

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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College Teaching as an Educational Relationship

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Most of us enter college teaching with no formal conceptualization of what we are trying to do. In this essay I provide a conceptualization of learner-centered college teaching that I believe enables us to understand it and do it better.

The Educational Helping Relationship We start as teachers by being preoccupied by our own concerns (teacher-centeredness, or Egocentrism; Robertson, 1999b). We begin in Egocentrism because generally we do not know what we are doing as teachers, we have little or no experience, we have done little or no formal study of teaching and learning, we are teaching new courses, we receive little or no meaningful support in our teaching infancy, and the stakes are high. Our promotion and tenure is on the line. This set of circumstances would make anyone defensive and egocentric.

However, as our careers progress and we acquire reasons for comfort (e.g., experience and tenure), we may discover the opportunity to integrate into our Egocentrism a meaningful exploration of students' experiences in trying to learn our topics (learner-centeredness, or Aliocentrism; Robertson, 1999b). As we come to see teaching as facilitating learning (helping students to construct their personal knowledge), it becomes a helping profession. It is now akin to, but different from, other helping professions such as counseling, psychotherapy, ministry, or social work.

Images that influence the literatures arising from the learner-centered teaching perspective such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule's midwife, Brookfield's skillful teacher, Daloz's mentor, Freire's partner, Knowles' andragogue, and Mezirow's emancipatory educator often encourage us to develop a relationship with learners that is based on trust and care and dedicated to nurturing learning and development in each individual (Robertson, 1996). In other words, the images encourage a helping relationship (Brammer, 1996) which is educational. It is oriented toward learning rather than problem solving as is the case for counseling or psychological healing (Robertson, 2000).

Benefits of This Understanding Understanding teaching as an educational helping relationship has three specific benefits (Robertson, 1996, 2000). First, doing so encourages us to explore the pertinent theory and research of the related helping professions so that we do not have to reinvent the wheel (Robertson, 1996, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000). Second, perceiving teaching as, potentially, a highly charged helping relationship helps us focus on the need to learn more about constructively managing the boundaries in teacher/student relationships in order to make them nurturing yet professional, caring yet appropriate (Robertson 1993, 1996, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000). Third, this understanding helps us move toward normalizing the critical professional supports already required or expected as exemplary practice in other helping professions for example, professional or peer consultation that offers confidential settings in which to discuss specific problems and cases related to teachers' work as facilitators of learning (1996).

Conflict and Paradox With this understanding, we need to realize that college or university teaching is a fundamentally conflicted educational helping relationship. That is, the role of teacher as learning facilitator has within it inherent, antithetical demands: for example, development vs. evaluation, to develop students but still judge their progress; teacher learning vs. student learning, to maintain and increase teachers' content expertise but still devote time to promoting students' mastery; teachers' inner experience vs. students' inner experience, to attend to both the student's and the teacher's subjective reality; and individuals vs. systems, to focus on both individual experiences and needs and the needs of the entire

teaching and learning system of the class (Robertson, 1999b, 2001, in press).

In Latin conflict means to strike together; and it typically denotes contention, antagonism, incompatibility, or contradiction. Paradox derives from Greek and means beyond thought. The word usually refers to something that seems contradictory but is nonetheless true. When we come to see college teaching as an educational helping relationship, we face conflicting demands. Our challenge is to integrate them. We are called to make paradox out of conflict—a single complex truth out of two seemingly opposing truths.

Achieving Paradox To illustrate this integration, let us consider the fundamental conflict that an educational helper faces in a graded course at an accredited institution: development vs. evaluation. The learner-centered college teacher focuses on the learners' frames of reference and helping them construct their personal knowledge of the content, either by integrating new personal knowledge into their existing frame of reference or by transforming the frame of reference itself (i.e., facilitating either simple or transformative learning; Robertson, 1988, 1997). Thus the focus is on trying to help students learn or develop within the only world they can experience: their own reality.

However, college teachers have other constituents besides the students. If they teach graded (including pass/no pass) courses at an accredited institution, then they must be responsible to external standards which may be drastically different from students' standards. College teachers in this case serve as evaluators representing their discipline, their institution, and society as a whole as expressed by regional accreditation associations. So the learner-centered teacher must somehow convince students to enter into a trusting, caring relationship with someone who is devoted to their individual learning and development but who will eventually judge them on behalf of authorities whom the students know are in the room but cannot see. "Tell me what YOU think (forget that I'm grading you)," teachers encourage students. Hearing only, "I am grading you," students play it safe and clam up.

Hence, we must devise ways to integrate these two roles “helper and

judge” in order to function effectively in the conflicted educational helping relationship that is college teaching. Facing role conflict, we have at least three choices.

First, we can negotiate with the self. For example, we can lower our standards of acceptable performance in one or both of the conflicting role domains. I can throw in the towel with regard to being a facilitator and retreat to teacher-centeredness; I can abdicate my responsibilities as an evaluator and give everybody "A's"; or I can hold myself accountable in both domains but decide to define as acceptable a much lower quality of performance in each.

Second, we can negotiate with others. We can discuss openly with others involved with our role conflict and agree upon acceptable ways of handling it. For example, we can discuss with the class the inherent conflict in our work as teachers and ask their help in creating effective ways to manage it, one of which is to encourage students to be aware of our conflicting roles and to be aware when each role comes to the fore and when it fades into the background.

Third, we can negotiate with neither the self nor others and just try harder. For example, when we have just given a student who was expecting a higher mark a "C" on a midterm, we can ignore the conflict and just work all the harder to regain the trust needed in order to function effectively as a facilitator of learning.

My own humble attempts to integrate these conflicting role demands have focused on the second alternative above: enlisting the help of others involved, specifically students. At some point during the first class, I routinely explain my teaching philosophy, acknowledging explicitly the conflict between being a facilitator and an evaluator. Normally, I sense an almost tangible sense of relief, appreciation, and bonding from students as we witness together the elephant in our parlor and talk about it openly. I explain that these apparently conflicting demands can co-exist in relative harmony (my understanding of paradox) and that the first step toward achieving harmonious integration is admitting that conflicting role demands are present. Then I try to be as precise and frank as I can about my evaluation system: where I act as an evaluator and where I do not, specifying my evaluative frame of reference as clearly as I can where

I do act as a judge. In my experience this approach works, and I recommend it for addressing other conflicts inherent in the educational helping relationship.

Conclusion F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Serving as a learner-centered college teacher challenges us to pass this test. The extent to which we struggle in this conflicted educational helping relationship called college teaching, is traceable, I believe, at least partly to the degree to which we have succeeded with integrating the relationship's inherently conflicting demands, i.e., made paradox out of conflict.

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