University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Archives of Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

10-1-1989

Teaching Excellence: TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY, Fall 1989

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives

Part of the Higher Education and Teaching Commons

"Teaching Excellence: TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY, Fall 1989" (1989). *Archives of Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education.* Paper 12.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Archives of Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Teaching Excellence

Distributed courtesy of:
CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE
University of Hawaii at Manoa
1733 Donaghho Road, Kuykendall 108
Honolulu, Hawaii 96822

TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY

Fall 1989

If Learning Involves Risk-taking, Teaching Involves Trust-building

The premise of this article is that learning, like all other creative acts, will flourish in an atmosphere in which the learner is willing to take risks, and it is the task of the instructor to create such an atmosphere for learning.

If we accept this view of learning as risk-taking, we can begin to confront the factors that discourage students from taking risks and build a class environment where learning becomes less of a risk, or where the risk-taking in learning becomes valued instead of dreaded. Both of these directions require that instructors develop a trusting relationship with students.

When students trust an instructor, they will believe in the instructor's ability to turn any situation into a learning opportunity; they will expect the instructor to value their efforts; they will be willing to take the chances that lead to learning and to view failures as learning opportunities.

What, then, might be the characteristics of an instructor who would support student risk-taking? These four stand out:

Model how to take risks: One way to build student confidence is to be willing to take risks yourself. A great deal of emotion and social behavior is learned through modeling (Bandura, 1977). By the way you handle errors and wrong turns, you demonstrate to students that even experts make mistakes. For example, being willing to consider non-standard questions and situations or being alert to and bringing in new developments in the field for which there are no "correct" answers both indicate to the students that you also are in the process of learning.

Exude organization and competence: Personally, I never worry about flying unless the pilot starts sounding nervous. The same seems true in classroom learning. When the students are convinced that the instructor is "in control" and knows where the class is going, they will feel more comfortable about taking risks. They will be confident that if they make a mistake or go off on a wrong tangent, the instructor will be able to bring them back on target. Therefore, the instructor must be well-organized and solidly grounded in the content such that he or she can handle any eventuality.

Minimize the pain of making an error: One reason many students are reluctant to take risks is the fact that our classrooms have such a strong evaluation component. They are afraid that if they make an error in class, it will affect their grade. Therefore, it would be useful to separate the learning from the evaluating. Does everything assigned have to be graded? If in-class activities are known to be "preparations" for the evaluation, but not themselves graded, students are just as motivated to use that opportunity to prepare. Evidence from the mastery learning literature has demonstrated the value of letting students check their learning prior to the "real" test (Bloom, 1984).

Another way to separate grading from learning is to allow students to work together on new ideas. That way their initial errors will be tempered by the responses of their colleagues before being seen by the instructor. There is a lot of work being done these days on the benefits of collaborative learning, much of it demonstrating the positive feelings that result when students work together (Johnson and Johnson, 1985).

And when you do manage to separate the learning from the evaluation in the minds of the students, you should work on separating them in your own mind. How you react to student errors will be an important determinant of how they perceive their own errors. If you look upon them as learning opportunities and encourage the students to explore their own thinking, you will be building trust and encouraging risk-taking (Adams, 1986).

Provide risk-taking opportunities: In order to help students take risks, the instructor must provide oppor-

(Continued on back)

tunities. This means not doing all the talking yourself. Outside observers of classrooms are struck by how much work instructors do in class and how little their students do (Weimer, 1989). Instead, instructors must let the students do some of the work, then stand back and let them do it without interference. Allowing students to struggle and take wrong turns helps them learn something from the process. This requires your not being rigidly tied to your own agenda. You will always have an ultimate goal in mind, but there may be many wrong paths which would be just as instructive and possibly more interesting because they would reflect the students' own struggle with the task rather than your preconceived notion of the "correct way" to do something. In the long run students will learn more from the following their own wrong path than from following the well-worn footsteps of the experts.

In the end we must come to the realization that it is the students who must do the learning. The teacher's task is to make learning possible, not to do it for them. This involves creating a classroom atmosphere of trust and confidence where risk-taking is possible, even exciting, and then giving the students ample opportunity to take those risks by being actively involved in their own learning. It may not be as easy and as comfortable for the instructor as "covering the material," but in the long term, the learning will be better.

MARILLA SVINICKI
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS-AUSTIN

References

Adams, J. L. (1986). *The Care and Feeding of Ideas.* Reading, MA; Addison-Wesley.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bloom, B. J. (1984). The 2 sigma problem: the search for methods of instruction as effective as one-to-one tutoring. *Educational Researcher*, 13, 4-16.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1985). Motivational processes in cooperative, competitive and individualistic learning situations. In Ames, C., & Ames, R. (eds.). *Research on Motivation in Education: The Classroom Milieu* (vol. 2). Orlando, Fl: Academic Press.

Weimer, Maryellen G. (1989). Who's doing the work? *The Teaching Professor*, 3(2), 1.

For further information, contact the author at University of Texas-Austin, Center for Teaching Effectiveness, Main Bldg. 2200, Austin, TX 78712-1111

A PUBLICATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Editor:
Loren Ekroth, Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1733 Donaghho Road, Kuykendall Hall 108, Honolulu, HI 96822

Associate Editors:
Sandra Tomlinson, Galveston College, 4015 Avenue Q, Galveston, TX 77550
Marilla Svinicki, Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Texas-Austin, Main Bldg. 2200, Austin, TX 78712-1111

SUBSCRIPTIONS: Institutional, $100 annually (unlimited reproduction rights); Individual, $10 annually. *Teaching Excellence* is published eight time annually. To order, send check or P. O. to Teaching Excellence, c/o Loren Ekroth, Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1733 Donaghho Road, Kuykendall Hall 108, Honolulu, HI 96822, or call (808) 948-6978 for further information.

The Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

Dedicated to Improving Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

The POD Network facilitates the exchange of information and ideas, the development of professional skills, the exploration and debate of educational issues, and the sharing of expertise and resources. For further information, write to:

Dr. Delivee Wright
POD Network
Teaching and Learning Center
University of Nebraska
121 Benton Hall
Lincoln, NE 68588

Other Publications:

To Improve the Academy (annual) 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, each @ $10.00

Handbook for New Practitioners @ 15.00

Membership Directory and Networking Guide @ $5.00

Bright Idea Network @ $5.00

For publication orders or information about the 1989 POD Annual Conference, please contact:

Dr. Emily Wadsworth
POD Network
Professional Development
Northeastern University
5500 North St. Louis
Chicago, IL 60646