
EDITOR'S COLUMN

Volume 5 – Talking about Teaching

Every dictionary and thesaurus includes the word stereotype and highlights its primary synonyms – trite, hackneyed, and unchanging manner. A sociology textbook would define stereotype in much the same way as an unreliable or less than accurate generalization about events, peoples, cultures and societies. Yet, the more technical definition, the one that is listed first in a standard dictionary, defines stereotype as a process for printing from a plate, that is, to reproduce the same words many times over.

Volume 5 of *Talking about Teaching* covers both versions of stereotype. It reproduces the wisdom, observations and philosophies of The Ohio State University faculty and graduate students who care about the quality of their teaching and think about it a lot. “Hard copy” of this collective wisdom is printed, and it is made available on-line through the OSU Knowledge Bank.

The essays themselves frequently pose questions that define the border between two primary cultures of a university: instructors and students. And each essay recognizes that both cultures can be broken down into many distinct subcultures. That is, there is diversity within each, hence creating the potential for all us who belong to the community we call The Ohio State University to generalize without much reliability or accuracy. The first essay is by Brandon Sullivan from Biochemistry. He has developed an essay around the theme of a Darwinian Pedagogy, observing that “Nature does not solve any one problem with a single solution. Instead, she is beautifully and functional diverse.” Likewise, the art and science

of teaching is best served by recognizing this same diversity in students, disciplines, and practices.

“We need to show students and remind administrators that the intrinsic value of the humanities is that they teach us about the range of human experience. Students instinctually value this, because they are human.” With this advice, Colin Stephenson from History makes a strong case for why we should value a liberal arts education in his essay on “Sustained Engagement: Justifying the Humanities in the Age of Multitasking and Social Networking.” Indeed, the push toward making one’s subject matter practical and applied is a good thing, but only to the extent that it does not crowd out our mission as educators to help our students learn the value of contemplation, without which a college-level education devolves into a one-dimensional emphasis on the rote memorization of trite factual tidbits and unchanging, hackneyed generalizations.

Anna Soter, with the School of Teaching and Learning in the College of Education and Human Ecology, extends Stephenson’s theme in the essay “What’s the ‘Discipline,’ in Education: A Personal Perspective.” Readers who follow the contemplative travels described in her essay cannot help but agree with the concluding statement: “And yet, since the field of Education has emerged relatively recently as a field of inquiry, an applied ‘science’ if you will, it may just be time for us to cease quibbling about whether or not it’s a ‘discipline’ ... and embrace the implicit extended intention embedded in the word ‘Education’ itself – acquiring knowledge to improve oneself and/or others, to influence the development of oneself and/or others, to impact oneself and/or others, to transform.”

I can imagine that if Glené Mynhardt from Biology met Anna Soter from Education over a cup of coffee and talked about what it means to be an educator, they would develop an instant sense of camaraderie and have much to share. Glené’s essay, “Growing into Teaching: A Graduate Student’s Journey,” is a concrete case study of education as a discipline which, if followed, helps teachers avoid the laziness of stereotypes about students. She offers the following advice: “Although I generally teach courses for biology majors, the diversity of perceptions, misconceptions, and cultural backgrounds can greatly convolute the expectations I have. I have made it a rule that every student should feel valuable in the classroom by getting to know their names, paying attention to individual struggles, and making learning an individualized process. I believe that finding value in the variety of personalities in our students helps them

feel welcomed and gives them a feeling of personal responsibility in their learning.”

For me, personally, the magnificent part of being a college level educator is playing the role of mentor, but recognizing that mentoring is more than the stereotype of the professor as the educated veteran helping the student as the inexperienced rookie learn about a particular subject matter. Indeed, mentoring is that proverbial “two-way street.” This is the essence of the co-authored essay by Samuel Beavers and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu titled “Taking Risks in Learning and Teaching: A Student-Faculty Dialogue about Intersectionality and Digital Narratives.” Reading the dialogue shows how both learned from each other. When asked by Judy for the reasons why he chose the digital narrative format over the traditional term paper in a course on race and gender stereotyping, Samuel replied, “As my work on the project progressed, I was very happy with my choice... because it became clear to me that the imagery of the film was actually the point. Most of the time, these films are not explicitly conveying racial stereotypes, in fact they are often claiming to be doing the opposite.” Judy affirms Samuel’s choice, observing, “Since learning to create digital narratives myself, I believe I have become a better teacher and writer. I am much more aware of my audience and also more interested in being a storyteller as well as a scholar.”

Appreciating diversity through the “human touch” is fully illustrated in Angela Thatcher’s description of the five ways she strives to help students as a TA for a class in her field of study – Rural Sociology. In the essay, “Techniques for TAs in Large Enrollment Classes,” Angela admits that her desire to help students comes from her undergraduate days of running up against TAs who were not very good. “As students, we’ve all had our own experiences with the unhelpful, unprepared, unreachable, or unapproachable TA that crippled our learning experiences. I always remember the experiences I had with TAs of this ilk as I do my own work, and I strive to be the exact opposite of them.”

No essay in volume 5 is more heartfelt than Bob Eckhart’s “To Share or Not to Share: Cancer and What Teachers Should Tell Students about It.” College level instructors, young and old, frequently deal with the issue of revealing personal information about themselves in class, and whether that enhances their effectiveness as a teacher and their students’ ability to learn. In this case, it was the situation where Bob, who teaches OSU’s English as a Second Language Program, missed several classes because

someone close to him was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He contextualizes his own experiences within the research on teacher revelations to make an important point: “The benefits of teacher self-disclosure are evidenced by the reciprocity effect. It is one of the most consistently-observed findings in communications research... The reciprocity effect ‘refers to the finding that self-disclosure by one person will elicit self-disclosure from another’...So, as teachers disclose items from their personal or professional lives, students are more likely to disclose to teachers in return.”

My own contribution to volume 5 focuses on self-disclosure as well, but not in an honest way. I use two essentially accurate stories (but partially fictionalized accounts to protect identities) of students’ attempts to scam me for a grade in the very same Rural Sociology large enrollment classes in which Angela Thatcher has been a TA (although she was not a TA at the time of either occurrence). I describe how the basic, fundamental and unerring mathematical features of a normal curve can help the college-level instructor avoid the rush to stereotype all students from a few very unusual experiences. Titled “The Iron Law of the Normal Curve,” I conclude that we should “... look on high standards of scholarship as a form of respect we give to those students who occupy the middle of the curve” even as we “...seek ways to handle the deviants without diminishing the quality of what we do for students who want something out of the time and money they invest in earning a university degree.”

The final two essays are edited versions by keynote speakers from the 4th Annual Mini-Conference on Teaching, which is organized and sponsored by the OSU Academy of Teaching and held during the Spring Quarter. Both essays are by administrators who describe how they juggle two somewhat incompatible, yet somewhat consistent goals of converting their respective universities from the quarter system to a semester format. These goals are the administrative entanglements of shifting from one system to the other and the maximization of opportunities this kind of change presents for enhancing the rigor of college level teaching and learning.

“The Currency Question” is by Mark Shanda, who is the Divisional Dean for Arts and Humanities in the College of Arts and Sciences. Like the others, his essay is sensitive to the negative side of stereotypes – not from the point of view of an individual class or specific forms of teacher-student interactions, but from the onerous, tedious and bureaucratically

imbued set of tasks associated with planning for the upcoming conversion of OSU from the quarter to the semester system. His essay reminds us that, in the midst of the minutiae about rules, regulations, red-tape, administrative change, and the excruciatingly boring and aggravating details that bedevil college-level teachers, there is the constancy of the mission to be educators, because educators make a difference in the lives of their students. He concludes by citing a song from the Broadway musical *Wicked*, and observes: “in light of the critical role that we as educators play in teaching our students, we would all do well to remember these words from the song ‘For Good’ as we stand in front of classrooms full of students...” I interrupt his essay in two ways: (1) stop moaning about the trite technicalities that sometimes make our jobs as educators feel so silly, walk into the classroom, “get it on,” and do your best; and (2) stop the hand-wringing about whether a semester system is better than a quarter system, or if a group exercise is better than lectures, and a host of other “or ifs,” walk into the classroom, “get it on,” and do your best.

Wayne Hall is the Vice-Provost for Faculty Development at the University of Cincinnati. UC, like OSU and many other universities in Ohio, is preparing earnestly for conversion to the semester system. His essay, titled “Semestermorphosis: Possibilities for Assessment and Learning,” describes how a change that is unwanted and uninvited by many faculty and academic units provides a golden opportunity to begin more systematic and rigorous assessments of courses and curriculum. As he emphasizes, there will never be a better time to institute a plan to benchmark students’ learning and faculty’s teaching than that point in time when the “Semestermorphosis” begins, and then to sustain these efforts far into the future. To quote: “...we hope that a heightened awareness of student learning outcomes as well as a more focused assessment of student learning in relation to those outcomes will become embedded within the entire teaching and learning enterprise. The lengthened academic term itself will foster this by more readily facilitating mid-term, formative assessment as a foundation for the summative efforts at the end of the term, as well as giving faculty more scope for SoTL projects that draw data from their own students. In short, one general principle underlying the semester-conversion process has emerged with new focus: Assessment is pedagogy.”

Before you are the ruminations found in 10 essays, whose authors represent the full range of disciplines found at a comprehensive university like Ohio State – education, the humanities, the behavioral and social

sciences, and the natural sciences. All address one essential fact based on the various authors' carefully considered contemplations, namely, the need for educators to search out and destroy stereotypes whose unreliable and inaccurate generalizations diminish the quality of both teaching and learning for instructors and students alike.

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