

Point/Counterpoint: Differing Views of College Teaching

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On many campuses there is a perception that professors and students in the College of Education have quite different educational philosophies and expectations compared to those in the College of Arts and Sciences. Two professors at Valdosta State University live these perceived differences at home and at work. These differences often lead to "lively debates" and to widely varied approaches in the classroom. They may also lead to differing outcomes for their students. Dr. Jack Hasling, Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice, and Dr. Jane Zahner, Department of Secondary Education, Curriculum and Instructional Technology, have long experience with teaching and marriage (to each other). In a conference session they took a "Point/Counterpoint" approach to topics important in college teaching. From the "E" (education) position of Dr. Zahner to the "A&S" (arts and sciences) position of Dr. Hasling, they led their colleagues in a discussion of:

- Objectives: What do we want (them to know and be able to do)?
- Learning strategies and study skills: Theirs or ours?
- Student motivation, satisfaction and retention: Who's responsible?
- Instructional technology: Why?
- Assessment vs. grading: Can they all be above average?

At the beginning of the conference session, the sociologist administered a brief questionnaire of items which discriminated audience positions on the above topics on a continuum from the "E" position to the "A&S" position. These discriminations were broad and general and did not allow for a middle position. After audience members marked their questionnaires, the educationalist instructed "learners" in the use of their audience response cards. If participants had marked "agree" or "strongly agree" to statements, they were to raise their electric green "E" card; if their response was "disagree" or "strongly disagree" they were to raise a flamingo pink card printed with "A&S". As each item, or pair of items was read by the presenters, a visual "vote" showed the prevalent and dissident views in the room. This provided a good way to start the discussion about each of the following topics:

Objectives

In the discussion of the role of objectives in college teaching the majority of the eight participants felt that students should be informed of the specific objectives of lessons/tests, and that syllabi should link objectives with student assessment methods. These statements describe practices that are nearly gospel in traditional teacher education. Dr. Hasling and a minority of session participants

felt that such specific linkages limited opportunities for "creative moments" during class lectures and discussions. Similarly, those of the "A&S" perspective argued that strict adherence to objectives in testing procedures minimize "learning to learn" as an outcome of test preparation without specific learning objectives.

Learning strategies and study skills

Participants in the session were more evenly divided on these two sub-topics. In responding to the statement, "study guides should be provided in all courses," most felt that the use of study guides sent the message to students that what was in the study guide was all that they needed to learn. Conversely, the majority of the session participants felt that "college professors should teach learning strategies". This led to an interesting discussion about whether it was sufficient to model and demonstrate learning strategies or whether a more direct instructional approach was needed.

Student motivation

A majority of session participants raised the "E" position card on this pair of items, indicating that they believed that "it is a college professor's responsibility to motivate a student to learn" and "motivational strategies are a necessary part of college level instruction." Professors from more traditional A&S perspectives tended to feel that motivation had to come from the student for learning to occur. This part of the session produced the liveliest debate from both the "E's" and the "A&S's". Various definitions of motivation and motivational strategies were offered by Dr. Zahner.

Student satisfaction and retention

In their responses to the items, "student satisfaction should be a major concern of college professors" and "retention should be a major goal of college professors," the majority of session participants indicated the belief that student satisfaction and student retention should be major considerations for college professors. Only Dr. Hasling and two other participants felt otherwise. This topic also sparked a good discussion and all participants seemed to feel that their respective institutions were very concerned about student retention.

Instructional technology

Questionnaire responses to "college professors should use technology in teaching their classes" were evenly split. Because of time limitations, discussion was limited. However, it was clear that participants consider using technology in their teaching strategies. Again, definitions of technology use varied greatly. It was obvious that faculty

are under a great deal of pressure to use technology without a clear and unifying reason to do so.

Assessment vs. grading

Again, discussion was limited due to time considerations. Questionnaire responses suggested that the majority (but not all) disagreed that "testing is not essential in college instruction". Dr. Zahner, a minority in the "E" position acknowledged that the content and level of the courses she presently teaches influenced her response. Most did not feel that "in an introductory class the average grade should be a "C". However, this seemed to be contradicted by their responses to an item which suggested that all students could be "above average" (i.e., the *Lake Wobegon* effect). A discussion of grade inflation, Hope Scholarships, and other related issues was in full force when it was time for the session to end.

Summary

One last item on the questionnaire was labeled "the mystery question." The subtitle of this presentation, "Can those of different educational faiths live and work together?" was stated orally and the audience was held up their

hands in response to the answers "No", "Yes" and "Maybe". All responded with "yes" or "maybe" which was not surprising considering the rapport which had developed in the group during the session. The group did have differing educational views and had done an excellent job of working together.

As expected, the differences between the "E"s and the "A&S"s were not clear-cut. The session was, however, an opportunity for friendly, lively discussion of college teaching issues with a view toward uncovering the basic assumptions that guide our teaching. Audience members were appreciative of the format of the session that allowed and depended upon their experience and involvement.

The presenters and participants were unanimous in their feeling that the topics and debates covered in the session were important and worth further examination. Most of the participants were experienced teachers (over five years of teaching experience) and had obviously engaged these pedagogical issues on an ongoing basis in their teaching careers. Opinions were strong but not inflexible. The presenters felt that the responses in the session suggest that they should pursue further research in the areas discussed.