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Strategic Teaching: The Possible Dream

Linc. Fisch

... within the limits set by our innate abilities, we should strive for excellence, for the best that we can do.

—Hans Selye

One of the most important days of my life was the day that I realized that I would never become a Great Teacher.

That day was a long time a-coming. I remember reading *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* in my youth. It left a lasting impression on me. I resolved to become a beloved teacher like Chips.

By the time I finished high school, tucked into a corner of my cranium was an image of walking down a leaf-strewn campus lane on an early September evening, bathed in the soft light from gas street lamps, on my way to library or seminar, leaving a faint trail of fragrant smoke from a Holmsian pipe.

I went to university and graduate school. I made good grades. I started teaching.

In my late twenties, a visiting professor spent a year on our campus. Woody played the banjo, sang folk songs, and was very popular with students. I saw him as an outstanding teacher, a Great Teacher. He was the embodiment of the charisma I hoped to have.

In my thirties, my Great Teacher image expanded to include a rating of 10 in each category on the form students used to evaluate my teaching. My dream continued. I would be a Star of the highest magnitude, a Triple-Threat Teacher, Super-Prof.

As I neared forty, reality set in. I had yet to find that beautiful autumn scene on a campus. I re-read *Chips* and to my surprise I found it didn't exist there, either. Students' evaluations of my teaching continued to be a mixed bag. I couldn't even master the ukulele, much less the banjo. I met many more Woodies and I found that I didn't match them any better than

I did the original model. I had long since discarded my sophomoric pipe and all the smoking paraphernalia that once cluttered my pockets. I had lived half my life and discovered that, alas, I would not, could not be a Chips. My quest for the Golden Apple would be fruitless.

That was The Day. Frustration. Depression. Quiet desperation. (I learned recently that such a malaise is not uncommon in mid-academic-life. One researcher calls it Professorial Melancholia and is beginning to study it.) I even considered a permanent move into administration.

That day was, as cliché has it, the beginning of the rest of my life. In the next several years, I took a long look at myself, though I realize now that it was not an organized introspection undertaken consciously. I drifted through several new assignments. I did additional graduate work. I explored a few tangents. I became better acquainted with myself.

I had occasion to retake some vocational interest and preference tests. I found that scientific areas, dominant earlier, were now balanced by artistic areas. Here and there, I participated in exercises that revealed my learning, teaching, and achieving styles. I submitted to a well-known personality inventory (the ENFJ name tag from that experience is still tacked to the bulletin board over my desk). I also noted that many of the “stars” of teaching that I knew sometimes flickered; they had weaknesses as well as strengths. I realized that the ways they deployed those strengths were what produced excellence in their work.

During this time, I did some new things and I did some old things differently. I found myself naturally gravitating toward the things I could do well. If I could not adjust my deficiencies, I moved to areas where they played a lesser role in my life.

The end result was of great importance: by no longer dreaming the impossible dream, I found that I was free to move toward accomplishing a possible dream.

The process I went through was really natural growth, prolonged as it was. Reflecting on my meandering journey, I realized that I might have accomplished the same result in much less time had I been more deliberate about it. I tried to extract the essentials from the experience. I began to call the process “Strategic Teaching” because of its similarity to strategic planning, now common in Academe as well as in business.

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The Strategic Teaching Process

As I conceive of it, Strategic Teaching is a process that largely builds on strengths. While it doesn't ignore deficiencies, particularly those which can be corrected, it doesn't dwell on weaknesses.

Thus, if a teacher wishes to engage in Strategic Teaching, the first step is assessing personal strengths and resources. While various self-assessment inventories (such as Myers-Briggs Personality Type and Canfield Instructional Styles) may be employed to advantage, they are not essential to the process. Re-reading student evaluations or having a trusted colleague observe and report on teaching can provide abundant useful information.

Additionally, a teacher may simply list strengths or discover them by responding to questions such as:

What do I enjoy most about teaching?

In courses or classes that have gone well, with what activities am I especially pleased and satisfied?

To what activities and teaching behaviors do students seem to have responded well?

What methods or activities in teaching have I particularly selected over alternatives?

What beliefs and values relevant to teaching do I hold?

For example, among the strengths I have been able to identify in my own case are these: spontaneity, ability to ask questions that guide student thought and behavior, a knack for designing participative learning exercises, ability to organize class sessions as a series of short scenes in order to maximize student attention. Some of the things I value are cooperation, creativity, freedom, harmony, integrity, responsibility and respect.

A second step, closely related to the first, is delineating the conditions and circumstances that a teacher would like to have characterize teaching. These should always be "possibles" – that is, they should be within personal capabilities already held or attainable through reasonable training or commitment. It may be poetic and noble to seek the impossible dream, but it can be depressing and debilitating to not achieve it.

Again, let me illustrate from personal experience. In my own teaching, I realized that I had been using an instructor-centered approach more than I wanted. I preferred to shift to a student-centered mode, engaging

students more actively in the material of mathematics and its applications. This was a condition attainable in part by means of reminding myself to ask questions more frequently (ability to frame questions was a strength I had listed). I could also employ movement more strategically in the course of my presentations — e.g., moving toward students when I wanted to engage them more in dialogue.

In addition, I wanted my class sessions to be more dynamic and less staid. This could be accomplished in part through a heightened mental set that I could achieve by taking a few minutes prior to each class to concentrate on the topic and its mode of presentation. I also wanted to develop more modulation in my voice, which required concentration as well as a little practice — both relatively easy to accomplish. (On the other hand, singing a few appropriate measures, which on rare occasion could contribute to certain presentations I make, strange as that may seem, might well be beyond my capability. Even if I could manage it, considerable training would be required for it to be successful.)

Step three is listing needs and goals, both short-term and long-term, of the department and college. Particular attention should be directed toward how these needs and goals might be changing in response to evolving circumstances in the constituencies served by the college as well as evolving circumstances in society in general. For example, in this phase of Strategic Teaching a list might include items such as computer literacy, writing across the curriculum, greater involvement of students in the learning process, preparing students for dealing with ethical issues, promoting community involvement and service, vocational preparation, emphasis on independent and life-long learning, interdisciplinary studies, accommodating and responding to diversity among people, and serving nontraditional students.

Step four is matching, insofar as possible, strengths and resources identified in the first step with items listed in steps two and three. To be sure, it is quite possible and appropriate to capitalize on strengths without their being instrumental to the accomplishment of personal or institutional goals. Yet advancing such goals provides a special incentive to carry out the process and represents Strategic Teaching at perhaps its fullest and finest.

Step five is deciding what actions to take in response to the outcomes of the first four steps and then devising a plan for carrying out those actions. A sensible plan would project activities for both the short-run and the long-run. It would specify in what areas of teaching the activities would occur and when they would occur. The first activity might be one that

carries the prospect of highly significant results. Or the plan might begin with a few activities that are relatively easy to carry out, with more to be added as progress is made. The plan of action should be flexible. And it should include an evaluation component, some relatively simple means of assessing the extent to which activities are accomplishing their intended purposes.

Step six is carrying out the plan. Since the plan is flexible, it can accommodate some adjustments in timing that may be dictated by circumstances. Since criteria for success are included, frequent monitoring can lead to modifications even as activities are on-going.

Perhaps the most important step of all in the process is reflecting on the experience and then responding accordingly. By assessing level of accomplishment, it may be possible to devise ways of refining an activity in order to increase its yield. By examining how an activity has worked in one area, it may be possible to design adaptations to other areas. Carrying out the plan may suggest new options to include in future plans. Thus, this seventh step is not at all a final step; it only completes one cycle of what may well be a continuous process.

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Clarification of the Process

The following example of Strategic Teaching in action may help clarify the concept and the process:

Dr. Ecks, a soft-spoken professor of government, had become increasingly uncomfortable with delivering hour-long, intricately-planned lectures in PS 121, an introductory course crammed with 100 students. One spring, she took time to tally her personal strengths in teaching. Among them she listed "ability to organize activities" (she was somewhat a perfectionist) and "facility in working with students, both in groups and in individual conferences." At the same time, her college was urging faculty members to try to involve students more directly and more actively in the learning process; the college also was searching for ways to include more vocational orientation in its traditional liberal arts program.

During the summer, Dr. Ecks talked with her department chair and negotiated a revision in course procedure. That fall, in PS 121 she gave only two full lectures per week. Every third class she presented a short introductory statement, did a live interview with a local political leader, and conducted a discussion among a panel of a dozen students (she

changed the panel members each week). The final five to ten minutes of that hour were devoted to questions from the rest of the students to the panel.

Toward the end of the semester, one of the scheduled guests had a conflict at class time. Instead of a live appearance, the interview was videotaped, and the presentation worked almost as well. Dr. Ecks realized that taping a majority of the interviews was an efficient way to use the new method without imposing on guests by inviting them over and over. She received a grant to do that for the next year.

The revised format worked well and Dr. Ecks continued it. In the third year, she adjusted the pattern so that discussions comprised half the class sessions, alternating with lectures. By that time, she had relocated the course to a room where eight subgroups could discuss the interview simultaneously. The final ten minutes of each discussion class were devoted to brief reports from two or three of the groups. Dr. Ecks also enlisted and trained senior students majoring in government to conduct the discussions; they received one credit in a practicum that helped prepare them for graduate school.

Students nicknamed the course “Grassroots Government,” and it became one of the most popular options for satisfying a divisional distribution requirement. A second section was scheduled. Dr. Ecks found her new teaching activity refreshing, and she was very pleased with the results.

This example illustrates several important aspects of Strategic Teaching:

- It need not be a massive, comprehensive makeover, exploiting all a faculty member’s strengths toward the accomplishment of many objectives. Initially, it might direct just one or two strengths toward one or two goals. Indeed, the process frequently works better when a faculty member concentrates on one aspect at a time and directs it to a specific course.
- Effectiveness is enhanced when the institution responds and adapts to the strengths of each individual teacher, just as individuals respond and adapt to their own strengths and institutional needs.
- Strategic Teaching is not simply a one-shot affair. It is a continuous process in which revision builds on revision and success breeds success.

In the case of Dr. Ecks, impressive results came about through extended effort. However, the process of Strategic Teaching can be more

modest. Consider Prof. Wye, a faculty member who observed colleagues whose classes always seemed to get off to a lively start. He noticed how their opening activities – even the way they entered the room – energized students. He thought to himself, “Hey, I can do some things like that; I’ve had a little acting experience in college.” He discarded his former style of sauntering into the room, casually sitting on the edge of the desk, staring at the clock, and waiting for students to arrive. He developed and used a variety of planned entrances and openings which generated student interest and activity. His approach required relatively little effort, yet produced significant dividends. Caught up with the similarity between theatre and classroom, Prof. Wye eventually drew further upon his stage experience to incorporate other new techniques into his teaching.

The cases of Ecks and Wye differ considerably from typical campus situations. The experience of Dr. Zie, a teacher approaching his tenure decision year, is more common. He and his department chair were in conference, discussing Zie’s latest student evaluations of his teaching in Course 104, which included a number of favorable ratings. But there also were comments such as “He speaks softly; it’s easy for my mind to wander,” “The course isn’t very exciting,” and “I wonder what use this course is.” Most of the conversation between Zie and the chair focused on the negative comments. He protested that his voice was naturally soft, and he didn’t know what to do about it. She suggested that he might consider taking voice lessons. He asked about ways to make the course more interesting and practical. She couldn’t seem to suggest anything other than “work harder at it.” (Her response was very much like teachers’ common admonishment to low-achieving students: “Study harder.”) The two of them, both well-meaning individuals, largely ignored the positive comments on the evaluations as well as Zie’s strengths. The conference became a frustrating half-hour for both parties. When he left, Dr. Zie was depressed and worried about his future at the college. (If this portrayal sounds familiar, it may be because many teachers find themselves in similar circumstances – or because we have within our acquaintance a Dr. Zie who gets little help in becoming a better teacher.)

Even if Dr. Zie were to discover some ways to improve in his areas of weakness, most of his efforts would likely be reactive, focused on a few negative comments in a specific course. Typically, he might give little attention and time to capitalizing on his strengths. In contrast, the process of Strategic Teaching is largely *proactive*, accenting and enhancing positive qualities. There is a world of difference between these two approaches.

Among the benefits to faculty who engage in Strategic Teaching are increased comfort and satisfaction from teaching – and perhaps even joy from the endeavor. Strategic Teaching helps keep academic work vital, exciting, and refreshing. It can help combat Professorial Melancholia, post-tenure slump, the deadwood syndrome, and other maladies (real or imagined) to which faculty members are said to be susceptible.

Of course, the greatest beneficiaries of Strategic Teaching are students. Better teaching will likely result in increased learning. Further, a teacher who is visibly striving to use personal resources to the fullest is clearly a good role model for students.

Strategic Teaching is a means of using human resources sensibly, effectively, and efficiently. It could become an important dimension in fulfilling higher education's mission in the predicted forthcoming era of reduced pools of professional teaching talent. Especially in that era, all teachers will need to distribute their efforts wisely.

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Making the Process Work

The Strategic Teaching concept may seem rather straightforward and uncomplicated. It's meant to be. But even simple concepts require care, diligence, and often dedication to put them into operation successfully.

For one thing, a process of building on strengths often seems a bit unnatural for many teachers. Oddly enough, we seem to have a natural tendency to focus, sometimes excessively, on weaknesses and their correction. Engaging in Strategic Teaching requires a change in behavior quite like successful weight control. In weight control, reducing caloric intake is important, but long-term results occur only with commitment to a different style of eating and living. Strategic Teaching may well require teachers to look at themselves and their roles from a new perspective.

By saying that Strategic Teaching involves concentrating on strengths and using them to enhance effectiveness of performance, I'm not suggesting that weaknesses be ignored. Overcoming correctable weaknesses does warrant attention as long as the primary focus on strengths is not sacrificed.

Strategic Teaching must be a genuine personal endeavor, motivated by a desire to come as close as possible to the teacher our innate abilities allow us to be. It cannot be something forced on us by others. It requires our acceptance and commitment and, in large part, our personal control.

Moving carefully through the initial phases of Strategic Teaching is appropriate. Obviously, it's inadvisable to develop a strategy for deploying strengths toward the achievement of goals without first determining in considerable detail just what those strengths and goals are. Jumping into an action plan without taking the necessary preparatory steps may risk overlooking significant options.

In selecting goals, aim high—but not too high, of course. Hans Selye, a noted authority on management of stress, cautions that perfection is nearly always unattainable. He advises that by not undertaking tasks that are beyond us we can avoid the frustration and humiliation of failure. “Everyone has his own limits. For some of us, these may be near the maximum, for others near the minimum of what man can attain. . . . Excellence is a wonderful goal in itself and highly suitable to earn us the good will, respect, and even love of our neighbors” (Selye, 1974, p. 11).

Another criterion for success in Strategic Teaching is detailing the proposed activity and its time schedule in writing. A “plan in mind” often turns out to be no plan at all. A plan doesn't have to be the ultimate in completeness, and it certainly shouldn't be cast in concrete. But it does require the crystallization, clarification, and precision that comes from writing it down.

If you are devising a plan, clearly identify activities and allow enough time to accomplish them. Be sure to include a means for assessing effectiveness. Strategic Teaching is characterized by continual forward movement. An activity is carried out and evaluated; then, revised activity is designed and carried out. As one set of behaviors is learned and consolidated, another set is initiated. A thorough plan might project activities through several such cycles. Be careful to not undertake too much at one time. But also be careful to not undertake less than might be appropriate at a given stage.

Commitment to new behaviors such as Strategic Teaching often involves taking some risks. Though we may try to keep those risks reasonable and sensible, we may not always attain the success that we wish, especially on early trials. Most of us in Academe are uneasy with receiving marks of less than “A” for our own work, but there are valuable lessons to be learned when we fall short of our goals. Benefiting from those lessons by recharting future activity more carefully and effectively can turn even the occasional partial failure into a success. After all, “failure” is really *opportunity*—opportunity to begin again, wiser than before. It's how we reframe our errors that makes the difference. We may take comfort and inspiration from John Dewey: “Not perfection as a final goal, but the

ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim of living.”

By emphasizing that Strategic Teaching is largely an individual process, I don't mean to imply that it's necessarily a solitary activity. The endeavor can be facilitated through interaction with others. A member of a counseling and testing staff might offer various instruments useful in self-assessment. A trusted colleague or a teaching consultant might provide helpful response to plans and activities. Two faculty members might well work together as each goes through the Strategic Teaching process; verbal commitment to another person gives impetus to carrying out plans and meeting target dates. Of course, the critical element in any collaborative activity always is mutual trust.

The process of Strategic Teaching could be adapted on a departmental or college level in order to deploy the unit's teaching resources effectively. In any such collective activity, it is essential that individual participation remain voluntary. Further, use of the process in a summative way is likely to be counterproductive. Strategic Teaching cannot be a college-wide crusade in which all faculty members are pressured to enlist.

At whatever level Strategic Teaching operates, its overall value will probably be a function of the institution's recognition and commitment to development of individual human resources. If an institution expects all teachers to fit a common mold, if those who don't fit that mold are discarded, then outcomes for faculty who engage in the Strategic Teaching process likely will be diminished. But if an institution values individual worth and fulfillment of human potential, then Strategic Teaching can be a valuable force in achieving excellence.

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My own journey toward better teaching has been an adventurous and productive odyssey. Once I became committed to the concept of Strategic Teaching, I found that continuous, gradual, incremental, planned improvement that builds on personal strengths and resources became a way of life. My journey, though slow and undirected at the beginning, has turned into an odyssey without end.

I commend Strategic Teaching as a deliberate process to all teachers who seek to become the best teachers they can be. Few of us may become as beloved as Chips. Few of us may become Great Teachers. But many of us, by dreaming a possible dream, can reach our own excellence. That

dream provides us great motivation and its attainment provides us more than sufficient reward.

Reference

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