
Regional

Teaching must become engaging to be effective

We live in a time of intense scrutiny as to the effectiveness of instruction in higher education. Questions are being asked of college and university administrators about the retention and graduation rates of their students. In fact, some states have tied funding of public institutions to this data. Others are asking how well we are teaching students to get that well-paid job after graduation.

It is interesting that the fundamental question of how well we are teaching our students is rarely answered. One reason for this hesitation is that we are still struggling with just how to measure teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. It's no wonder that none the countless college rankings that are – like those from U.S. News & World Report – address this most important issue.

Now a new report by the American Council on Education, titled “Unpacking Relationships: Instruction and Student Outcomes,” is addressing this very matter.

It is no secret for those of us in higher education that engagement by students is key for their success. What we sometimes forget is that we are talking about a two-way street. We cannot expect them to be engaged unless faculty members do their part as well. That is why there is an increasing demand for professors to move away from the traditional approach of just lecturing from a lectern to provide students with more hands-on experiences. That is also the reason why we like to support more scholarly activities by faculty in which undergraduate students participate so they can learn by doing.

As Confucius said, “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.”

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

According to the report “The more engaged students are in learning environments, the more likely they are to complete, learn, and be satisfied. Further, student beliefs about their academic ability influence their success in education, and faculty interactions sit at the intersection of reinforcing or debunking student beliefs.”

The report describes learning as “a highly-complicated process dependent upon a variety of factors, teaching is an equally complicated activity focused upon creating an environment in which students can and do learn and are able to be successful.” This is important to remember especially when we hear simplistic proposals for “quick fix” solutions to the problems that higher education faces today.

No surprises there. What is really interesting about this report is that it clearly outlines the areas of “intersection between instruction and student outcomes, arguing that what faculty do and how instruction occurs matter, and matter greatly.”

The report states five factors related to success in the classroom. The first is transparency. This refers to the need to clearly outline what the expectations for the course are, as well as how they will be assessed on whether or not those goals were achieved. In other words, the students must understand from the beginning why they are being asked to study certain topics, to develop certain skills, and/or to complete certain assignments. Without

this understanding students will feel disengaged, and chances are that they will either fail or drop out.

The second factor is related to pedagogical approaches. As mentioned earlier, learning that goes beyond memorization and is more hands on and active is essential. After all, we all know that what students memorize just for the exam they will forget by the week after, which also means that personalized instruction is essential. Thus, both online instruction and the use of large classrooms to teach hundreds of students at a time are less effective.

The third aspect is comprehensive assessment. In other words, grades alone do not provide enough feedback. Students have to have the opportunity to practice what they have learned in class and integrate what they have learned into the larger picture – another reason why we should avoid large classes where the interaction between the instructor and the students is minimal.

Another important aspect is self-regulation. Students must be given the opportunity to move from being passive learners to active ones by constantly participating in their own learning. Instructors need to provide opportunities for students to reflect on what they have learned.

The final factor is alignment. Faculty must carefully create the course so that goals, content, instructional design, pedagogical approaches, assignments and evaluative criteria are coherent with one another.

What all this means is that faculty must foster a learning environment, rather than just giving passive instruction. And it is in this necessity where the difficulties of implementing these ideas reside.

Despite being stereotyped as “liberals” or “progressives,” the fact of the matter is that faculty tend to be very conservative when it comes to their profession, many times being almost “allergic” to change. Sometimes we even find faculty who keep teaching the same material in the same way for decades while remaining oblivious to societal changes.

Although younger faculty tend to be more innovative and resourceful when it comes to pedagogical approaches, that is not always the case with older ones.

Because the 1986 amendments of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the law granted a temporary exemption for postsecondary institutions to enforce mandatory retirement at age 70. That temporary exception was later allowed to expire and Congress eliminated mandatory retirement in higher education as of January 1, 1994. This made the United States one of the few countries in the world to offer true lifetime employment security to tenured faculty members.

This privilege has been severely criticized in many circles where it is seen as a benefit that no other profession enjoys. If higher education institutions want to ameliorate public criticism, they must show sincere efforts to evolve into a more effective profession. After all, we do what we do for the sake of our students.

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