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Editor's Introduction: The Educational Developer as Magician

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Chapter 1

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After so many changes in the academy, faculty and educational developers face challenges that require magic to meet. Faculty members are supposed to perform the magic, and we educational developers are expected to teach them how. The trick is to teach more in the same amount of time to disinterested and unprepared students, under the conditions of larger classes, less authority, and lower rewards. College and university faculty are under attack for falling short, and educational developers are next in line to feel the heat. Perhaps we should start defending our faculties, explaining our challenges, and publicizing our efforts and inroads.

Ever think of yourself as a magician? Even if *you* don't, other people apparently do because they are entrusting us faculty and instructional developers with such challenging tasks that it would take a lot of magic to achieve what they want. In fact, they expect us to be master magicians and to transform the faculty into at least journeyman magicians themselves.

What's the trick? To teach, within the same four-year block as years ago, more knowledge and skills than ever before to students who are unprepared to learn them, as well as disinterested in learning them, under the conditions of larger classes, less authority, and lower rewards than ever before.

Let's break that trick down.

No one would argue that the knowledge required to succeed in professional, semiprofessional, technical, and managerial positions has grown astronomically over the past fifty to seventy-five years.

And we in higher education are well aware that the public and our own accrediting agencies demand that we develop in students a host of skills—critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, ethical judgment, cultural sensitivity, written and oral communication, information literacy, and scientific literacy, for example—that we never had to address explicitly before. In fact, we didn't even talk about "skills" thirty years ago. Should this broader and more challenging learning process take the same four years that it used to? The government and the public seem to think that it should.

Now let's examine our students.

Students Today

A considerably higher proportion of high school graduates than ever before in the United States enter either two-year or four-year institutions of higher learning. In 1919, the figure was 32.8 percent, in 1927 32.0 percent, in 1939 20.1 percent, and in 1947 33.2 percent, then between 1951 and 1964, the percentage rose from 30.0 percent to 39.5 percent (Campbell & Seigel, 1967). Today, about 75 percent of high school graduates take some kind of postsecondary schooling within two years of graduation (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002)—an amazing increase of about 90 percent in four decades.

However, a much smaller percentage of high school graduates—32 percent—is actually college-ready by the most minimal yardstick, which means having completed the basic college-required courses and having acquired *basic* literacy skills (Greene & Forster, 2003)—obviously an inadequate definition of *college-ready*. Of those actually entering our colleges and universities, only 47 percent are ready in the sense that they have at least basic reading, writing, and math skills (Miller & Murray, 2005).

Many of us can recall when, for better or for ill, universities screened applicants for proficiency in academic skills. But probably none of us can recall when an eighth-grade education, let alone a high-school diploma, provided solid proficiency in English and math. In fact, with her American third-grade education and absolutely no intellectual bent, my grandmother (born in 1888) exceeded "functionally literate." What happened in the last hundred years? Even in 1995, only 29 percent of entering freshmen

took at least one remedial reading, writing, or math course (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996). But in 2005, 53 percent needed one or more remedial courses (Miller & Murray, 2005), which represents an 83 percent increase. What happened in those ten years?

Students come to us culturally unprepared as well, and they have been since the early 1990s, when the term *classroom incivilities* was coined. Like the generations before them, they behave in their college classrooms much the way they did in high school. But today's students have learned standards of behavior that show little respect for instructors or for fellow students who want to learn. High schools tolerate such conduct, perhaps because they no longer have the legal right to enforce behavioral rules in meaningful ways. In addition, students can't be expected to behave as politely in a setting in which they feel "forced" to be, and now that college feels almost as required as high school for many students, they attend for reasons other than genuine desire.

Not only are students less prepared for college-level work and behavioral expectations; they don't particularly value the knowledge and skills we have to offer. As we well know, the vast majority of them attend college for strictly instrumental reasons—to get a better-paying job than they could otherwise or to please their parents—and they aim for obtaining the diploma, not learning. They view that diploma as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for living as well as or better than their parents do. Deluged for years with subtly high-pressure advertising, they value material success dearly. But few see serious learning as the means to achieve it. Because many of them skated through high school doing very little work for their good grades, they are not about to knock themselves out now. They eschew rigor, reading, and writing and feel entitled to the decent grades they believe they (or their parents) paid for. (Among the younger, middle-class students, many parents will aggressively back them up on their claim.) Not that students won't work. Most put long hours into their gainful employment and either family duties or Greek activities, electronic entertainment, and "beer and circus." But they certainly do not regard a full college course load as a full-time, life-engrossing pursuit, and they may even resent those who challenge their perception.

According to Biggs (2003), the current student profile is much the same in the British Commonwealth. He puts faces on the situation, as he describes two archetypical college students. Susan is every professor's dream—bright, curious, academically motivated, well-prepared, goal-oriented, reflective about her course material, and interested in deep learning. In 1980, 75 percent of the students in college classrooms were like Susan (Brabrand & Andersen, 2006). In contrast, Robert is pursuing a degree to get a decent job and is probably less academically talented than Susan. In any case, he comes to his classes with little (or at least much less) preparation, motivation, and interest in the subject matter. Rather than reflecting on and constructing the knowledge he receives, he prefers to surface-learn and memorize whatever material is necessary to get by. Robert's type made up only one-quarter of the student body in 1980—relatively few made it through or even attended college—but today it represents almost 60 percent, no doubt more in many colleges and universities (Brabrand & Andersen, 2006). Meanwhile, the Susans of the world make up less than 42 percent overall. For this day and age, Biggs defines *good teaching* as "getting most students to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic students use spontaneously" (2003, p. 5)—in other words, turning a lot of Roberts into Susans.

This is a noble goal, but how realistic is it? Robert doesn't want to change. He has different values and is probably busy with other pursuits of higher priority than his course work. Even if he did want to change, he might not be capable of thinking as deeply as Susan routinely does.

In recent years, we have studiously avoided acknowledging differences in students' raw ability to learn, and we believe that anyone can learn anything in the right learning environment. This may be true, but consider the time factor. Some students grasp complex concepts and relationships in their first exposure and can explain them to their slower peers in group work, while others *in the same learning environment* (same class, same instructor) never really "get it." We all have known students who have repeated a course, put genuine effort into it, and never "got it." How long can a person stay in school? The students who learn *immediately*

and with little help from anyone, like Susan, may simply be more able than others.

Enter the Magician

Changing Roberts into Susans is where the magic comes in. And we faculty developers are supposed to teach faculty how to perform this magic act—one student at a time, again and again and again.

But perhaps nothing is impossible for our faculty with the proper institutional support and enough time with each student. So let's look at how our colleges and universities are trying to help their students get motivated and succeed. On the one hand, they have instituted more lenient policies on course withdrawals and repeat-course grade replacement, as well as student-support services and even personal coaches. But on the other, they are accepting greater numbers of students, thus creating a more anomic social environment. They are also accepting more heterogeneous student populations and crowding them into larger classes, especially in the freshman year, when students are most likely to fail or leave. Although large classes enhance the bottom line, the research consistently shows that they work against every positive student dimension you can think of: motivation, class attendance, attention in class, classroom civility, academic integrity, learning, academic performance, development of higher-order cognitive skills, long-term retention, teaching evaluations, college persistence, and satisfaction with the course, the discipline, and the institution—not to mention instructor morale (Cuseo, 2004). The faculty just cannot provide enough individual help and attention to so many students, nor can they pitch so much material to so many different levels of background and ability at once. So colleges and universities may giveth to students in some ways, but they taketh away in others.

Given the preparation and attitudes that students bring to college, plus their need to work a job or two, along with the double-edged support institutions provide, it is little wonder that today's students commonly take five or six years to graduate from college, if they graduate at all. According to a 2007 report by the

National Center for Higher Education Management, only 47 percent of those who enter four-year institutions right after high school graduate within six years (calculated from Figure 8 in the NCHEM report). Nor is it any wonder that most graduates are entering the labor market lacking basic skills. According to a 2006 study by the American Institutes for Research, fewer than 50 percent of students graduating from four-year colleges and fewer than 75 percent of those graduating from two-year colleges have attained literacy proficiency.

Many of today's students would never have completed, if they even had attended, college under the old system in operation over thirty years ago. Higher education was considered a privilege for the brightest and most diligent. It was also a screening device. Students who couldn't cut it, no matter how poor the instruction they received, simply flunked out or dropped out. This was expected, even *desirable,* as unofficial certification of an institution's selectivity and high standards. Back then, the students were solely responsible for their own learning. Colleges and universities were not held accountable for much of anything, least of all the effectiveness of instruction. Lecturing was *de rigueur* for the faculty. Yet, although we have no national literacy assessment data from "back then," employers and the public were not complaining about their graduates' poor literacy skills, sloppy reasoning, and shallow knowledge bases. These college survivors must have had well-honed learning skills, solid cognitive abilities, and plenty of self-motivation.

How times have changed. Despite what our students and institutions bring to the table today, faculty members are under fire, apparently, for failing to achieve the same results with their students that they used to. Neither the public nor the government seems to notice the drastic increases in ill-prepared and differently motivated students, class sizes, and heterogeneity, and the breadth of knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the educated labor force. Two recent reports—one issued by Jobs for the Future (Reindl, 2007) and the other by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2006)—sounded the alarm that the United States is falling behind other developed nations in college completion rates. Again, in view of the situation just described, it is little wonder. But what was the solution forwarded?

Get the federal government to fund more higher education costs, as is true in all of the seven nations with higher college completion rates? Beef up the K–12 system so more students leave high school truly college-ready? Institute some cultural change to exalt learning, knowledge, and excellence in school? Reduce class sizes and heterogeneity? No, the solution given was simply to increase its degree production by 37 percent (Reindl, 2007)—a measure guaranteed to worsen the situation that students, institutions, and faculty already face. Reindl did not propose any means or sources of support for so radically raising degree production without lowering standards. Rather, he blasted higher education for increasing spending and tuition, turning out poorly skilled graduates, and not providing sufficient access. In other words, American higher education is solely responsible for the problems in higher education, as well as for solving them. Expect no help.

The Faculty's Dilemma

This brings us to the faculty's loss of authority and rewards. It is within many of our living memories that students and the public at large held all levels of teachers—professors most of all—in the highest esteem. Although only modestly paid, K–12 teachers commanded respect for their above-average intelligence and their contribution to the greater social good. Professors, almost all of them tenured or tenure-track, enjoyed good or very good salaries, enviable job security, abundant free time, and the respect that was then widely accorded to highly intelligent individuals. Those who taught were role models who drew their motivation from a "higher source" than sheer materialism.

Fade to today. In many, perhaps most, high school settings, demonstrating intelligence and interest in learning is almost taboo. The most highly rewarded heroes in and out of school are athletes, rock musicians, and Paris Hilton or Brittany Spears look-alikes. Having certain things that money can buy, from tennis shoes to electronics, cements one's social status. Given this personal history, many of today's college students must look askance at us for investing so many years in our education in return for relatively low-paying jobs. The fact that we are seen as "service

workers" expected to satisfy a rather demanding and stressed-out set of customers—one that our institutions competed for and desperately want to retain—does not enhance our prestige. Our administration wants us to please our students, even though many of them don't like taking the most effective medicine we can prescribe: active learning (Michael, 2007; Rhem, 2006; Thorn, 2003). If they do poorly, it's *our* problem because we are supposed to retain them. More accurately, we are supposed to make them retainable, despite our large, heterogeneous classes.

Along with suffering a loss of authority, faculty are being worked to death with sixty- to eighty-hour weeks. Except in community colleges, they are expected to publish and present more than ever before, despite the dearth of grant support and travel funds. At the same time, they are teaching heavier course loads and larger classes and are supposed keep abreast of and publish in not only their discipline but also the scholarship of teaching (Sorcinelli & Austin, 2006). In addition, they are less free than in the past to teach and assess as they see fit (Wilson, 2007). After all, their raises and promotions depend, at least to some extent, on their student ratings, and a number of students (it only takes a few) penalize their instructors for active learning strategies and "strict" grading methods (Johnson, 2003; Rhem, 2006; Thorn, 2003). Meanwhile, faculty salaries have been slipping for many years. Of course, the untenured experience these trends most sharply—in particular, the 46 percent of faculty (as of 2003) who work part-time for pitiful pay and no benefits (American Association of University Professors, 2005–06). Many of these are road warriors piggybacking multiple jobs.

As higher education faculty become an economically weaker, more politically frail, and less respected force in American society, they are an easy target for blame. Employers, the federal and state governments, report-generating centers, and the general public collectively point the finger at the quality of instruction for the poor overall quality and insufficient numbers of college graduates (Carey, 2007; Eaton, 2007). Faculty receive little recognition—none at all from outside academe—for student-centering their teaching, and they are faulted for pursuing research, even though their professional survival depends on it.

Blaming the faculty means blaming us. We have dodged the bullets thus far only because we have not been particularly visible

to academe's critics. But our obscurity cannot last for long. Will we be the next scapegoats? Will we be held responsible for the lengthening time-to-degree, students' unsatisfactory persistence rates, the stagnant numbers and percentages of college graduates, and the downward spiral in their literacy levels? After all, aren't we the ones who are supposed to train and "fix" the faculty to train and "fix" the students? Didn't we get to our positions because *we* worked magic with students? Where's our magic now? If we were performing our tricks right, our society wouldn't be in the educational pickle it's in today, right?

Conclusion

Perhaps we should think about defending our faculties, about informing our nonacademic constituencies about the challenges instructors—and we—face from our ill-prepared students, the knowledge economy's burgeoning expectations of them, our money-driven institutions, and our own industry's broken labor market. All these conditions preclude the magical results everybody wants. Even if we educational developers ran the universities, it is unclear what we could accomplish with our current students and resources.

To Improve the Academy showcases our best efforts to achieve magical results. As the evaluation results show, these efforts do make headway. Those who discount the fruits of academe's labor as puny need to know about these innovative programs. They need to know about the array of successful, ongoing programs that have attracted faculty year after year. And they need to know how dedicated today's faculty are to making whatever magic they can with their Roberts.

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