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Author(s): Richard Unruh.

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Transactions between Learners and Teachers

RICHARD UNRUH

My philosophy of teaching is essentially summed up in the following statement: “Teaching is not simply transmitting knowledge to passive learners. Instead, teaching is creating transactions between learners and teachers in which they explore areas of knowledge together. Learning depends on learners actively seeking knowledge and understanding, both of which are the result of the learner’s own activity.” I typically put this statement up on the screen the first day of class, and from the outset invite students to join me in a collaborative learning process for the rest of the semester. My role in that process is to provide them with resources from which to learn, methods by which they can gain the most from those resources and prepare to engage in an active search for knowledge in class, classroom experiences that invite them to engage in critical thinking and an interactive search for knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, and assessments of their learning that measure their level of knowledge and understanding. All the dimensions of this role, with the exception of specific classroom experiences, are set forth in each course syllabus.

Each student’s role in the collaborative search for knowledge is likewise outlined in the syllabus. They are challenged to take responsibility for their learning, avail themselves of the resources for learning, prepare for classroom learning, actively engage in the classroom learning process, and deepen and broaden their learning beyond the classroom. Throughout each course the cooperative nature of the learning enterprise is emphasized, and students are continually invited—and encouraged—to be as active in the process as I am. In every class session students are actively engaged in one or more of the following: answer questions in small groups and discuss their answers as a whole class, debate issues and search for the “truth” between opposing perspectives, put themselves in the shoes of an author they have read or political figure they have studied or person living at some time in the past to dialogue about issues from their perspective, express and defend their personal opinion about a topic under consideration, and the list could go on. The purpose is to get them to actively seek knowledge, en-

gage them in critical thinking about the subject matter of the course, and push them into the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy—application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Hopefully their learning will be considerably enhanced as a result.

This philosophy of teaching has evolved over the years in response to an on-going search for enhanced excellence in my teaching—which has been the foremost goal of my academic career. Its development and implementation have been significantly aided by participating in on-campus teaching seminars, subscribing to *The Teaching Professor* and *College Teaching*, constantly exposing myself to other literature on how to improve my teaching, and attending a Teaching Professor Conference entitled “Celebrating Teaching and Promoting Learning” in May, 2004. Many things I was exposed to at this conference were already part of my teaching repertoire, but clarifying the role of students in the learning process, focusing more on internal rather than external motivation for learning, giving students opportunities to broaden and deepen their learning and encouraging them to take advantage of them, and seeing myself as someone who guides their learning rather than teaches them material were among the ideas I brought home and have endeavored to implement.

In recent years, I have incorporated specific Internet-based assignments into my American Politics & Society and California History & Politics courses. In the former, the intention is to educate young adults about potentially useful resources that can enhance their role as citizens in a democracy. In the latter, the intention is to educate future teachers about potentially useful resources that can enhance their performance in the classroom someday.

A long-time interest of mine has been assessing the quality of my courses and teaching to continually improve both. Hence, mid-semester and end-of-the-semester evaluations have been administered to students for years. The mid-semester evaluations are important because they enable me to make mid-course adjustments that can potentially enhance the learning process. Altering how I conduct class sessions, respond on student-submitted assignments, or help learning-challenged students improve their performance are examples of changes I have made in response to these evaluations. The end-of-the-semester evaluations, where I have students assess the learning value of the different components of the course, are particularly valuable in improving the course the next time it is taught. I have

changed textbooks, modified syllabi, and changed learning experiences based on these evaluations—all for the better. In addition to these formal assessments of my teaching, I assess the learning value of each class session after it is over. If there are modifications that could potentially enhance that learning value, I identify them in my class notes and endeavor to make them the next time the course is taught. This has resulted in significant course improvements over time.

Someone once said, “Teaching isn’t a job, it’s a calling. If you ever forget that, it’s time to get out.” I have never considered teaching a job I needed to do, but a privilege I have been permitted to enjoy. To me it has been a high calling because of the service it has enabled me to provide. Contributing to the intellectual growth of others, and particularly in a Christian context, is amongst the most meaningful endeavors one can engage in. Fresno Pacific has given me the opportunity to do so in a manner that has given me the freedom to experiment, and to pursue the highest level of excellence of which I am capable. My current philosophy of teaching reflects where I am in that journey at present, but it is an evolving philosophy as I continually seek to push the quality of my teaching to an even higher level. For me that endeavor will not end until I retire, because I hope it keeps my teaching fresh and intellectually challenging.