Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

Learning to Teach: Sharing the Wisdom of Practice

Author: Lee S. Shulman, President
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

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Abstract: What different picture emerges, and what consequences follow, if we think about the teacher as the primary agent of his or her own accountability?

Essay:
It's hard to open the paper or turn on the radio these days without finding yet another call for educational accountability. It's a reasonable thing to seek. The public needs to know that schools and colleges are delivering on their promises to students and to society. The problem is that the typical mechanisms for ensuring quality (such as external tests or other measures of some sort) often miss much of what actually goes on in classrooms. A different way of looking at accountability is through the lens of the classroom, where, after all, the proverbial rubber of teaching and learning meets the educational road. Do we need tests and state "report cards" to take the measure of education's effectiveness as an enterprise? Maybe. Do we need teachers who see student learning and its improvement as their professional, ethical responsibility? Absolutely.

What is entailed in this responsibility? An analogy is helpful here. Consider the story we read in the news at least once a year. In one version, a passenger on an airplane experiences severe chest pain, and the cabin attendant asks if there is a physician on board. A physician comes forward and attempts to assist the patient, but after several interventions the patient dies. Subsequently, the family of the deceased sues both the airline and the physician, the latter for malpractice. Had the physician remained in her seat and withheld her professional service, she would have been held harmless, no questions asked.

In another version of the story, an auto accident leaves several people by the roadside badly injured. A physician drives by and decides not to stop and render medical

assistance for fear that he will be held responsible for any care he delivers. Perhaps he had just read a news story about the first physician. He is later criticized for inaction, for an unwillingness to act professionally. Once a person or a community takes on the mantle of a profession, every act is potentially permeated with ethical questions.

My point is that excellent teaching, like excellent medical care, is not simply a matter of knowing the latest techniques and technologies. Excellence also entails an ethical and moral commitment--what I might call the "pedagogical imperative." Teachers with this kind of integrity feel an obligation to not just drive by. They stop and help. They inquire into the consequences of their work with students. This is an obligation that devolves on individual faculty members, on programs, on institutions, and even on disciplinary communities. A professional actively takes responsibility; she does not wait to be held accountable.

Consider the case of one of last year's U.S. Professors of the Year (a program co-sponsored by Carnegie and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education). Dennis Jacobs is Professor of Chemistry at the University of Notre Dame. Several years ago, teaching the introductory course in his department, he found himself face to face (often during office hours) with students who were failing his course or dropping out. This was disturbing for a couple of reasons. For one, these students were clearly bright and hardworking enough to succeed--but they weren't succeeding. Second, it was disturbing because failure for many of them meant abandoning long-held dreams and career aspirations.

Now, in some chemistry departments, the student failure rate in an introductory course is a badge of honor. But Jacobs was having none of this. Feeling an ethical responsibility for the success of his students, he designed an alternative approach to the course, employing small-group study circles and an emphasis on conceptual thinking. And then--this is an essential part of the story--he set about to document the effectiveness of this new approach. My colleagues and I at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching refer to this commitment as "the scholarship of teaching and learning."

Leaving aside many of the details, Jacobs's approach not only allowed more students to succeed in meeting the chemistry department's high standards (far more students passed the course), it also modeled a kind of professionalism that should be at the heart of our ideas about educational accountability. Jacobs didn't just "drive by" when he saw what was happening to his students. He stopped what he was doing and gave assistance. He took responsibility for the quality of his students' learning through his own innovations and highly demanding assignments and tests.

Teachers like Dennis represent a kind of teaching excellence that is, admittedly, beyond what we find in lots of classrooms where teachers are content to teach well and leave it at that. It's tempting to say it goes "beyond the call of duty," but in fact my point is just the opposite. Teachers must accept the ethical as well as the intellectual and pedagogical challenges of their work. They must refuse to be drive-by educators. They must insist on stopping at the scene to see what more they can do. And just as is the case on airliners

and freeways, many of the needed resources may be lacking. Nevertheless, they must seize responsibility.

There is no more powerful form of accountability.

THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION
for the ADVANCEMENT *of* TEACHING
51 Vista Lane
Stanford, CA 94305
http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/