The Hard-Easy Rule and Faculty Development

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Two things remind us of faculty development's slow progress. One lies in the realization that we often repeat the same exhortations made decades ago. That is, we admonish campuses to take teaching seriously (Commission for the Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, 1987), while saying little about what would, at last, induce such changes. The second sign of slow growth comes in a grudging recognition: Two decades of calls for higher status of professors as teachers have brought few obvious changes in teaching or in the viability of faculty development programs (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1983; Cross, 1976; Dunne, 1984).

Indeed, the skepticism of faculty development's founders about translating good intentions into real improvements sounds as timely now as it did in 1974:

> In the past, reformers have attempted to improve teaching by exhorting professors to reeducate themselves to the task, by providing tips on technique, by readjusting the subject matter, by offering prizes for exemplary performance, and the like. It is hard to estimate the net yield, if any, of these methods. (Group for Human Development in Higher Education, 1974, p. 17)

What inhibits progress in faculty development? What inclines us to unheeded exhortations? Menges and Mathis (1988), in their Herculean analysis of this literature, found a signal failing in the field — a lack of unifying theory. Until faculty development comes up with a productive theme, they imply, it will continue to flounder.

While Menges and Mathis offer no specific directions about where to find threads for useful constructs, they provide a clue. Their review of

hundreds of articles suggests that faculty developers might begin by reexamining academic reward systems.

This paper proposes a new look at why traditional calls to reward teaching go unheeded. It offers a simple theory that helps make sense of what gets rewarded in academe and of why mere admonishments to value teaching in its present state cannot succeed. Therein lie two related questions that could help establish a more productive theme for faculty development: 1) why the field needs a broader orientation, and 2) how practitioners can enhance the status of teaching.

The Hard-Easy Rule

The germ of the idea comes from a manuscript on work. Its author, Kerr (1988), is a management professor concerned with organizational reward systems, and his insight into what work gets rewarded and what does not, though based on nonacademic organizations, offers the potential for understanding what keeps teaching from its desired status. Kerr's rule, which he left unnamed, says that while achieving hard goals is almost always rewarded, failing to make easy goals is almost always punished. Kerr also implies that the rule can be stated another way; i.e., successes at easy tasks earn few rewards, and failures at hard tasks earn few punishments.

Kerr gave a brief but intriguing sense of how this distinction works. He found, for example, that workers bitterly agreed about organizational pressures to set difficult goals (with high prospects of failure and with concomitant levels of hopelessness). And he found that the same workers complained of being implored to somehow attend to thankless tasks (while experiencing reward systems that keep such tasks thankless).

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Kerr's distinction, between rewarding tasks and thankless tasks, generalizes nicely to academe. Academicians treat scholarly writing (and its kin including grant writing) as hard. We treat teaching, fairly or not, as easy. This application of the notion from organizational development to faculty development is labelled the hard-easy rule.

In its basic form, the hard-easy rule says that professors gain most of their rewards via successes at hard tasks like writing for publication and find most of their punishments via failures at easy tasks like teaching. Restated, excelling at easy tasks such as teaching brings few rewards; failing at difficult tasks like scholarly writing brings few punishments,

despite complaints about publish-or-perish syndromes. (I present data that support this contention anon; I realize that some readers will disagree strongly with my opinion.)

How do we know which academic tasks are hard? The answer, in this context, lies in looking at what campuses most clearly reward and at which tasks professors most commonly attempt and fail. Clearly, writing for publication brings the biggest and most valued rewards for academicians. This same activity, of competing for space in scholarly journals that boast of rejection rates over 90%, is structured so that most participants fail, often repeatedly.

But is it also true that failures to publish bring the most substantial punishments? In fact, despite their public pressures to publish, most campuses display remarkable patience in awaiting their new faculty's publications. And even on campuses where faculty are continually reminded that they must publish to gain tenure, newcomers quickly learn that significant numbers of colleagues survive the process with publication numbers of none or one (Turner & Boice, 1987).

How do we know which academic tasks are easy? The answer lies, in part, in noticing what campuses encourage but rarely reward in substantial ways. More directly, it lies in seeing what campuses punish for obviously inadequate performance. And finally, indications of easiness go hand-in-hand with a lack of training and an assumption that nearly anyone can master the activity easily. Teaching, unfortunately, usually fits these criteria all too well.

Here again, our immediate responses contradict the hard-easy rule. Don't we know, with some certainty, that research campuses routinely advance poor teachers to tenure? In fact, faculty developers can only guess in this regard. My own observations of classroom teaching and of retention/tenure/promotion committees at four large campuses suggest that tenure commitments to poorly-rated teachers are anomalies, probably no more common than on campuses without research emphases.

Perhaps the most immediately obvious part of the hard-easy rule is its assumption that campuses treat teaching as an activity demanding little training or supervision. A number of observers of academe, such as Dunne (1984), describe the reluctance of graduate programs (other than "lowly-regarded schools of education") to train doctoral students as teachers.

Some of the most impressive evidence about the "easiness" of teaching appeared in Fink's (1984) landmark study of new professors. The majority of his sample saw no rewards or encouragements for teaching

on their campuses. Despite participating in a mentoring program with two senior faculty each, only 40% of these new faculty were observed by mentors in classes, and only half of those incorporated mentors' suggestions into their own teaching.

Evidently, we are little more likely to impose advice about teaching on new colleagues than we are to expect them to take our advice. And, to touch on Fink's data again, we cannot expect novices to try to effect many changes on their own; in his sample, only one-quarter of the new faculty reported such efforts. Is it any wonder that teaching, as a task for which we get little training and accept little advice, is considered easy?

Implications for Faculty Development

What insights lie beyond the basic predictions of the hard-easy rule, that academic rewards and punishments accrue to different activities? The hard-easy rule posits reasons why mere exhortations and good intentions fail:

1. Teaching, so long as it remains ostensibly easy (i.e., seen as requiring little training, as unspecifiable in terms of excellence, as uncompetitively evaluated, as only occasionally labelled a failure), will not merit the same rewards and status as hard tasks like writing for publication. No amount of admonishments about why teaching should be valued more than research/scholarship/publishing will change the fact that teaching is, nonetheless, seen as easy.

2. Faculty developers help keep teaching easy. We often tolerate beliefs that excellence in teaching cannot be defined, and we generally avoid the stringent evaluation of teaching via expert evaluators. Until we identify ourselves with an activity that merits serious training and evaluation, we cannot expect the status of teaching or of faculty development programs to increase.

3. Faculty developers help keep writing hard. As a rule, we do little to facilitate the scholarly writing of colleagues; thus, we perpetuate publication as the province of an elite minority.

The traditional exclusion of help for scholarly writers from faculty development programs, with their roots in instructional development programs, seems understandable. But even recent calls for broad, eclectic practices omit programs for colleagues as writers (e.g., Menges & Mathis, 1988).

Corollaries to the Hard-Easy Rule

1. *Easy tasks, paradoxically, often occupy more time and generate more anxiety.* Studies of how new faculty spend their time and of what stresses them during their first four years at a large, regional university showed curious differences in reactions to demands for teaching and scholarly writing (Turner & Boice, 1987). These new faculty commonly spent 15-22 hours per week preparing lectures, rarely less, but often as many as 30-40 hours. In contrast, new faculty routinely spent some 0-1 hours per week on scholarly writing at a campus that made loud demands for publication. Fittingly, these new faculty reported feeling far more pressured and anxious about preparing and presenting lectures than they did about writing for publication. Bowen and Schuster (1986) reported comparable differences in allocations of time for professors surveyed across a variety of institutions.

Why would new faculty, who admit that writing brings the biggest professional rewards, invest more time and emotion in teaching? Their interview responses to this question provided nearly unanimous agreement: Teaching was not, new faculty began, at all as easy as its reward and training aspects suggested; it required far more time for preparation than they expected. They were, as Fink (1984) predicted, working hard to master the narrow "facts-and-principles" style typical of new professors, one that demanded the bulk of their workweeks.

Moreover, new faculty continued, they worked hard to avoid failing at teaching. They seemed aware that obvious failures at teaching, no matter how uncommon, led to personal and collegial embarrassment, even to rejection in the retention/tenure/promotion process. New faculty, finally, added another concern about teaching. Its assessment by departmental committees, chairs, and higher administrators seemed capricious; its basis in student evaluations and hearsay suggested that a few troublesome students or a single teaching gaffe could lead to real punishments.

Not one of these faculty in their first four years, incidentally, mentioned expectations of rewards for their teaching efforts.

While new faculty reported constant worries about managing their teaching, they rarely volunteered concerns about publishing. And while their senior colleagues occasionally reminded them to write for publication, the reminders were delivered without a sense of urgency. What senior faculty did communicate with urgency was a readiness to criticize a single subaverage student rating procured by new faculty, most directly in annual reports of new faculty progress. To the chagrin of new faculty,

their seniors often persisted in recalling (and, thus, punishing) such teaching failures over subsequent years.

2. *Easy tasks tend to be done only well enough to ensure safety.* Given the pressures to teach defensively, in ways to avoid complaints and punishments, efforts at teaching may lean more to adequacy than to daring and excellence. Given the lack of public, comparative data about how well professors teach, we must remain tentative about this contention. My own systematic observations in the classrooms of hundreds of colleagues, though, confirm it. Most teach in straight lecture format, with reasonably clear organization; i.e., they teach adequately. And most, when I probe them to reflect on their development as teachers, recall with some relief the point at which they felt they were doing well enough to cut back on lecture preparation time. They seemed content to avoid serious student complaints.

3. *Success at hard tasks can be delayed, often indefinitely.* Given the high rejection rates of scholarly journals (and of funding agencies), academicians expect each other to fail at writing. We also expect, or at least tolerate, the procrastination of writing. New faculty in another study confirmed the point about delays (Boice, 1989). They typically worked slowly at writing, devoting little time to it and preferring to finish other tasks first (especially preparation for teaching). These new faculty reported that they were waiting for large blocks of undisrupted time before doing serious writing, assuming that the wait would help engender more cleverness and perfection. And they also commented that no such delays were allowed in mastering teaching.

4. *Failures at hard tasks are punished less often than we suppose.* Here, as with public information about professors' teaching, we have only limited information. The lore about failures due to inadequate publishing levels suggests refusals to grant tenure at rates of some 15%. Actual practice, at campuses where I have consulted, seems even less punitive. Four campuses, two of them doctoral-granting, where I have collected systematic data, show a direct failure rate of new, untenured faculty of less than 6% in the retention/tenure/promotion process. Even allowing for individuals who reported feeling pressured to leave and who did so voluntarily, the attrition rate is less than 10%.

Add to that another datum. Most of the new faculty who failed on these study campuses did so, apparently, more because of poor student ratings of their teaching than because of their silence as writers. So, although clear failures at teaching seem to occur infrequently, they are punished regularly, even on campuses where faculty grumble that teach-

ing is not taken seriously. What faculty might better say is that excellence in teaching is not taken seriously.

5. *Faculty developers work in easy areas.* Stated simply, most of us have chosen to neglect the hard side of academic rewards. We undermine our credibility when we neither work to help colleagues with tasks they find hardest nor work to help colleagues realize that teaching done properly also remains hard.

6. *Faculty developers must work, inevitably, to make teaching "harder."* The hard-easy rule suggests that credibility awaits accountability. Thus, only when university teaching is more openly and comparatively evaluated, will it begin to accrue the rewards common to publishing. As this occurs, faculty developers should move more from the role of motivators and facilitators to that of formative evaluators of professors.

Predictably, some faculty developers already promote approaches that promise more obvious substance for teaching (e.g., Weimer, 1990). The best efforts include strategies for combining traditional lecture formats with writing-intensive and critical thinking components. Over a decade ago, Cross (1976) devoted an entire book, *Accent on Learning,* to computer-assisted instruction and other ways of making teaching more demonstrably substantial than lecturing. The rest of us may be overdue in showing a readiness to add hard-hearted evaluations to our efforts, even in areas of academe that usually remain unscrutinized (Seldin, 1988).

What keeps us from moving more rapidly toward this seemingly inevitable change? One reason is already apparent; i.e., professors show an understandable reluctance to undergo thorough evaluations, especially in comparative fashion. Many of these same individuals, however, readily submit to competitive evaluations from scholarly journals — probably because writing for publication is difficult, an activity where professors can afford to fail.

A second reason that may delay our confrontation with the hard-easy distinction as it now stands is elitism. We may perversely enjoy the idea of writing for publication as especially hard. The oft-supposed problem in helping colleagues as writers is that we could cheapen writing for publication.

Cross (1976), again, and Gardner (1961) before her have already addressed a variation on this dilemma. Stated simply, it asks, can we be equal and excellent, too? Cross put the question about devaluation like this: How possible is it to extend elitist privileges — those valuable because of their scarcity — to the masses? If we help make writing easier, will we devalue and further overcrowd our journals? And, to reverse the perspec-

tive, if we require an already dwindling supply of talented professorial candidates (Bowen & Schuster, 1986) to submit to public and comparative evaluations of classroom performance, will we unintentionally undermine excellence in teaching?

Cross, among others, offers reassurances and solutions. We must, she notes, be prepared to encourage excellence by evaluating actual performance *and* by accommodating individual differences in achieving mastery of performance in both writing and teaching. In regard to writing, this might involve cultural and resource supports that prod professors to write and to find easier access to journals that maintain high standards but that also allow authors to make as many improvements and revisions as they need. *To Improve the Academy* already meets this standard.

In the case of teaching, the equivalent action could mean that new professors are permitted to experiment and learn, within reasonable limits, without fear of immediate punishment.

7. *So long as faculty development concentrates on easy tasks, it will garner more punishments than rewards.* This final corollary is confirmed, sadly, by the peripheral and transient status of faculty development programs on most campuses. Programs identified with hard activities, such as research/grants offices, rarely face the same extinction threats that we do.

Conclusions

Consideration of the hard-easy rule, unpleasant as its reality may be, suggests that we need to rethink the reasons why teaching remains unrewarded and why our well-intentioned exhortations go unheeded. The next step, beyond facing unpleasant realities, may lie in finding ways to moderate the hard-easy distinction between teaching and writing. We could, for instance, work concertedly to bring more credibility (i.e., hardness) to teaching by promoting programs that:

1. Accustom professors to frequent, criterion-based ratings of trained observers (including, possibly, some trained student evaluators).

2. Combine such evaluations with developmental opportunities to experiment and learn in relative safety from immediate punishment (e.g., structured opportunities for teachers to observe alternative approaches and to obtain non-administrative feedback about attempts to incorporate such alternatives).

3. Eventually make evaluations by expert raters public and comparative.

4. Ultimately use comparative teaching ratings for competitive rewards, much as is already done with writing for publication. In its extreme, such an approach would lead to each university boasting of its faculty's prowess as scholars and as teachers. Ideally, we might add two more steps to make teaching harder: We could push, even more effectively, for graduate programs that train students as both researchers/writers and teachers. And we could prod, more systematically, for hiring procedures that carefully scrutinize applicants' skills and potentials as teachers.

Faculty developers must also, if teaching is to achieve the status it needs, help reduce the hardness of writing to more reasonable levels. Writing development programs already exist for faculty (Boice, 1988), and the additional outlets for writing are becoming available in electronic publishing.

Making writing for publication less hard offers three advantages. First, it would increase the communication of useful ideas and findings, even in groups with oral traditions like faculty development. Second, it should, as more of us and our campus colleagues write for publication, reduce a major source of guilt in academe. Third, the easing of writing would help decrease its distance from teaching and, thus, help transfer more of the information and rewards from what we publish to what we teach.

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