

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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When Disability Enters a Teacher's Life, Must the Teacher Stop Teaching?

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In the past 20 years, progress had been made on most campuses to assist undergraduate students with disabilities. However, another population with similar concerns exists on our campuses and usually has no specific program or support available: faculty and TAs with disabilities. Disabled college instructors may consequently need the support of faculty development professionals.

Regrettably, faculty and TA developers may feel ill at ease dealing with mental health difficulties, learning difficulties or disabilities, sensory impairments, physical impairments or mobility difficulties, or progressive, medical or other conditions (Tynan, 2005). When an instructor with a disability requests help, teaching consultants may feel unsure of their ability to provide guidance. The following case study suggests that consultants can separate the issues surrounding the disability from the pedagogical issues involved and help disabled instructors perform well in the classroom.

The Case^[1]

Tom, a teaching consultant, received a call from a departmental faculty member asking if he could work with a TA who had a

disability. During a recent meeting, the TA, Betty, had expressed her frustration and wanted to leave the program. The professor really didn't want to lose such a good graduate student. Tom agreed to meet with Betty.

During their first meeting, Betty complained that her students were rude and lazy. She said that when she had been a student, she had always been prepared because she really cared about school and studied very hard. She also explained that she had always treated her faculty with respect, but her students didn't afford her the same consideration because she was a TA. Betty ended by saying that she was ready to quit graduate school and abandon her plans to achieve the doctorate and teach.

During the second session, Tom asked Betty how the class was going. Betty exploded about how ill mannered the students had been during a recent field trip to the Convention Center. She said that she used to enjoy field trips but now found them impossible to do because students were so impolite. Tom asked if there could possibly be anything else bothering her, regarding the situation, and she burst out, "Yes, I am going deaf! I wear a hearing aid, but I can't hear my students if they are always hiding BEHIND me!" Tom asked her to describe in more detail her perception of the situation.

Betty's hearing had been worsening for some time and she had been told that eventually she would be deaf. She used several basic formats in her class: lectures, panels of invited speakers, and field trips. She had few problems when she lectured because the students listened. During panel presentations, she had an interpreter who signed the panelists' comments and the students' questions for her—which worked pretty well. However, sometimes she noticed students talking with each other and giggling and was afraid that they might be laughing at her. Such behavior was even worse on the field trips than in class. She was aware that she tended to walk in front of the

group and do most of the talking. Students who wanted to chat dropped behind. This bothered her a lot because she feared that the students would fail the exam. And, to top it all off, they didn't think she was an expert—even though she had actually worked in the field after she received her master's degree and prior to returning to complete the doctorate. She felt incompetent, out of control, and annoyed with students who didn't take her or the subject seriously.

The Consultation

Tom checked with Betty to determine if she had been in contact with appropriate disabilities experts on campus. She assured him that she had, but that she was concerned about her classroom experience. Tom decided to help Betty determine which concerns were directly related to the disability, which to her perceptions of students' reactions, and which to her lack of experience in teaching. Once they accomplished this, they could address some acceptable solutions together. Additionally, they had to determine how to communicate the results of the consultation to her faculty mentor. Betty, with Tom's help, wrote down the points that were bothering her. Then, together, they sorted the problems into the following categories:

Problems based on my disability

- I'm uncomfortable telling people about my disability.
- I can't hear students when they are behind me.
- I assume students are making fun of me.

Problems based on student behaviors

- Students are rude and impatient.
- Students don't pay attention to me.
- Students walk behind me when
- I'm lecturing on the field trip.
- Students make fun of me.

Problems based on a lack of pedagogical knowledge or skill

- I've never considered how my disability influences my teaching methods.
- I focus on what I am saying rather than what the students are learning.
- I haven't planned individual and group focused activities.
- I haven't set norms and expectations for classroom and field trip interaction.

Solutions

After analyzing the list, Betty could clearly see the difference in the impact her disability was having and the problems caused by a lack of skill in teaching. She decided that her failure to address the disability up front caused students to misunderstand what was happening in the classroom and on field trips. She realized that blaming the students interfered with her ability to plan student-focused activities that would work and engage them despite her disability. She also had to face up to the impact her disability really did have. For example, she had to tell students to stand in front of her so that she could read their lips when they had specific questions. Or they could give their questions to the interpreter and have him communicate with her. Betty also had to learn some new pedagogical skills and put them into practice.

Tom suggested that she discuss her disability with her students, explain how it affects her and them, and to explain the interpreter's role and how to interact with him. Tom pointed out that many people have disabilities and many others will have them as they meet life's challenges. Betty decided to give students the sign language spelling hand signals and encourage them to learn signs. She thought they might have fun making the extra effort if she gave them extra credit for spelling out their answers by hand. She also decided to use one-

minute papers for feedback during each lecture class and establish email communication with the whole class so students could express their questions and concerns and receive answers quickly outside of class. Betty's teaching style tended to be the same whether she was lecturing or leading a field trip. As Betty and Tom continued to work together, she decided to develop a new format for her field trips in which students explored the site and filled out individual worksheets. She would write a good worksheet, give clear directions, and plan some questions as small group activities and some as individual activities. She established grading guidelines for both. Each field trip would end with a whole group question/answer session with everyone sitting in front of her. Betty felt relieved that students would benefit from active engagement and realized that she did not have to lecture about everything.

Follow-up on the Consultation

By the end of the semester Betty reported that she felt much better about herself and her teaching. Subsequent field trips had gone much more smoothly after she instituted the worksheets. Students had responded well to her request to learn to spell out words and were very willing to communicate directly with her or write down questions and comments. Everyone relaxed, had a good time; and students reported that they felt they had learned a lot.

In their last consultation, Betty told Tom, "I'm so happy. My class gave me very good reviews at the end of the term. I'm so glad that I didn't quit. Now I know I can adapt. My students can adapt. Best of all, I can continue my doctorate. By the way, I talked to my faculty mentor and told him I'm going to stay in the program and become a teacher. And, thanks for referring me to the Disabilities Office—even though they usually don't work with instructors, they gave me some great ideas, too."

This case raises questions about the needs of instructors with

disabilities and the role of teaching consultants in providing service to them. Since this case was first written, some progress has been made. There is a new listserv for Faculty with Disabilities, and researchers at the University of Colorado have conducted two surveys with instructors with disabilities to better define the parameters of the problem.

References & Resources

Tynan, A. (Ed.), (2005). Time to take stock: Disability and professional competence. DIVERSE: The UK Veterinary Medicine Disability Project, Higher Education Funding Council for England. London, England: The Royal Veterinary College, London.

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