Must Faculty Teach in Ways That Make Them Easily Dispensable?

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Many faculty pay little attention either to the scholarship on effective pedagogy or to the literature that asks how our academic goals might be better articulated. One direct consequence has been teaching that remains much less effective than it could be. Another is our tendency to attribute our lack of success more to student inadequacies than to our pedagogical deficiencies.

The internet and ever-cheaper computing have now made global distance education practical. Hence the question: How many professors can, or even should, be replaced with good distance education courses? One line of scholarship has made such change seem educationally appropriate. In “Explaining, Exploring [and] Understanding the No Significant Difference Phenomenon,” T. R. Russell notes, "scholars have been able to find no significant difference resulting from the use of or lack of use of technological means of delivery” and "no matter how it is produced, how it is delivered, whether or not it is interactive, low tech or high tech, students learn equally well" (Adult Assessment Forum Winter 1997:59; see also http://cuda.teleeducation.nb.ca/nosignificantdifference for summaries of 355 studies).

If we don’t like Russell’s conclusion, we should either document any important things we are already doing that distance education is not, or try to change our pedagogy so that it is better than the teaching technology can easily provide.

What might such a pedagogy look like?

To help you create your own answers to this question, read Marcia Baxter Magolda’s new book, Creating Contexts for Learning and Self-Authorship: Constructive-Developmental Pedagogy (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999). Even faculty who aren’t particularly concerned about the issues raised by distance education versus face-to-face encounters with a teacher will profit from Baxter Magolda’s splendid, synthesizing overview.

In her opening chapter Baxter Magolda creates a vision of what higher education might be. Specifically, she synthesizes three rich strands: an emphasis on the student’s own experience (John Dewey and Jean Piaget through Parker Palmer, Nel Noddings, and several other feminists), an emphasis on self-authorship or liberatory education (Paulo Freire and Ira Shor through Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault), and an emphasis on intellectual development (Jean Piaget, William Perry, Patricia King, Karen Kitchener, and Robert Kegan). Her synthesis provides a brief introduction to much of the best thought about the goals of teaching in higher education.

The collective vision is one of a pedagogy that will promote both disciplinary mastery and “self-authorship.” The sense of self-authorship is broadened to include intellectual development, the
The development of a sense of personal definition through conscious choices of values and much more, and the development of interpersonal competence. In this use, she follows Robert Kegan (e.g., In Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life, Harvard University Press, 1994). Throughout the book she integrates her framework with Kegan’s.

The opening chapters also summarize her earlier longitudinal study of cognitive development in college. In that study Baxter Magolda found three principles that promoted students’ epistemological development (applied here to self-authorship in the larger sense). These are validating students as knower ("acknowledging their capacity to hold a point of view, recognizing their current understandings, and supporting them in explaining their current views"), situating learning in students’ own experience ("using students’ experience, lives and current knowledge as a starting point of learning"), and defining learning as mutually constructing meaning ("the teacher and students put their understandings together by exploring students’ experiences and views in the context of knowledge the teacher introduces"). She emphasizes the role of discipline and teacher knowledge: validating students as knowers validates their capability to think and construct knowledge; it does not validate misunderstanding of the concepts under study or interpretations that lack foundation.

The middle of the book includes four extended case studies (two co-authored with Jennifer Buckley). The cases apply the three pedagogical principles to the analysis of contrasting college courses, courses in which the teachers implicitly had constructive-developmental goals and used pedagogies that were largely compatible with the principles. The courses included a large, required, introductory education course (with both whole class and small group sessions); a small non-majors mathematics course (‘math by inquiry’); a senior/graduate biology course using “interactive lectures” (as well as literature reports and the preparation of grant proposals); and her own two-semester, graduate course on student development theory.

Although she discusses many specific techniques, she emphasizes that “using the three principles as an underlying structure for pedagogy is not a matter of using new techniques; it is, rather, a matter of transforming one’s assumptions about teaching and learning.” These case studies are powerful tools for faculty who wish to understand such a transformation and its implementation. They illustrate how the three principles play out in actual class sessions and how students’ developmental positions mediate their responses to the sessions and assignments. The study’s design—selecting courses from a variety of levels, disciplines and class sizes—will allow many faculty to envision a variety of ways in which a constructive-developmental approach could work in their own classes.

In the closing chapters Baxter Magolda further deepens the vision of what higher education could be and helps us see how constructive-developmental pedagogy will help us achieve it. Here she first synthesizes the pedagogies displayed in the four cases and her three pedagogical principles with three other streams: Kegan’s work on developing students’ minds, Freire’s and Shor’s ideas on developing knowledge communities, and dialectical views that stress the interplay of the objective and rational with the relational, aesthetic, and narrative modes of knowing. In this, overall, Baxter Magolda manages quite an achievement. She follows it with a consideration of the “imaginary” but compelling problems that flow from the early socialization of many faculty into very different, authoritarian views of teaching. The real problems that flow from the diversity of modes of thinking that students bring to the classroom are also addressed. She ends with a consideration of the promise of constructive-developmental pedagogy for fostering self-authorship and lifelong learning and for better preparing students to participate in the public and private aspects of adult life.

Despite its clarity, this book is so rich that I shall have to reread it several times to harvest its full benefit. Moreover, it should be read together with her recent analyses of the post-college struggles and changes in self-authorship, epistemology, identity, and interpersonal maturity in a sample population she has studied for the 12 years since they first entered college (Baxter Magolda, Journal of College Student Development 1998 39:149-156; 1999 40:333-344; 620-644; and 2000 41:141-156). These struggles clarify the processes of development and make the need for pedagogical change even more starkly clear.

The underlying vision in both sets of work is of a pedagogy which—if implemented across a substantial portion of a student’s curriculum—would be much more effective in achieving both our content goals and the broader goals of liberal and professional education. I agree with both the vision and the means.

Moreover, I believe that such an education would be much harder to replicate in the distance education modalities than in the one in which students currently experience (Baxter Magolda is a bit more hopeful about doing this via distance education than I am).

Finally, this book provides a theoretical framework, a set of important specific questions, and some well-developed examples of how to approach the questions. These present a solid base for important scholarly analysis of both teaching and learning in a wide variety of classes and programs—perhaps even in yours?

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