RESOURCES

Teaching in College: Community College Edition

If Learning Doesn't Happen, Can We Still Call it Teaching?

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If Learning Doesn't Happen, Can We Still Call it Teaching?

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A learning-centered reform movement is sweeping across American community colleges. Placing an emphasis on learning rather than teaching is more than a semantic change, it is a major philosophical shift for higher education. Student learning as the outcome of our teaching practices is the overarching goal of the learning-centered college. In the words of Terry O'Banion (1997), we must ask two key questions of ourselves every time we plan our courses or our lessons:

1. How will (activity in question) improve and expand student learning?
2. How will we know that it has?

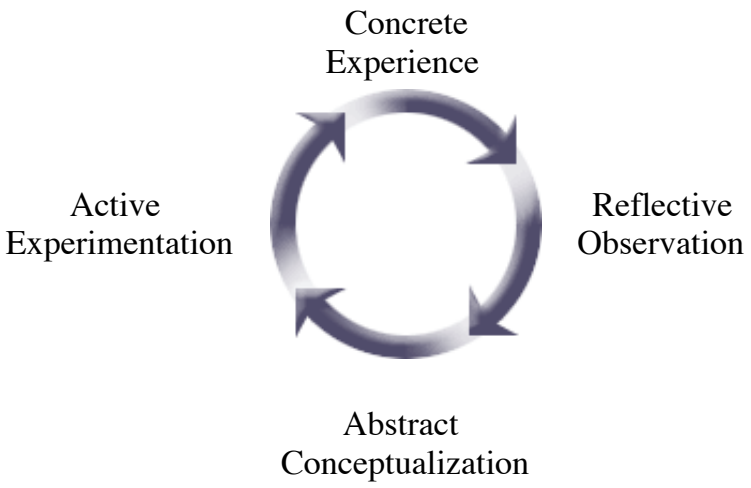
These two simple questions have profound implications for everything we do as teachers, from course planning to learning activities to assignments to grading to evaluation. The priority of the community college has always been teaching. To move our attention to learning is the necessary step in order to know if our efforts are at all valuable to our students.

Many of us have felt a disconnect between our values as teachers and our methods of instruction. Faculty are quick to express the desire to develop student's thinking skills, for instance, yet research consistently shows that in practice we emphasize the memorization and recall of facts at the lowest cognitive levels. As Lion Gardiner (1994) has noted in his comprehensive review of the literature:

"Numerous studies of college classrooms reveal that, rather than actively involving our students in learning, we lecture, even though lectures are not nearly as effective as other means for developing cognitive skills. In addition, students may be attending to lectures only about one-half of their time in class, and retention of information from lectures is low."

To center ourselves on learning we need to depart from the received models of information delivery with an over-reliance on lecture and

isolated student effort. Research in the fields of learning theory and brain function both support the movement of instruction toward active learning strategies, cooperative group lessons, and frequent assessment of student writing and thinking. David Kolb's (1984) model of active learning offers a coherent approach to teaching "around the circle":



This suggests that when teaching any core concept in our courses we should provide a variety of avenues for students to "learn by doing." While this addresses the cognitive diversity among our students in terms of their learning styles, it also presents a rationale for teachers to move through a variety of methods to ensure that students learn the concepts as fully as possible.

Kolb's research on retention of knowledge indicates that students keep only 20% of what they're learning if the teaching method is exclusively the delivery of abstract concepts (usually via lecture). When professors include an activity for students to reflect and observe, the learning increases to 50%. By adding a concrete experience for students—such as a field trip or even a vicarious experience like a video—the learning increases to 70%. Kolb asserts that by adding in active experimentation to this mix, i.e., giving students a chance to try out what they're learning by creating their own application or through laboratory experimentation, they retain 90% of what is being taught (1984). Designing several ways for students to work through course content increases the odds of successful learning. Advances in the application of brain research to teaching has shown that the cognitive connections outlined in a model like Kolb's actually builds neurological connections that permit learning to be retained (see Cross, K. P. 1999; also Smilkstein, R. 1993)

The upshot of all this is that we have to move instruction from telling to doing. And we need to assess what gets done in terms of our goals for the learning in the first place. Our questions now include, "What does the student know?" and, "What can they do?" Remember, if learning isn't happening, then we can't call it teaching.

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