IMPROVING COLLEGE TEACHING

Peter Seldin

Teaching in colleges is marked by historic paradox: though institutions constantly talk up its importance, they evaluate faculty primarily on the basis of scholarly achievements outside the classroom. Teaching is what almost every professor does, but it seems to suffer from that very commonness. It occupies the greatest amount of most professors' time, but rarely operates at the highest level of competence.

There seems to be an ingrained academic reluctance to regard teaching in the same way the profession regards every other set of skills: as something that can be taught. Professors who take painstaking care for method within their discipline of chemistry, history, or psychology, for example, all too often are unreflective when it comes to teaching.

Some professors even regard teaching as so straightforward that it requires no special training. Others find it so personal and idiosyncratic that no training could ever meet its multiplicity of demands. But most share the common folk belief that teachers are born and not made. "He (or she) is a born teacher," is said of too many good teachers as a copout by those who aren't. And some good teachers fuel this belief by agreeing, "I guess I'm a good teacher. Things seem to go well in the classroom. The students say they like what I do. But I don't really know how I do it."

In fact, the marginal truth in this belief applies no more to teaching than to any other profession. If there are born teachers, there are born physicians, born attorneys, and born engineers. Yet those who are naturally great at these professions invariably spend an unnatural amount of time acquiring skills and practicing in the vortex of intense competition. Potentially great teachers become great teachers by the same route: through conditioning mind, through acquiring skills, and through practicing amidst intense competition (Eble, 1988).

The interest in improved teaching has mushroomed rapidly in recent years, burrowing into all areas of the country and all types of institutions. Colleges and universities are moving from lip-service endorsements of the importance of teaching to concerted and sustained efforts to improve programs. Faculty and administrators flock to teaching conferences; government agencies and private foundations offer financial support, and a wave of new books on the subject appear.

Yet the concept of improving teaching is hardly new. Years ago its emphasis was to improve subject matter competence. To further such competence, sabbatical leaves and attendance at professional meetings were encouraged. Claimed as rationale was a deeper understanding of the content of a discipline. Practically no attention was paid to how that understanding could best be imparted to students. Today, this early approach has been turned around. Now the concept is based on three assumptions: first, the primary professional activity of most professors is teaching; second, instructional behavior is not inborn, but rather a learned web of skills, attitudes, and goals; and third, faculty can be taught how to improve their classroom performance.

The "new" emphasis on teaching stems from "new" social and political forces. Demographics have changed the student population and their educational needs. The advent of educational

technology has forever altered concepts about teaching and learning. And public outcries demanding reaching accountability have roused legislators and governing boards to actions. All forces rally for improved teaching.

BARRIERS TO IMPROVEMENT

How have the faculty responded to efforts around the nation to develop their teaching competence? Regrettably, they have mostly dragged their heels. Why? Several reasons come to mind. First, there is a core belief embedded in many teachers that only someone knowledgeable in a discipline can talk meaningfully about it. They believe that general ideas about teaching don't easily translate into the discipline-specific terms and concepts that a teacher of a particular course can readily act upon (Angelo, 1994).

Second, some teachers fail to recognize the need for improvement in their own teaching. They think that they are already doing a good job in the classroom, a perception that reduces their interest in teaching improvement programs. For example, in a survey of nearly 300 college teachers, Blackburn et. al (1980) found that 92 percent believed their own teaching was above average. For Angelo (1994, p.5) that finding evoked Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, "a place where all the woman are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

Third, the generic nature of many teaching improvement programs sometimes doesn't respond to a given teacher's highly personal and specific needs. Said a Wisconsin professor, "Why should I invest time and energy in programs that don't directly relate to the teaching problems I face?"

Fourth, many faculty have yet to be motivated to cross the threshold of a teaching improvement program. inertia more than opposition has kept them on the sidelines. As a California professor said as she shrugged, "Some day I'll probably take part in a teaching improvement program. But not right now."

WHY IMPROVE TEACHING?

The reasons for improving teaching are found in four different yet interconnected areas. They are reasons related to: 1) institutions of higher education, 2) faculty members, 3) students, and 4) society and societal forces (Cole, 1978; Seldin, 1993).

Institutional Reasons

Today, there is virtually endemic dissatisfaction with the faculty reward system. The typical system overvalues research and scholarship and undervalues teaching. One by-product of this tilted reward system is the inattention paid to teaching by graduate schools in their doctoral programs. (For a report on one institution that does pay attention, see the chapter by Black.) At bottom, the values predominant in higher education generally do not support teaching. Yet the intensified competition for students today requires that institutions strengthen their claim of offering outstanding teaching. Colleges where superior teaching is the rule rather than the

exception, and where it is sufficiently recognized and rewarded, enjoy a distinct advantage in the competition for students.

Despite the growth of the faculty development movement over the past two decades, as a practical matter, only a relatively small percentage of faculty take advantage of available teaching improvement programs. That is most unfortunate since so many teachers have never studied the history of the teaching profession, are unaware of the professional literature in teaching and learning, and have never systematically developed their own teaching philosophies.

Teachers, like other professionals, should have a hungering need to update themselves, to engage in professional growth, to expand and deepen their understanding. They must be attentive to fresh pedagogical techniques, student learning theories, and technological advances. Even the best teachers must continue learning in order to remain the best.

Students

College students today are quite a different mix than they were even two decades ago. Today, there are more students from minority groups, more older students, more students who are working full-time, more students with physical handicaps, and more students without a college going tradition in their families. And those who teach today's students must learn to gear instruction to a new classroom dynamic.

Society and Societal Forces

Lastly, we come to societal reasons for improving teaching. Telecommunications and computer technology have emerged as powerful forces in teaching and learning, especially when in the form of live, two-way video connections. With these connections, the classroom experience is essentially brought into the students' homes or offices. Clearly, distance education via electronic telecommunications technology poses special requirements on the professor who must design and deliver instruction in a manner very different from teaching a traditional class. If their teaching is to be effective, faculty delivering distance education courses using telecommunications require formal training in using the new technology (see the chapter by Arreola).

APPROACHES TO IMPROVING TEACHING

Since college professors are hired with the expectation that they will offer effective instruction, providing them with assistance to improve their instruction is no more than a logical extension of this expectation.

Just as students deserve guidance as learners, professors are entitled to helpful direction in their teaching. No matter how good a teacher is in the classroom or laboratory, he or she can improve. No matter how effective a particular teaching method, it can be enhanced.

The argument has been raised by some that we still lack the final answer to the question of what constitutes effective teaching. That may well be true, but the key ingredients of effective

teaching are increasingly known. We have no reason to ignore hundreds of studies that are in general agreement on these characteristics. They include a deep knowledge of the subject, an ability to communicate with and motivate students, enthusiasm for the subject and for teaching, clarity of presentation, and fairness.

What might activities to improve teaching look like? Eble and McKeachie (1986, p. 14) suggest that growing as a teacher, "...may be a matter of enlarging a faculty member's knowledge of learning theory and pedagogical practices, of increasing the professor's interest in and commitment to teaching, of reinforcing and rewarding excellent teaching, and of providing opportunities to bring about this kind of growth. "

What might such opportunities for growth look like? Seldin (1993) and Eble and McKeachie suggest that they include, among others, emphasis in the following areas:

1. Programs to develop the repertoire of teaching skills needed by the professor to be effective for different kinds of students and different kinds of learning goals. Included are skills in using a variety of teaching methods, skills in the use of current technology, and discipline related skills in teaching particular concepts or materials (see the chapter by Ambrose).
2. Programs to build bridges between what the teacher knows and what the student is trying to grasp. Students differ in experience, ways of thinking, and motivation. For that reason, no single method of teaching is equally effective for all students. Skills are required to recognize where individual students are and how to reach them.
3. Programs to develop skills and understanding having to do with interpersonal relationships with students. Vital to most students' learning is the sense that the teacher cares about them. Research tells us that the most effective teachers are available to students and work closely with them both inside and outside the classroom
4. Programs to help teachers gain greater understanding of how their disciplines' organizational structures facilitate or inhibit student learning. Teachers must communicate differently to students who are taking introductory classes than they do to those in doctoral seminars. Learning how to communicate at the proper student level is a key component of effective teaching.
5. Programs to assist teachers to find greater intrinsic satisfaction in their teaching. Such enhanced motivation may be individually fostered or may arise from a campus climate that inspires commitment and enthusiasm.
6. Programs that help teachers learn how to continue learning from their experiences as teachers. That means achieving skill in monitoring one's own effectiveness and adapting one's methods to a particular class and teaching situation (see the chapter by Fink).
7. Programs that encourage faculty to support, critique, and assist each other's teaching (see the chapter by Millis and Kaplan), that foster conversation about teaching, that assert a sense of common purpose, and rally dispirited or isolated faculty to a greater commitment to teaching and learning (see the chapter by Pastore and by Hecht).
8. Programs that provide feedback to instructors on their teaching performance. This approach is particularly advantageous to teachers needing more individual help than can be obtained from workshops. Feedback sources vary but generally used are student ratings, videotapes of performance, and classroom observers. Simply giving the diagnosis

of classroom problems is not enough; instructors must also be given remedies for the problems. Teaching improvement is much more likely when the feedback is discussed with the teacher by a sympathetic and knowledgeable colleague or teaching improvement specialist who helps interpret results, provides encouragement, and suggests specific teaching-improvement strategies.

Because teachers may need different kinds of help at different career stages, instructional improvement efforts must be geared ro particular faculty needs. For example, new teachers fresh from graduate school will likely need help in lecturing, leading discussions, and constructing tests. Those at mid-career will likely value learning new skills, taking part in interdisciplinary work, and adopting new technologies in the classroom. Those in the latter stages of their careers will likely benefit from systematically reflecting on their teaching and becoming mentors for their more junior colleagues.

A cautionary note. Regardless of the professor's length of teaching experience, there is no single best way to improve teaching. What is effective for some may be ineffective for others. But something works better than nothing, and certain programs and approaches work very well. Programs and approaches work well to the extent that they fit both the character of the teacher and the culture of the institution (Weimer, 1990; Seldin, 1993).

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL TEACHING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS

The guidelines and strategies suggested in the literature are the product of a wealth of experimentation and experience. They are worth careful consideration. Institutions that are considering the introduction of a teaching improvement program or that are anxious to overcome remnants of resistance or ease sticking points in an existing program would do well to give serious consideration to this advice. What are the benchmarks of successful teaching improvement programs Eble and McKeachie (1986), Menges (1991), Seldin (1993), and Seldin (1994) suggest the following:

- Tailor the program to the institution's culture.
- Design it for long-term impact but build it for short- term payoffs.
- Structure it with multiple approaches to meet individual preferences, schedules, and styles.
- Gain clear and visible support from top-level administrators and be sure this support is publicly articulated.
- Use advisory groups to design and manage the program.
- Start small and rely on pilot projects targeting specific needs or groups.
- Approach the improvement of teaching positively and offer opportunities for the solid contributors and the stars, not just those who have been ineffective.
- Enable teachers to participate as partners and let them exercise significant autonomy and initiative in shaping their development experiences.
- Enlist substantial numbers of faculty in planning and administering the program.
- Simulate faculty enthusiasm and a high rate of participation in various aspects of the program. See up a feedback mechanism to learn of tangible changes in courses, Beaching strategies and methodologies, or curricula resulting from the program.

- Challenge teachers to screech their individual efforts.
- Reduce resistance to the program not by fire or muscle buy by being willing to listen to others, explain and modify the program, and allow enough time for the program's acceptance.
- Recognize and reward excellence in Teaching.

THE KEY ROLE OF ADMINISTRATORS IN IMPROVING TEACHING

To bring substantive improvement to college teaching requires a campus climate have supports and rewards Beaching, giving i.e. equal status with scholarly research and publication. If institutions are going to embrace superior teachers and superior scholars equally, the initiative and guidance for such transformation falls to administrative leaders. As Seldin (1990, p.9) argues: "They must champion the importance of Beaching and personally crusade for this idea. In a sense they muse stake their careers on this point and actively seek and find forums from which to broadcast to academia the importance of teaching. They muse introduce and promote appropriate institutional polices and practices."

What kinds of concrete action might be taken by administrators in support of a higher priority for Beaching? Experience suggests have the following approaches, used in combination, work well.

Making the Campus Environment More Responsive to Teaching Each professor should be encouraged to see personal professorial goals in the classroom. Experimentation should be encouraged and viewed as a normal pare of professional growth. Teaching loads should be kept to reasonable limits so the teacher has time to keep abreast of changes in the discipline.

Providing the Proper Setting and Tools to Support Instruction

Unfortunately, in many colleges, classroom conditions--including light, heat, air, and noise--are no beer controlled today than they were in less technologically advanced times. Floors are not swept. Equipment doesn't work. Chalk and erasers are in shore supply. Failure to pay attention to these details suggests to instructors that teaching is considered a second-class activity by the institution.

Rewarding Improved Teaching

Many teachers argue that the biggest roadblock to improved teaching is the reward system that pits teaching against research. Many institutions give lip service to the importance of teaching but then turn around and reward scholarly research and publication. Clearly the reward system needs to be reworked so that there is greater recognition of superior teaching. If teaching is not given a central role in hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions, faculty will correctly perceive that only research and publication are considered important.

CONCLUSION

Until recent years, the widespread institutional bias toward research and scholarship outside the classroom discouraged and rendered pointless efforts to improve teaching. Today, however,

teaching is being taken more seriously. Swelling pressure from such diverse sources as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the American Association for Higher Education, state legislatures, faculty, and students have moved institutions to reconsider the importance of teaching and the role of the teacher in the classroom. Countless institutions are reexamining their commitment to teaching and exploring ways to improve and reward it.

Teaching is an art and not a science. Yet, every artist needs a grounding in technique before setting to work, and there is no artist--or teacher--who cannot improve his or her skill.

No one would make light of the hurdles confronting professors intent on improvement. Progress may be slow. For some, the effort may possibly fail. But the stakes for teaching and learning are high, and the effort is imperative.

President John F. Kennedy was fond of telling a story about the French Marshall Louis Lyautey. When the marshal! announced that he wished to plant a tree, his gardener responded that the tree would not reach full growth for more than one hundred years. "In that case," Lyautey replied, "we have no time to lose. We must start to plant this afternoon."Administrators and faculty intent on improving teaching also have no time to lose. They, too, must start to plant this afternoon.

In the succeeding chapters in this book, readers will find pragmatic advice on key influences on teaching quality and successful programs for improvement.

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His well-received books include *Successful Use of Teaching Portfolios* (1993, with associates), *The Teaching Portfolio (* 1991), *How Administrators Can Improve Teaching* (1990, with associates), *Changing Practices in Faculty Education* (1984), *Successful Faculty Evaluation Programs* (1980), *Teaching Professors to Teach (* 1977), and *How Colleges Evaluate Professors* (1975). He has also contributed numerous articles on the teaching profession, student ratings, and academic culture to such publications as *The New York Times, The Chronicle of Higher Education,* and *Change* magazine.

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