

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 6, Number 1, 1994-95

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

Mentorship in the classroom: Making the implicit explicit

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There is a new reality lurking in our old stone buildings, and it shows up in unusual places. For one thing, the old jokes aren't as funny as they used to be.

Prof (sitting in office, hears rapping on door): Who is it?

Other (muffled voice through door): It's me.

Prof (to office mate): What's the poor chap trying to say?

The "under-prepared student" once something of an oddity on American campuses, now seems omnipresent. And not only in undergraduate institutions, not only in America. The government of Great Britain ordered a 25% increase in university enrollment. Black South Africans will occupy a majority of the places in previously white and apartheid universities. The Association of American Medical College will triple minority representation in medical schools in their 3000 x 2000 campaign, drawing heavily on the urban areas that have been on the receiving end of the wrenching body blows of poverty, unemployment, and despair, the areas that have provided many of the under prepared students that higher education is currently endeavoring to educate.

Or is it a matter of the "over prepared professor" one who understands the appropriateness of using the nominative case following the intransitive linking verb? There continues to be,

however temporarily, a professorate steeped in the academic tradition that values correctness in diction, precision in syntax, rigor in research, a foundation in liberal studies, and the ability to trade puns with a Shakespearean scholar. All right, there have been lapses in research. And perhaps not all are as well read as they might be. And yes, an Ivy League supreme court nominee was heard to use the repetitive "what it is is..." Academic writers have been known to begin sentences with conjunctions. Some of our most celebrated researchers have agreed with Hemingway that plagiarism is stealing from some who is better than you are. But the point is not that academics have shortcomings and aren't above reproach. The point is, what happens when the under prepared students meets the over prepared professor? Who gives way? Who accommodates? And how?

From the collision between under prepared and over prepared has emerged an instructional medium designed to build bridges over the chasms that separate the two. Supplemental instruction (SI), a widely used academic support program, has taken root in hundreds of US. colleges and universities, dozens in the UK., and has received the endorsement of the local A.N.C. groups in such disparate places as Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein in the Republic of South Africa.

First used at the University of Missouri-Kansas City as a means of retaining students in the professional schools, SI has been disseminated domestically for nearly two decades with the aid of grants from the US. Department of Education. Relying on "field-based research," the staff at SI Central (UMKC) have accumulated a considerable repertoire of instructional techniques. They have not, however, previously addressed the question, "What can the field of SI offer to the professor in the classroom?"

As Deanna Martin, the program director, describes it:

"SI has shown that many students need mentors. The statement applies not only to the students whom faculty typically regard as marginal, i.e., the D students. There are others with much higher aspirations - some of them aiming at the platinum professions - for whom B is a marginal grade. Many of them fail to meet their goals because they have no experience in the milieu of tertiary education.

They believe literally everything they are told. When a professor says, "Attendance is not a factor in grading," and another student interprets that as, "The professor doesn't care whether or not we attend classes," these marginal students may believe that attendance is irrelevant.

Students need mentors. In an SI program, the SI leader can fill that role. Or the professor can do it for an entire class."

In case our idea of mentoring is out of synchrony with the ideas of others, let's define the term operationally. In our minds, mentoring means telling someone how things really work. Not what the rules say, but what the insiders know. For example:

- Remind students what the course is about by giving them the big picture, not once, but often. Many high school and college advisors give students the idea that courses are in the curriculum to be "got out of the way," as in, "This semester you can get biology out of the way." As mentors, we can remind students that this is the semester that they have the opportunity to learn about life ... to learn the difference between a frog and a rock.
- Students don't typically know to value syllabi. Few high school teachers use them; therefore, students lack experience with this fundamental organizer. The way to emphasize the importance of the syllabus is to refer to it at the beginning of each lecture, each week or each unit.
- When you answer questions, lead off with something like this: "Let me tell you how I would think about that." Many students have no idea of how professors think about their subject. Their idea of intellectual mastery is the high school history teacher who knows the textbook so well that she can tell you from memory on what page a picture may be found.
- Administer a minimal impact examination as soon as possible after the beginning of the semester. Then advise those who are not satisfied with their results to seek assistance through whatever avenues are open to them. The unsatisfactory grade will

encourage compliance early while they can still make changes.

- Help students develop strategies to organize information. Simple visual matrices allow for organization of some kinds of information. For example, differences among bacteria fit this kind of organization, as do differences among the branches of government. Students need to see these and other discipline-specific information patterns.
- Make explicit that which is implicit. If an exam determines half the students' grade, it is important to explain what that means. For many students in high school, the relationship between test scores and course grades, on a scale of 1-10, lay somewhere between 0 and "tenuous." Don't overestimate the level of freshman sophistication concerning the ways of the university.

Mentorship in the SI Model In the SI model, mentorship stands at the center of students' relationship with the SI leader. The leader assumes the mantle of the model student who attends all lectures, takes exemplary notes, and in every way demonstrates the qualities which will assure success in the course. The leader convenes sessions outside class hours. Students attend voluntarily. The sessions blend what-to-learn with how-to-learn-it, artfully mixing study skills with content in ways that empower students in both. SI produces the most dramatic results in the traditional high risk classes where assistance is available to all students in the class. Improvement in student performance and reduction in attrition rates attest to the overall success of the SI model and the mentorship it embodies.

What about Covering the Material? What then becomes of the traditional role of the professor whose *raison d'etre* has been and continues to be, "covering the material?" First, the professor must become something more than the dispenser of lectures.

That there are multiple educational roles has been known as long as there has been formal education. In recent memory, when education was a prerogative of the privileged classes of society, faculty could elect a single role, that of the writer and lecturer. The student, her

teachers, and her parents were responsible for delivery of a capable receptacle into which the professor might deliver knowledge, wisdom and insight. Those others would assure that the student had mastered the basic skills of reading, writing, listening, analyzing, questioning, calculating, and communicating.

But no longer. With the influx of students who are unfamiliar with so much of what is implicit in the life of the college, many of the skills have now become the responsibility of the professor or his or her designees. And that, of course, is what SI does, i.e., becomes the professor's designee and does for the professor what he or she would like to do if time in the classroom were not a problem.

With SI in place, the students are no longer left in the dark as to what is expected of them and how to accomplish it. The implicits are made explicit. And once made explicit, they can be learned. Once learned, they can assist in further learning and eventually result in success for even the "high risk" student. We encourage all faculty to examine their courses for the implicits that can get in the way of learning and incorporate some SI so that those barriers no longer stand between the student and the content.

For more information Martin, D.C., Arendale, D. and Associates. *Supplemental Instruction: Improving First-year Student Success in High-risk Courses*. Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The Freshman Year Experience, 1992.