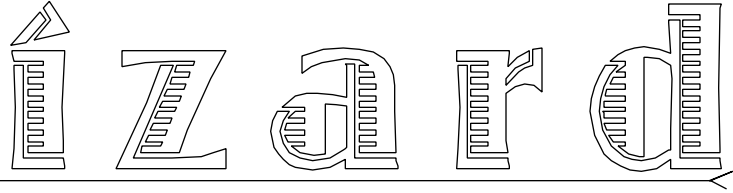


the

Spring 1996
Issue number 34



OUR STUDENTS' EYES

from *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* by Stephen Brookfield

Seeing ourselves through students' eyes is one of the most consistently surprising elements in any teacher's career. Each time we do this, we learn something. Sometimes what we find out is reassuring. We discover that students are interpreting our actions in the sense that we intend. They are hearing what we wanted them to hear and seeing what we wanted them to see. But often, we are profoundly surprised by the diversity of meanings students read into our words and actions. Comments we made incidentally that had no particular significance to us are heard as imperatives. Answers we gave off the cuff to what seemed like inconsequential questions return to haunt us. Long after we've forgotten them, they are quoted back at us by students to prove that now we're contradicting ourselves. What we think is reassuring behavior on our part is sometimes interpreted as overprotective coddling. What we regard as an inspired moment of creativity, when our awareness of new possibilities causes us to diverge from the plan for the class, is perceived as inconsistent or confusing behavior. A joking aside appreciated by some leaves others insulted.

The main difficulty in trying to see

ourselves through students' eyes is that students are understandably reluctant to be too honest with us. They have probably learned that giving honest commentary on a teacher's actions can backfire horribly. Teachers who say they welcome criticism of their actions very widely in how they respond when it is actually expressed. Students have an understandable reluctance to describe how they see the teacher's power and authority adversely affecting what happens in class. Even under the cloak of anonymity, it feels risky to point out oppressive aspects of a teacher's practice. It takes courage to suggest in public that teachers have unwittingly stifled free discussion, or broken promises, or treated certain kinds of students with more deference than others. Given the egomania of some academics, and the power they wield, student paranoia is sometimes justified.

Therefore, a cardinal principle of the attempt to see ourselves through students' eyes is anonymity of students' critical opinions. When students have decided that you have earned their trust, they may choose to speak out publicly about negative aspects of your actions. But early on in the history of your relationship with a class, you will get honest criticism only if anonymity is guaranteed. You have to make students feel safe. After students have seen you, week in and week out, inviting anonymous commentary on your actions and then discussing this publicly, they start to believe that you mean what you say about the value of critical reflection. But saying you welcome critical commentary from students and having them actually believe this are two quite distinct and separate events. Between them lies a period of time in which you must consistently model a public, critical scrutiny of your actions.

Seeing our practice through students' eyes helps us teach more responsively. Knowing what is happening to students as they grapple with the difficult, threatening, and exhilarating process of learning is of the utmost importance; without this foundational information, it is hard to teach well. Obviously, a good grasp of methods is essential. But this must be coupled with insight into what is happening to students as those methods are put into practice. Without an appreciation of how students are experiencing learning, any methodological choices we make risk being ill-informed, inappropriate, or harmful. This is why, in my opinion, the most fundamental metacriterion for judging whether or not good teaching is happening is the extent to which teachers deliberately and systematically try to get inside students' heads and see classrooms and learning from their point of view.

WHEN TEACHERS GO BACK TO SCHOOL

from *Becoming a Critically Reflective
Teacher* by Stephen Brookfield

A significant number of college teachers on any community college campus are likely to be pursuing advanced degrees. The experience of being a graduate student is rarely incidental; most likely, it is full of significance for our own teaching. In graduate study, our self-image as a competent learner is confirmed, challenged, or destroyed. As graduate students, we are brought face-to-face with the realities of power. Our professors control our fate, or at least our career possibilities. No matter how congenial our relationship might be with an adviser, we know that in the last resort, his word goes. Until we find an idea and a methodology that he likes, we are never going to finish that dissertation. His agenda and his style of working are important factors in our lives. Without his approval of what we want to do, we know we are not going anywhere.

Reflecting on how it feels to have someone's approval determining whether or not we are deemed (or deem ourselves) successful learners is salutary. It makes us much more aware of the power we wield our own classrooms. Knowing this should remind us that we must always use that power judiciously and to good educative effect. As we notice the effect produced on us by an advisor's approving or dismissive comment about our work, we are given a valuable avenue of insight into how our own students experience our judgments and comments on their efforts. This helps us give more respectful and educative evaluations.

For many teachers, the experience of graduate study is, at best, ambivalent. For every professor we encounter who communicates clearly, there is one who glories in opaqueness. For each class in which we experience a mix of activities involving our intellects, bodies, and emotions, there is one that is arid and monotonal. For each teacher who demonstrates a concern that students actually learn

" For each teacher who shows it is important to attend and respond to how students are experiencing learning, there will be one who displays a breathtaking disregard for such matters. "

"Studying how good and bad professors work can teach us more about the interpersonal dynamics of teaching than can any number of texts or workshops on small group discussions."

something, there is one who makes it clear that time spent teaching is an annoying distraction from the real business of academe (building a resume with enough refereed articles to knock the socks off a tenure review committee or to ensure a new job when tenure is denied). And for each teacher who shows it is important to attend and respond to how students are experiencing learning, there will be one who displays a breathtaking disregard for such matters.

Studying how good and bad professors work can teach us more about the interpersonal dynamics of teaching than can any number of texts or workshops on small group discussions. Yet despite the opportunity graduate study offers for purposeful reflection on the nature of teaching, many teachers I speak with keep their lives as graduate students and their lives as teachers neatly compartmentalized. On the one hand, they bitterly regret having to visit a university campus on a Tuesday night for hours of back-to-back, mind-numbing lectures, the purpose of which is never entirely clear. On the other hand, they sometimes proceed unwittingly to reproduce that same spiritless teaching in their own classes on Wednesday morning.

Keeping a regular learning journal of your experiences of graduate study can provide you with some provocative information, rich insights and implications for your own teaching. Even if your experience is one of near-total demoralization, from one point of view it is beneficial. Think of your being humiliated as a kind of gift. When you know what is in your professor's actions that you find so shaming, depressing or alienating, you can resolve to analyze

your own teaching and make sure that these same kinds of behaviors and interactions are kept to a minimum. If you feel powerless in your role as a graduate student, you can investigate where this powerlessness originates and what happens to make you feel it so deeply. Then you can study whether or not you might unwittingly be reproducing with your own students the very same power dynamics that so overwhelm you when you are in the student role.

VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

The Open University of Catalonia now has a pilot group of 200 students, scattered throughout northern Spain, connected to lecturers, tutors, and learning materials via electronic communications and studying business or educational psychology using the Catalan language. By 2000 there will be 11,000 students.

<http://www.uoc.es> .

(Financial Times 16/17 Mar 96)

TEAM LEARNING: HARNESSING THE POWER OF SMALL GROUPS

Condensed from "Team Learning" by Larry K. Michaelsen. The concise, full-length article is published in the 1992 edition of *To Improve the Academy*, which is available at TEP.

"Team Learning" is a group-based classroom format that was originally designed for large classes but has subsequently proven effective in many settings. It is a comprehensive approach to active learning with four main features: 1) A six-step class sequence that allows students to spend the majority of their class time applying concepts, rather than simply learning about them; 2) Permanent and purposefully heterogeneous work groups; 3) Grading based on a combination of individual performance, group performance and peer evaluations; 4) Most class time devoted to small group activities.

Building student teams into your course structure has many advantages. First, it enables students to engage the course material at a higher cognitive level than the passive, note-taking lecture format that is most common in large classes. Second, the existence of permanent (course-long) groups can provide the students with a social support base that is often missing in large classes or on large campuses. Third, enduring group interactions have shown to reduce stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities, in addition to developing other task and social skills required in a group setting. Finally, the Team Learning approach decreases the instructor's need to cover the simplest concepts, usually increases attendance, and often lightens the instructor's burden of generating enthusiasm for the subject.

SIX STEP SEQUENCE

In the Team Learning approach, the course term is broken into 5-7 learning units. To organize these units, the teacher must ask themselves: "What do I want students to be able to do when they are done with this section?" And: "Now what do they need to know in order to do it?"

Students then learn the content of each learning unit by moving through the following six-step sequence:

- 1) *Individual Study* (of assigned reading material).
- 2) *Individual Test* (15-20 multiple-choice questions and/or homework style problems; scored during group test if possible).
- 3) *Group Test* (same questions/problems as individual test; groups must be given immediate feedback by your scoring the exam or providing prepared "correct" answers).
- 4) *Preparation of Written Appeals* (open book; from groups only).
- 5) *Instructor Input* (in response to students' remaining questions or the instructor's perceptions of the issues about which additional input is needed).
- 6) *Application-Oriented Activities, Projects and Exams* (should look—and feel—like the kinds of things you'd hope students would be able to do once they have completed the course/learning unit).

ESTABLISHING A GRADING SYSTEM

Team Learning requires both individual and group accountability. As a result, I recommend that the students' grades be based on 1) individual reading and other preparation, 2) group performance to encourage cohesiveness, and 3) peer evaluation, to discourage "free-loaders" and encourage groups to reflect on themselves.

At the beginning of the term, I form the class into groups of 5-7 members, and then meet with representatives from each group. Together we negotiate (within limits) how each of the grading components will be weighted in their final grade. This demonstrates early that this class is different than most, as well as build some early cohesiveness within the group and ensure that grades are based on both individual and group performance.

FORMING TEAM LEARNING GROUPS

Two principles should guide the formation of Team Learning groups. One is that member assets (e.g. full-time work experience, previous relevant course-work, access to perspectives from other cultures, etc.) and also member liabilities (e.g. negative attitudes toward the course, limited

fluency in English, etc.) should be evenly spread across the groups. The other is that the groups should not be formed in a way that results in unnecessary barriers to group cohesiveness. For example, one of the greatest barriers to cohesiveness can be a previously established relationship between a subset of group members (e.g. boyfriend/girlfriend, fraternity brothers, sorority sisters, etc.). As a result, allowing students to form their own groups almost ensures the existence of possibly disruptive subgroups.

The process for making group assignments should be as visible as possible to the students, allaying any students' fears that the teacher's assignments may have ulterior motives. An effective and practical approach is to gather important data orally and then:

- 1) Decide how many groups you want to have in your class.
- 2) Ask students with a specific asset to stand and "count-off" by the number of groups you want. ("Will everyone with at least one year of full-time employment please stand up?" Then, if you want five groups in your class, have them count off "1,2,3,4,5,1,2" etc.).
- 3) Repeat steps 2 and 3 with different categories until everyone belongs to a group.

WRITTEN APPEALS AND INSTRUCTOR INPUT

Students read outside course material and take individual exams on it. Then, they take the same test in their groups. After they have taken both exams, I present the correct answers to

the class and allow the groups to prepare written appeals if they disagree with my answer. This has the double benefit of both re-engaging them with the material they understood the least and channeling the negative energy from getting a wrong answer into a productive activity. If a group produces a written appeal that I find acceptable, then I will award them (and only them) the points for the question on their group test. This provides incentive for every group to examine their work, re-engage the course material, and attempt an appeal.

The outcome of the testing and appeals process shows me specifically where the large gaps in the students' understanding lie. This allows me to target my lectures—which I call "Instructor Input"—directly at the areas in which the students are having problems.

GROUP PROJECTS

Finally, students spend the majority of their class time working on projects in which they apply the material they have learned about in all of the preceding steps. It can be quite challenging to develop good group activities. To work well, application-oriented assignments:

- must require the groups to produce a tangible output. Otherwise, neither the instructor nor the students will have any idea about the effectiveness of the groups. Otherwise, students are likely to see them as irrelevant "busy work" and neither the instructor nor the students will have any idea how well the concepts are being understood.

- must be difficult enough that very few, if any, of the students can successfully complete the assignments working alone. Otherwise the majority of group members will sit back and watch the better students do the work.

- should allow the groups to spend the majority of their time engaged in activities that groups do well (e.g., identifying problems, formulating strategies, processing information, making decisions) and a minimum of time engaged in activities that individuals could do more efficiently working alone (e.g., creating a polished written document).

- should give students the opportunity to practice dealing with the same kinds of issues and problems they will encounter in later course work or in future jobs. Being able to see how the concepts apply to realistic problems is a tremendous asset to both motivation and learning.

- should be interesting and/or fun.

When the projects are completed and graded, then we begin the cycle again for the next learning unit.

USING A "QUALITY CIRCLE" IN THE CLASSROOM

Adapted from "Classroom Research in Accounting: Assessing for Learning" by Philip G. Cotell, Jr.

By far the most effective classroom assessment technique I have used is a Quality Control Circle, which was originally adapted from industry. In industrial Quality Circles, production line employees work closely with managers to identify and solve production problems.

I first used the Quality Control Circle in a large intermediate financial accounting class. To establish the circle, each section of thirty-six students elected two representatives from a group of volunteers. I encouraged all the students to take any course-related suggestions, complaints or compliments they wished to express to their representative on the Quality Control Circle. To elicit as frank an assessment as possible, I assured the students that I would not request, and that representatives would not reveal, and names of those who gave feedback to the Circle.

I met frequently with the Circle throughout the semester. Our meetings were held in the dean's conference room, which was set up as it would be for a corporate business meeting in a professional office. Through these actions, I communicated to its members the importance I attached to the Quality Control Circle.

The information that I have gleaned from the Circle has been marvelous. For example, one day I walked out of a class convinced that I had thoroughly confused students with an example used to explain the difference between construction costs and construction expenses when using a percentage-of-completion method. That same evening, coincidentally, I met with my Quality Control Circle. Two members reported that several students had made complimentary remarks about the clarity of the example I used in class. Because of this feedback, I have kept an example in my teaching repertoire that I would otherwise have discarded.

I quickly established trust with the Circle by being careful never to react negatively to information they brought to me and never to probe for the source of the comments. This sometimes required considerable restraint on my part, because some comments seemed trivial. One comment in particular that always makes me bite my tongue is "Your method differs from the book's." However, most comments from the Quality Control Circle have been quite helpful and have enabled me to make rapid, positive adjustments in my teaching.

UNIVERSITIES DEBATE CD-ROM DISSERTATIONS

Universities across the country are debating the issues involved in allowing doctoral candidates the option of producing their dissertation in electronic format, on CD-ROM. For many subject areas, such as the behavioral sciences, scholars don't dispute that a CD-ROM can convey research data much more accurately and succinctly than a type-written paper. The problem arises 20 or 30 years from now, when those CD-ROMs will be forever inaccessible because the technology to display them will be obsolete. "When the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered, they were 2,000 years old and we could read them," points out a University of Texas professor. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University requires all theses and dissertations to be submitted electronically, beginning next January. (Chronicle of Higher Education 8 Mar 96 A19)

TREATING T.A.S WELL AT MARQUETTE

Cathleen Thom, Marquette University

Universities across the nation structure their graduate programs in a variety of ways. And within the institution, departments have dramatically different ways of providing (or not) support, resources, teacher training and teaching opportunities for their graduate teaching assistants. Cathleen Thom, a teaching assistant at Marquette University, felt that the T.A. program there provided the kind of support and services essential to her success both as a student and a teacher in training.

I was a T.A. at Marquette University for three years. The structure for my assignment was that students came to a large lecture on Mondays and Wednesdays and attended smaller discussion groups led by T.A.s, where material would be discussed and reinforced in greater detail. Each T.A. was responsible for leading three to four discussion groups, with about 20 students in each group.

One T.A., a Ph.D. student, was selected by the professor to serve as the Leader T.A. The L.T.A. is a position unique to Marquette—the L.T.A. acts as a coordinator and leader of the T.A.s, as well as a liaison between the T.A.s and the professor in charge. The L.T.A. acts as an assistant to the professor—troubleshooting and fielding student questions when he is absent. The L.T.A. also handles T.A. scheduling and task assignments.

The Marquette History Department treats its T.A.s very well. Their stipend

is reasonable, and if they do a good job they can be assured of a T.A. assignment for the duration of their graduate coursework.

Marquette TAs are actually allowed to teach—not just be glorified graders. However, T.A.s are responsible for all grading of their students.

The professor writes the main exams, T.A.s grade them, and T.A.s also write and grade quizzes and essays assigned to the students. They keep regular office hours for students needing extra help.

Marquette T.A.s are evaluated by videotaped teaching sessions, by classroom visits by their peers, student feedback and the professor. In addition, the professor asks students who come to visit him during office hours what their opinion is of the course and of their discussion leader. He usually obtains a favorable response. T.A.s must also attend bi-weekly sessions on teaching methods.

T.A.s share offices in threes, which allows them to support each other and become friends as well as teammates.

All graduate students and faculty are invited to department social functions, which encourages interaction with faculty. T.A.s are respected as budding professionals in the Marquette History Department. In turn they are expected to act as professionals, both on and off-duty.

The department supports its most promising T.A.s by providing them with a chance to serve as a teaching fellow. This allows them to independently design and teach a course.

Several former T.A.s have also obtained, with department help, part-time and/or temporary teaching positions while in ABD status at undergraduate colleges in the Milwaukee area. The department

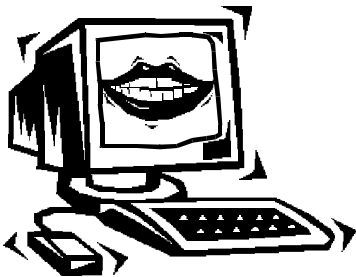
provides information on job openings in both teaching and public history for M.A. and Ph.D. graduates.

In just the past two years, the Marquette Graduate School has embarked on an ambitious program to better prepare its graduate students for their future roles as college and university faculty. They have launched the *Preparing Future Faculty* program, which was facilitated by a Pew Foundation grant. This program, which is designed and run by graduate students, is still in its infancy, but is growing stronger. In it, graduate students instruct each other and recruit faculty to familiarize them with the important variety of roles a faculty member must play: teacher, adviser, committee member, researcher, author, etc.

Seminars are held for graduate students, led by faculty members, on writing a c.v. and cover letter, interviewing effectively, teaching methods, committee responsibilities, writing grant proposals, and putting together a teaching portfolio to submit to prospective employers. Selected graduate students are sent to various conferences in the U.S. and Canada at university expense to participate in discussions on the various roles of faculty. When they return they share what they have learned with others.

PEOPLE REALLY DO WANT TO BE FRIENDS WITH THEIR COMPUTERS

Two Stanford University professors have delved into the pile of research literature on how people interact with computers and have concluded that people interact with computers much as they do with other humans. Subjects who were asked to perform a task on a computer and then were asked to rate that computer's performance, gave better evaluations if they were using "their" computer to do it. They insisted they were not trying to be polite to the computer, but the researchers concluded that in fact that's just what they were doing, similar to the way people tend to evaluate a co-worker's performance higher if that person is present. (Chronicle of Higher Education 15 Mar 96 A12)



The Lizard is published by the Teaching Effectiveness Program, Academic Learning Services, 65 PLC. To be placed on the mailing list, contact G. Cooper (gcooper@oregon).

Editors: M. Sweet
Layout/ Design: G. Cooper
Production: UO Printing, TEP
Contributors: B. Butterfield, J. Perko, D. Frayer, S. Rogers, S. Erhmann, K. Prior, T. Panitz

SCHOOLS, COMPUTERS, AND KIDS

Two of the many well-known individuals vocal in the debate about the effectiveness of computers in education are John Gage, chief scientist at Sun, and Neil Koblitz, University of Washington mathematics professor. Gage: "The old model of the teacher absorbing physics, biology, and the physical sciences and then pouring into kids' brains is gone. It is the kids who do the exploration; the kids are in control." Koblitz: "Kids have to be free to exercise their imaginations. To be inundated with visual stimulation and a machine that does it for you is not the best way to learn. It is not science simply because they are punching a keyboard on a computer."
(New York Times 7 Mar 96 B1)