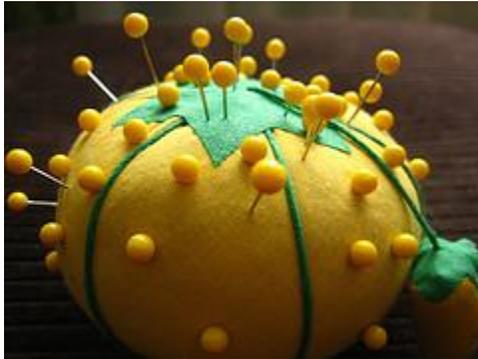


What Ails College Teaching?

November 18, 2008 By Peter Wood



The Penn State Economics Department has seized one of the basic principles of Adam Smith—the advantages provided by a division of labor—and brought them to the classroom. Smith famously cited the manufacture of pins, in which one set of laborers produced the long pointy parts while another manufactured the pinheads. A successful pin required both, which calls into question the doormat that Fox’s Bill O’Reilly is hawking these days, emblazoned with the motto, “No Pinheads.” Hey Bill, pins without pinheads are just plain old needles.

But I digress. The Penn State Economics Department version of the pinpoint/pinhead division of labor is to separate the bulk of teaching responsibilities from the tenured faculty. Instead, the students who sign up for the courses in macro and microeconomics take courses taught by “teaching specialists.” The teaching specialists have advanced degrees in economics but they are employed solely to teach large lecture courses—frequently addressing auditoria of 600 or 700 students. They are not expected to pursue research in economics, or to publish. Moreover, the division of labor doesn’t stop there. The teaching specialists are supported by a phalanx of undergraduate workers and graduate teaching assistants, who, in the words of one of the teaching specialists, form “a small army” to “assist with exam proctoring, homework collection, grading, in-class quizzes, and more.” A “Supplemental Instruction Leader” takes notes and holds review sessions. And another teaching assistant is “solely dedicated to coordinating group projects.

An Alternative to Settled Mediocrity?

The teaching specialist I am quoting is G. Dirk Mateer, whom I met at a conference last week put on by the libertarian-leaning [John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy](#) in North Carolina. The session in which Mateer spoke addressed “Incentives for Excellence in Teaching,” which is to say that it dealt with one of the basic paradoxes in higher education: that a system ostensibly aimed at teaching the next generation of students tends to perform the task indifferently. There is a settled mediocrity in American college teaching, surpassed here and there by talented and energetic individuals, but seldom disturbed in its languorous self-satisfaction. On most campuses, mediocrity can rightly pride itself on being a whole lot better than the conspicuous dreadfulness of a handful of professors who dedicate themselves variously to the nine muses of bad teaching: Boredom, Mumbling, Disorganization, Confusion, Forgetfulness, Stridency, PowerPoint, Textbook, and Vacuity.

The reasons why American colleges and universities founder at their most basic task are numerous. Faculty members are generally trained as graduate students to be subject specialists, not teachers. If they are so fortunate as to win a tenure-track academic appointment, their future depends far more on scholarly achievement than on success in the classroom. Scholarly success is a fairly visible thing—articles and books are peer-reviewed—but teaching is seldom subject to close evaluation by experts. Success (and failure) in the classroom are more rumored than seen. Many universities rely on student evaluations of teaching, which are typically a very poor diagnostic—although they do seem to register the particularly egregious cases.

If a university does get serious about evaluating teachers, it is faced with the problems of setting standards across a wide variety of subjects, styles, and approaches. The challenges are not insurmountable, but they can be formidable. The university needs a rubric of evaluation flexible enough to illuminate both the giant introductory lecture course and the advanced seminar with a dozen students around the table; to comprehend the excellence of a chemistry professor’s chalk talk as well as a law professor’s Socratic questioning; and to weigh the professor’s performance in individual classes with his success in the course in providing students with something that will endure.

Adding to these difficulties are the social dynamics of most colleges and universities. Very few faculty members are willing to intrude on each other's classes by asking to sit in as observers. It is not uncommon for a faculty member to teach for years on end without having a single visitor. Tenure and promotion committees typically are more comfortable poring over student evaluations than they are in sending their members out to see firsthand how well a candidate teaches.

In light of the numerous obstacles, colleges typically make half-hearted attempts to foster good instruction. Most employ some system of student course evaluations (usually at the end of the semester) and most present awards to acclaimed teachers (usually based on student nominations). Some colleges also offer programs for instructors who come forward asking for assistance to improve their classroom techniques. Some colleges in recent years have also adopted curricular reforms that are motivated in part by a desire to improve teaching. The return to core curricula, for example, puts a spotlight on the capacity of professors to demonstrate their command of canonical books that are often outside their specializations. In the opposite direction, the creation of freshmen seminars taught by senior faculty members summons their ability to teach material within their specializations to students who know little of the subject and who often come equipped with strongly-held misconceptions.

Each of these steps has some value but they clearly have not added up to a broad-based emphasis on good teaching in higher education. We can contemplate this failure in several ways. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings thought that some regime of "outcomes assessment" would move higher education to take a more serious attitude towards ensuring that college students learn something useful to the marketplace. Her proposals never really took flight—for which there is much to be thankful. A strict system of outcomes assessment might indeed ensure that students master a certain kind of cut-and-dried content, but it would do little to restore the liberal arts teaching that has languished in the last few decades. And that brings us back to the Penn State experiment.

The Penn State Economics Department, applying ruthless economic logic, diagnosed the problem and imposed a solution. The diagnosis was that professors who pursue advanced scholarship in economics have little incentive to devote their time and effort to the chore of teaching large introductory and mid-level undergraduate courses. They weren't necessarily very good at these tasks and their time could be used more profitably in advancing the reputation of the Department through top-notch research. Enter the teaching specialist and his small army of assistants.

According to Dirk Mateer, the approach has met with spectacular success. Over the eight years it has been in place, the number of undergraduate economics majors has nearly tripled, enrollments have surged, and student satisfaction is way up. Mateer extols the model of teaching specialists, who have rolling renewable five-year contracts, as something that can profitably be exported to many other academic contexts.

A good idea? Perhaps, but it does seem to put the tenured faculty in a potentially awkward position. They need to convince administrations (and in the case of Penn State, the Pennsylvania taxpayers) that it is worth a large continuing expense to keep them around just to pursue research and to teach a few small classes for advanced undergraduate and graduate students. No doubt the senior faculty members believe that the university and the taxpayers are getting a good deal: a whole lot of prestige in exchange for their salaries.

But it is not hard to imagine that, especially in tough economic times, some members of the University administration and perhaps some state legislators are thinking that if Dirk Mateer and his fellow teaching specialists can do such a good job teaching undergraduate economics classes, who needs the pinheads?

Adjunctification

The teaching specialist approach may well point the way to one part of the future of mass higher education. It is a way for the large residential university to compete with the economies of scale offered by online universities. Are Americans generally ready to trade our hit-or-miss approach to

teaching by scholars/teachers for a more reliable but big-box approach to teaching by teaching specialists?

I doubt there is a single answer. In fields such as economics in which the basics of introductory and intermediate courses are well-established and highly routinized, large-scale impersonal classes make a fair amount of sense. The “small army” of student assistants ensures that the students can still ask questions and get one-on-one answers, and the teaching specialist is free to concentrate on his live performance.

In other fields, the basic tasks are not so amenable to this approach. It is hard to imagine worthwhile composition courses taught on a mass scale, and there are many fields where the key to the student’s intellectual progress is writing papers that the instructor reads, corrects, and grades assiduously.

That kind of work can be performed by people other than tenured or tenure-track professors, and it often is. It is carried out on many campuses by writing preceptors and adjuncts, who are paid meager wages and who share very little in the life of the institution. A “teaching specialist,” by contrast, is someone who is paid a more substantial salary and who gains a modest but real standing in the academic community. Teaching specialists are adjuncts translated to a higher plain.

Frank Donoghue’s recent polemic, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (2008) draws attention to the rapid increase in the proportion of faculty members who are off the tenure track. In 1975, it was 43 percent. By 2001 it was 65 percent. The latest numbers I can find suggest the trend continues. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education’s* redaction of Department of Education data, half of the nation’s 571,508 full-time faculty members don’t have tenure. And 48 percent of the total of 1,290,000 part-time and full-time faculty members are part-time. That means about 70 percent (907,000) of American faculty are untenured either because they are adjuncts or because they are tenure-track.

If we are concerned about the overall quality of teaching in American higher education, these are worrisome figures. That’s not because adjuncts are inherently or disproportionately poor at teaching. To the contrary, some adjuncts are highly talented and highly motivated. The nature of their employment, however, means that most of them are insecure, unrooted, and unable to look beyond the particular courses they are contracted to teach. They have virtually no say in designing the curricula in which they teach. Many teach at more than one college, commuting from campus to campus to patch together a livelihood. Higher education’s reliance on adjuncts may ensure that the necessary courses get taught, but it also means that the scholarly community that is at the heart of a college or university is gradually being replaced by a set of contractual relations with poorly-paid transient workers.

I somehow doubt that is a model that meshes with the endlessly enunciated “commitment to excellence in teaching” that echoes through college viewbooks and presidential orations.

Incentives for Excellence

The Pope Center probably has the right idea in framing the problem as one of incentives: minimizing the disincentives that prompt faculty members to avoid teaching and creating more compelling reasons for talented individuals to put their energy and imagination into teaching. The Penn State division-of-labor approach makes good sense in the limited context of a highly routine subject that can be taught on a mass scale by individuals who have mastered the art of auditorium performance.

But what about the situations in which “teaching specialists” are not likely to be the answer? Despite its widespread fondness for hiring adjuncts, American higher education still extols the ideal of having students learn directly from active scholars. And indeed, it is worthy ideal, no matter how often we fall short. The key advantage to having active scholars teach undergraduate courses is that they can teach from the midst of their subjects. To the extent that higher education is just the transmission of an established body of knowledge, we don’t need active scholars to teach it. That can be done by teaching specialists. But to the extent that we want students to engage the deeper, unsettled intellectual

problems that drive inquiry, we do need active scholars in the classroom. These are the men and women who embrace the difficulty of framing good questions with which to approach the unknown, and who must synthesize knowledge as they go along.

Creation, discovery, and synthesis are not easy things. They require patience and a willingness to stick with what seem unyielding problems. The teacher/scholar demonstrates qualities of character along with intellectual mastery and the capacity to excel. Those seem to be good reasons to keep at least some scholars in the undergraduate classroom. But our current system leaves so much to be desired. Where do we start?

Surely scholars would benefit from more emphasis on learning how to teach during their days as graduate students. I suspect grade inflation is major disincentive for most scholars when they contemplate teaching. They need the freedom to fail students and to assign low marks. Otherwise we work with a debased currency, and students are sentenced to a fog of incomprehension about their own intellectual ability. We need to consider long-term measures of student success, such as matching the quality of writing in senior theses to the students' instructors in freshman English.

I'm convinced that major improvements in the quality of college teaching can best be reached by taking a long-term view. Faculty members should not be thought of primarily as parties in a one-time transaction that end with the course. If they have succeeded in teaching something valuable, it will linger with students and often grow. The measures that we are looking for ought to include the evidence that a teacher has wrought something permanent in a student.

Of course, few scholars will invest that kind of effort if their college regards teaching primarily as a professional obligation. Over the last year, I've been engaged off and on in a debate with the advocates of student affairs programs who see their work as a desperately needed complement to the faculty. According to student affairs folks, faculty address themselves merely to some narrow slice of the higher cognitive function of their students, and it is up to the student affairs professionals to reintegrate this with "the whole student." I've argued that the student affairs folks have this exactly wrong. The real work of the faculty goes far beyond "cognitive input." We shape students' aspirations and give them glimpses of the horizon by which they can orient their lives.

But I fear that the student affairs folks come near the truth when it comes to many college administrations. The proliferation of adjuncts and the treatment of teaching as mainly a transactional matter are expressions of disdain for the deeper role of the scholar in educating students.

At this point, perhaps we need to turn to Adam Smith's other great book, his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As important as it is to have a wise division of labor, we need to also consider what we owe others. According to Smith, man has "some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it."

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From things he has written I gather that Dirk Mateer is sympathetic to the market-driven non-tenure track "teaching specialist". However, there is no reason why this has to be a non-tenure track position. Science departments have used "teaching specialists" for years for freshman chemistry. Some departments have regular faculty who are very good freshman chemistry and do it repeatedly. The great George Pimentel filled this role at Berkeley for many years while maintaining a distinguished research and public affairs profile. That was decades ago. There are also "Professors of Chemical Education" around the country who have tenure. My own department has a tenured "Senior Instructor".

The Carolina Journal has some interesting stuff, presumably from Dirk Mateer himself,

regarding his approach to teaching intro economics: “He uses a variety of methods (film clips, music videos, songs, demonstrations, group work, and other active learning processes) to stimulate students to think about economics.” Perhaps this is the way out of pedagogical mediocrity. collegewikis.com has a couple of interesting posts about his class.

I don't know quite what to make of the tripling in econ majors at Penn State. In about the same time period, econ majors have doubled at the University of Oregon. I don't know if this is because of improved pedagogy. I haven't heard any of my econ colleagues talking about film clips, videos, songs etc. in the intro course, but perhaps they are doing something like that.

Re: “Tenure and promotion committees typically are more comfortable poring over student evaluations than they are in sending their members out to see firsthand how well a candidate teaches.” – please tell that to the University of Oregon. I've spent hours lately visiting classes and writing up the results according to the ever-more-formalized process for teaching evaluation for tenure and promotion required by the University Senate and implemented by the Administration.