

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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## The Critical Match Between Motivation to Learn and Motivation to Teach

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**Incongruence** Students will be pleased with a course if educational outcomes match the expectation they had for taking the course in the first place. They may even experience extra delight if outcomes exceed their expectations, but they will surely be disappointed to the extent that the outcomes fall short of expectations. One way professors strive to avoid such disappointment is by providing a syllabus that lets students know in advance what they can reasonably expect. However, even a very clear syllabus won't avoid disappointment if there is a fundamental difference between what professors and students believe their courses ought to achieve. In a recent essay about the different cultures of professors and students, Lars Eric Larson (1993) discusses the problem of professors and students perceiving course purposes differently. In Table 1 we outline five perceptual conflicts that we observe in course interactions. They are based on some of the original professor/student differences identified by Larson. (See Table 1.)

**Motivation of Teaching and Learning Behaviors** Martin Covington (1993) and his research collaborators have for many years investigated motivations underlying learning behavior. Their conclusion is that course grades and self-image are far less important in motivating student learning than a student's own self-estimate of ability. In other words, the strongest motivation for learning is the

perception by students that their personal abilities will be maintained or improved. Even though an expected course grade might be low, learning motivation will remain high if students believe that necessary personal abilities are being enhanced. Although students enrolling in a specific course may verbalize a diverse set of motives for doing so, they are quite homogeneous in their overall desire to enhance personal skill and ability. Most college students see education as a way to enhance their positions in life. Given such a promise, students generally respond positively to learning challenges; but, as we know, they are easily bored if this promise weakens or is lost.

Students take a broader view of teachers than mere "knowledge transmitters." They evaluate course experiences by diverse criteria such as effect on grade averages: parental expectations: peer attachments; perceived importance for subsequent courses: usefulness in later life and career; and, yes, interest and entertainment content. However, we believe that their over-riding, long-range concern is the appropriateness of course knowledge to personal growth and plans for skill formation relevant to their career aspirations.

A stark reality of higher education is that it is difficult for students to see direct links between course work and ultimate payoffs, particularly with regard to liberal arts endeavors. So how can the potential energy of student interests be engaged? Our own teaching experiences and understanding of learning show that student motivation to learn can be dramatically influenced by course structures, teaching methods, and instructor attitudes. Thus, we advocate institutional changes that encourage pedagogical modifications- that is, modify teacher attitudes and incentives as a means of ultimately stimulating student motivation and learning outcomes.

Traditionally, faculty members have viewed course material as something to be "transmitted to students." This is typically accomplished by lectures and demonstrations. The professor knows the material, and the students must learn it-a clear and simple learning model. There is a powerful underlying cultural environment that supports this style of teaching, particularly the pervasive notion

that the student is solely responsible for educational outcomes, not the professor. That is, professors profess while students "assimilate" and get tested on the amount they retain. Students often feel that this pedagogy grades them for performance unrelated to personal growth and development of their abilities.

We believe that there already exists a broad-based awareness of this cultural predicament. We also acknowledge that we account for only two small voices within a very large chorus of advocates for adoption of "more active" learning methods. The problem is how to begin redirecting the inertial forces of our academic culture? How can the teaching/learning motives of professors and students be made more congruent in the existing environment? In our opinion, what is needed at the discussion table is general exposure to a wide variety of specific, successful tactics. We need to witness how various institutions are solving this problem- implementing new incentive systems that encourage faculty members toward pedagogic innovation, especially active learning options.

What we propose is more than bootstrapping more enthusiastic classroom presentations. Reform involves considerable revamping of traditional teacher incentives and eventual cultural shifts away from the incongruent attitudes displayed in Table 1. Given the great difficulty of making large cultural changes quickly, we have developed a special program that can be embedded within a traditional college curriculum. Our hope is that what is first *embedded* will eventually become *integrated*, sparking shifts in pedagogical preferences. The program is called "The Practicum Program" and is described in detail elsewhere (Teeples & Wiebman, 1997). It provides a framework in which it is appropriate and necessary for professors and their students to be jointly responsible for course content while not seriously jeopardizing the strong cultural norm that professors ought to exercise dominant control over course coverage.

**Table 1 Five Key Dimensions of Student- Professor Interactions**

	Dimension	Respondents	Response
1	Control	Professors	Feel authoritative and that they should exercise full course control.
		<i>Students</i>	<i>Recognize that they are clients, however, feel that paying clients should share in control.</i>
2	Knowledge	Professors	See acquisition of knowledge as an end in itself.
		<i>Students</i>	<i>See knowledge as a means to an end.</i>
3	Method	Professors	Match teaching style to the type of material being taught.
		<i>Students</i>	<i>Judge teaching styles by criteria that are unrelated to course content.</i>
4	Motivation	Professors	Feel a student's enrollment in course is tantamount to being motivated.
		<i>Students</i>	<i>Feel the professor is compensated, at least in part, to motivate them to learn.</i>
5	Purpose	Professors	See narrow purpose for taking a specific course, e.g.. learning per se, and preparation for follow-on courses in the discipline.
		<i>Students</i>	<i>Have varied purposes, e.g.. course fits personal schedule, is a required course, raw curiosity, heard that teacher was interesting, wanted to be in course with a friend, parents insisted.</i>

An institutionally supported practicum program is just one tactic for implementing active learning methods and making the motives of professors and students more congruent. Fostering undergraduate student/faculty research is another approach. In general, the incentives should cause professors to feel more responsible for the educational outcomes of their students. By "incentives" we do not refer exclusively to monetary rewards and reimbursement. If a course goal is to complete a project for an outside client, the professor's reputation (as well as the students' and the institution's) is a strong, congruent incentive toward effective learning. In joint projects, the

professor is more likely to focus on each team member and make sure he or she performs well enough to meet or exceed criteria agreed upon by the group. Active learning approaches that foster teamwork are especially motivating because the professor can expect social pressures from within student groups to assist in monitoring individual performance levels. Above all, active learning approaches cannot appear to be pointless. The exercises ought to be aimed at clear learning objectives. A connection to students' expectations about improvement of personal abilities is paramount.

In the practicum setting, coursework is usually arranged so that professors and students share similar risks. Students are investing for skills relevant to their futures, and the professors see the project as facilitating professional advancement. Compared to lecturing, the teaching/learning motives are more congruent.

But how plentiful are such opportunities for consistent active learning at the undergraduate level? Other than perhaps some satisfaction from improved educational outcomes, what is a professor's payoff from implementing more active learning pedagogies? What if the tactic causes professors to relinquish some course authority and be exposed to greater risk of professional advancement?

Educational research seems to signal some clear benefits to students from the kinds of pedagogical changes that we are advocating. At least we can say that student motivation is elevated when belief runs high that students are gaining the skills and experience that employers and graduate schools are actively seeking. Positive feedback from these "outside sources" and former students clearly reinforces such belief. Undergraduate professors in our program have been quite successful in making this kind of teaching serve at least some of their scholarship aspirations. The question is whether this source of improved motivation can be made more consistent with the educational goals and professional motivations held by professors.

**Conclusion** Our personal experiences convince us that when courses are designed so that professors and students share responsibility and work together to achieve common goals, there are very positive effects on educational outcomes. Not only is learning

more uniformly superior but harmonization of teaching/learning motives also improves the emotional quality of the educational experience for both professors and students.

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