

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 1, Number 8, 1989-90

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

Why Professors Don't Change

Loren Ekroth, *University of Hawaii at Manoa*

Today's professors are challenged to teach a student population increasingly diverse in age, levels of academic preparation, styles of learning, and cultural background. Professors are now expected not only to "cover the material," but also to help students to think critically, write skillfully, and speak competently. To address the increased demands of evolving circumstances would seem to require changes on the part of college teachers. Yet many appear not to change in how they think about and approach their teaching.

Organizational systems tend to resist change, and academic systems are no exception. Clark Kerr commented on the essentially conservative nature of colleges and universities: "About eighty-five institutions in the Western world established by 1500 still exist in recognizable forms, with similar functions and with unbroken histories, including the Catholic church, the Parliaments of the Isle of Man, of Iceland, and of Great Britain, several Swiss cantons, and seventy universities. Kings that rule, feudal lords with vassals, and guilds with monopolies are all gone. These seventy universities, however, are still in the same locations with some of the same buildings, with professors and students doing much the same things, and with governance carried on in much the same ways." (Kerr, 1982).

Barrier #1: The Stability of the Situation A principal reason why faculty don't change their approaches to teaching is that the professional situations in which they work tend to be stable. For example, the physical settings and seating arrangements in which teaching takes place (some called "lecture halls"), the time schedules

within which courses are structured, the institutional procedures for making curricular decisions, and the reward systems for instructional performance constitute guardians of tradition and barriers against change.

A key stabilizing factor in the professorial situation is the academic discipline within which college teachers have been socialized. By the time faculty enter the professoriate, they have undergone an extensive and largely consistent "apprenticeship of observation" of what teaching in their discipline is supposed to be. In fact, Joan Stark and Malcolm Lowther of NCRIPAL concluded from their recent study that the specific academic disciplines are the *strongest* influence on how faculty plan courses of instruction. It appears that there will be more similarity between, for example, chemistry professors at quite diverse institutions (such as community colleges and research universities) than between chemistry professors and literature or history professors at their own institutions (Stark, 1988).

Barrier #2: The Self-definition of Professors What does it mean to be a professor in one's special field? The way faculty answer this question will have a determining effect on how they behave in the teaching situation. For example, do they define themselves principally as "transmitters of an organized body of knowledge"? Or perhaps as "facilitators and managers of student learning"? In the course of becoming teachers, academics acquire a definition of their professional selves. As Bakker (1975) says, "It is not too surprising that people like to apply definitions to themselves and to their fellow men, or that once established they try to keep them the same. After all, if people are to play a role relative to each other they need to know how they can predict the other's responses.

Barrier #3: The Feedback Circle in the Classroom The college teacher steps into a teaching situation for which participants are prepared by years of observation and socialization. In all likelihood, the classroom or laboratory situation will confirm the professor's definition of what it means to be a teacher, and the way students act in relation to this teacher will exercise a powerful regulatory function on the teacher's behavior. For example, with rare exceptions, the teacher will control the channels of communication in the classroom. Students come to expect this behavior and may appear

uncomfortable if a professor changes.

Barrier #4: Discomfort and Anxiety Whenever professors take instructional detours from the familiar and expected, they risk encountering some awkwardness or anxiety. Like cyclists on wobbly wheels, they will understandably feel uneasy when trying the new, different, or unfamiliar. "Can I carry this off?" "How will the students react?" "What will my colleagues think?" are questions that may arise at the boundary of their emotional comfort zone. When professors stick to the "tried and true" methods within the traditions of their disciplines, such uncomfortable questions are likely to be much less frequent.

One's familiar methods are, as Kenneth Eble observed, "as persistent as the bad habits of our youth." One of the habitual behaviors Eble noted was the tendency of professors "to be guided in techniques and practices by the routes of least resistance: to favor the lecture, to shun innovations and adjuncts to instruction, to reduce teaching chiefly to class preparation and delivery on as few hours a week as possible and at the most convenient times." (Eble, 1980). Behavior that is familiar feels comfortable, and what feels comfortable resists change.

Barrier #5: One's Most Enchanted Listener The most traditional and revered form of teaching is the lecture. This form serves many functions, not least of which is that of establishing the professor as *an expert*, as *one who knows*. When professors "cover the material" by lecturing, they have an opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of the subject and to explore in public some of the most interesting intellectual issues that attracted them to their fields. They get to wonder aloud. As they listen to themselves think aloud, they may demonstrate the tendency to be their own "most enchanted listeners." (Johnson, 1956). Being the center of attention can be gratifying. Lowman suggests that lectures survive because, like bullfights and 'Masterpiece Theater', they satisfy the need for dramatic spectacle and offer an interpersonal arena in which important psychological needs are met." (Lowman, 1985). Thus, in spite of the fact that the lecture may not be the most effective method to achieve certain kinds of learning objectives, it tends to resist change.

Barrier #6: Faculty See Few Incentives for Changing For a professor to deviate from established teaching methods invites some professional risks and emotional discomforts but offers relatively few rewards. Developing and offering a new course in a traditional and agreed-upon manner may receive some professional recognition; but making significant changes in *how* one instructs an established course is unlikely to receive similar recognition. In addition, although colleges and universities regularly recognize faculty for presenting papers at academic conferences, far fewer recognize faculty for presenting papers at conferences specifically concerned with college teaching. Furthermore, some institutions offer scant professional recognition or funds for faculty who attempt to increase their instructional competence by attending instructional trainings and institutes.

What Can Help Faculty Change? Gaining the cooperation of the students and colleagues involved can reduce resistance to change. For example, instead of surprising students with unexpected methods, professors can explain their rationale and request student collaboration in the process. Change is made easier when a class, academic unit, or entire institution agrees on the value of making certain changes and commits itself to the process. (One example of the success of such collaboration is the group of medical schools that have changed from traditional lecturing methods to small group tutorial methods known as Problem-Based Learning.)

When one is bound by professional definitions and roles, "breaking set" by trying something new maybe helpful. A teaching exchange in a different kind of institution or a stint at cross-disciplinary team-teaching can stimulate and support change. As well, observing classes taught effectively in alternative ways or talking with instructors who approach teaching differently can stimulate creative changes in one's teaching. Modeling provides one of the most effective means of learning new behavior styles.

It may also be helpful to view the feelings that accompany change as signs of vitality and as indicators that you are refusing to be stale in your teaching. You may discover that conscious change can be exciting and renewing and a powerful antidote to professional bore-out or burn-out Even if your approach to instruction is demonstrably

effective, you may decide a change to an alternative method is necessary to keep yourself challenged and fresh.

The changing circumstances of college teaching demand that faculty reflect on how they teach. In many cases professors will need to add new skills and understandings to their repertoires and revise or discard others. A professor's ability to change will depend on individual desires and actions and also on the institution's willingness to encourage, reward, and assist the process of change.

References

Bakker, C.B. (1975). Why people don't change. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*. 12(2), 164-172.

Eble, K. ed.(1980). *Improving Teaching Styles*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, No. 1. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 5.

Johnson, W. (1956). *Your Most Enchanted Listener*. Harper.

Kerr, C. (1982) "Postscript 1982." *Change*, 14(7), 23-31.

Lowman, J. (1985). *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 97.

Stark, J.S., et al.(1988). *Reflections on Course Planning: Faculty and Students Consider Influences and Goals*. Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Watzlawick, P., et al (1974). *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*. New York: W. W. Norton.