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LEARNING TO NOT TEACH

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One of the most important skills I have learned as a university professor is how to not teach. In fact, I gave up trying to teach long ago. Fortunately, I haven't given up trying to learn.

This article, then, is about teaching and learning. It consists of a series of personal statements, questions, hypotheses, conclusions, descriptions, and observations about learning, teaching and learning to not teach. As best I can tell, the series doesn't follow any logical sequence. Learning seldom follows any logical sequence. Teaching does. I hope you find the material to be of interest.

1. The longer I am employed as a professor, the less sure I become as to what a teacher is supposed to do. When I stand up in front of a class and someone says explicitly or implicitly, "teach me," I become confused because I seldom feel as if I have anything to teach.

2. Whenever I do feel I have something to teach, I generally am disappointed. Most of the time, others already know it or don't find it particularly useful, interesting, relevant or profound; and neither do I.

3. I tend to agree with Carl Rogers' (1961) "Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning." In essence, he contends that anything of value can't be taught, but that much of value can be learned. I suppose that's one reason I find teaching so unsatisfying and learning so much fun.

4. I find it ironical that the various constituencies of higher learning (students, professors, and administrators) worry so much about teaching. I suspect their concern with teaching has its purpose — to divert energy from the difficult job of learning — which involves essence — and to focus on teaching — which deals with the illusion that the power to grow lies with someone else.

5. "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." A hostile comment to be sure, but one which for some reason is very popular among doers. Try substituting the word "learn" for the word "teach." The comment now reads, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, learn." The comment no longer makes sense. I wonder why? Maybe the answer to that question says something about the relative importance of teaching and learning.

6. It also occurs to me that teachers require learners in order to survive but that learners don't require teachers. Maybe that's why teachers emphasize the importance of teaching so much. They have to create a market for nonessential services.

7. In my discipline, there is a journal called Exchange: The Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal. What if it were called Exchange: The Organizational Behavior Learning Journal? I'll bet the content of the articles would be very different and a lot more interesting.

8. As a professor, I don't take responsibility for what others learn. I do take responsibility for what I learn, though. In fact, my basic goal in class is for me to learn something new. What others learn, if anything is up to them. I'm always pleased to help them learn something if they want to, but I won't be responsible for what they learn or whether they learn it.

9. In fact, I am struck with the bizarre willingness on the part of colleagues to take responsibility for students' learning. I know they take responsibility because they ask colleagues and students to evaluate their teaching ability for purposes of promotion and tenure. They get depressed if students don't perform well in their classes.¹ They read journals on how to improve their teaching effectiveness. Each of those acts in-


¹Appreciation is expressed to Neil Botel and Sally Gillespie for their helpful comments concerning the content of the manuscript.
dicates they in some way feel they are responsible for what their students learn — or fail to learn.

10. Many of them have the maxim on their desks (or in their minds), "If the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught." That maxim is quite peculiar, because it clearly implies that the basic responsibility for learning belongs to the professor. Consequently, if the student does badly, the professor is at fault. But, following the same logic rigorously, if the student performs competently the professor must get the credit. For all intents and purposes, then, the student doesn't exist, except as a sort of inanimate, passive receptacle for the professor's competence or incompetence.

11. In my opinion, anytime a professor accepts responsibility for his students' learning, he denies their existence. He doesn't respect them very much, if at all. If students permit the professor to accept responsibility for their learning, they don't respect themselves (or the professor) very much either.

12. When I take seriously the proposition that I am not responsible for students' learning, I become very anxious because it forces me to ask once again, "What is my job?" I wish I could say I've developed a satisfactory answer.

13. I never find grading a satisfactory experience. It deals with teaching, evaluation, accreditation, indoctrination, control, and unthought. It's de-meaning to all parties. I get ulcers on the inside of my bottom lip every time I do it.

14. I very much enjoy responding to students' work. I write letters, correct grammar and punctuation, critique, curse, applaud, cheer and frown. I learn a lot from responding. It's just grading that doesn't make sense.

15. In my classes, students are free to express themselves (use the material) in any way they wish. For their exams, students have written poetry, done scientific research, produced essays, sung theories, made movies, danced analyses of variance, presented plays, juggled (literally) constructs, cooked concepts (which the class ate), composed music, created works of art, and welded nails.

16. Given such freedom, most people have produced extraordinarily competent work. Some have produced work which is very incompetent. Very few have produced anything mediocre.

17. In a learning environment, students either "make it big" or "fail miserably." In a teaching environment, most people fall into the middle. Maybe that's the purpose of teaching — to insure mediocrity. Bureaucracies have to be staffed from somewhere, and no one is more mediocre than a well-taught student.

18. I require participants in my classes to work on their examinations with at least one other person. They can work with as many others as they like. They don't have to collaborate on a single project. (X may write an essay, Y may sing), but they may work on the same project if they wish. (For example, they may work together on a piece of research.) However they choose to work, they have to share their grades.

19. The reason for eighteen may be found in the literature of behavioral science. Bion (1961), Lynch (1977), Spitz (1946), and Harvey (1977) have pointed out that connection with other persons is a requirement for psychological and physical survival. Alternatively, any act (such as requiring that people work alone) leads to illness, both mental and physical.

20. The more I have learned to not teach, the more I realize that connection is a requirement for survival, and the more I become interested in learning, then the more disturbed I become when people cheat. I define cheating as the failure to help someone (at his/her request) on the various exams.

21. When I was a youngster, my grandfather used to say, "I'm going to learn you something." Until recently, I thought he wasn't very bright. Now I realize he was probably the smartest of us all.

22. As a learner, I never read the results of student evaluation forms. The forms are evidently useful to others (Bullphrogs, I suspect. They provide them with flies to flick and divert them from the task of draining the swamp (Harvey, 1977)). They are not useful to me, so I never look at them. If I did, I would be inviting students to learn the skills of passivity, non-risk taking, interpersonal incompetence, and irresponsibility. I am always willing to talk with students face-to-face in class about their compliments or their criticisms, but once the class is over, it's too late to make use of either.

2Some say that their performances form a bell-shaped curve. I have concluded that bell-shaped distributions of performance in academia are artifacts of an environment in which teaching is stressed. In a learning environment, performance is generally bimodally skewed, with most persons performing very well, a few performing very badly, and almost none falling in the middle.
23. The more I learn, the more I enjoy competence. The less I teach, the more I experience competence in myself and others. I love to be around competent people because I learn a lot from them and I'm more competent in their presence.

24. The more I learn to not teach, the more anxiety I experience in the classroom. I think the anxiety stems from the fact that I don't really know what will happen from class to class and frequently can't do anything about it when it does.

25. Although I am more anxious in a learning environment, I also have a lot more fun. More events in the classroom are genuinely funny.

26. That reminds me. Have you ever wondered why textbooks aren't funny? Have you ever wondered why the Bible isn't funny? Probably for the same reason. They were written to teach you something.

27. Likewise, have you ever known a competent professor, preacher, politician, manager, or student who wasn't funny, who didn't have a sense of humor or an appreciation of the absurd? I haven't. For example, did Jesus ever tell jokes or pass gas in church? (He must have — He ran the money changers out of the Temple, didn't He?) When He did, I'll bet the disciples roared and God laughed. I just wonder why His biographers (textbook writers) forgot to tell us about it. Probably because they were trying to teach us something; and in doing so, they destroyed part of His essence.

28. One last idea. If I've learned anything from being a university professor, it's that I only try to teach those I don't respect.

Do let me know if you feel I've tried to teach you something. If so, I'll be glad to apologize.

References


Rogers, C., “Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning” (Chapter 13), *On Becoming a Person*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1952, pp. 272-278.