

Introduction

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Some years ago I asked Toby Fulwiler to lead a writing-across-the-curriculum workshop for the faculty of the college where I worked. I had participated in two Fulwiler workshops and we had become friends. A course I was teaching conflicted with Toby's first session, so after I helped him set up his overhead projector I excused myself. "I have to prepare a lecture for this afternoon's class," I said. Toby replied, with a smile, "are you still lecturing? I guess it's okay if you don't care whether or not your students learn anything." I laughed (a little ruefully, I confess) and went off to write my lecture.

But his comment rankled, so I decided to try a writing-across-the-curriculum experiment. Instead of lecturing on the content of the chapter I had asked my students to read—my original plan—I asked them to write for five minutes on the three most important points in the chapter. Then they reported, one by one, on what they had written. Their lists were all somewhat different, but taken together with the discussion which followed, they neatly summarized the chapter. I asked a follow up question here and there, added some historical perspective and suggested a few additional connections, but the students did most of the work. They covered exactly the same material I would have covered, but they used their own examples, raised their

own objections, and had a much livelier discussion than any we had previously enjoyed.

The net result was an excellent class, from everyone's perspective. I covered the material I wanted to cover that day. The students internalized a reasonable summary of that material. The two or three students who had not read the assignment were deeply embarrassed. I didn't get to show off quite as much as I like, but my pleasure in a good discussion and engaged students was recompense enough.

That day changed my teaching forever. Even though I had been a part of a couple of Toby's workshops before and had even incorporated some of the teaching-across-the-curriculum methods in my courses, I was teaching for the most part just as my instructors in graduate school had taught: standing in the front of the room and telling my students the truth. On that day I learned that, no matter how satisfying it is to tell my students the truth, it's not a very effective way to help them learn.

Karl Smith tells a similar story. He began his career teaching as he had been taught, through lectures. After a few years he realized that it wasn't working very well. As a conscientious faculty member, he cast about for alternatives. His breakthrough came through a workshop on cooperative learning led by David and Roger Johnson. He began using cooperative learning techniques in his classes and found that his students were more engaged, more interested, and learned more than if he did nothing but lecture. What's more, he was having more fun.

Since our first introductions to writing-across-the-curriculum and cooperative learning, we have both attended many workshops and learned a variety of exciting ways to teach. (We both enjoy more freedom to do that sort of thing than most faculty. I have been a full-time

administrator for many years, with some faculty development responsibilities and a modest travel budget. I teach only occasionally, alas. Karl consults widely, leads workshops on cooperative learning and other topics, and has become an authority on teaching improvement.) Both of us wish that we had become acquainted with these ways of teaching much earlier in our teaching careers.

Hence this book. We hope that it will be read by college and university faculty within the first few years of their teaching careers. We hope that it will introduce them to alternatives to the traditional lecture method of teaching. We hope that each chapter will introduce readers to a new way of teaching, a new paradigm, which is intriguing enough to warrant further investigation. To that end, each chapter concludes with a list of references for further reading. In addition, most of the contributing authors give workshops on their topics. We encourage readers to participate in them as their time and budgets allow.

Why do we need new paradigms for college teaching? Because the old one doesn't work very well any more. Perhaps it did once, when the professor was the only one who had access to the relevant books and the students hung on his (it was almost always a male) every word. But today our students have access to the same books and other resources that we have. And—let's face it—few of our students are that interested in what we have to say. Most of the students in most of our classes are there for some other reason than interest in the material: they need the course to meet some requirement (e.g. general education distribution requirements, graduation requirements, certification requirements); it meets at a convenient time; it requires no math; their parents insisted that they take it; it was the only course available when they registered.

Does that mean that they are disinterested? Not at all. They are very interested in completing the requirements and being credentialed. But most of them are not particularly interested in philosophy or math or English or chemistry for its own sake. Faculty lounges are thick with complaints about today's students: they don't read, they can't think, they're only interested in getting ready for a job. I am convinced that the root of most of these complaints is that our students are different from us. They have not fallen in love with an academic discipline the way we did when we were in school and we hold them responsible for it. "When I was their age," we say, "I took my professors seriously, I listened to their every word. Why just this morning a student said my lecture was bogus, do you believe it? These students today, they just don't want to learn, how soon can I retire?"

So what else is new? Professors have struggled with not-very-interested students for a very long time. When I went to college and first started teaching, it didn't matter. In the growth years of the sixties and seventies we acted as if there were an inexhaustible supply of students. Our attitude was, if they're not interested, they can go away; we're here to teach the ones who care about our subjects. As a result, as many as a third of the first year students at large public institutions would fail to register for a second year. We have learned, to our sorrow, that we do not have an inexhaustible supply of students. As the population of 18 year-olds rises and declines, so do our enrollments. Retention of the students who have already enrolled has become important to our department chairs and deans and presidents and legislators.

Consequently, we can no longer aim our teaching solely at the students who are interested in what we have to say. That makes teaching much harder. When students hang on our every word, we don't have to worry about keeping their attention, about being relevant, about

being inclusive—they will be interested enough to learn in spite of anything we might do. But when students are taking our courses only to fill out a graduation requirement or to earn three (relatively) painless credits on the way to graduation and a job, we have to work harder to make sure that they learn something. And helping students learn something, after all, is the primary responsibility of a teacher.

Fortunately, the interests of our department chairs and deans and presidents and legislators are congruent with an interest most of us share, at least to a degree. Most of us would like our students to succeed in their chosen endeavors and would be willing to help them—if only we knew how. But all most of us know how to do is lecture.

Is lecturing always bad? Certainly not. Karl Smith and I both lecture occasionally and, I daresay, successfully. But neither of us is good enough to lecture successfully all of the time. Very few teachers are. (I can think of two, among my many teachers. And both of them would have helped us learn more and better if they had encouraged more active learning, more collaboration, more reflection on the process.) In my experience, lectures work the best when students are prepared (that is, they have read the assigned material and thought about it at least a little), when I'm prepared (that is, I have thought about the points I want to make well enough to draft a lecture), and we're all interested in the same issues. How often does that happen? Not very often.

In most class meetings, only a few students are thoroughly prepared (and if they show it, it annoys their less-prepared colleagues—a genuine disincentive to either prepare or perform). I am almost always well-enough prepared, but I am seldom interested in the same issues as my students: what will be on the test, how does this material affect my life, do I need to know this

stuff for my major? And so, when I used to lecture every day, I would tell a few jokes to get their attention, scare them with dire warnings about the upcoming exam, and occasionally throw a tantrum (surprisingly successful, if not overdone).

But now I use some of the techniques described in the following chapters. I ask my students to write a little about a given topic and share what they have written with each other or with the whole class. Since they know I am likely to ask them to write, they usually prepare better. And writing for a few minutes helps us all to think about the same issues (and yes, every now and then the topic is what should be on the exam or why this material is important). Sometimes I lecture for a bit after these writing exercises, sometimes I ask the students to talk. In either case, the class almost always works better than when I spend the entire hour lecturing. The students learn more about the material, I learn more about what they still need to learn, and we all have a much better time.

Then why doesn't everyone do it? Well, there are disadvantages. I remember describing this writing-across-the-curriculum method to a burned-out colleague from the history department. She'd been telling me how awful her classes were, the students weren't learning anything, she was bored and cranky, it was a disaster for everyone. She thought the write-a-little, speak-a-little routine I described was worth a try, so I helped her implement it in one introductory class. All semester she would tell me how much everyone liked it: the students were more involved (and so was she), they were learning at least a little more, and they seemed much more interested in the material. I was very pleased. Next semester, I asked her how her classes were going. "They're awful," she said. "The students aren't learning, they hate me, I'm bored stiff and I hate them." I was amazed: "The writing-across-the-curriculum routines aren't

working anymore?” “I had to give it up,” she said. “I couldn’t cover the material.”

That is a problem. If you adopt writing-across-the-curriculum or cooperative learning or other techniques described in this book, you probably will not be able to cover the same amount of material as when you do nothing but lecture. Is that bad? If your prime responsibility is to your department, then it may be very bad. Some departments structure their curricula such that the introductory course is prerequisite for more advanced courses; if students have not covered certain topics in the first course they are lost later on. Those are usually the departments which use the introductory course to weed out large numbers of students so that their enrollments in advanced courses are manageable. When only a few students earn A’s in the introductory course, the instructor has been a successful gate-keeper.

But if your primary responsibility is to your students, covering the material is not so important. You may decide that what students actually learn is more important than how much material you cover; that helping the students develop the tools to manipulate the information they learn is more important than the material itself; that encouraging the students to draw connections with what they are learning in their other classes is as important as whatever they learn in yours.

How much does the amount of material we cover really matter? In philosophy—my original discipline—we can still design a curriculum which will be largely relevant 25 or 50 years from now. Philosophy students will always read Plato and Aristotle, Hume and Kant, Russell and Wittgenstein. But few disciplines are like that. In most, the information we present to our students is obsolete within a few years. In some (e.g. computer science or biotechnology) it is obsolete within months. And even if the material we cover had lasting value, how much of it

will our students remember? Not very much—especially if the information only passed through their minds between a lecture and an exam. If it had lasting value and they could remember it, how many would? Career counselors say that we change careers an average of four and a half times during our lifetimes. The specific information we learned in our major fields is mostly irrelevant after the first career change.

How many of us consciously adopted lecturing as our primary mode of teaching? Not very many, I think. Most of us started lecturing on the first day of class because that's what all of our teachers have always done. Besides, that's what they pay us for: being the authority, the sage, the one who knows all and tells some. And it's very satisfying to put together a coherent, tidy lecture: main point, subordinate points, illustrative examples, counterargument, counter-counterargument, any questions? See you tomorrow.

So satisfying—but, as Toby pointed out to me that day, the students don't learn the material very well. Why not? Perhaps because lectures are a distancing mechanism, a way of telling the students that we are different from them and we know more than they do. Graduate students respond in that sort of setting because they are desperate to be like us. But most undergraduates have a different ambition. So they tolerate our lectures, glean what they need from them, and dismiss us as irrelevant to their lives. And we stomp into the faculty lounge, complaining.

Why do we want to distance ourselves from our students? Perhaps because we are so different from most of them. We've always been successful at school, the smartest in the class. Our classmates were athletic heroes or social successes. We were the stars in the classroom. So we earned undergraduate and graduate degrees and found teaching jobs in colleges and

universities. We stayed in school, the place where we shine. But when we began teaching, we discovered that our classes are just like the ones we were part of as children. Only a few of our students want to be the smartest in the class; most shine elsewhere. So we distance ourselves. We stand, they sit; we talk, they listen; we think, they take notes.

But at the same time, we're dissatisfied. We know that our jobs are not only to be the sage, but to help our students learn. Even though we feel that we are different from them, we want them to like and respect and admire us. Most of all, we want to help them succeed. But we don't know how. The chapters in this book are meant to show us.

Parker Palmer tells us that the most important thing is to connect with our students and help them connect with the material we are teaching. Nel Noddings encourages us to connect through the use of stories. Wendy Bishop and Toby Fulwiler demonstrate how the braiding of voices—students and faculty intertwined—can help us connect with one another and can help us all learn. Craig Nelson attacks various taboos which drive most college teachers. Terry Collins shows us how to draw students into a course through an inclusively-written syllabus. Ed Nuhfer describes a classroom management procedure which can help us measure how well we are connecting with our students and how well they are learning. Don Dansereau and Dianna Newbern explain how knowledge maps can help us teach when words fail us, when we are describing relationships which are not amenable to linguistic description. Tom Creed tells us how electronic communication (E-mail and the World Wide Web) can liberate us from the temporal and spatial constraints of the typical classroom. Karl Smith and Alisha Waller describe both the principles and particulars of cooperative learning—techniques which undergird many of the chapters in this book. David and Roger Johnson, gurus of cooperative learning,

explain the value of structured controversies in drawing students into the learning process.

Valerie Bystrom presents a variety of learning communities, wherein students are encouraged to draw connections between different courses and ways of thinking. Smith and Waller conclude with an overview of the changing paradigms of college teaching.

These paradigms are not really new. Teachers have been practicing them since students first gathered. In recent years, as faculty started to become conscious of their roles as teachers as well as professors, they have been discussed at conferences and in workshops and described in articles and books. Ken Eble's *The Craft of Teaching* (Jossey-Bass, 1972); Bill McKeachie's *Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning Teacher* (D.C. Heath, 1986); Joseph Katz' (ed.), *Improving Teaching Styles*, volume 1 of Jossey-Bass' admirable *New Directions in Teaching and Learning* series; the succeeding volumes of that series; and other books and articles have summarized and detailed some of these paradigms. But descriptions of them have not, to our knowledge, been collected in a readily accessible form in one volume until now.

We encourage you to sample them all, read the ones you find intriguing, and apply the bits and pieces of technique which you think hold promise for you, in your particular teaching situation. But please read Parker Palmer's chapter first. Parker is eloquent and persuasive, as always. He makes one point which all of us should heed: *don't get caught up in the techniques of teaching!* Teaching techniques are helpful, says Parker, but they are only techniques. The best teachers are the ones who connect with their students, form a community with them. Some teachers can do that through lectures, others through small group exercises, still others through learning communities or mind maps or cooperative learning. The technique is less important than making the connection. Please use this book in that spirit: as a set of paradigms which may

help you connect with your students and thereby become a better teacher.

A final note: When editing a volume of essays, one must balance between making the essays look and sound the same or letting each author have his own voice. We have edited lightly, so that the format is more or less consistent but the distinctive voices of each author or set of authors comes through. And so there is quite a range in voice, from the scholarly (Johnson & Johnson, Dansereau & Newbern) to the impassioned (Nelson, Nuhfer) to the conversational (Creed, Collins, Nodding). One chapter (Bishop & Fulwiler) braids several voices into an integrated whole. The authors welcome your comments; E-mail addresses of those who have them precede most chapters. I welcome your comments as well.