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February 1998 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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## ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

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From the Office of Associate Dean

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# Teaching Makes a Difference

This month brings the conclusion to the articles on teacher behaviors that make a difference in student achievement. We have already addressed the top five characteristics. Those are Clarity, Variability, Enthusiasm, Task-Oriented and/or Businesslike Behavior, and Student Opportunity to Learn Criterion Material.

The remaining six variables are generally less influential but nonetheless deserve recognition for the role they may play in student success. Rosenshine and Furst generally indicate that these variables also warrant further study.

### Use of Student Ideas and General Indirectness

Teachers can involve students as active participants by using the students' ideas in the class. Examples include:

*Acknowledging* the student's idea by repeating key words and the logic expressed

*Modifying* the idea by rephrasing it or conceptualizing it in the teacher's own words

*Applying* the idea by using it to reach an inference or the next logical step in a process

*Comparing* the idea by drawing a relationship between it and ideas expressed earlier by students or the instructor

*Summarizing* what was said by the individual or group

**General indirectness includes acceptance of student feeling and praise or encouragement, as well as use of student ideas. Instructors should recognize and acknowledge student feelings such as frustration over not understanding the content or testing anxiety, rather than ignoring or disregarding student feelings.**

## **Criticism**

**There appears to be a strong trend for a negative relationship between criticism and student achievement. Note, however, that “criticism” does not include mild forms of correcting student behavior, such as simply letting a student know that the answer given was wrong. Criticism includes strong disapproval and extended comments that are more judgmental than corrective in nature. Good teachers avoid berating students or dwelling on student error, but continue to point out when students are incorrect.**

## **Use of Structuring Comments**

**Structuring comments include statements that provide an overview for what is to happen or what has happened. Examples include a review of the previous lesson at the start of each class session and a brief summary at the end of a session, indicating “where we are going next.” The same is true for transitions from one section of a course to another, as well as from one part of a class session to the next. Cognitive scaffolding is another description of structuring comments. The instructor continuously provides the connections among various parts of the class and course, linking them together in a meaningful way--like a scaffold.**

## **Types of Questions**

**Some research has identified two types of questions--lower cognitive level and higher cognitive level. The descriptions parallel the thinking behind Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, discussed in several earlier issues of *Academic Programs*. Lower cognitive level questions include “what” and “where”, asking for a discrete piece of information that can be recalled. Higher cognitive level questions are “why” and “how”, requiring the respondent to analyze, synthesize or evaluate pieces of information to form a new conclusion. There is not consistent evidence that the use of one type of questions is better than the other. More important is the research that indicates a mixture of**

higher and lower level questions is desirable.

## Probing

The variable probing generally refers to teacher responses to students answers which encourage that student, or another student, to elaborate upon the answer. Again, research is inconclusive, but there does appear to be some merit in the use of probing questions and statements. Following a lower level question with higher level question is a good example of probing. Asking for additional detail and elaboration are other examples.

## Level of Difficulty of Instruction

The relationship between the *student's perception* of the level of difficulty of instruction and student achievement has not been established. In fact, there are conflicting results showing some positive and some negative relationships. Perceived level of difficulty can be a function of student ability, teacher activity, and the interaction of the two. Overtly trying to make a course difficult or easy probably has little impact on how well students learn the criterion material.

## Summary

Teaching is both a science and an art. The research that helps us sort out what we can do as teachers to help students achieve is the science part. How we apply what we know becomes the art.

## Thinking About Student Feedback

The first third of the semester is over. What do you know about how well your course is going?

Early student feedback can be a tremendous early warning system for helping a teacher find out how well he or she is doing in a course. Rather than waiting only until the end of the course and gathering ICES data, the teacher can collect some basic information earlier in the semester so that positive changes can be made and the *current* students can benefit from their own input.

Early feedback forms should not be as lengthy and complicated as the ICES systems. In fact, good feedback can be generated by asking the class to respond to three questions:

**What is going well in this course?**

**What is not going as well in this course?**

**What one specific suggestion do you have to make this course better?**

**The information can be collected on a half sheet of paper during the first several minutes of a class session. The instructor can summarize the written information and determine what changes can be made to satisfy the concerns that are raised.**

**Students do not need to get a formal summary of their input. Instead, during the next class session the instructor should thank them for their responses, indicate that several good suggestions were made and will be acted upon, and give one example of a change that is being implemented immediately.**

**The potential results are nearly all positive. Students will feel like their ideas are important and that the instructor is truly interested in providing a better learning environment. The instructor will gain some ideas about the course while there is still time to do something about the concerns that are raised. Hopefully, a more positive learning environment will result in better learning!**

**Of course, early feedback does not replace end-of-course student evaluations. Be sure to submit the necessary paper work to have ICES forms generated for your classes.**

**If Peer Review is Acceptable for Evaluating Research,**

**Why Shouldn't It Also be Used to Evaluate Teaching?**

**Adapted from an article by Michael Moffatt**

**A clear trend in American higher education over the last century has been the steady retreat of the faculty at prestigious colleges and universities from undergraduate teaching, and the concomitant development of research as the primary or even sole criterion for professional advancement. At the university where I teach, many junior and middle-level professors firmly believe that good teaching can actually work against your chances of promotion. If the recommendations in your promotion file go on at great length about your teaching, it must be because whoever wrote them couldn't think of enough good things to say about your research.**

**Defenders of the *status quo* argue that good researchers make good teachers, that there's nothing intrinsically contradictory between the two, and they trot out anecdotal examples of well-known scholars who both teach and do research capably or even brilliantly.**

**Skeptics can usually think of at least as many counter examples, however, and, more important, so can most undergraduates. What can be done to increase the weight given to good teaching?**

**Almost entirely missing from higher education today, it seems clear, is an effective system of evaluating teaching. Conspicuously present, it seems equally clear, is a set of rationalizations for this absence--justifications that make existing arrangements appear intelligent, inevitable, just, and even "natural."**

**It's frequently said, for instance, that good teaching can't be measured. It's also recently suspected that the most popular professors among undergraduates are the "crowd pleasers," not the capable, demanding teachers.**

**However, good research couldn't be measured--or the research frauds separated from researchers who have something significant to report--if it weren't for the massive system of peer review by academic presses and scholarly journals that has quietly evolved as research has been accorded more emphasis. The legitimacy of peer review is based on the premise that good scholars can recognize scholarly work when they see it, even if they can't define it in advance. If relatively disinterested peer review is acceptable for evaluating research, why shouldn't it also be for teaching?**

**Real evaluation of teaching would be analogous to the review employed in scholarly publishing, where disinterested experts evaluate the work of their peers. In the case of teaching, both senior professors recognized by their departments as good teachers and scholars recognized for their research would make regular classroom visits to evaluate instructors' performance. Both types of expert would be necessary, because a complete teaching evaluation ought to include ratings of both the teaching style and the scholarly knowledge of the faculty member being reviewed.**

**Critics of teaching evaluations sometimes argue that classroom visits by colleagues would abridge the academic freedom of the professors being evaluated. But why would peer review of teaching threaten academic freedom any more than peer review of research does?**

**Critics also cite the possibility that teaching evaluations could lead to the**

**imposition of content-empty teaching “methods” on higher education. An appropriate evaluation system, however, could be part of a considerably more flexible and discipline-centered approach to improving teaching. Junior professors could team-teach with established teachers to pick up good pedagogy by emulations, and perhaps in return influence their mentors with their energy, imagination, and fresh knowledge. The evaluators also might learn many useful things, positive and negative, about their own teaching from observing their junior colleagues.**

**In any case, the official charge to those evaluating teaching ought to be to rate the effectiveness of the teaching style and method a particular professor has developed independently, not to impose a set of previously defined criteria. Once again, this system works reasonably well for research; why not for teaching?**

**If a real evaluation system were developed nationally, good teaching might come to be valued on a par with research, and new support for good teaching might materialize. Public and private donors might become interested in giving more money to colleges that they knew were emphasizing good teaching. Some graduate programs might decide to specialize in turning out good teachers. New publications and associations might develop to communicate new discipline- centered and content-centered methods of teaching. Teaching awards might really come to be valued. And, at a time when the cost of higher education continues to rise much faster than the cost of living, undergraduates might begin to get a good education in return for their tuition dollars.**

**Michael Moffatt is author of Coming of Age in New Jersey--College and American Culture, published by Rutgers University Press. The original article appeared in the Opinion section of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 4, 1989.**

## **Petitions**

### **ACES Student Awards Banquet**

**Sunday, May 3, 1998**

## **Illini Union**

**A major goal of Academic Programs staff has been to reduce the number of petitions that are generated in the college. It looks like some progress is being made! For calendar year 1997 for example, there were only 180 petitions submitted for course substitutions. And 141 were approved, for an approval**

**rate of 77%.**

**Why the changes? First, the new curricula are all in place, and students and advisers are doing a much better job of planning to avoid potential conflicts. Secondly, the overall philosophy of Academic Programs is more widely understood. The role of the College administration is to ensure the integrity of the programs that faculty have established, and to ensure that each graduate has earned a degree that meets the standards of the University.**

**Course substitutions should not be taken lightly. Each is judged on its own merits. When it comes to a time that lots of petitions are received and approved for the same reason, then there is probably a clear signal that a curricular change is warranted. Generally, the petition process should be used only when there has been a serious error made by some entity other than the student which would impair the student's progress toward the degree. Not wanting an 8:00 a.m. class, not liking a requirement, or finding an easier course are not reasons for course substitutions. Instead, petitions generally may be warranted when a required course is not offered as expected and planned, or a similar course was completed elsewhere, or a student was systematically given erroneous information.**

**The curricula are controlled by the faculty, not as individuals but as a collective group. Disagreeing with the curricular requirements is not sufficient reason to submit a course substitution petition. Likewise, most curricula in the College include areas where students may select two or three courses from a list of 10 or 15 alternatives. Such breadth and option, by its very nature, would indicate that the faculty has determined the limits of choice, as it should be.**

**The University of Illinois is a prestigious university. Protecting the integrity of the university, the college and the degree is the responsibility of everyone. Our alumni expect nothing less.**

**With time and patience the mulberry leaf becomes a silk gown.**

**Check out the presentations from the February 13 UI-Online Retreat at:**

**<http://www.online.uillinois.edu/retreat/program.html>**

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