The Manifesto

Our Immediate Purpose

Good teachers are those who care about their students and want to grow more effective at helping them learn. The immediate purpose of *Teaching & Learning in Higher Ed.* is to support good teachers in their journey toward more effective teaching.

This project is not aimed at inexperienced teachers, uninformed teachers, or underperforming teachers, though such teachers may certainly benefit from it. Instead, this project exists to support all good teachers—those who care and want to improve—however experienced, knowledgeable, or effective they may or may not already be.

We celebrate "beginner's mind," "an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, *even when studying at an advanced level*."

Whether one has been teaching for thirty minutes or thirty years, there is much to learn about learning. The premise of this project is that all teachers can improve through seriously engaging with the scholarship on teaching and learning.

Our Broader Agenda

We believe in the power of informed teachers to make positive changes in their own teaching. We also believe that informed teachers can come together to work toward meaningful reform in higher education.

The Disconnect We Seek to Address

It has been well-documented that colleges and universities are substantially failing to effectively educate students, in range of ways and for a range of reasons (e.g. Rebekah Nathan, *My Freshman Year*, 2005; Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 2007; Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, 2010).

Meanwhile, solid working answers, creative ideas, insightful questions, useful data, effective theories, and innovative practices for pedagogy and curriculum flourish in the scholarship on teaching and learning, easily accessible in books, journals, conferences, workshops, websites, blogs, etc.

This is the disconnect we seek to address. Not enough of those who can make a difference in higher education—including teachers—read this scholarship. Unfortunately, as Maryellen Weimer observes, "Faculty have a long history of avoiding educational research" (*Learner-Centered Teaching*, p. x).

Three Arguments for Reading

Many of the college and university teachers we know live incredibly full lives, between teaching, grading, scholarship, advising, committee work, time with family, involvement in the community, etc. And yet, we are asking them to take on one more substantial task: to read the scholarship on teaching and learning. How do we justify this? We have three arguments for reading.

First, we believe that teachers should read the scholarship as a matter of professional responsibility.

Second, we believe that when teachers seriously engage with the scholarship, they can make significant improvements in their teaching practice, which, in turn, can lead to significant improvements in their students' learning.

Third, we believe that when teachers seriously engage with the scholarship and, as a result, improve their teaching, they may accrue other benefits as well. We have found that reading the scholarship on teaching and learning has been deeply meaningful for our teaching, our research and writing, our relationships with students and colleagues, our intellectual lives, our satisfaction with our work, and, as a result, our lives as a whole.

Six Insights from the Scholarship

It may be helpful to articulate some of the insights that the scholarship has to offer. We offer the following six as particularly important examples.

First, *what matters is not teaching but learning*. John Tagg puts this particularly poignantly: "Teaching is valuable if and when it leads to learning, but not otherwise" (*The Learning Paradigm College*, p. 18). This insight is about shifting from focusing on what teachers put out to focusing on how students develop knowledge and skills. Moreover, we should understand learning not only in terms of students retaining information but also in terms of more "significant learning," as L. Dee Fink puts it, including developing skills, learning to learn, and growing as persons (*Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, p. 30).

Second, *one of the best ways to get students to learn deeply is to engage them in learning activities*. Maryellen Weimer offers, quite simply, that "students need to be

working on learning-related tasks" (*Learner-Centered Teaching*, p. 60). Similarly, L. Dee Fink posits "What will the students actually do . . . ?" as one of the crucial questions teachers should to ask (*Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, p. 103). Moreover, learning by doing can be particularly effective when students do, in however limited a way, the actual work of the discipline. Ken Bain explains that particularly effective teachers routinely get "students to tackle authentic and intriguing questions and tasks . . . similar to those that professionals in the field might undertake" (*What the Best College Teachers Do*, p. 99-100).

Third, *another of the best ways to get students to learn deeply is to get them writing*. As Chris Anson puts it, "Recent research has shown that frequent, intellectually engaging writing activities result in 'deep learning' such as stronger analysis, synthesis, and integration of ideas from various sources" ("Writing and Deep Learning," p. 1).

Fourth, *concrete teaching materials go a long way in helping students learn abstract thinking*. The reason for this, as cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham explains, is that "new things are understood by relating them to things we already understand" and "most of what students are familiar with is concrete" (*Why Don't Students Like School?*, p. 89-91). Instead of giving students general principles or information without context, teachers should find ways to use relevant artifacts (texts, cases, images, actual objects, etc.) for illustration and inquiry.

Fifth, *most students do not go to college to learn, but some do and others can be convinced to.* Rebekah Nathan documents this reality in her study of college student culture. On one hand, she observes that "peer culture is of central importance" and that "for most segments of the student community, academic life is tangential or at odds with peer culture . . ." (*My Freshman Year*, p. 99). But on the other hand, she also notes that student culture has "depth and complexity" and that there are in fact pockets of students who want to learn (p. 142).

Sixth, *when teachers learn more about teaching and learning, their students benefit.* The scholarship on teaching and learning in higher education is full of testimonies of how teachers can improve their teaching practice through engaging with the scholarship. Moreover, a number of recent studies empirically confirm what the anecdotal evidence suggests and what, after all, might be common sense, that learning about learning can help us help students learn (e.g. George Lueddeke, "Teaching Practice in Higher Education," 2003; Graham Gibbs and Martin Cofey, "Impact of Training of University Teachers," 2004; Angela Brew and Paul Ginns, "Engagement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," 2008).

These principles are supported by significant theoretical and empirical evidence, as the cited books and articles document. But these principles are not prescriptions. The scholarship rarely tells teachers what to do but rather what has worked elsewhere, what has not worked, what might work, and why. After reading, it is up to teachers to adopt and adapt what they think may be useful for their own teaching.

Reading as the Root of Reflective Practice

We advocate reading as an important step in the journey toward more effective teaching. But, of course, student learning does not automatically improve when teachers read the scholarship.

We advocate active, purposeful, and participatory reading. We advocate teachers reading in order to reflect critically and creatively on their own teaching philosophies and practices in order to change them and improve them.

We advocate reading as the root of a reflective practice that includes reflecting, dialoguing with others, experimenting in the classroom, stepping back and considering the results, more experimenting, more dialogue, and more reading.

We encourage reading as part of a two way exchange between "reflection and action," with both informing each other, in a process that some have called "praxis" (e.g. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 51) and that others have called "scholarly teaching" (see Michael Potter and Erika Kustra, "Scholarly Teaching," 2011).

The Focus of Our Critique

It is accurate to state that most college and university teachers do not teach nearly as effectively as they could if they would seriously engage with the scholarship on teaching and learning in higher education. But we want to make it absolutely clear that we are not blaming teachers for this situation, which, sadly, has become a hobby for some.

The focus of our critique is not teachers but the broader institutional, ideological, and material contexts that make *not reading* the scholarship the norm. For instance, misaligned structures for tenure, promotion, and prestige in many colleges and universities and an inadequate understanding of authentic learning in the broader culture both work to devalue teaching and learning.

Colleges and universities should expect teachers to specialize in teaching and learning—in addition to whatever specific subjects they study—and should support them in doing so. That they routinely do not is truly bizarre.

But even so, this manifesto is less about critique than about reform. While teachers are not the problem, they are part of the solution. We believe that those teachers who go against the grain and seriously engage the scholarship on teaching and learning can serve their students more effectively and can advocate for meaningful reform in higher education more broadly.

Our Reading Recommendations

The enormous mass of information and resources available on the scholarship on teaching and learning is more than daunting. It only takes a few internet searches on "teaching and learning" (or on one of the countless issues, practices, or philosophies that fall under that category, such as "collaborative learning," "active learning," "writing across the curriculum," etc.) to come up with more material than one can reasonably sort through.

So where to start? What to read first and what to read next?

One of the central aspects of this project is to recommend a few good readings, a manageable number of particularly useful texts from the scholarship on teaching and learning. We make our top recommendations in our core reading list. We make recommendations for further reading in our other lists and on our blog.

We don't take the significance and responsibility of recommending readings lightly. Many teachers first read the scholarship on teaching and learning when someone they respect and trust recommends a book or an article. Recommending a good and fitting reading is an act of generosity and possibility. Following through with such a recommendation by reading the recommended text is an act of generosity and possibility as well. In the best cases, this becomes a mutual process.

Our Invitation to Read On

If this manifesto strikes a chord with you, we invite you to read on. Read the reading lists; that is, read the lists and *then* read the books on the lists. Browse our blog and consider submitting to it.

Paul T. Corrigan

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