Confessions of a teacher: Why am I doing it the way I am?

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Abstract

I have been teaching in higher education for most of the past twenty years, long enough to do it without much thought or reflection, doing pretty much the same thing semester after semester. This is the story of how I was challenged to think about what I was doing and how I was doing it, and to experiment with new ways of effectively engaging my students in the process of learning. It meant changing almost everything in the midst of the semester. It was both challenging and exciting.
Background

Historically, my most significant assessment tool was a comprehensive final exam – ostensibly to measure my students’ learning. For the most part, it was a multiple-choice exam with a few matching questions thrown in, to be sure that they knew the main characters and their particular contribution to the field. I would also typically offer a series of essay questions for those who complained that they didn’t do well on multiple-choice exams. The essay questions would be optional, allowing those who were satisfied with their odds of doing well enough on the multiple-choice questions to let it be, but for those who wanted an opportunity to dilute the consequences of their anticipated poor performance, they could submit answers to a series of variously weighted discussion questions. Honestly, my hope was that very few would choose that option, because we all know that running an answer sheet through a Scantron machine takes much less time and effort than reading and grading a series of essay questions.

As efficient as the multiple-choice tests were, I knew that there was something lacking in the overall picture of learning, particularly with a cumulative final exam. I was concerned that I was encouraging my students to take what the Urban Dictionary refers to as the bulimic approach to learning: take it in, puke it up and move on relatively unaffected by the contents of the course. Bain quotes Robert de Beaugrande: “‘Bulimic education’ force-feeds the learner with a feast of ‘facts’ which are to be memorized and used for certain narrowly defined tasks, each leading to a single ‘right answer’ already decided by teacher or textbook. After this use, the facts are ‘purged’ to make room for the next feeding.”

For the students, after taking the final exam, they were done with the course. For me as the instructor, after running the Scantron sheets through and assigning a final grade to them, I was done. Oh yes, I had to actually record and submit the final grade before I was completely done … free to forget about what was past and go on to my courses for next semester.

In the back of my mind, there were nagging questions: Did I truly measure what the students learned, or was the final exam an indicator of who was best at gazing into the crystal ball and guessing what questions might be included on the exam … and who was better at memorizing data? Is there a place for creativity in the Social Sciences … and, if so, to what extent?
That question was raised as I thought of my own two children, both very bright and each with their own learning style. One functioned (and continues to function) very well in the traditional academic setting. The other was always frustrated in that environment and, as a parent, I knew that his grades did not reflect his learning. His grades reflected his teachers’ frustration with his attempts at creativity within traditional testing formats.

**Stimulus for change**

On a whim, I accepted an open invitation by Bryant’s Center for Teaching and Learning to be a part of a book discussion group reading *What the Best College Teachers Do* by Ken Bain (2004). I wanted to be a better teacher and this seemed like an opportunity to think collaboratively about the whole process. I wanted my students to leave my class better people and more prepared to function in the real world. I had reservations about whether that was happening, or whether I had fallen into an academic routine of convenience: present the material, give a series of tests, have the students write some sort of research paper, give a final exam, give a grade … and be done for the semester.

Being a part of the discussion group opened me up to another way of thinking about what I was doing and why. It also introduced me to the field of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: “systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public” (McKinney, 2012) and the work of CASTL (Hutchings, 2002). “Critically reflective teaching happens when we identify and scrutinize the assumptions that undergird how we work.” (Brookfield, 1995). This is what I wanted to do: not only identify the assumptions I have been using throughout my career, but to think critically about them and share my journey. While my path differed from that of Randy Bass, I identified with him when he came to “the realization that he didn’t really know much about student learning, and that he needed to be more ‘intentional’ about designing his courses and teaching to the learning (1999).

At the time, I was teaching a psychology course in Child and Adolescent Development. During the conversations about Bain’s book, two of his ideas in particular caught my attention: 1) Real “learning” is more likely to take place when people actually work with material, rather than simply trying to memorize it, and 2) Several people working together produce a better product than one person working alone. Both ideas suggested ways for more learning, and learning on a deeper level, to take place. A colleague in the book group suggested that I consider having my class compile a “Parenting Guide” for her, given that she
was five months pregnant, and would be in her last trimester by the end of the semester. Rather than using a traditional final exam to assess my students' learning, I involved them in a final project which was to create and present a Parenting Guide for, and to, a real person.

Moreover, my colleague had a mentoring relationship with a woman who was also expecting a baby about the same time. We thought it could be interesting to have half of the class put together a Parenting Guide for the mentee and her baby's father, while the other half put together a guide for my colleague. We wondered how the students might think differently when considering the social context: an unmarried woman of color, living in a low socioeconomic situation having her first child, as opposed to a married, white, middle-class professional woman who has a ten-year-old stepchild.

I saw this project as allowing the students to be much more creative in demonstrating the learning that had taken place during the course. It also would incorporate the two contentions of Bain that initially caught my attention

**Methodology**

Based on my new ideas, at mid-semester I changed the two major components of the course evaluation. We agreed as a class that instead of having each student write a major research paper and take a traditional multiple-choice final exam, as the original syllabus called for, the students would create Parenting Guides for the two mothers as their new final exam. The class was divided into small groups and three of the groups would focus on my colleague and three would focus on her mentee. Of the three focusing on my colleague, each group was assigned one specific aspect of development: physical, cognitive and language, or personality and social. The same was true for the three groups focusing on the mentee. All six groups were also instructed to include the importance and influence of family, peers, media and school as they relate to each particular area of development. All of the groups would present their written guides to my colleague and summarize them with an oral presentation as their comprehensive final exam. The groups were self-selected (my compromise with the students for changing the syllabus mid-semester); my preference was to randomly assign the students to their respective groups in order to minimize the possibility of having groups made of those students with whom other students didn’t want to work. Following the oral presentation, my colleague was to keep the three guides
that focused on her situation and pass along, as she deemed fit, the set of three guides that focused on her mentee.

As part of their preparation for these real-life case studies, my colleague agreed to meet with the class prior to their presentations, giving the students an opportunity to connect with her and to ask for any additional information about her particular situation and circumstances, as well as that of her mentee. She continued to make herself available to my students as questions arose during their process of developing the Parenting Guides.

I replaced the course-evaluative major research paper with a reflective paper assignment, in which they summarized what they learned. I wanted the students to think about what course material was useful for them as they envisioned themselves being parents, aunts, uncles and members of the community where public policy makes a difference in the development of children and adolescents. This reflection provided the students an opportunity to both review the entire semester and to think of the material in terms of the usefulness and applicability in their own lives. The reflective paper served as another way of personalizing the course content and engaging the students on a level other than purely academic.

Finally, after the course ended, I asked some of our staff from the Center for Teaching and Learning to help administer a questionnaire for my students, soliciting feedback on the whole process. Their responses were submitted through Google Docs, allowing complete anonymity on the part of the students. The responses were given to me by the Director of Faculty Development, who administered the questionnaire. Of thirty-two students, ten responded, and I received a combined narrative of responses to each of the questions.

Results

The first noticeable result to this new way of trying to give students incentives to learn was that they seemed to get excited about the project and there was a lot of energy surrounding the opportunity to work with the material and present what they thought were the important aspects. The task felt much more enjoyable, more meaningful, more engaging and less formidable than trying to memorize a semester’s worth of information. (I’ve never noticed students being excited about a final before!) The students
appeared to like the challenge of doing something practical with the information, as opposed to the feeling of needing to cram for a final exam.

Of the responses from the questionnaire, there was complete unanimity regarding the issue of this process being an adequate assessment of their learning. The students also deemed the practical application to be a real asset. One student commented, “the Parenting Handbook was very helpful in understanding what we had learned throughout the course … it is something we can take away for our own futures, making this class special and not just simply a requirement.” Another said, “It allowed us to express our creativity and apply what we’d learned to a real life situation … better than a test.”

Not all of the students were pleased with the change of course requirements mid-semester. While some students were vocal about the sudden alteration of the syllabus, most of the students who responded to the questionnaire simply acknowledged that it would have been helpful to have the assignment at the beginning so they could be thinking about the project throughout the semester. My impression was that those who were focused on their grade were more reluctant. From the very beginning, those students wanted to know what they were going to have to do to get the grade they wanted. My bias suggests they were less interested in actually learning the material, i.e. they were happy with a “bulimic final,” as long as they got a good grade for the semester.

As for the written Parenting Guides themselves, there was a degree of unevenness in terms of the overall quality of the work. My suspicion is that the self-selected groups were not as heterogeneous, and thus were deprived of a richer level of collaboration. Some guides were complete with a cover page and an index of chapter headings, while others literally divided their guide with references to the chapter numbering from the text. In retrospect, I suspect that in leaving room for creativity, I left the project too open-ended and could have given more specific guidelines.

Another limitation was that the students had a difficult time knowing what to do with the aspect of the mentee being both a person of color and of low socioeconomic status. The class members were almost exclusively white and from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds. In both the presentations and the written guides, there was awkwardness and tentativeness in knowing how to address the obvious differences between their own life experiences and those of the mentee. The two sets of written guides were virtually indistinguishable in terms of the nature of the content. In the absence
of the mentee, the oral presentations sometimes came from a perspective reflecting the students’ inability to grasp the reality of someone with a low socioeconomic status, as evidenced by one group suggesting that since the mentee lived in a poor neighborhood, she “should consider sending her child to a private school.” This is precisely what the students’ parents had done for them. I was disappointed with the seeming lack of understanding and sensitivity for this issue. While the text did talk about the impact of poverty and socioeconomic status, that was not a major emphasis. I had hoped the students would grasp the opportunity to specifically think about the unique challenges faced by people in low socioeconomic situations. While the text alluded to numerous issues that are more challenging for people in lower socioeconomic circumstances, I believe that the students saw that as not being relevant for them and dismissed it – even to the point of not remembering that we had talked about some of those challenges. I think that, had the students known from the beginning that they needed to be looking at those issues and thinking about how they might want to counsel the mentee, they would have done a better job. In retrospect, I could have done more to engage the students in conversations about the power of one’s socioeconomic situation to shape development.

A striking observation was the similarity of the oral presentations among all six groups. It was as if they had all been given an assigned format. Each group chose to make a PowerPoint presentation, highlighting what they deemed to be the important parts of their guide. Each group began with the members introducing themselves. Subsequently, it was obvious that each group member had been assigned a specific block of information, which each in turn presented. The presentations were much drier than the corresponding written Parenting Guides. It was all too scripted, with little or no interaction among the presenters. Each student gave a summary of their part of the guide, with little or no reference to the other parts. It made me wonder how and where they learned the template for oral presentations. Again, I was intentionally vague about how they were to give their oral presentation, telling them that it was totally up to them how they chose to present their guides. In the future, I would specifically suggest to the students that they be intentionally creative in their oral presentation, and to be aware that this is not a typical business presentation in which each person has a particular area of expertise, but rather a unified whole.
After the presentations were made and the Parenting Guides handed in, I continued to feel a longing to provide feedback on both the written and oral aspects. There was still more teaching/learning to do, and I wanted to do it. This was a new experience for me. I wanted there to be one more opportunity to dialogue with my students about their experience and my reaction, along with the reaction of the two mothers.

**Evaluation: If I had a “Do Over”**

If I were to do a similar project again, I would divide the class into two teams; one team would provide a comprehensive guide for my colleague and the other a comprehensive guide for her mentee. This would be a semester-long project, and the students could be thinking about it from the beginning of the semester.

The original course syllabus asked that the students write a personal journal entry at the conclusion of each chapter in the textbook. Using questions that encouraged them to reflect on the information, I wanted to know how it might apply to them, in meaningful or useful ways, now or in the future. Going forward, I would continue this, but with a double-pronged focus. One prong would continue the personal reflection; the other would have them focus on ways the material might be presented and used in a Parenting Guide. I envision this as a vehicle to encourage the students to investigate, elaborate and comment on the material, rather than simply summarizing what they found in the textbook. The way I presented the Parenting Guide project made it too easy for the students to limit themselves strictly to the text, denying the richness of other sources and perspectives.

I would also require the written and oral presentations to be submitted prior to the time of the final exam and use the exam time for evaluation, allowing me and the students the opportunity to share reactions and observations about the course experience. Doing this would also allow the two mothers time to read the Parenting Guides and have feedback for the students about what was helpful and any issues that, from their perspective, might have been more fully developed. I envision using the block of time reserved for the Final Exam to be used as a time of reflection on all of our parts – including allowing the students to give feedback and evaluation of their own experience and any changes that would have made the educational enterprise more beneficial for them. I see this as a way of adding one more layer of richness to the learning experience.
Conclusion

As the professor, I know what the whole process felt like. There was much more energy in the class as they worked on their final project. They acknowledged that it was much more fun than studying for a final exam. Just because a process is fun, does not make it a valuable learning experience, but I contend that by making the assignment applicable to real life situations – theirs, my colleague and her mentee – the students were much more engaged in actually thinking about the material and envisioning the practical aspects of it. The assignment engaged their imaginations and allowed for creativity, all the while encouraging them to process it from a comprehensive perspective.

Instead of simply giving the information to my students because of my position as the professor, this new way of learning allowed me to facilitate while the students sifted through the material. They used this opportunity to look for ways to be more informed and thoughtful people in the real world.

Yes, there is room for creativity – both in presenting the course material and in assessing what the students actually learned though the process. Making the effort to be creative, and inviting the students to engage their own creativity results in more enthusiasm and engagement with the material. After reading the Parenting Guides, I am convinced that my ultimate goal was better served: a deeper level of learning took place. The students left my class with a much better grasp of the complexities of the subject matter and are better prepared to use the material in the real world, incorporating it in their present and future lives.
References


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