JET
The Journal of Effective Teaching
an online journal devoted to teaching excellence

Improving the Quality of Instruction Through a Service Teaching Framework

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Abstract

Many professors lack sufficient pedagogical training needed to teach their courses effectively. In an effort to aid professors in improving the quality of instruction in their courses, this article distills the principles embedded within a service teaching framework for instruction. The principles discussed throughout this article pertain to: establishing relationships with students, formative assessment practices, responding to negative issues in a positive manner, valuing and validating students' perspectives, and exceeding course requirements. I conclude with a discussion of three important actions needed for this framework to be implemented successfully.

Keywords: Service, teaching, quality.

Many professors report feeling inadequately prepared by their graduate school experiences to fulfill their teaching responsibilities effectively (Beckerman, 2010). While many professors have an extensive knowledge base in their respective academic fields, they have very little knowledge about how to teach their content in effective ways (Beckerman, 2010). Unfortunately, this lack of adequate pedagogical preparation often leads to the implementation of poor-quality courses for students. Given the ever-increasing pressures for professors to conduct research and serve at the department, college, and university levels, many professors have very little time to reflect on the philosophical principles that guide their teaching practices. Because one's teaching philosophy directly impacts one's practices within the classroom (Gossman, 2008), it is imperative that professors closely examine the principles that guide their teaching. The purpose of this article is to outline the philosophical principles embedded in a service teaching framework for teaching quality. Inevitably, the courses that professors teach are likely to vary in objectives, student demographics, assessment measures, and delivery formats. Hence, this framework is not presented as a panacea for all instructional issues or concerns within all courses. Instead, this framework highlights a broad set of principles for professors to apply, amend, and adapt in their respective contexts to improve the quality of instruction for students. This paper concludes with a discussion of three prerequisite actions that professors must embrace for the service teaching framework to produce effective results.

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Service Teaching Framework

It is not a novel idea for professors to create and alter course content to provide opportunities for students to learn through service learning activities (Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, &Fisher, 2010). While it is common for professors to think of themselves metaphorically as conductors, coaches, or facilitators in the classroom, few professors think of themselves as a "servants" of students. Being experts in their respective fields of study, most professors view teaching as an opportunity to share their knowledge, expertise, and skills with students, rather than an opportunity or responsibility to serve students. To date, very little scholarship examines the role of teaching as a means of serving students or teachers as being what Bowman (2005) calls servant leaders. If we give deference to Bowman's notion of teachers as servant leaders, an important question arises inevitably. How might professors teach in ways that allow them to use their expert knowledge, skills, and resources to better serve the different needs, interests, and abilities of students in their courses?

Recently, I enjoyed a wonderful night out on the town with my family at a nearby restaurant. The meal was delicious and the service was exceptional. While reflecting on this experience, a metaphor emerged that aptly responds to the aforementioned question. Namely, when a patron visits a dining establishment, he or she orders, eats, and pays for a meal. While the price of the meal is fixed and publicized on the menu, the patron offers gratuity based on the quality of service they experienced. A tip in the amount of 10% or less of the total cost of the meal typically indicates that the patron was not very satisfied by the service they experienced. In contrast, a tip in the amount of 20% or greater of the total cost of the meal typically signifies that the patron experienced exceptional service. Finally, a tip in the amount of 15% of the total cost of the meal typically indicates that the patron had a satisfactory experience. If we apply this metaphor to the quality of instruction professors implement in their courses, there are five specific principles professors should carry out to ensure their patrons (students) receive excellent service. These principles pertain to: showing genuine concern for students' needs, interests, and abilities, examining students' progress regularly, responding to issues and challenges in a positive manner, valuing and validating students' perspectives, and exceeding official course requirements. Further, the acronym S.E.R.V.E is used to summarize the principles within the service teaching framework.

(S) Show genuine concern for students' needs, interests, and abilities

Excellent servers typically begin their interactions with patrons by welcoming them (patrons) to the establishment, introducing themselves, and establishing a working relationship. Then the server typically begins asking questions related to patrons' needs and desires. In this same vein, professors should begin their courses by establishing a working relationship with their students and assessing their students' needs, interests, and abilities. One way that professors can achieve this objective is by administering a pre-course survey on the initial day of class to clearly identify students' personal concerns, learning preferences, and background experiences related to the course requirements and objectives. This assessment data should be used to determine the broad scope and sequence of

the course. Professors should use these data to make negotiations between what is already available on the course syllabus (menu) and what best responds to and supports students' needs, interests, and abilities. Professors should also refer to this initial data throughout the course when making subsequent pedagogical, curriculum, and assessment decisions. Inevitably, professors will encounter students with needs and or interests that cannot be easily accommodated within the broader scope and sequence of a course. Just like excellent servers typically offer other suggestions when a patron requests a specific item that is not readily available on the menu, professors should willingly suggest other alternative choices when they encounter students who have needs and interests that cannot be easily accommodated within the scope and sequence of a particular course. The goal of this practice is to negotiate a course experience that is closely suited to the needs, interests, and abilities of the students involved.

Professors can also show genuine concern for students' needs, interests, and abilities by demonstrating a willingness to differentiate instruction and content (where feasible) to respond to these different needs, interests, and abilities. Much has been written (e.g., Anderson & Algozzine, 2007; Minnott, 2009; Subban, 2006) about the benefits of differentiating instruction. Yet and still, relatively few professors take this concept into serious consideration when making pedagogical and curriculum decisions in higher educational contexts (Doolittle & Siudzinski, 2010). Far too many professors develop courses with uniform instructional practices, assignments, and assessment measures (Doolittle & Suidzinski, 2010). In keeping with the goal of showing genuine concern for students' needs, interests, and abilities, professors should be willing to differentiate (where feasible) instruction and content within each course they teach from section to section and from semester to semester. In this same vein, professors must also be willing to differentiate instruction and content as students' needs, interests, and abilities shift throughout a particular semester. Referring to the original metaphor, if a patron decides (after taking one bite of the lasagna) that they would prefer to have the chicken instead of the lasagna, an excellent waiter is more than willing to meet their patron's newly emergent desires. Similarly, professors who are committed to enacting this principle within the service teaching framework should also be willing to differentiate instructional choices and curriculum content within their courses as students' needs, interests, and abilities shift throughout the semester. Further, as Anderson and Algozzine (2007) point out, students tend to be more engaged and demonstrate higher academic outcomes in classroom contexts where the instructor adapts the instruction to content to match changes in students' needs, interests, and abilities over time.

(E) Examine Students' Progress Regularly

Exceptional waiters "check in" with patrons regularly throughout the dining experience to ensure that the patrons' needs are being adequately met. In keeping with this metaphor, it is likely that students will demonstrate varying degrees of understanding and proficiency with course content at varying times throughout the semester. While some students may understand and apply the concepts presented in a course quickly, other students will need these same concepts to be re-presented in multiple ways to attain the same level of understanding and application. One way for professors to readily identify

and monitor students' needs and abilities regularly is to incorporate formative assessment practices at the end of each class session in their courses. In short, formative assessments are assessments that provide teachers and students with on-going feedback about student progress toward identified learning goals (Noyce & Hickey, 2011). More often than not, professors develop and implement courses wherein summative assessment practices are used more often than formative assessment practices (Joughin, 2010). Summative assessment practices evaluate student learning at the end of the teaching and learning experience (Joughin, 2010). Summative assessment practices tend to provide few opportunities for professors to make substantive changes to their courses to better assist students in reaching desired learning goals and objectives. Research studies (i.e., Hargreaves, 2005; Pemberton, Borrego & Cohen, 2006; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006) suggest that students perform higher in classrooms where professors assess content more frequently and in smaller increments than in classroom where professors only use only a mid-term and final exam in their courses to assess student learning. Hence, formative assessment practices tend to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom in three ways (Joughin, 2010). First, formative assessment practices provide opportunities for professors to check for understanding while the learning process is still taking place. As a result, professors are afforded more opportunities to adjust their instructional practices to better meet students' needs and abilities. Next, formative assessment practices provide students with on-going feedback about their own performance and progress toward a particular learning goal. Hence, students no longer have to wait weeks to find out how well they are or are not performing in a particular course. Instead, based on formative assessment data, students will have a general idea about their level of proficiency in a course from session to session and week to week. Students can use this data to determine which concepts need to be reviewed and or studied in greater depth. Third, formative assessment practices provide additional opportunities for students to practice and apply the information, concepts, and skills presented in each class. Some formative assessment practices professors might consider implementing at the end of each class session include but are not limited to: observations, checklists, exit slips, learning logs, graphic organizers, written response assignments, demonstrations, discussions, self-reflections, and peer rubrics (Noyce & Hickey, 2011).

Another way for professors to examine students' progress periodically throughout a course is by administering a mid-course survey to students (Brown, 2008). This survey should include four open-ended questions related to students' experiences in the course thus far. The first question should solicit feedback related to what students' perceive to be the most positive aspects of the course thus far. This question will provide valuable insight into the instructional and curricular practices that should be maintained and or strengthened throughout the remainder of the course. The second question should solicit feedback related to what students' perceive to be the negative aspects of the course. This question will provide valuable insight into the instructional and curriculum practices that might need to be adjusted or negotiated to better meet students needs, interests, and abilities. The third question should solicit feedback related to what students can or need to do to improve the overall quality of the course. The rationale behind this question is to encourage students to take responsibility for their roles within the teaching and learning process. The fourth question should solicit feedback related to what the professor can do

specifically to improve the overall quality of the course. The rationale behind posting this question is that it provides an opportunity for professors to learn from students about specific ways of improving the quality of the course. Data from this survey should be summarized into a table or graph and shared with students during the subsequent class sessions. Finally, professors should engage students in a short discussion related to the results from the survey and what changes will be made during the remainder of the course to better accommodate students' needs, interests, and abilities.

A third way professors can evaluate student progress regularly throughout the course is by having a mid-course conference with students (Gunnlaugson & Moore, 2009). A mid-course conference provides an opportunity for professors to engage in authentic and meaningful dialogue with students related to the course objectives, expectations, and assignments as a way of deconstructing the conventional power boundaries between teachers and students that typically impede the teaching and learning process in most classrooms (Freire, 1970). Once these boundaries are deconstructed, students are more likely to reveal deeper needs and interests they have that were not documented by the mid-term survey. In keeping with this strategy, professors should arrange a time within each course (typically one or two class sessions at the most) to host a mid-semester conference with each student. Professors who teach courses with large numbers of students enrolled may have to plan for more than two course sessions to accomplish this goal. Moreover, professors who teach courses with large numbers of students enrolled may also have to adjust their regular office hours during this time to provide time to meet with each student. Students should sign up for conferences that range anywhere from 10 to 15 minutes in length. During these conferences, professors should pay close attention to the themes that emerge related to students' needs, interests, and abilities. Wherever feasible, professors should then use the information gained during these conferences to make positive improvements to their courses.

(R) Respond to Issues and Challenges Positively

Inevitably, issues, challenges, and concerns are likely to arise throughout the duration of any course. In as much as it is important for a waiter to respond to issues that arise while serving a patron in a positive manner, it is equally important for professors to respond to issues that arise within the course and among the students in a positive manner. Although this line of thinking almost goes without saying, Amada (1999) points out that professors tend not to respond to the issues and challenges that arise in a course in a positive manner. Even more so, professors tend to respond in an apathetic or overly negative manner when students are perceived to be responsible for causing these issues or challenges (e.g., paper not in APA format, poorly written paper, poor test performance, lack of engagement during class). In much of the same way that excellent waiters are willing to respond to negative occurrences (i.e., a spilled drink, underprepared entrée, change of appetite, etc.) that transpire while serving patrons in a positive manner, professors should be willing to respond to negative occurrences that transpire within their courses in positive ways to improve the overall quality of the teaching and learning experiences within their courses.

How then should professors respond to students who are, in fact, solely responsible for the issues and challenges that transpire within a course? It is important to note that this principle (respond to issues and challenges positively) does not suggest that professors should ignore the issues or challenges that may develop throughout the duration of a course. Instead, this principle simply challenges professors to maintain a positive stance while seeking solutions to these issues or challenges. Further, by establishing and maintaining this commitment to positivity, the overall quality of the students' experience within the course is likely to remain high.

(V) Value and Validate Students' Perspectives

For students to feel comfortable sharing their needs, interests, and abilities throughout a course, professors must work to create a classroom environments that value, respect, and affirm the perspectives and positions of students. Renn (2000) points out that professors tend not to acknowledge students' perspectives during classroom discussions when these perspectives are inconsistent with the dominant perspectives presented within the course or field of study. Even more so, many professors use their professional experience and expertise as a means of invalidating or discrediting students' perspectives and positions on various topics (Renn, 2000). These kinds of non-dialogic and oppressive interactions between professors and students do very little to enrich or empower the students involved (Freire, 1970). Students tend to be less engaged and contributive in classroom contexts where their personal input is not valued and or incorporated into the learning experiences (Freire, 1970). Hence, professors must be willing to value and validate the perspectives of their students to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning in their courses.

One relatively simple way for professors to value and validate the perspectives of students in their courses is to develop and implement a method of facilitating classroom discussion that actively and strategically solicits input from each student in the classroom. Quinn and Zhixia (2010) provide an excellent example of how professors might actively and strategically solicit feedback from each student in a class session. For example, students have an opportunity to earn a maximum of 10 points for actively participating in classroom discussions. Each student is given colored cards with different point values prior to the time designated for classroom discussions. The red card is worth 4 points; the orange, green, and blue are worth 3, 2, and 1 point, respectively. One student begins the discussion by responding to a question posed by the professor. To determine who comments next, the previous speaker selects someone who indicates readiness by raising his/her highest point value card. For a comment made by a student to be awarded points, it must be responsive to the current line of discussion, include something new, and be of appropriate length. A students is penalized (by losing his or her lowest point value) if his or her comment does not to meet this previously mentioned criteria. By losing the lowest point value instead of the highest point value the student can still attain maximum of 9 out of 10 points during the discussion. The professor serves as the judge and assigns point values to students' responses. Quinn and Zhixia (2010) note three important results associated with using this method of discussion regularly in their courses. First, in contrast to other traditional methods of classroom discussion, this method provides students with more opportunities to hear and respond to other students in the classroom. While tradi-

tional methods of facilitating classroom discussion tend to center on teacher-to-student discussions, this method of classroom discussion centers on student-to-student dialogue. Next, this method of classroom discussion provides additional opportunities for the professors to gain insight into students' thinking. Finally, the authors note that the students who participated in this method of discussion reported experiencing greater overall enjoyment with the course. Thus, by using this and or similar methods of facilitating classroom discussion, professors are able to establish a classroom environment where students feel valued and validated. Further, this validation is likely to translate into higher student achievement outcomes, because students tend to engage more and work harder in classroom contexts where they (students) believe the instructor sincerely cares about what he or she has to say (Barnett, 2011).

(E) Exceed Requirements and Extend Efforts

Excellent waiters are willing to exceed what is minimally required of them in an effort to better meet patrons' needs. In like manner, the service teaching framework encourages and challenges professors to go beyond what is "officially" required of them to better meet students' needs, interests, and abilities. In keeping with this principle, professors must be willing to do more than what is officially required in a course to ensure that students have quality experiences within their courses. Some ways professors might extend themselves beyond the official course requirements include but are not limited to: agreeing to provide feedback on drafts before official due dates, meeting with students outside of office hours, connecting students with the academic and social resources necessary to be successful, making study guides and notes readily available to students, and reteaching unlearned content. In a study involving course evaluation data from 283 professors, Helterbran (2008) found that students tend to form more favorable overall perceptions of professors who are willing to extend themselves beyond the official course requirements. More importantly, Helterbran also found that students are willing to work harder in courses where they perceive that the professor is willing to provide additional assistance where needed. Thus, professors must be willing to extend themselves beyond what is officially and normally required to improve the quality of teaching and learning experiences for students in their courses.

In addition to exceeding the official course requirements, professors must also be willing to establish relationships with students that extend far beyond the current time period. An excellent waiter works to develop relationships with patrons that are reoccurring and long-term in nature. In like manner, professors who are committed to teaching in ways that allow them to use their expert knowledge and skills to serve students' needs, interests, and abilities must be willing to work toward developing mentoring relationships with students that transcend the current period in time as well. One way that professors can achieve this goal is by making the resources, lectures, and texts discussed in each course from semester to semester and from year to year available to previously enrolled students. This information can be easily catalogued and maintained though a professional course website, wiki, or blog. As new texts, developments, and findings emerge within a particular field of study, professors are likely to accommodate these texts, developments, and findings into their courses. While the students who are currently enrolled in a particu-

lar course will benefit from these new texts, developments, and findings, former students are not afforded these same opportunities. Hence by making material available to previously enrolled students via a course website, wiki, or blog, former students can integrate and apply these new texts, developments, and findings in their current coursework and or career experiences. At the same time, former students will have an opportunity to engage in and benefit from on-line discussion boards with current students. Further, this practice of making new course content available to former students will provide opportunities for professors to serve in a mentoring capacity to students for many years after the class has come to an official end.

Discussion

In this paper I have outlined and discussed a 5-part service teaching framework for improving the quality of teaching in college courses. For professors to implement this framework in their courses in a manner that will lead to effective results, professors must first be willing to embrace three important changes related to how they currently think about and carry out teaching practices in their courses. First, professors must be willing to change the way they look at teaching. In many institutions of higher education (both non-teaching and teaching institutions) today there is an ever-increasing amount of pressure for professors to improve the quantity and quality of scholarship they produce as a means of meeting tenure and promotion goals (Hansen, 2008). Consequently, a disproportionate amount of time, effort, and resources are directed toward assisting and supporting professors in conducting research, presenting at national conferences, securing grant funding, and writing for publication while teaching is viewed as a secondary and less important responsibility within the broader tenure and promotion equation (Henson, 2008). Hence, for the principles embedded within the service teaching framework discussed in this paper to be implemented in a way that produces effective results, professors must be willing to think of teaching as equally important as research and scholarship—even if the institutional context where they work does not necessarily hold the same view of teaching.

Professors must also be willing to change how they interact with and relate to students in their courses. Essentially, professors must be willing to deconstruct traditional relational boundaries between students and teachers that position the professor as the only source of legitimate knowledge in the classroom. Unfortunately, far too many college professors work to establish and enforce distant relationships between themselves and their students as a means of maintaining their status an their authority as expert in the classroom (hooks, 1994). While these types of relationships work to grant power and privilege to professors, they work to deny power and privilege to students (hooks, 1994). Thus, for the service teaching framework to be implemented in a way that leads to effective results, professors must be willing to change how they interact with and relate to students in and out of the classroom. They must be willing to see students as co-teachers in the classroom and the teaching and learning process as one wherein both teachers and students co-construct knowledge and learn from each other.

Finally, professors must be willing to rethink their roles and responsibilities as the teacher in classroom. Professors must be willing to see themselves as more than an instructional leader in the classroom. Instead, they must develop a more expansive view of themselves as an advocate for students. Embedded within the service teaching framework is the underlying assumption that professors will position themselves as advocates for students' best interests. For that reason, professors must be willing to think of teaching as a means of working *with* students to improve students' professional, political, and intellectual power and position within the world (Freire, 1970). Professors must be willing to move beyond seeing teaching as a process of merely transferring knowledge and skills and toward a more politicalized view of teaching as process of precipitating social and intellectual change in and among students they serve. Further, while the former view of teaching works to maintain the current quality and status of teaching in many higher educational contexts, the latter view of teaching labors to make radical improvements that students deserve.

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