

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Teaching Goals, Assessment, Academic Freedom and Higher Learning

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The term "essay" comes to us through Michel de Montaigne, who used the French "essai" to mean "a try" or "an attempt." "Essai," in turn, had its roots in two Latin words - "exigere," to examine, and "exagium," a weighing or balancing. In this brief essay, I'm going to try to convince you that examining our teaching goals carefully - and balancing them against our students' learning goals and colleagues' teaching goals --- can help us become more effective, and perhaps even excellent college teachers.

Goals Defined Goals are the destinations we set out to reach, the ends we work toward, the results we strive to achieve. As Lawrence Peter and Raymond Hull point out in *The Peter Principle*, "If you don't know where you're going, you will probably end up somewhere else." But goals are far more than just ending points for our journeys. They also serve as navigational beacons along the way. Without clear teaching goals, for example, we can't readily assess how effective our efforts are, figure out when we and our students are off track, tell how far off we are, or determine how to get back on the right track. For these reasons, almost all assessment efforts begin with goal-setting or goal-clarifying exercises, and end by comparing achieved outcomes against stated goals. Even if you don't care a fig about assessment, though, setting and pursuing explicit goals can make teaching and learning more effective in your classroom. Psychology and everyday experience

show that by setting challenging but attainable goals for ourselves, and achieving short-term successes along the way, we increase satisfaction, gain greater confidence in our ability to achieve further goals, and feel more motivation to continue. Many of us have had this "success breeds hard work breeds more success" experience while developing athletic, musical, foreign language or other similar skills. (Some folks even claim to experience this goal-related "self-actualization" while dieting, but that remains to be confirmed.)

If the above is reasonably accurate, then goal-directed teaching and learning ought to be more effective and satisfying for both faculty and students, especially when both pursue complementary goals. But how can we achieve this optimal experience? First, we make our teaching goals explicit, and compare them with our colleagues. Second, we help students to make their learning goals clear and to compare them with our teaching goals. Third, we assess how well we're achieving our goals, help students do the same, and make necessary adjustments based on the results of our assessments.

Identifying and Clarifying Teaching Goals This should be no problem. Most faculty have course syllabi on which our goals are made explicit. Or do we? In seven years of working with and surveying college faculty, K. Patricia Cross and I have noticed that many teachers find it difficult, at first, to answer the question, "What are your teaching goals for this course?" A typical first-level response is something like, "I'm teaching Chapters 1 through 12 in Flux and Miasma's 3rd edition" or "I'm teaching U.S. History from 1620 to 1865." These goals focus on the content to be covered, but give no hint as to why it's being covered. In-depth conversations lead to more specific answers, such as: "I'm using Chapters 1 through 12 to help students learn to recognize, set up, and solve real-world problems in organic chemistry" or "I'm trying to help my students develop an informed awareness of the development and dynamics of race and class relations prior to the U.S. Civil War." These follow-up conversations convinced us that "real" teaching goals, the goals which direct choices of content and teaching method, were often implicit.

To provide faculty a quick and easy way to begin uncovering their deeper, implicit goals, Professor Cross and I developed the

"Teaching Goals Inventory," or TGI, with help early on from Elizabeth Fideler. The TGI is a questionnaire that invites faculty to rate their instructional goals for a single course. It contains 52 goal statements, covering a wide range of learning outcomes, each to be rated on a five-point scale running from "not applicable" to "essential."

In 1990, nearly 3,000 faculty from two- and four-year colleges responded to a survey version of the TGI. Some of the results surprised us. For example, we found that teaching goals in our sample differed little by race or gender of the faculty -- or even by type of institution -- but markedly by academic disciplines. Nonetheless, faculty from all disciplines agreed that developing higher-order thinking skills- such as analysis, application, and problem-solving - was among their most "essential" teaching goals. Overall, teaching discipline-specific knowledge and skills ranked second to developing higher-order thinking skills. (For more information on the TGI, see Angelo and Cross, 1993). Follow-up interviews confirmed our sense that most faculty saw teaching specific disciplinary content largely, though not entirely, as a means to develop more general and lasting skills, abilities, habits and values.

Espoused Goals and Goals-in-Action We knew from the research and from our own observations, however, that the commitment to "higher-order" goals faculty indicated on the Teaching Goals Inventory wasn't necessarily coming through in the classroom. Specifically, we and the faculty we worked with noticed that, despite our lofty goals, our lectures, assignments, and tests too often seemed to focus on "lower-order" skills, such as memorizing or summarizing. Chris Argyris (1985) writes about gaps between "espoused theories" and "theories-in-action," gaps between what we say and think we believe and what we act as though we believe. After analyzing course goals with the TGI, we and our colleagues began noticing more and more gaps between "espoused goals" and "goals in action." We developed a simple gap-detection routine to use in workshops. Start by listing your most important (espoused) teaching goals for one course. Then find all the places in the syllabus where you actually, explicitly promote those goals through lectures, labs, discussions, assignments, and the like. Next, find those moments when you actually assess or evaluate students' attainment

of those goals. Those goals which you actually teach to, assess, and evaluate represent goals-in-action. Don't be too hard on yourself if there's little or no evidence of action on some of your espoused goals. That's typical. In using the TGI, faculty often discover that they have many, previously implicit essential teaching goals. Sometimes they decide they may have too many. Italians have a nifty saying for this all-too-human tendency: "*Far pensile e fare, ch'è il mare.*" Between thinking and doing there is the ocean. (Well, OK, it rhymes in Italian!) Discovering that some of our most fervently espoused goals may not be expressed through our teaching can be the first step toward closing the gap.

Individual Teaching Goals, Shared Teaching Goals, and Academic Freedom Given the above, it should come as no surprise that very few of us know much about our colleagues' teaching goals - even when we are teaching supposedly identical sections of the same course. In consulting with departments and programs, I've found that faculty teaching the same course - even those who share a common syllabus, text, and final exam - usually have quite different instructional goals, and are invariably surprised at the scope of the differences. The range of teaching goals within a department and across the campus is usually much greater, and the aggregate teaching goals often differ sharply from those found in departmental and institutional mission and goals statements.

I think that these differences in teaching goals raise questions about the equity and comparability of the education students receive, particularly in required, general education courses and foundational courses in the majors. These differences also raise troubling assessment questions. If faculty have very diverse teaching goals, then it is not meaningful or responsible to assess the outcomes of their efforts with common instruments. And if faculty teaching goals differ from the stated goals of the program or institution, then focusing assessment on the latter goals risks failing to notice what is being accomplished. To usefully assess the effectiveness of teaching and learning, we need to know what goals teachers are working to achieve. While academic freedom might be endangered if faculty were required to teach only to certain goals, I don't believe that asking faculty to make our goals explicit is unreasonable. Rather, I believe asking the question of ourselves and discussing the results

with our colleagues and our students is a necessary step toward meaningful assessment and instructional improvement.

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