From Textbook to Community

Throughout my teaching career, I have sought to learn from some of the pros in my field. I have grown familiar with their buzz words, e.g., *giving, respect, relationships, responsibility, process, growth,* and *change.* I have observed their behaviors.

Among the pros was a high school senior class advisor who encouraged students to buy something for the school or the community with funds remaining in their account after all graduation expenses were paid. This exercise bore its own message: Education must move from the textbook to the community when possible. It is a giving process, it is a lesson in reciprocity...it is accountability.

Another was an educational administrator who believed that while the three Rs—reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—were critical to the process of education, so were three others—respect, relationship, and responsibility. He promoted mutual respect among students and faculty alike, he trusted that this respect would carry over into other relationships, and he sought to instill a sense of responsibility in and among his students. Results? Perhaps one less criminal and one more potentially productive member of society.

I have chosen not merely to acknowledge these experiences but to incorporate them into my own teaching. Therefore, I have evaluated my courses and decided to make an unprecedented change: Community service is now a requirement in each humanities and social science course.

My primary goal is to get students involved with the community, to recognize and accept that they share some responsibility for its welfare. Specifically, the community service requirement is a six-hour commitment to visit and observe activities in community organizations. The first three hours must be spent in three different organizations. The final three hours must be spent in one of these three organizations and must be completed in a single block of time. This block-of-time requirement serves a dual purpose: it ensures commitment to one of the organizations, and it provides a potentially valuable contact for employment after graduation.

Two data retrieval forms assist students in chronicling their experiences. The first contains preliminary data which must be submitted to me for pre-approval one week prior to any visit. This allows time for me to call the sites, help students establish contacts in the event that problems arise, and verify attendance through random checks. Students must provide the following information:

- Date
- Time
- Name of student
- Course reference
- Name, address, and telephone of organization
- Contact, Title
- Supervisor's comments (optional)
- Supervisor's signature, Date

Upon their return from each community service activity, students detail their experiences by answering the following questions:

1. Why did you choose this particular organization?
2. What were your expectations when you began the community service activity?
3. Were there any special incidents that occurred during this time?
4. What was your reaction to this experience?
5. What particular traits, skills, and/or qualities did you bring to this service?
6. How could you improve this experience?
7. How did you grow as a result of this experience?
8. By what date do you expect to complete your note of thanks?

Students' responses to questions #4 and #7 are critical—responses indicate what they are learning about themselves and the world in which they live. Moreover and even as important, they learn that education does not always come from a textbook.

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Participative Evaluation

Gradually, I have been converted to believer in cooperative teaching and learning strategies. After years of lecturing, I have come to understand that students can learn from each other *almost* as well as they can learn from the thoroughly thought-out, meticulously prepared, and brilliantly delivered lecture. Amazingly, students *sometimes* learn from other students better than from discerning and sharp-witted lecturers. Moreover, sometimes they can improve on the lecturer's finely tuned examples, often providing examples that are more meaningful (and perhaps more interesting).

Just as student interaction can promote and enhance learning, teacher-student interaction can promote and enhance teaching. However, teacher-student evaluation, or participatory evaluation, needs to be carefully structured to offset real or perceived status differences between teacher and students (or at least the "power" that the giving of grades bestows on the teacher). The following evaluation strategy has proven to be useful.

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Shortly after mid-term, I devote one class day to evaluation. I explain that (1) I value student opinions about the course, my teaching, and their learning, and (2) I wish to gather opinions *now* because I believe end-of-the-quarter evaluations occur too late to serve the students providing them.

I write three or four questions on the board. Most often, the first question addresses some specific aspect of the course. Often this question deals with the students' reaction regarding some change in pedagogy I have tried—for example, a new testing technique or type of assignment. The other questions probe for information about changes the students would recommend and about techniques they found useful.

In order to ensure concrete and utilitarian feedback, all questions require at least a three-item response. For example, "List three things I could do to help you understand and learn the material." Because I am looking for concrete "how-to" ideas, students are to include suggestions for implementing proposed changes.

Students are divided into teams (three to five members). I attempt to put students together who may not be familiar with each other, hoping that they might recognize in this new relationship that learners have different learning styles and different expectations of the teacher, that teaching often involves balancing the needs of *all* individuals.

Each group discusses the three evaluation items and agrees on a *group* response. One member of each group is selected to record the responses in writing. [Typically, students are to assign this responsibility to the youngest group member. The process of identifying the youngest member serves as a nice ice-breaker.] I leave the room for 20 minutes; students discuss the three evaluation items, record their responses without identifying themselves, and place the written answers on my desk.

Thus far, the process involves students only. When I return to the classroom, teacher-student participation begins. I take one question at a time and read each group's responses aloud. All of the students are invited to participate as I probe for additional information to clarify responses, inquire about alternatives for implementing suggestions, and discuss the suggestions that all agree should be implemented. Finally, I identify the suggestions that I can incorporate into instruction and reject, with explanation, those I cannot.

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This technique provides an opportunity for students to discuss learning likes and dislikes, first with one another and then with the instructor. The participatory nature of the exercise requires the students and the professor to acknowledge and celebrate the uniqueness of individual learners.

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