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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of seven short essays concerning teaching in general and college teaching in particular. Then first five essays were published in "APA Perspective," a newsletter of the National Association for Asian and Pacific Islander Education, and were revised for this paper. The final two essays are new. The titles are: (1) "Improving Teaching in Higher Education in Guam: Quality and Diversity Travel Together"; (2) "A Teacher's Reflections"; (3) "Why are Some Teachers Better at Teaching?" (4) "Some Thoughts on Human Learning"; (5) "CATs for Improving Teaching and Learning"; (6) "Critical Thinking, What Exactly is It?"; and (7) "Teaching, Never-Ending Challenge." (Papers contain references.) (SM)

Education Essays: Thoughts on Teaching

Yukiko Inoue, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Educational Research

College of Professional Studies
University of Guam
UOG Station, Mangilao, Guam 96923 USA
Phone: 1-671-735-2447
Fax: 1-671-734-3651
E-mail: yinoue@uog.edu

Education Essays: Thoughts on Teaching

This paper consists of my short essays concerning teaching in general and college teaching in particular. The first five essays were published in *APA Perspective* (which is a newsletter of National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education). These five essays were revised for this paper, and the last two essays are new ones.

1. Improving Teaching in Higher Education in Guam
2. A Teacher's Reflections
3. Why Are Some Teachers Better at Teaching?
4. Some Thoughts on Human Learning
5. CATs for Improving Teaching and Learning
6. Critical Thinking, What Exactly Is It?
7. Teaching, Never-Ending Challenge

Improving Teaching in Higher Education in Guam: Quality and Diversity Travel Together

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We, as faculty members, can improve higher education in Guam by making quality teaching the focus of our effort in educating for diversity at the University of Guam (UOG).

Certainly U.S. universities are increasingly multicultural but the teaching force continues to be predominantly white. "As a society, we seek a sense of cultural pluralism, that is, a state in which people of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and social groups maintain autonomous participation within a common civilization" (McNergney & Herbert, 1998, p. 297). In this regard, the diverse student population at UOG provides us faculty with such a perfect setting for multicultural education and responsive research. I think we should see our students as faculty

members of tomorrow and realize that they demand a curriculum that reflects their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Approximately ninety percent of the UOG students are racial and ethnic minorities, and I see the University facing the challenge of a transformation that will only be possible by discovery and implementation of knowledge through teaching and research.

Higher education faculty members are teachers, scholars, and researchers and, therefore, are members of a profession where learning should never cease. In my view, *teaching* and *research* are 'two sides of the same coin.' Teaching is so closely intertwined with research that we cannot discuss one without discussing the other. This means that faculty members must devote their energies to developing and improving their scholarly competence by keeping current in their discipline and at the same time must continue to improve as instructors. This means improvement in curriculum development, syllabus writing, classroom practice, and student assessment. Teaching, research, and service are the missions of institutions of higher education, and faculty members are expected to become the 'collective minds of the community.'

Teaching is indeed a highly personal activity. Teaching, nevertheless, should not be a private affair that goes on between a professor and students. Inviting colleagues and experts to the classroom is one way to integrate diverse and multicultural perspectives across the curriculum. UOG Faculty can derive maximum benefits from *collaboration* in teaching and research. Thus collaboration will increase productivity, maintain motivation, stimulate creativity and, accordingly, will enhance knowledge, improve scholarship, and contribute new research findings. Similarly, *collegiality* among faculty members will decrease the isolation of classroom teaching. By *sharing* and *disseminating* research findings, we become resources for each other. The research can provide the direction and substance for making decisions. As faculty, we need

to remind ourselves of the significance of what we are doing. While research is a way to update and modify teaching, teaching is a way to implement and evaluate new research findings.

Quality and *diversity* must go hand-in-hand. With the collaborative/collegial partnership seasoned with innovative/creative thinking and sharing/dissemination, I strongly believe that our faculty can develop an institution that is sensitive to pluralism which, in turn, will provide the students with the learning environment that nourishes and encourages their success. To reach our goal of quality education for diversity in higher education in Guam, the UOG faculty must work together. We must set ourselves to work today.

Reference

McNergney, R. F., & Herbert, J. M. (1998). *Foundations of education: The challenge of professional practice (2nd ed.)*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

(*APA Perspective, Summer Issue*, 2001, p. 1.)

A Teacher's Reflections

Teaching is indeed complex work. McNergney and Herbert (2000), for instance, point out that teachers are regarded as professionals because of how they think and behave. Teaching is also an ongoing activity. Therefore, willingness, desire, and energy of the teacher are the essential ingredients to continuous growth and development in their teaching career. Why do some teachers do a better job at teaching than others do? I ask myself this intriguing question. Searching for the answer, I reviewed my college teaching based on the three categories: knowledge and skills; attitude and behavior; and leadership and management.

Knowledge and skills: My teaching is based on lecturing (to be exact, delivering a classroom presentation rather than a formal speech) and places greater emphasis on the

importance of the interaction of the instructor and students. I basically use the following three teaching methods:

- active teaching by demonstrating skills and conducting participatory class activities;
- student-centered teaching by focusing on active learning and cooperative learning; and
- teaching for mastery by providing maximum opportunities for students to practice the material and apply it.

Attitude and behavior: It is generally believed that not only pedagogical content knowledge but also the attitude and behavior of the teacher are very important aspects of daily instruction. I keep five points in mind:

- strict but fair in teaching and grading;
- maintain friendliness but keep a professional distance from students;
- try to be a good listener as well as a good speaker;
- evaluate students based on multiple assessment tools; and
- help students become decent and productive citizens.

One of the student comments, which gives me an enormous amount of energy to pursue my teaching career, is that I bring a refreshing vitality to each class and teach with an exuberant spirit, delighting in my students' responses.

Leadership and management: It is a well-known fact that classroom management is a requirement of effective teaching. I try to use time efficiently and effectively to cover all the learning activities for each class meeting. On the first day of class, I clarify that the goal of my course is to develop an atmosphere of cooperation and not competition, and that the grading scale is not based on a curve so that one student's grade does not influence another student's grade. In addition, I particularly emphasize professional demeanor which, in this course,

includes being prepared for the class, engaging in a class discussion, listening attentively to students (and expecting that others will listen attentively to the instructor and to one another), and respect for differing points of view.

Finally, as Parker Palmer says, real learning does not happen until students are brought into the relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. I try to create a sense of community in the classroom. In striving to be a facilitator rather than a teacher, I ask basic questions to stimulate discussion on basic concepts that allow the students to achieve competency in the content area. When I recognize the students' competence and experience, I especially welcome and encourage their participation. The classroom is often viewed as a theater and the teacher as a performance artist. If I can get the students' attention and create interest and excitement, I strongly believe that they will learn the content.

Reference

McNergney, R. F., & Herbert, J. M. (2000). *Foundations of education: The challenge of professional practices (3rd ed.)*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

(*APA Perspective, Spring Issue,* 2002, p. 3 & p. 5.)

Why Are Some Teachers Better at Teaching?

I always ask myself this intriguing question: Why do some teachers do a better job at teaching than others do? For the past two years, I have also asked my educational foundations students what they had to say about it. At the beginning of each semester, I ask all my students to fill in a student information form, in which they write their names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, native languages, majors, and expectations for the course, as well as their future goals. I added one more inquire to the form: "Some teachers are better at teaching than others. Why?"

The following are the typical answers of my college students: Because they:

- look at teaching as a vocation not as an occupation;
- are passionate about their content areas;
- put more time and energy into preparing for each class meeting;
- are practicing reflective teaching, evaluating their daily teaching;
- have a strong desire to foster the development of young people;
- communicate effectively with students;
- consider their teaching as an opportunity for a lifetime of growth;
- have developed better teaching styles and methods;
- love to teach and put their whole heart into teaching;
- make the subject matter interesting and meaningful;
- enjoy the interaction with students;
- were well trained and have good educational foundations;
- have more patience and tolerance than others do;
- have good classroom management skills and leadership;
- are consistent in attitudes and behavior;
- are not only good speakers but also good listeners;
- have a profound teaching philosophy;
- enjoy learning as well as teaching;
- have a special human quality as a teacher;
- care about not only the outcome of but also the learning process of the student;
- know how to discipline the students;
- do not neglect to make efforts for their continuous improvement in teaching;

- have a better insight into how to help students learn;
- have a combination of learned skills and innate talent to teach others;
- have self-satisfaction with the teaching profession;
- have greater interpersonal and intrapersonal skills;
- teach not only by the book but also teach from their own experience; and
- take time to know students and genuinely care for them.

The above answers are not particularly new but, in fact, are matters of common knowledge. These comments remind me of the notion that the key determinant of successful teaching is not always cognitive intelligence but other important determining factors, such as emotional and social intelligences. The comments further remind me of Thomas Edison' remark.

Thomas Edison (1847–1931) expressed the view that: "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration" (Edison, *Life*, 1932, Ch. 24). If Edison's analysis were applied to teaching, we might say that good teaching is *one percent* natural ability and *ninety-nine percent* hard work. There is no magic in successful teaching. Hard work and application to the task are essential.

(*APA Perspective, Summer-Fall Issue*, 2002, p. 7.)

Some Thoughts on Human Learning

I believe that learning is not so much a gradual revelation of truth as a self-reinforcing process that deepens and embroiders knowledge. According to Kolb's experiential learning model (1984) and the cognitive approach to learning, students actively discover knowledge, gain insights into learning problems, organize and process information, and direct their own learning.

Although Kolb's model originated in the business world, it can be applied to all kinds of learning disciplines. Beginning with the assumption that learning occurs through the uniting of two dimension—the taking-in of information and the processing of information—Kolb conceived learning as a four-stage cycle: (i) concrete experience (engaging in new experiences—that is, *feeling*); (ii) reflective observation (perspective experiences—that is, *watching* and *listening*); (iii) abstract conceptualization (creating concepts to integrate observations into theories—that is, *thinking*); and (iv) active experimentation (utilizing theories to make decisions and solve problems—that is, *doing*). Kolb's model can be extrapolated to broader applications in the field of education, including how students learn, how teachers teach, and how teachers and students interact.

However, despite the applicability of such broad-based theories, it is important for college teachers to recognize individual differences in their students. In particular, it is important to recognize the differences in individual *thinking styles*—otherwise teachers can confuse a student's thinking style with the quality of a student's ability to think. It might therefore be useful, at the beginning of a semester, for teachers to conduct a learning-style inventory for each student. This can be used to divide students into group activities or projects based on the types of learning style (for example, diverger, assimilator, converger, and accommodator). It is well known that most students know very little about how learning is influenced by their own individual role-actions and capabilities.

In today's technologically sophisticated society, educational technology has a vital role in expanding human capacities for learning and for enhancing human reasoning abilities. One of the central metaphors of the information age is to posit the human mind as a computer. Just as the human mind has functions that receive data, store them in memory, and retrieve them as

needed, so a computer has functions that accept data, process them, and display information. A computer can certainly handle enormous amounts of data quickly and accurately. Nevertheless, a computer operates under the control of software, and people programmed the software. Computers are certainly adept at the tasks they perform, but only insofar as those tasks do not require insight or intuition. The human capacity for insight and intuition, and individual differences in learning styles, demonstrate how truly remarkable the human capacity for learning really is!

(*APA Perspective, Spring Issue*, 2003, p. 10.)

CATs for Improving Teaching and Learning

Teaching itself is very complex work; yet, grading is the most difficult task in my college teaching. I explain, in the course syllabus, that grades are earned and not given by the instructor, with an emphasis that students are given maximum opportunities to increase their grades and consequently, their success is up to them. Nevertheless, the longer I teach, the more I think of gathering and interpreting information about students' performance and what kinds of classroom assessments can be used to improve student learning. In regard to classroom assessment techniques (CATs) beyond traditional testing, I have recently read the articles that follow on poster presentation and oral communication.

Akister and Kim (1998) share the experience of using poster presentations as an alternative to written assignments for assessing students' learning. Poster presentations are now a well-established feature of professional conferences, and the authors point out that specifically poster presentations:

- make presentations accessible to a greater audience;
- offer a visual representation of a piece of work, providing cues that enable those viewing the poster to seek further clarification and information on areas of interest to them; and
- provide an opportunity for direct discussion and exchange of ideas with the presenter.

The *visual* and *verbal* elements of posters have added richness to an assessment profile that had been based largely on written assignments. And they conclude that poster presentation appears to have the potential to shift students from a failure-driven to an aspiration-driven mode of performance.

Quigley (1998), on the other hand, provides guidelines for faculty on designing and grading oral communication assignments. The author starts with the notion that critical thinking skills required to create and convey an effective oral message are an important part of a college education, but many students have little structured practice or systematic assessment of their oral communication skills as part of their undergraduate programs. According to the author, oral assignments can:

- encourage an active, involved role in learning;
- enhance listening skills;
- promote articulation of ideas and opinions;
- provide opportunities to hear how others respond to one's thinking; and
- often provide practice in teamwork.

In addition, I agree that oral assignments allow students to take greater responsibility for their own learning as well as learn significant course content from each other.

These two techniques are examples of active teaching and learning. I also want to touch upon the grading of classroom participation since attendance and participation are important in my courses. Class participation is difficult to assess and subjective, but I strongly advocate the following notion by Bean and Peterson (1998):

> Grading class participation can send positive signals to students about the kind of learning and thinking an instructor values, such as growth in critical thinking, active learning, development of listening and speaking skills needed for career success, and the ability to join a discipline's conversations. (p. 33)

In the syllabus, I emphasize the professional demeanor, which includes being prepared for the class, engaging in a class or group discussion, listening attentively to others, and respect for differing points of view.

We know that good teaching does incorporate assessments that motivate and engage students in ways that maximize benefits in the teaching-learning process. I also emphasize in the syllabus that my goal is to develop a cooperative not competitive classroom climate and that sharing knowledge and experience by participating is highly recommended.

Finally, as an instructor, I am constantly struggling to improve my professional judgment and decision-making, and must conclude there is no magic formula for improving teaching.

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Akister, J., & Kim, C. (1998). Poster presentations: Finding alternatives to written assignments for assessing students. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, 9*(3), 19-31.

Bean, J. C., & Peterson, D. (Summer 1998). Grading classroom participation. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 74*, 33-40.

Quigley, B. L. (1998). Designing and grading oral communication assignments. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 74,* 41-49.

Critical Thinking, What Exactly Is It?

Critical thinking is:

(a) identifying and solving problems.
(b) the skills listed in Bloom's taxonomy.
(c) decision making about important issues.
(d) all of the above.
(e) none of the above. (Beyer, 1985, p. 270)

Many of my college students dislike multiple-choice test items. Instead they prefer short-answer and essay items or matching items. Answering multiple-choice items is not easy because oftentimes an educated guess does not work. Constructing good multiple-choice items is not easy either. When I occasionally develop multiple-choice questions to assess student learning, I follow McMillan's (2001) recommendations: keep the language simple and concise, avoid wording such as "all of the above" or "none of the above," and include no more than four alternatives for each question. The above-cited question is a good example to illustrate the proper construction of multiple-choice items. In this essay, nevertheless, I want to discuss the concept of critical thinking.

Critical thinking is viewed as an important learning outcome for college students. What is critical thinking? Answering the above question, as Beyer (1985) states, is not as easy as one might expect, mainly because critical thinking is so vaguely defined, differs considerably throughout our classrooms, our disciplines, and our schools. Many remain ambivalent about the concept of this important thinking skill and, consequently, many different instruments are used for its assessment. It seems that there is no common definition of critical thinking. For instance, Malekzadeh's (1998) words, in management courses, critical skills are "to do research, analyze data, critically evaluate the results, and present the findings in well-argued papers or well-crafted

presentation" (p. 590). McMillan (2001) maintains the definition of Ennis's critical thinking: "decision making or judgment about the merits and worth of a belief or action" (p. 174).

Educators do not seem to agree upon the definition of critical thinking, and it does appear that critical thinking is one component of critical academic skills: mathematics, problem-solving, critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, comparing, higher-order thinking, and judgment. According to Beyer, one major school system uses the term 'critical thinking' as an umbrella for just about every thinking skill that can be taught in social studies classrooms. I particularly agree with Beyer's notion: "Critical thinking is unique because it involves careful, precise, persistent and objective *analysis* of any knowledge claim or belief to *judge* its validity and/or worth" (p. 271). I sum, this is my interpretation that critical thinking is the act of independently and systematically weighing evidence to make an evaluation and judgment or to determine merit.

Back to the above question, what is the correct answer? Beyer implies that critical thinking and problem solving are not exactly the same, and that equating critical thinking with other reasoning skills, such as Bloom's list of skills, inquiry, or decision making is incorrect. Using elimination is often the best way to answer multiple-choice items.

I encourage my students to use this technique and I think we can apply it to this question. Although McMillan would object to its use as an option, the best answer here is "none of the above." We solved the problem now, but the definition of critical thinking is still not entirely clear to me. Critical thinking, what exactly is it?

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Teaching, Never-Ending Challenge

There is no magic formula for effective teaching. Teaching is always challenging, even though I have been in the teaching profession for many years. Below are some of my practices to create an interactive and productive atmosphere for my college students (usually 25 to 30 students) in the education courses I teach.

Make the first class successful. I believe that getting off to a good start is a necessary foundation for effective teaching. The first day of class can go a long way toward setting the tone for the rest of the course. On the first day of the course, instead of just handing out the syllabus and answering questions about assignments, I try to i) get to know students' names and backgrounds; ii) help the students get to know each other as well as to know the instructor (students are indeed curious about the instructor and each other, but usually do not ask); iii) communicate the instructor's expectations to students and let students know what they can expect from the instructor; and iv) make sure that students are comfortable in the class right from the start. As the proverb goes, "A good beginning makes a good ending."

Give innovative lectures. McKeachie (1994) writes, "Effective lectures combine the talents of scholar, writer, producer, comedian, showman, and teacher in ways that contribute to student learning" (p.53). Lecturing has both disadvantages (for example, placing students in a passive rather than an active role) and advantages (for example, a classroom lecture places greater emphasis upon the importance of the instructor-student interaction). I maintain eye contact in promoting an interesting and innovative lecture. At the same time, I remember that sometimes instruction is more effective by asking thoughtful questions rather than by giving a lecture.

Organize small group activities. Certainly effective student-teacher interactions are promoted in an environment in which students feel free to ask questions of the instructor and

their classmates. Physically arranging the students closer to the instructor and each other in the classroom (even placing students in a circle) accelerates learning. It is a good idea to conduct a learning style inventory on each student to make class activities productive. For example, divide students into group exercises based on their learning styles (diverger, assimilator, converger, and accommodator) or learning differences (visual versus oral-aural).

Provide a facilitative environment. Students gain a sense of achievement when they receive appropriate feedback on their homework assignments and examinations (I usually avoid red for written feedback and use blue or green instead). It is important for instructors to use verbal encouragement positively as a way of motivating the students.

Be accessible to your students. Excessive anxiety can be avoided when the instructor provides the students with opportunities to communicate with the instructor before, during, and after class. The students need to know they can call for help. Students also should be encouraged not be afraid of making mistakes in their oral presentations and written assignments.

Finally, as Matejka and Kurke (1994, p. 117) suggest, it is useful to end the syllabus with an encouraging statement such as: "We will maintain as informal a classroom atmosphere as possible while upholding the principles of good education. Let's have a great class!"

Reference

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