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AUTHOR Kennedy, Cathleen A.
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ABSTRACT

In this speech to the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, an educator describes her experiences as a telecourse teacher, which led her to thinking about the goals and purposes of community college teaching. From there, the speech addresses the question of how to provide quality in education in light of technological advancements introduced into educational practices. Asserting that educational reform is nothing new to teaching, the paper advocates looking at the past to speculate on how educators should respond to the future. It considers the ways innovations have generated controversy, and how economics and politics provided the necessary backdrop for change to take place. Taken together, all three factors have helped shape teaching practice. One way to look at how innovation influences teaching practice is to consider how it has changed the ways students gain access to information and participate in the educational process. The speech also questions how teachers are to balance the role of evaluator and the role of tutor, and how their perspective about these two roles shapes the way they look at educational change. The paper concludes with three qualities that students look for in their teachers: respecting students, caring about student learning, and listening to what students say about teaching. (VWC)

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Community College Teaching: Divining the Future from the Past

a talk by Cathleen Kennedy at the 1999 Spring Plenary Session of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges
April 16, 1999

Introduction

Before jumping in to what I consider my formal talk, I'd like to catch you up on the factors that led me to thinking about goals and purposes of community college teaching. I think it's fair to say that I would not be here talking to you today if not for a pivotal event that occurred when I was a fairly new teacher in 1989. It changed my entire focus from thinking about my responsibility as a "teacher of Computer Science" to thinking about my responsibility as just "a teacher."

The event? I was asked to teach a telecourse.

My initial response was that I was much too busy as a new teacher learning the ropes to think about adding another responsibility. But in talking to others about the idea I was told that teaching a telecourse was a "gravy" job-you don't have to give lectures, the tests are already written, and they are machine graded. All you have to do is conduct a few review sessions, administer the tests and assign grades. As a matter of fact, teachers of telecourses are often called course administrators instead of teachers. Of course, I was told, a telecourse can't be part of your regular academic load, and telecourses aren't paid at the same rate as other teaching because you don't really "work as much." I found that telecourses were paid at about half the rate of the equivalent on-campus versions. At that time, it sounded good to me, so I agreed to teach the course.

The first time through, I did find it pretty easy, but as I got to meet the students during those review sessions it became apparent that these students were getting a very different learning experience from the students I taught on campus, and I began to worry about my responsibility to them. I felt that somehow, even the students who were getting A's in the telecourse weren't learning as much as my on-campus students.

This started me thinking about my responsibility to provide an effective and meaningful educational experience for all my students, including those at distance. As I started toying with the idea of using interactive online components to build a different kind of distance course, I thought about how I would replicate what I did in the classroom. That, in turn, made me question what I did in the classroom. I realized that I had simply been following the format set down by teachers before me-lecture, homework, projects and testing-and not really thinking about what my students needed to help them learn.

From there it was a short step into the debate about technology and educational quality.

Thesis

Of all the debates surrounding higher education today, none are more contentious than those that challenge our perceptions of educational quality. Should your campus spend more money on transfer courses, vocational programs, or remediation? Should you hire teachers or counselors? What is the appropriate use

of online technologies in instruction? What is the role of the local economy and employer needs in determining curricular priorities? Questions like these can chip away at the core of what we do every day and demand that we defend our values and motivations for teaching. In many cases, we find faculty members pitted against one another because they have different beliefs about the purpose of education in general and of community college education in particular.

This is nothing new to teaching. Educational reform has always been inextricably linked to waves of public opinion stemming from political agendas, economic trends, and innovation. Each major transition in educational practice has been accompanied by bitter debate and controversy surrounding the very definitions of educational quality and academic purpose. Whether we look at educational transitions stemming from invention like paper and the production of textbooks in the Middle Ages, or economic influences like the impact of mercantile development of new trade routes during the Renaissance, or political effects like the establishment of Land Grant colleges to meet the demands of emerging professions in 19th century America, teachers have been at the center of the debates defending educational quality. As we face new pressures for change, largely from outside our academic institutions, we might look at the past to speculate on how we should respond to the future.

What are the controversies that have shaped transitions in teaching practice? I'd like to attempt to answer this question by considering the ways innovations have generated controversy, and how economics and politics provided the necessary backdrop for change to take place. Taken together, all three factors helped shape teaching practice.

Innovation shapes teaching by changing the ways we do things, particularly the ways we communicate. Economics shapes teaching by changing the ways knowledge and an education are valued by society. And politics shapes teaching by changing the purposes of educating individuals.

I think it's important to get a good perspective of the historic relationships between government, academic institutions, and faculty in order to examine the source of our beliefs about the role of teaching. One can assert that we have picked up much of our values about education and the role of teaching from our own teachers, who, in turn, learned from their teachers, who learned from their teachers, linking us back through the generations to early teaching traditions. At this point, I certainly want to recognize that I am going to draw primarily on the Western tradition, which is not the only one. A full dissertation invites further exploration of other traditions also.

As we examine the events that shaped teaching tradition, we find that teachers have been challenged to preserve academic standards while adapting to a changing world. We see that teachers' visions of purpose have changed from teaching the elite how to get ahead politically, to differentiating human reason from the will of God, to celebrating the discovery of the sciences and enjoyment of the arts, to solving the societal problem of inequality. We see that the power and status of teachers has changed from expensive private tutors, to cloistered monks and scholars, to professional purveyors of knowledge. And we see that teaching pedagogy has changed from a tradition of professional rhetoric, to tutoring in a protected enclave, to presenting open lectures, to teaching in classrooms for prescribed minutes per day.

One way to look at how innovation influences teaching practice is to consider how it has changed the ways students gain access to information and participate in the educational process. Certainly, not all innovations showing potential for improving access have been enthusiastically adopted by educators or by academic institutions. Radio, film and television have had limited impact, if any, on teaching practice or on student learning activities. Although televised education did increase access, there were no accompanying reforms to the structure of education or improvements to educational quality. In fact, televised courses modeled the structure of the day: teachers lecturing and testing, and students listening, reading, memorizing and in some cases, practicing.

For innovation to truly effect change in educational systems, it must coincide with a perceived need for change that the innovation can support. I should note here, that the perceived need may lead to negative effects as well as positive. In this talk, I want to examine the role of innovations that have stimulated controversy about alternative ways of teaching and learning.

It took many centuries for writing and books to influence teaching methods. Scholars believe the earliest "textbooks"-that is, books used for educational purposes--were transcriptions of Plato's lectures from the 4th century BCE. Before textbooks and even before the great library in Alexandria, most libraries were personal collections of monographs written by the scholars of the day. As academies achieved the permanence of residing in buildings, libraries were established for use by scholars and their students. The sharing of these early scrolls introduced the possibility of acquiring information without sole dependence on a teacher's memory or interpretation.

Teaching, of course, has a rich oral tradition, and we still find vestiges of both sophist and Socratic teaching methods. The sophist approach emphasized developing the ability to memorize and expound on information. The primary role of the sophist teacher was to produce answers to student questions-regardless of their accuracy. We might assert that this was an early version of the "Sage on the Stage." Socrates' dialectic method of interrogating students to guide them to deeper understanding was in pointed opposition to the sophist method of memorization. We might think of Socrates' approach as a version of the "Guide on the Side," helping students understand their own views by confronting them with opposing ideas.

The introduction of paper to Europe in the 7th century lead to increasing production of more durable manuscripts and the potential for greater access to the knowledge of the day. Learning could be less time- and place-dependent. Books were finally transportable. In addition, political turmoil in the Middle Ages contributed to the spread of knowledge and building up of European libraries. In the 12th century, soldiers returned from the Crusades with ancient writings, and scholars from Constantinople fled to Europe with their precious manuscripts during the Turkish invasion of the 15th century.

Yet, great controversy surrounded providing public access to these documents and it took many centuries and additional external forces to change the ways of teaching and learning. In part, manuscripts were considered too valuable, and often too sacred, to allow public access, and so they continued to be protected within monasteries. By the Middle Ages, the number of scholars was gradually increasing, and students would travel to the cities where the scholars lived to learn from them directly. Students attended lectures by scholars of note, read the recommended textbooks, and worked with Masters in a student-tutor environment. Textbooks for specific university subjects became more readily available, as local booksellers knew in advance which textbooks were needed and arranged for copies to be made. Students were still unable to find the books they might use for research because most books were still accessible only to theology students in monasteries, but this was not a problem for Medieval students since research as we know it was not particularly important to them. Instead, students focused on the nuances of syntax or interpretation of existing manuscripts as their basis for study. Some scholars claim that oral disputation was the whole of higher education in the Middle Ages.

By the 13th century both traditional monastic schools and the newer fledgling universities were competing for students. In addition, greater availability of books meant that students were not entirely dependent upon teachers for accessing the knowledge of the day. In fact, early university professors were paid directly by their students and were therefore rewarded for attracting large audiences. Students had significant power in determining both the curriculum and teaching methods and ineffective teachers were driven out. Early universities were fairly loose collections of students and teachers with a common focus, usually in the law, theology, or medicine, which were recognized and sanctioned by the local government in much

the same way as guilds were. They were the epitome of self-governed, democratic communities, and as the Middle Ages drew to a close, they began to take on identities similar to monasteries in their separation from the external world and protection of knowledge and scholars.

It wasn't until the late 15th century, with development of the printing press, that universities began growing into large institutions with thousands of students. Wealthy citizens began hiring teachers in specific disciplines to establish colleges within the universities and students traveled great distances to attend university. As a trend toward nationalism rose, the aristocracy and governments began investing in expansion of universities and protected them from the outside world, while making their own demands regarding curricula, and student and teacher comportment. Queen Elizabeth I, for instance, tried to control not only curricula and who would receive degrees, but also when lectures were scheduled and student and teachers attire. In other countries, religious leaders controlled what was taught and had authority to hire and fire teachers.

Many scholars saw the mass distribution of books as a threat to higher education. Their fear was not focused on job security as much as on educational quality. Young men could not possibly understand the writings of the day, nor interpret them properly, without a scholar to guide them. In addition, to the Scholastics of the period, discovering knowledge was not the goal of education. Instead, students were to learn how to develop and defend propositions through thoughtful applications of logic and rhetoric. The question of how many angels could dance on the head of a pin is a famous example of a contention of the day.

The Renaissance awakened a resurgence of the humanist tenets of ancient scholarship that challenged the utilitarian approach to teaching and learning common in the 15th century. But the Scholastics insisted that their traditional curriculum remain pure and untainted by new ways of thinking and doing things-no instruments like telescopes could be used to study astronomy and no foreign language manuscripts could be used to study history or other cultures. In fact, the Scholastics had little interest in the past. The Humanists, on the other hand, celebrated the accomplishments of the past, sought and studied ancient manuscripts in their original languages, and had great appreciation for literature, art and foreign cultures.

As a result of the Medieval scholars' resistance to change, alternative institutions were established throughout Europe, initially funded by wealthy individuals who saw the study of humanities as a passport to the status of "gentleman." These new institutions were loose collections of scholars, artists and artisans who met to study the Humanities.

The academic debate of this time can be characterized by conflicting purposes of education. On the one hand, traditional scholars defended their view of higher education to produce virtuous citizens; the Socratic view that the properly trained mind will guide individuals toward the virtuous path and thoughtful leadership. On the other hand, Renaissance scholars saw the purpose of education as preparing people for the "real" world; they sought to introduce foreign language, military strategy, economics, art and literature.

Against a backdrop of economic uncertainty and political unrest in Europe, universities became the locus of dispute, revolutionary thought, and subversive activity as scholars, religious leaders, the aristocracy and government all tried to exert their own controls over higher education. For the most part, the church maintained control over the universities throughout the Renaissance and into the Enlightenment.

During this period, universities stayed obstinately out of step with society and refused to recognize new disciplines. Prominent scientists of the day developed their own societies and academies separate from the universities. For example, the Royal Society of London was chartered in 1662 and other societies were established throughout Europe, operating like universities by holding lectures,

publishing journals, and promoting research utilizing the new "scientific method."

As the Industrial Revolution began to take shape, the distinction between universities controlled by the church and those that were secular became more apparent. The secular universities were often guided by economic and political needs, providing expanded curricula in the sciences and emerging professional areas. Some universities were funded by local industries that had a vested interest in acquiring skilled and educated people to run the new businesses. Universities faced continuous pressure to derive their purpose and practices from their benefactors' needs or beliefs.

Over the past two millennia, then, teaching in higher education has evolved from the model of independent Greek sophists, to loose collections of students and Masters, to academic sanctuaries, to large institutions with distinct goals and purposes. Throughout this period, students have come to the scholars of the day to access knowledge and to become educated, and scholars have fulfilled the roles of delivering information, training students to think rationally and critically, and maintaining the tenets of their disciplines.

Historically, teachers have carried the burden of establishing and maintaining curricular standards and protecting students from the vagaries of shifting economic and political pressures for change. We may smile indulgently as we look back on the scholars who resisted the introduction of the arts and sciences into the curriculum, but we have no way of knowing the counterfactual: what higher education would look like today if they hadn't been so obstinate and insisted on extensive debate and testing of the new concepts outside of the university environment.

Today, we are tempted by another innovation that can provide greater access to information outside of accepted scholarly controls-the Internet. This innovation is also accompanied by other external pressures: a global economy and new political challenges. Some say that politics is always about budget prioritization, so maybe these two come down to the same thing. How do we balance the objective of providing higher education to everyone with limited resources? And how do we preserve educational quality?

Antithesis

The preceding view of teaching considers only one of our roles as professionals-that of preserving academic standards. Up to this point, we have ignored the other role teachers play-the role of student collaborator and ally. We have divided loyalties. Of course, we do have an obligation to establish and maintain academic standards and to preserve societal values and beliefs about education. But we also have an obligation and loyalty to students: to support them in discovering their potential, to help them cultivate an appreciation for learning, and to believe that they are smart and capable individuals.

It is when we look at this role of teacher as ally that we realize the importance of diversity in our faculty and the relevance of our teaching practices to the larger society into which our students will ultimately fit.

One question we can ask is how teachers balance these two roles, the role of evaluator and the role of tutor. A second question might be how our perspective about these two roles shapes the way we look at educational change.

One of the things I enjoy doing early in the semester is to talk to my students about my role and their role in the course. I think of myself as one the who coordinates their exploration of the subject, provides expertise in the application of the course concepts to practical exercises, and gives them feedback about how they are doing relative to the course objectives and standards necessary to be successful in the next course. I think some of them believe this right up to the first test-and the others know that my best intentions won't change the fact of my role. Which is, ultimately,

to judge their competence in a rather antagonistic way. Because the sad fact is that I am the only judge at the end of the term who considers: whether they have met the standards of the course, whether they can be successful in the next course, and how their performance compares to others'.

Before we shake our heads and shrug our shoulders about something that simply must be, let's explore for a moment an alternate scenario; a scenario where my main focus is on developing my students' potential instead of on passing judgment.

In this scenario, I wouldn't give any grades. Judgment about mastery of concepts and ability to apply them to relevant problems would be left to others-perhaps to a department committee who judges all student work in each course, or to a standardized test.

My focus would be to work with my students as their coach, helping them to build the necessary critical thinking skills they need to approach the kinds of problems I expect them to encounter. We would be co-conspirators in their success in the course. I would be the one who believes in their ability to learn. I would still do most of the things I do now, but both my students and I would know that I'm not their judge, but their ally.

In addition, students would learn that they are not competing against one another for course grades, but are working as a team engaged in a common pursuit. It would be easier to build community in the classroom, helping students to see themselves as part of a community of learners instead of individuals struggling alone.

We may actually be in that world without grades now-despite the time we spend evaluating and grading our students; not to mention the time we spend preparing them specifically for midterms and finals. Concerns over grade inflation and a general distrust of the reliability of GPA to differentiate students from different campuses point to the meaninglessness of grades to institutions; but many students still think grades are the goal. In some studies of grading practice we find more variation in student grades associated with rater variability than with student ability. That means that a student grade can depend more on which classroom a student is in than what the student actually learns.

At this point in time, I'm not quite suggesting my new scenario as a practical alternative to what we do now. Instead, I offer it as a point of comparison to point out the difference between focusing on the abstract concept of "protecting educational quality" and the concrete implementation of "providing a high-quality educational experience" for individual students. Along these lines, we could approach the challenge of organizing life around school instead of school around life.

What do you think students want from their teachers? In a meta-analysis of over a dozen studies of student evaluations of teachers over a 5 year period, the same three qualities come up at the top:

1) Respect for students
2) Care about student learning
3) Listen to what students say about teaching

In contrast, here is what 52 university professors studied in 97-98 reported that they thought went into high teacher ratings by students:

1) Good Teaching
2) High grades
3) Fair grading

Interestingly, only one of the 52 teachers thought that "respect for students" went

into high teacher ratings. Some of you may be familiar with Greenwald and Gillmore's study of student ratings of teachers at University of Washington which shows a high correlation between expecting a good grade and giving the teacher high marks. For many years, teachers have been pointing to similar informal findings as a reason to abandon student evaluation of teachers. I think there's another message for us here, and that is findings like these confirm the concept that students perceive the teachers' primary role to be evaluative instead of supportive. But what they're looking for in a teacher is someone who respects and cares for students.

Another longitudinal study of faculty attitudes over a 50 year period found that teachers have been very consistent about what they like and dislike about teaching. They like to work with capable young people, they enjoy intellectual challenges and lifelong learning themselves, and they appreciate the autonomy and independence afforded them in college teaching.

They dislike meaningless distractions, doing too much work, not being recognized for their teaching and not receiving the resources they need to do their work effectively. I know how I interpret each of these dislikes, but I'm sure we each have our own version of "meaningless distractions" and "too much work."

The teaching profession attracts a particular kind of person. Individuals who have a desire to invest themselves in work that will benefit others and outlive themselves. We refer to this as generativity-caring for the next generation.

The point is that teachers enjoy their work for fairly clear reasons, and these reasons don't particularly suggest a judgmental role but rather a focus on development of our students in all the ways they need to be successful in life. This is what shapes our individual values and beliefs about the purpose of education and should help us use what we know about teaching traditions to think about the challenges ahead.

Conclusion

By their very nature, reforms generate controversy, and the ensuing discussion and debate are essential components of thoughtful and purposeful decisions. But at some point, we need to find common ground so that we can move forward and put into practice what is appropriate for our students, and not what is popular to a specific regime of politicians, economists or businesses. If we don't come to consensus and make decisions in a timely manner, the decisions will be made for us, and in large part, for the wrong reasons.

If we should repel certain reform efforts, then let's articulate the reasons and substantiate them with research. If some reforms show merit or promise, let's encourage early experimentation so we can test the results. But let's not engage in endless debate-history shows us that we will, indeed, need to change.

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Signature: Cathleen A Kennedy	Printed Name/Position/Title: Cathleen A. Kennedy / Professor
Organization/Address: College of San Mateo, 1700 W. Hillsdale Blvd. San Mateo, CA 94402	Telephone: 650-574-6150 FAX: 650-574-6329
	E-Mail Address: kennedyc@smccd.cc.ca.us Date: 1-21-00

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