. Contributed chapters will deal with empathy, anger, joy, assessment, intersubjectivity, online environments, women faculty of color, or-

ganizational trauma, and ambition. As you can see in what I have written here, I believe that emotion plays a central part in so many aspects of the teaching and learning system and that the most effective college teachers (and advisors) need to be aware of their own and their students' emotional lives and how they interact. What we are doing here in

talking about generative paradox and emotion in college teaching is to further elaborate the most effective teaching perspective—systemocentrism, or teacher/learner-centeredness.



Caring for Students/ Caring for Self

I don't want to sound like a Hallmark card, but learner-centered teaching involves caring for students, which means trying to help each individual develop to the fullest extent possible. (Army version: "Be all you can be.") That is a tall order for the teacher, especially in large classes.

That is where caring for the self comes in. You need to do it. Actually, you need to do both: care for students and care for the self. Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*, 1982) reported on a study of women deciding to abort their pregnancies, and her results led to a developmental model regarding a person's capacity to care. First stage, we focus on ourselves; second, we focus on the other; and third, we integrate our care for self and other, and do both at the same time. That is what the teacher needs to do. Voilà, generative paradox. I wrote a book on how to do that, *Making Time, Making Change: Avoiding Overload in College Teaching*.

"ONE MUST NOT THINK SLIGHTINGLY OF THE PARADOXICAL... FOR THE PARADOX IS THE SOURCE OF THE THINKER'S PASSION, AND THE THINKER WITHOUT A PARADOX IS LIKE A LOVER WITHOUT FEELING: A PALTRY MEDIOCRITY."

SOREN KIERKEGAARD

Individual Mentor/Group Learning Leader

We need to facilitate the learning of individual students who learn at different rates and in different ways. But also, we have a responsibility to keep the herd moving. To get this done we can create group work where meaningful incentives exist for students to teach each other. To teach is to learn twice, and tremendous development can come to both students—the learner and the teacher—from peer-led instruction. Voilà, generative paradox.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

WHY DON'T I CHANGE EVEN WHEN I WANT TO?

At the risk of being too simple, I think we can say that resistances to change exist in the self and in our relationships. Due to space constraints, I will address only resistances in the self. For more discussion of how resistances in the self and in relationships work, and for a plan to relax them, please consult my books, *Self-Directed Growth and Making Time, Making Change: Avoiding Overload in College Teaching*; also *How the way we Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* by Robert Kegan & Lisa Laskow Lahey.

What am I doing to keep myself from changing?

Often the reason you do not change is that your commitment to change co-exists with a counterbal-

ancing commitment to the status quo that is energized by fear. Follow this sequence to see how resistance in the self works:

COMMITMENT: I am committed to the value and importance of using classroom assessment techniques.

INTERFERENCE: I do not take time to learn about classroom assessment techniques and how to use them.

FEAR: I am afraid that if I take time to learn about teaching innovations such as classroom assessment techniques I will not have time to do my actual teaching, research, and service properly.

COMPETING COMMITMENT: I am committed to giving time to teaching my actual students, as opposed to taking time to learn about teaching them, and also to giving meaningful time to my research and service responsibilities.

BIG ASSUMPTION: I assume that if I take time away from teaching to learn about teaching—i.e., add one more thing to my heaping plate—then the quality of everything that I do—direct teaching, research, and service—will go to hell in a hand basket. My chances for promotion, tenure, and merit pay increases will drop precipitously as the quality of my work and relationships decline.

CONSEQUENT FEELING: As a result of taking time to learn about classroom assessment techniques, I will feel bad about myself, vulnerable, afraid, guilty, edgy, depressed, anxious, and overloaded.

No wonder I don't change.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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