
**Teaching Intellectual Skills and Attitudes-of-Mind:
Reflections on a Course on College and University Curriculum**

Clifton F. Conrad

Conrad, Clifton F. "Teaching Intellectual Skills and Attitudes-of-Mind:
Reflections on a Course on College and University Curriculum." Teaching
Education 1 (February, 1987), pp. 54-59.



ow, more than a decade after accepting my first full-time teaching position, I am sobered by the realization that I probably will never realize the spellbinding eloquence of a William Jennings Bryan, the lyricism of a T.S. Eliot, or the intellectuality of a Hannah Arendt. Any shades of hubris have long since given way to humility and with it a

heightened awareness and vulnerability about my teaching.

Yet, while the anvil of experience may have tempered my expectations of grandeur in the classroom, I have not sunk into existential despair. To the contrary: a more realistic sense of the extraordinary challenge of teaching effectively—as well as a sharper sense of my own strengths and limitations—has led me to become more self-conscious about my teaching.

Nowhere have I felt more self-conscious about my teaching than in my course entitled "Curriculum in Higher Education." As one of four core courses in the doctoral program in Higher Education at the Uni-

versity of Arizona, the course serves those preparing for administrative or teaching careers in higher education. The course attracts an unusual variety of students. Many have considerable work experience in higher education, while others are new to the field; many boast backgrounds in the liberal arts and sciences, while others have been trained in professional fields; some view their Ph.D. programs primarily as tickets to successful careers, while others perceive their programs as both encompassing and transcending such a vocational rationale.

A View of Professional Education

Fundamental to my teaching is the

belief that graduate professional education should link closely with liberal education rather than be viewed simply as vocational preparation. The concern of the college professor should be not only the transmission of knowledge but equally the cultivation of several other qualities—qualities that help to forge a link between liberal and professional education. My teaching is built around three such specific qualities.¹

The most obvious quality of a professional education is that it helps students to acquire both theoretical and applied knowledge. Knowledge and information provide the raw material for inquiry, discourse, reflection, choice, and action—indeed, the essential foundation that can inform professional experience and enrich professional judgment. In the process of building an information and knowledge base, students need to acquire a firm grasp of the basic facts, generalities, and theories that comprise their professional area of study. Moreover, since professional fields draw much of their intellectual nourishment from various academic disciplines and related fields, it is essential that students become well acquainted with the relevant literature, theories, and ways of knowing in fields outside their area of specialization.

A second, equally important quality of a professional education is that it imparts a variety of basic intellectual skills. Certain fundamental skills will serve students well in their careers and offer something of lasting value in a changing world. There are many such important skills; four find mention here. One involves communication: the capacity to write, speak, and listen effectively and to use the symbolic languages of statistics and the computer. Another skill—one which I consider to be of singular importance—concerns the capacity for rational thought and problem solving. This capacity is rooted in the development of the higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—the ability to define the key issue in a complex problem, place such an issue in its appropriate intellectual and temporal context, recognize pertinent facts and their interrelationships, examine every relevant point of view, and

arrive at conclusions based on the available data and sound reasoning. Still another skill concerns learning how to learn: a professional education should help students to read systematically and comprehend more fully what they read, to conceptualize the knowledge they acquire, and to evaluate what they learn. A final skill concerns a critical understanding of the ways that knowledge is generated, including the epistemological underpinnings of the field. By becoming familiar with the full repertoire of methods or ways of knowing in their fields, students can more ably interpret knowledge critically and engage in scholarly inquiry that contributes to the field's knowledge base.

A third quality of a professional education focuses on the encouragement of certain attitudes which should be coupled with the aforementioned intellectual skills. Although this topic is a delicate one fraught with dangers of indoctrination, five attitudes seem worthy of particular attention. The first is an appreciation of form as well as substance, especially of style and grace in language. The second is a respect for evidence and willingness to evaluate and interpret facts and events objectively, including the ability to distinguish the normative and emotive from the positive and factual. The third concerns intellectual tolerance and open-mindedness—a respect for divergent viewpoints and the ability to suspend judgment. Since objectivity and tolerance never exist in a vacuum, a fourth attitude is a sensitivity to the evaluative and ethical dimensions of problems and issues. The final attitude, closely related to the fourth, involves a sensitivity to broadly humane values, including an appreciation for individual differences based on gender, race, and cultural background. In short, because many of the vital events and decisions in professional life demand a delicate balancing of values and ethical principles with logic and rationality, professional education should concern itself in part with the development of broadly humane values and the ability to integrate reason and values in judgment and decision-making.

To summarize, the three qualities discussed above—qualities that enhance the



crucial link between professional and liberal education—provide the philosophical underpinnings that inform and guide my teaching. Since my course on college and university curriculum emphasizes intellectual skills and attitudes-of-mind, the remainder of this discussion focuses primarily on those ways in which I endeavor to link these skills and attitudes to several key dimensions of my course.

Resources: Communicating Expectations

I have long observed that most professional courses—indeed, much of formal education—tend to place far greater emphasis on content acquisition than on the refinement of intellectual skills. Given that putative norm, I consider it especially important to apprise students that my expectations for the curriculum course may differ from those of other courses. To encourage them to take this message seriously, I utilize several kinds of resources.

Perhaps it is not fashionable to prepare a course syllabus that runs to some 60 single-spaced pages, but I am persuaded that a carefully prepared, lengthy syllabus can serve multiple purposes. Like most syllabi, mine is organized around the course content. But two important features of the syllabus communicate the message that there will be an emphasis on the application of intellectual skills to the problems and issues that arise naturally from the content of the course. First, my two-page statement of objectives communicates that message. While several of the objectives emphasize mastery over specific content, roughly half stress that students develop skills in analyzing and evaluating college and university curricula. Second, some 20 pages of the syllabus comprise essay-type discussion questions for which there are no “correct” answers. On one level, these questions help to guide students in their reading and class preparation. On quite another, such questions indicate that knowledge about curriculum is only a point of departure, that the broader purpose of the course is to foster and promote understanding of curriculum through careful analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Besides the syllabus, one other course

handout communicates my expectations. This handout forcefully and in some detail explicates my criteria for evaluating written work. The "criteria for excellence" this document elaborates upon—such as defining the problem, providing context, employing an analytical framework, communicating with clarity and style, distinguishing opinion from analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and systematically developing the argument—all convey my concern with refining students' intellectual skills and fostering certain attitudes-of-mind.

Finally, I select course readings which challenge students and consistently illustrate the application of the intellectual skills and attitudes-of-mind that I have identified as important. Course readings can illustrate to students what is meant by such an intellectual skill as logical reasoning or such attitudes as respect for evidence or intellectual tolerance. Required reading invariably includes selections from scholars outside the field. This past term, for example, I chose some writings of the historians Frederick Rudolph and Douglas Sloan to illustrate the skills of analysis and interpretation as well as finely crafted prose, the Yale Report of 1828 and a selection from Robert Hutchins to illustrate humanistic ways of knowing, and selections from the sociologist David Riesman and the philosopher Bernard Murchland to illustrate tightly woven arguments and a sensitivity to ethical concerns and broadly humane values.

Teaching Strategies: Pedagogy in the Service of Liberal Professional Education

While a well-developed course syllabus and a carefully compiled reading list can provide the scaffolding for a course, it is in the classroom setting that course expectations, students, and the instructor come into immediate and sustained contact. In my curriculum course, I have experimented with a variety of pedagogical approaches designed to help students (and myself) refine those intellectual skills and attitudes that make up my philosophy of teaching. Currently, I employ three major pedagogi-

cal strategies: lectures, focused discussions, and student presentations.

During the first few weeks, my preferred vehicle for bringing historical and philosophical perspectives to bear on curriculum design and analysis is the lecture. While I encourage questions—indeed, I prefer that my lectures be punctuated by questions, if only to keep the sessions lively—there are two major reasons for the lecture format early in the term. First, to most students the course material is new. Clearly, they need some grounding in the lexicon and the literature on curriculum. Second, I consider it important to consciously model those same qualities I seek to cultivate in my students. Like it or not—and I increasingly view this as an opportunity—most of us serve in varying degrees as models for our students. As such, we must be sensitive to those attitudes and behaviors we display. I am convinced the lecture can serve as a powerful medium for demonstrating intellectual skills and attitudes that comprise my philosophy of teaching. Besides being models of effective oral communication, for example, my lectures function as demonstrations of what I mean by analysis, synthesis, and interpretation as well as lend an awareness of the valuative issues associated with college and university curricula.

For most of the remainder of the term, I employ an inquiry or seminar format. The essay-type discussion questions in the syllabus provide the context for focused classroom discussions as the didacticism of the lecture gives way to the dialectic of the seminar. One virtue of the seminar is that herein both students and the instructor can help to model certain skills and attitudes. However, an even greater strength of this mode lies in its possibilities for systematic cultivation of desired qualities in students. Unlike the lecture, the seminar encourages students to participate actively in the learning process, to focus their classroom energies on acquiring and refining various skills through actual practice. The ongoing human exchange lends students the opportunity to improve their communicative skills, their skills of analysis and interpreta-

tion, and their ability to organize and conceptualize knowledge. In the same vein, the seminar can prove the optimal classroom vehicle for helping students develop certain attitudes. A recent seminar, for instance, which focused on comparison and contrast of three recent reports on undergraduate education, generated a vigorous debate—one which seemed to help students become more tolerant of diverse viewpoints and more sensitive to the value differences reflected in the reports.

Finally, during the last two weeks of the term, I require that each student present a formal, scholarly paper to the class. Such a presentation encourages students to demonstrate the three qualities that comprise my philosophy of teaching. In this way the presentation serves as a culminating experience. Having served their brief apprenticeships, students need to demonstrate both publicly (oral presentation) and privately (scholarly paper) that they have fortified their repertoire of intellectual skills and attitudes-of-mind.

Providing Feedback and Rewards

Providing feedback to students is essential to the achievement of the goals of my course. Especially since the aforementioned intellectual skills and attitudes both are difficult to obtain and lend themselves to alternative interpretations, students need feedback. What have they done well? How can they improve? Feedback can increase their motivation and enhance their performance by providing a direction as well as an incentive for improvement.

From almost the onset of the course, I work continuously to provide constructive feedback. To be sure, the lecture format precludes much feedback, but I do provide some verbal and nonverbal responses to student queries. As the course matures into its seminar format, the opportunities for feedback multiply markedly. Frequently I use gestures to communicate. In order to introduce subtlety and nuance, however, I also make numerous verbal comments aimed at isolating those instances in which students display certain intellectual skills and attitudes. Examples: "Ms. Talbott, I think your comments have effectively crystallized the underlying issue of our entire

discussion," or "Mr. Birk, your thoughtful interpretation of these data is something that we all might think about." Finally, I provide extensive written comments on each scholarly paper, oral presentation, and essay-type final examination. Often I severely edit student papers both for style and substance, writing in-depth comments throughout (rather than penning an occasional cryptic remark) to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the narrative and suggestions for improvements. My experience has shown that an instructor's taking the time and effort to comment extensively can have a powerful impact on student learning.

To be highly effective, however, feedback cannot exist *in vacuo*; it must be coupled with instructor rewards which provide an incentive for students to renew their efforts to excel. Whether lecturing, leading a discussion, listening to presentations, or writing comments, I constantly seek to reward those same skills and attitudes which lie at the center of my philosophy of teaching. While nonverbal rewards such as simply paying attention to students can provide incentives, it seems that verbal rewards which are at once subtle and intangible are more likely to have a lasting impact. Openly telling students after class that they contributed to the quality of the discussion is but one illustration of such rewards. Of course, to retain their effectiveness, rewards ultimately must be tailored to individual needs and given only intermittently. Under these conditions, they seem to go a long way toward enhancing student motivation and learning.

Reflections

Each time I teach the curriculum course I invariably entertain the same metaphoric vision of what could transpire. Put simply, the metaphor is one in which I view the curriculum class as a rapidly improving orchestra preparing a series of unfinished symphonies. By the time of the initial meeting of the orchestra, I have carefully selected the major scores and communicated my expectations for the upcoming season. During the first few sessions, I serve both as music director and con-

ductor, though I give orchestra members the opportunity to express alternative interpretations of the music. Later, without relinquishing my post as director, I encourage each member to take her or his turn at the podium as an associate conductor. A stint as conductor encourages each student to demonstrate and practice those skills and attitudes I have emphasized and modeled in my role. Finally, the apprenticeship completed, each student acts as both director and conductor, selecting and interpreting the score to the entire orchestra and receiving extensive feedback and rewards for the performance.

Notwithstanding the virtues of metaphor, I would be remiss not to conclude this essay with a few brief reflections on some practical difficulties I face in wedding my philosophy of teaching to the instructional setting. First, teaching intellectual skills and attitudes is extremely demanding of an instructor. It takes considerable time and energy to implement my philosophy—to prepare my lengthy syllabus, provide students with extensive written comments, prepare discussion questions, and so forth. Perhaps even more telling, implementing my philosophy can make me acutely aware of my own limitations. Communicating and modeling appropriate skills and attitudes are one thing; inciting students to adopt and display those behaviors is often quite another. Not least because such intellectual skills as effective communication and logical reasoning are difficult to realize, I often find myself disappointed in my efforts to cultivate such qualities in others. As a human being with my share of personal and intellectual frailties, I have failed on too many occasions to challenge and reward students in ways commensurate with my philosophy.

Second, many students are apt (at least initially) to view my philosophy of teaching as anathema. Socialized through long experience into the view that learning primarily implies content acquisition—and, in turn, that teaching implies a lecture format in which the teacher is the only active participant—students may resist. Since my philosophy places unexpected demands on some students, it is important that I take

considerable pains to imbue the course with a special richness and movement that softens any natural resistance. Suffice it to say that I am not always as successful in this respect as I would like to be.

Third, it never is easy to evaluate student development of those intellectual skills and attitudes that comprise my philosophy of teaching. The essay examination and the scholarly paper can, I think, be evaluated fairly and objectively. But I am the first to admit that these evaluations must be done carefully if a student is to learn from and acknowledge their legitimacy. The inherent difficulties of assessing attitudes are such that I have not attempted any formal evaluation of the five attitudes that I seek to cultivate in students, but I take notice of these attitudes throughout the course.

Finally, and most importantly perhaps, an instructor has to accept the reality that most students—at least in a single course—will fail to realize fully the qualities that make up my philosophy of teaching. Each time I teach my curriculum course, I intermittently am struck by a sense of failure to develop in students certain intellectual skills and to nurture specific attitudes. I have to remind myself that the cultivation and refinement of such skills as logical reasoning and effective communication do not come easily.

There seems to be no shortage of obstacles to developing and implementing a course in professional education which concerns itself not only with the transmission of knowledge but equally with the cultivation of qualities that can help to forge a link between liberal and professional education. Despite these difficulties, I remain convinced that all of us who espouse this philosophy should not abandon our agenda but should renew our efforts to connect our philosophy to our pedagogical practices. We owe it to ourselves. Above all, we owe it to our students.

Note

¹In no small measure, my philosophy of teaching has been influenced by Derek Bok. See Bok, Derek, "On the Purposes of Undergraduate Education," *Daedalus*, Volume I, 1974, pp. 159-172.