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TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH HEART: THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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I don't like reading—it's really boring. I'd much rather watch a movie or play a video game.

I've never been any good at writing. I feel so frustrated by all those grammar and punctuation rules. I hope I don't have to write too many essays in college.

I'm terrified of math. I've never really understood it, and I don't think I ever will. Plus, I just don't see how it relates to the real world.

I don't know exactly why I'm here. All my friends are in college, so I decided to enroll, too. I guess going to college is the thing to do, but I don't see what the big deal is.

Teachers in America's community colleges have heard comments similar to these numerous times. Students' voices send a clear message: College can be a frustrating and frightening experience. Having stepped through the community college's open door, many students are academically and emotionally unprepared for the challenges of higher education—challenges that educators can recite readily. Often requiring remediation, increasingly larger numbers of students struggle in reading, writing, and math courses. Deemed “at-risk,” they frequently lack the family support and study skills necessary for academic success. As they juggle school with responsibilities at home and work, they sometimes miss class because of unanticipated problems with transportation or childcare. While they represent diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, they share poverty as their most common characteristic.

Although these issues have been well documented in the literature, we have overlooked an important reality: Our students enter college dreading general education courses. The irony of this “learning outcome” from the public school system is that children begin their education with great excitement and curiosity, but over the years they learn to

dislike learning. Each year, millions of students bring to the community college a lifetime of negative academic experiences that influence their self-esteem and their attitudes toward education. Unfortunately, for these learners, success often proves more elusive than does access.

For over two decades, institutions of higher learning have experienced state budgetary cuts. As appropriations continue to decline, taxpayers and legislators demand that community colleges demonstrate increased institutional effectiveness. In July 2006, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education released a 27-page draft report with recommendations for reforming federal student aid and accreditation policies, improving institutional transfer processes, and measuring the value-added outcomes of a college education (Field, 2006). Calling for changes regarding access, affordability, quality, innovation, and accountability, the draft report has ignited heated conversations among post-secondary educators. The commission's criticism of higher education's current state of the art reinforces Roueche, Boswell, and Roueche's (1997) contention that colleges can no longer hide behind a curtain of anecdotal data. Asking serious questions about what and how community college students are learning, the public wants to hear answers that describe how and what data are being collected and succinct analysis of those data that best describe, measure, and evaluate learning outcomes.

We would argue that perhaps institutional effectiveness emerges less from a college's resources than from its development of “human talent” (Astin, 1985)—that is, from the nurturing of students' academic and personal potential. Working in two-year institutions traditionally dedicated to teaching, most faculty have emphasized cognitive outcomes; and students, in turn, have acquired knowledge, comprehension, application, and other thinking skills. Yet the dream of transforming from a teaching college to a learning college compels educators to teach the whole student—mind, heart, and soul. In reality, many exemplary community colleges place students at the heart of learning every day. College faculty, administrators, and staff members who recognize the affective domain's powerful influence on learning can help students cultivate their human talents best, and in the process, enhance institutional effectiveness.

A Blueprint for Educational Effectiveness

If we wish to build the home of our dreams, we begin with an architectural vision, draft it, and hire a team of skilled workers who then lay the foundation and establish the framework. With a vision, mission, and values statement for its foundation and a strategic plan for its framework, a community college dedicated to student learning represents a dream institution—the learning college. To progress from dream to reality, college constituents must monitor the building process carefully through the establishment of clearly defined outcomes, core indicators, specific timelines, assessments, and strategies for revision. A perpetual work-in-progress, a dream institution will require continuous maintenance of the systems and processes that make it a learning college. While busily attending to the daily operations of the college, faculty and administrators must remind themselves periodically of the extraordinary tenants they serve—namely, the most academically and demographically diverse learners in higher education.

If we think of the learning college concept as a blueprint for individual and institutional success, the key design features include outcomes and assessments within an engaging instructional process that faculty, staff, and administrators collectively support. Though well intended, most community colleges have not yet built learning colleges successfully from this blueprint. By focusing exclusively on achieving cognitive outcomes in our college courses, we often neglect the importance of developing student attitudes. Community college teachers, in fact, face the dual challenges of helping students acquire cognitive skills and, simultaneously, transforming their negative perceptions about general education courses and the instructors who teach them.

Roueche, Milliron, and Roueche (2003) reported from their study of faculty who had received NISOD Excellence Awards that many taught in community colleges to “make magic happen”—to make a positive difference in their students’ lives, to create classroom environments in which students will feel even more positive about the course content and the learning process on the second day of class than they had felt on the first, and so on throughout the semester. These teachers possessed an obvious ability to make any subject fun, interesting, and useful for their students. As a result of thoughtfully planned learning experiences, their students frequently reported being sorry when a class session or course ends.

Practical magicians on the front lines of teaching excellence regard the development of a positive attitude about learning itself as the ultimate learning outcome, even more important than the mastery of a particular skill. This attitude facilitates a student’s attempt to master the order of operations; to distinguish between a main idea and a supporting detail; or to compose a clear, cogent, and creative paper. Indeed, the adage that “attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference” is especially appropriate in the education of at-risk students whose outlooks on learning may pose the

greatest barriers to their success. To promote student success, community college instructors must consciously teach in both the cognitive and affective domains.

Teaching and Learning in the Affective Domain

Although most teachers are familiar with the objectives from Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive domain, they may not be as familiar with those of the affective domain—involving “changes in interest, attitudes, and values” and the “development of appreciations” (Bloom, 1956, p. 7). Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964) classify affective learning as receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, and characterizing. By planning and assessing affective outcomes, teachers can help students develop feelings, emotions, and predispositions conducive to learning. Such outcomes, however, often elude empirical observation: While teachers can examine and measure behaviors, they cannot see feelings, emotions, and predispositions—the crux of the affective domain. Instead, teachers must infer affect from action and attitude from behavior, thus rendering the assessment of the affective outcomes more challenging than assessment of the cognitive.

However, there is much to be learned from current research about “sweet spots for achievement,” as Goleman (2006) observes with compelling language and forceful admonitions about designing and implementing instructional strategies that can improve student performance. He reports that research documents strong links between fear and poor performance, between being “frazzled” and learning being disrupted. “Because high anxiety shrinks the space available to our attention, it undermines our very capacity to take in new information, let alone generate fresh ideas. Near-panic is the enemy of learning and creativity” (p. 268). The conclusion is that moderate to challenging levels of stress can promote interest and learning, the willingness to try; however, extreme pressure causes the mind to “frazzle” and affects both the ability to solve problem or grasp new ideas. “Frazzle is a neural state in which emotional upsurges hamper the workings of the executive center... we cannot concentrate or think clearly. That neural truth has direct implications for achieving the optimal emotional atmosphere both in the classroom and the office” (p. 267). Goleman argues for creating learning environments that reflect what we now know about how brains work, how learning occurs.

The type of stress that most activates the stress hormones, and so shoots up cortisol levels, lurks in the classroom, in the form of social threats like fears of a teacher’s judgment or of seeming ‘stupid’ in the eyes of other students. Such social fears powerfully impair the brain’s mechanisms for learning. (p. 273)

Of course, as individuals differ in all facets of their cognitive, social, and emotional development, they also differ in the levels at which they respond to stressful situations. Some, as Goleman suggests, are the stock market “day-trad-

er” types, able to withstand enormous pressures and work reasonably to wonderfully well regardless; for example, most students with the ability to manage their stress or to withstand stress at enormously high levels, likely would be unflappable doing board work in front of their classmates and unaffected by making mistakes. However, as educators, we can anticipate that most learners in our colleges do not fit this model, and that many who have doubts about their academic abilities and limited basic skills would be affected in seriously negative ways when stress levels outpace or over-reach their capabilities to handle them.

Increasing numbers of teacher practitioners report in *Innovation Abstracts*, NISOD’s flagship publication, on the successes of instructional strategies that reduce stress levels to accommodate more learners at ever-higher levels of learning by making student learning activities and classrooms more student-friendly. None of these teaching strategies compromise the achievement level or quality of the material to be learned. Rather, they reflect the thoughtful acknowledgment that learning does not have to be “grim and serious business,” that more enthusiasm and motivation is achieved by partnerships between students and teachers, and that performance can be improved by instruction’s measured steps toward achieving objectives. For example, in “The Unexpected Detour in the Journey Through the Two-Year College: Developmental Mathematics,” Steven Gonzales, a math professor at Central Arizona College, describes ways to take the “sting” out of developmental courses, including alternatives to the normal 16-week formats for selected introductory math courses to provide seamless transitions between developmental and regular courses with eight-week formats. In “Back to the Board,” Maria H. Andersen, a math instructor at Muskegon Community College (MI), describes a strategy in which students work together in a highly visible place—the board—in problem-solving activities that heretofore would have stymied or frightened most, allowing two students to work together and with pairs in close proximity to reduce stress and improve the performance of all. Moreover, she varied the technique by using board work to review previously learned material, test understanding, and learn new material—choosing to institute board work at important junctures in the learning cycle. In “Within a Star’s Reach: The Sirius Academics Initiative,” Kathleen Ciez-Volz, an English instructor at Florida Community College-Jacksonville, describes strategies for improving student performance in developmental and credit-bearing academic courses by addressing some of the students’ academic challenges created by current classroom instructional technology, including offering numerous “learning objects” that integrate the auditory, visual, and/or kinesthetic senses to produce interactive learning experiences that created more stimulating environments in which to improve writing. In “Fifteen Minutes Before Class,” Jerry Clavner, a social sciences professor at Cuyahoga Community College (OH), describes a simple strategy for lowering students’ stress levels, especially for those who feel intimi-

dated by asking questions in class, by inviting students in to meet briefly in one-to-one sessions shortly before class begins. And, in “Arranging Classroom Seating to Maximize Student Discussion,” Charles Cardwell, an assistant professor of philosophy at Pellissippi State Technical Community College (TN), describes a successful horseshoe-shaped seating arrangement that improves student participation and interaction, and helps students ease into course material and become better partners in learning. In the situations they describe, these instructors acknowledge the power of positive experiences—everything we have known intuitively and now are further convinced by extensive data from brain research.

Several years ago, in writing about emotional intelligence, Goleman (1995) envisioned an education for the “whole student,” one whose “mind and heart” teachers value equally (p. xiv). The teaching of the whole student becomes especially important in community colleges that serve the most ethnically, economically, and educationally diverse learners in all of higher education. Having struggled in their previous school experiences, most students arrive at the community college’s open door academically embattled and embittered. To win their educational battles—to persist and succeed in their courses—community college students need to master more than cognitive objectives; they must experience positive affective learning. As Palmer (1998) notes, “Reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world” (p. 4).

Skilled at applying cooperative learning, constructivism, mastery learning, computer-based learning, among other approaches, exemplary teachers possess an impressive repertoire of “tips, tricks, and techniques” (Palmer, 1998, p. 5). Yet their excellence emerges less from polished pedagogy than from heart-felt humanity. Such teachers do not merely teach their subject matter; they teach human beings. In the words of one NISOD Excellence Award recipient, “Your humanness is what’s being learned” (Roueche, Miliron, & Roueche, 2003, p. 133). With astute insight, this teacher recognizes that at the end of the course, a student may not recall the precise distinction between a dangling and a misplaced modifier, but she will remember how the teacher treated her, how she felt in class, and whether she will take another course with this teacher or in this subject. After working with “countless teachers,” Palmer concludes: “The most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it” (p. 5). In a supportive, nurturing classroom, students learn much more than a set of prescribed cognitive outcomes; they learn about themselves—who they are, what they believe, and what they hope to become. Practical magicians have discovered that the way to a student’s mind is through the heart, and they teach in a manner that “tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart” (p. 11). When the mind and heart learn together, students become engaged

in a process that re-kindles the enthusiasm of their earliest educational experiences.

Conclusions

Opening the doors of higher education to academically unprepared learners, community colleges can offer access at the cost of success. Enter . . . students who struggle with basic literacy skills. Enter . . . students for whom English is a second or other language. Enter . . . adult students returning to classrooms. Enter . . . students who are economically disadvantaged. With increasing enrollments and decreasing resources in higher education, taxpayers and legislators demand that community colleges demonstrate their effectiveness. The public wants to know, “What are students learning?” “How are they learning it?” and “What are colleges doing to help them learn?”

When students enter a community college classroom, teachers must ask themselves two questions: First, “Can today’s content be immediately applicable and relevant to my students?” Second, “How can I make this material so interesting that students want to and can learn it?” Many of the answers to these questions reside outside the cognitive domain. Indeed, the attitudes developed in classes are more powerful indicators and predictors of future student behavior than any cognitive outcome. By defining instructional and, by extension, institutional effectiveness as the development of “human talent,” faculty can teach the whole student, and in doing so, overcome emotional and attitudinal barriers to academic success within the open-door college.

And, finally, we are reminded of Page Smith’s observation in *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (1990): “There are, I am sure, indifferent community colleges as well as good ones, but the ones I have visited have all charmed me, and I am pleased to have an opportunity to express my gratitude for the lively times and good spirit I have experienced in my visits” (p. 20). Further, we recommend some evidence of a renewal of that spirit that is addressed in part—and at its heart—by studies addressing the issues of social and emotional intelligence. At the heart of teaching and learning lies the affective domain, which ultimately may be our best hope for transforming today’s teaching college into tomorrow’s learning college.

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