February 2001

# ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

From the Office of the Associate Dean Vol. 5 No. 2

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## Teaching Portfolios and Learning Portfolios

A teaching portfolio is a collection of evidence of good teaching practice, where teaching is seen as everything that faculty do to help students achieve course and program goals. *Teaching portfolios* are prepared by teachers. Students prepare *learning portfolios*. Most often they become an assembled collection of work from a specific course submitted to the teacher for final and summative assessment. More innovatively, they are a collection of learning achievements accomplished across a series of courses in a program or major, for example. Higher education borrowed the idea of portfolios from artists who prepared them to illustrate their work, thereby gaining more work and/or employment. A learning portfolio may include sample work, but that work serves to document as well as illustrate the kind of learning skills, qualities, and achievements the student has. Portfolios like these can strategically position a student on the job market.

**Strengths and Problems with Teaching Portfolios**

· maintain a record of teaching accomplishments
· provide a tool for reflection on teaching
· improve teaching performance
· provide a better basis for dialogue on teaching
· burdensome and time-consuming to create
· difficult to assess
· difficult to introduce universally with success
· faculty resistance to overt "self-promotion."

**Strengths and Problems with Learning Portfolios**

· empower students they set learning goals
· focus teacher attention on learning
· program portfolios are a unique source of evidence of program effectiveness
· document growth and achievement
· lack of good research evidence about their impact and costs
· reliability inter-rater consistency
· student indifference and resistance
· insufficient teacher planning and preparation.
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The authors caution that the problems especially must be taken seriously. Both teaching and learning

portfolios have enormous potential to support and document innovative practice, where they have been developed so as to minimize the impact of the problems that are commonly associated with them. Where portfolios are introduced without attending to the difficulties, then their potential is unlikely to be realized, and harm may actually be done.

Adapted from *The Teaching Professor*, May 2000

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# New Staff in Academic Programs

Several staffing changes have been made in Academic Programs. **Mick Harmon** has been promoted to Admissions and Records Officer II. Mick will continue to manage new transfer students' course evaluations and file development, encode the ACES degree audit reports and assist students regarding program requirements. New responsibilities include managing the College's degree certification process, working closely with the departmental records personnel, and increasing his role with summer orientation and course registration. **Kimberly Lomax** has begun her new role as a Clerical Assistant, in the records area. New to the U of I, Kimberly attended SIU and Parkland. **Robb Middleton** is the new secretary working with John Santas. Formerly with Extra Help Services, Robb is a graduate of Parkland College and attended EIU. Since Rob Chappell works with Wayne Banwart, you may need to identify which Rob(b) you want to speak with when you call! **Jo Evans** is the new secretary working with Jesse Thompson. She recently moved back to Champaign, and is a graduate of the U of I.

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# Time to Be a Student Again?

Adapted from an article in *The Teaching Professor* By Nancy Warner Barrineau, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Aug/Sept. 2000.

With grad school years behind us, do we forget what it's like to be a student? Are we so focused on being *teachers* that we neglect to remember ourselves as *learners*?

Becoming a student again gave me a renewed empathy for my students and rekindled what I once knew. The experience convinced me: All of us would profit from being students in a field that is new to us.

**Good teaching, teaching that inspires me, most often models skills I need to acquire**. In a music performance class, the statement is axiomatic. But is teaching students to analyze a poem or solve a quadratic equation that much different? A high percentage of our students would surely benefit from *seeing* us perform the tasks we are asking them to attempt, just as watching my professor play a piece helps me learn to do the same.

**Encouragement is a much more powerful motivator than criticism or even a grade**. Hearing my teacher get excited when I mastered a new and difficult skill spurred me to practice more than any amount of reproach could have.

**I haven't truly learned the materials until I am asked to demonstrate in some active way that I "have it."** Reading, taking notes, or talking about playing the guitar doesn't let me know whether my playing is improving. These disciplines help me, of course, but I never know for sure what I have absorbed until I am forced to use the information.

**I always work harder when I know I will be asked to "perform" in a larger forum.** A healthy dose of fear, I learned, isn't always a bad thing. How many of us would work as hard as we do preparing for a conference presentation if we weren't just a bit sobered at the thought of presenting to respected colleagues in the field? This lesson, I think, applies to both our students, who should be learning to give presentations in front of *their* colleagues, and to us as teachers who should have the same kind of respect for our classroom audience.

**The more I put in, the more I get back.** No one else can put in the practice hours except me. And no amount of intellectual enthusiasm for the subject helps me unless I am willing to work hard and consistently toward my goal. I learned to accept that there is only so much I can do as a teacher. Most of the motivation and effort must come from my students.

**Collaborative learning, despite its frustrations, is extremely satisfying and motivating.** Will I neglect my studies if I am facing only the teacher? Sometimes. Will I practice harder in order not to disappoint (or feel embarrassed in) the group I meet every Monday morning? Absolutely. Will the experience be more satisfying if the others have prepared hard too (and more frustrating if they have not)? All of us know the answer to that one. I haven't succeeded until the whole group does, just as we have accomplished nothing at all until our students have mastered the skills we are there to pass along.

**Most importantly, learning a new field, with its foreign skills and professional jargon, can be enormously frustrating and dislocating.** Sometimes, when I am completely unable to grasp a concept or demonstrate skills, I feel truly stupid. Part of my brain shuts down. I am tempted to quit. Often I say, "Start over; I don't understand what you are asking me to do." Finally, it occurred to me to wonder how many times my students share this sentiment and how many of them are self-confident enough to voice it in class. I certainly wasn't when I was a college freshman.

Although I enrolled in these courses merely to improve my skills, the experiment taught me far more important lessons than the ones I had anticipated. I gained new insight into my own students, especially those in general education classes out of their chosen fields.

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# ACES Student Awards Banquet

Please mark your calendars

# April 29, 2001

11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

# Park Inn Conference Center, Urbana, IL

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A university should be a place of light, of liberty and of learning.
Benjamin Disraeli

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# Learning as Biological Brain Change

Jean-Pierre Changeux produced an attractive model for the process of learning, considered biologically. It is proposed that our thoughts and perceptions are indeed what John Searle calls an "emergent property" of our brain states. It is hard today to deny that perception and thinking are functions of the brain. Nor would many deny that this "function" is a massively complex pattern of signals going from dendrites to cell bodies to axons to dendrites and so on. We will never know the paths that signals take to generate a memory. That there are such paths, however, is not in question.

If, as the model suggests, learning is a matter of using pre-existing synapses until they are stable and hard- wired, it can then be thought of as brain change, as well as brain use. Our brains are different for having learned something; all of which would seem to put matters completely in the hands (heads) of the learner.

What part does teaching play in this scheme? Learning is indeed a private, internal process that takes place in the head of the learner, and therefore cannot be *caused* by an external agent, human or otherwise. But I use "cause" here in a very narrow and rigorous way. To say that an external agent cannot cause learning is only to say that such an agent cannot itself stabilize the synaptic junctions needed for learning to occur. External elements can of course have a remarkable *influence* on learning. Indeed, learning in most cases is influenced, or stimulated, primarily by external agents. It is precisely here that teaching is critical.

One unexpected and perhaps unwelcome result of seeing learning as a biological process is that we might begin to concentrate on the common aspects of learning in different people, not just on the differences among them. The accepted wisdom that "different people learn in different ways" is so pervasive that it has attained the status of doctrine. At one level, the idea is beyond challenge. No two people's brains are wired the same way and so each person's mental state is different from the next even when everyone perceives the same event. Yet, the synaptic stabilization model suggests that when several people all learn the same thing, they *all* fire repeatedly whatever synaptic junctions *they* have available to enable understanding. So at this very basic level we are all doing the same thing when we learn.

We all come to a learning opportunity of course, with different memories and experiences, and we will each use different combinations of hard-wired and labile pathways to burn in new circuitry. This fact provides a base-level model for the theory of multiple learning styles. But the same model suggests that *everyone's* learning style is, in fact, unique; there are as many learning styles as there are learners. This, in turn, can explain the enormous difficulty teachers have in trying to design instruction to accommodate the wide range of learning styles in any given classroom.

If there is an overall lesson here for the design of instruction, it would be that such a design must include accurate information, clear presentation, but should also consider the elements of emotional involvement on the part of the learner.

A particularly powerful stimulus for setting students' emotional barometers are teachers themselves. The old observation that students tend to like a subject if they like the teacher has, then, a real basis in the biology of learning. Making teaching and learning a more personal interaction between teacher and students might well be an effective first step in getting students themselves hooked on a subject.

But it should be *only* a first step. Truly effective teaching weans the students in the sense that it encourages and reinforces curiosity and other modes of emotional involvement with content. Such teaching, I believe, becomes more probable when teachers think of learning more consistently as a biological process.

Adapted from "Learning as Biological Brain Change" by Robert Leamnson in *Change*, November/ December 2000.

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## ACES Convocation and Commencement

Please mark your calendars

May 13, 2001

Undergraduate Convocation
9:30 a.m. Krannert Great Hall

Graduate Convocation
10:00 a.m. Smith Music Hall

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# More on Student Evaluations

Instead of relying on students' evaluations, I suggest the following: Instructors first create well-defined behavioral objectives and methods for determining whether the students master them. These objectives and testing methods should then be examined by departmental committees (or perhaps national committees) to judge whether they meet agreed-upon standards for that particular course.
Instructors should then collect from students at the beginning of each course data on baseline skill levels relative to course objectives. This initial test also allows the instructor to examine whether any students are lacking the prerequisite skills required to complete the course. Students without the necessary readiness could be counseled to take lower-level courses before proceeding in the current course.
At the end of the course, data should be collected on final performance on course objectives, and instructors should then report the products of their teaching effectiveness. The change (increase) in performance is compared to the expected change in performance. In essence, this provides a measure of percent of behavior change produced by the instruction relative to change in behaviors expected.
Having instructors publicly report their teaching effectiveness in this manner has many positive implications. Students might base their registration decisions on which instructors are more successful at getting students to reach desired goals rather than which instructors give "easy As." This measurement would be valuable to personnel committees and administrators for making decisions on tenure and merit pay increases. Instructors could examine the effects of different teaching techniques and instructional designs by using this unit of
measurement of teaching effectiveness. Some instructors may exhibit outcomes of over 100%, indicating that their students are learning above current standards. This may lead to pressure to raise standards due to proven effective instructional design. Instructors would likely continue collecting student surveys on their teaching styles and behaviors and use this information to find teaching characteristics they can systematically modify and to examine respective outcomes. Instructors would eventually create personalized student surveys that produce information about their teaching styles and behaviors that are related to effectiveness for their particular course. In fact, this type of educational

research (i.e, examining factors of teaching effectiveness) would be encouraged at the individual instructor level because an instructor's career would depend on higher effectiveness. Finally, grading leniency would no longer be a concern because the core course objectives and measurement devices will have been inspected and approved by departmental experts.

Adapted from "Student Evaluations of Teaching Measure The Intervention, Not the Effect" By Dave Buck, Department of Psychology, West Virginia University, in *American Psychology*, November 1998.

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ACADEMIC PROGRAMS is a publication of the College of ACES, Academic Programs, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.  *Academic Programs* is also accessible at: http://w3.aces.uiuc.edu/Acad-Prog/goodteach.shtml

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