What do you teach?

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When asked, “What do you teach?” I reply, “I don’t teach anything!” Once said, I typically get a chuckle followed by a request for clarification. So let me explain. I cannot “teach” anything if a person does not want to learn. Furthermore, the phrase “to teach” fails to acknowledge the student’s role in a process that should be “student centered”. So what do I do? “I help the learner to learn!” Maybe those words mean “teach” to you, but to me they change the entire way I view the role as a “teacher”.

I came to Delta College from UC Davis in the fall of 2002. Previously, I had spent 17 years working with advanced undergraduates, primarily in the teaching laboratories. One thing that shocked me after my first semester at Delta was the low retention rates and passing rates in key biology courses (anatomy and physiology). At the time, it seemed to me that the students did not possess the learning skills required of college level work. I tried a variety of things to fix the problem but nothing I did seemed to help. When I came up for sabbatical in 2008, I sought the help of Dr. Harold Modell at Bastyr University in Seattle. Quickly, here is a short list of Dr. Modell's credentials: he co-founded the Physiology Education Research Consortium (PERC), served as editor of the journal “Advances in Physiology Education”, and received an award from the American Physiological Society for scholarship in education. I had collaborated with Dr. Modell on a number of studies in physiology education that he was conducting while I was still at UC Davis. Through collaboration and my readings of his work, I became aware that he had a very different approach to education, and his classroom format seemed intriguing yet foreign to me. My goal on sabbatical was go to him and learn a different approach to classroom learning and apply that to my courses in an attempt to put a dent in the low retention and passing rates.

During my four month stay in Seattle, I worked with Dr. Modell helping the learners to learn physiology. The learners in this case were first-year students of Naturopathic Medicine. I spent the first 2 weeks observing, and then as I began to understand the process, I became Dr. Modell’s teammate and we worked together with his students. To be sure, that was the easy part of the sabbatical. The much more difficult task lay ahead; implementing substantive changes in my own classroom approach. After returning from Seattle, I spent four months deconstructing and reconstructing my course.

Here are some changes I made. First, I had to change my ethos regarding teaching. I transformed my view from being the “teacher” to being the facilitator. I will not mislead you; this was a very difficult job because I had to dump a box of old, well-entrenched behaviors. To keep myself on task, I had to keep reminding myself that my job was no longer to teach but to help the learner! Second, on the first day of my course I have the students address the question “Why are we here?” Through case study discussions, students draw two important conclusions:
they are responsible for their own learning and life is cumulative. This establishes the tone for my course, and I deliver on that level. Third, I spend a few days developing a sense of community among the students. I expect participation and before most students are willing to participate, they need to have trust. It is therefore important to develop ground rules for our learning community so we have a safe learning environment. The fourth and most radical change, I disposed of the traditional classroom format. For one thing, I do not lecture. Instead, I have students involved in group activities. They work together to solve problems. I give them scenarios and ask them to predict the outcome and to give reasons for their prediction. I have them design systems or gadgets that behave like physiological systems (although they do not recognize it at the time). After each group activity we have a community discussion, where students share and debate their ideas. I simply guide the process. Lastly, I hold the students accountable. It is their responsibility to prepare for and contribute to the community discussion. When the students fail to do that, I do not step in and “lecture” (a common mistake made by a novice at this). Instead, I will pull up a chair and sit quietly in the middle of the room and wait. If that fails to catalyze a discussion, I send them home with the message that they now have to learn the day’s subject on their own. The topic of physiology is challenging enough for most students in a guided learning environment, and having to go it alone is usually enough punishment to persuade them to prepare better and contribute more in the future.

After 2 semesters of implementation, my retention and passing rates are only slightly better than before. Regardless, I am very positive and believe that I am improving the learning environment at Delta College as a whole. For one, I am better equipped to help the learner to learn, and as a result, my students come through as better thinkers. I am getting positive feedback from students who have learned in this different classroom structure. They drop in to say hello, and express to me how much easier it is to “learn” in their other courses. A few days ago, one student said to me, “I am picking up things in my other courses so much faster than before, and I only got a ‘C’ in your course….imagine if I had gotten an ‘A’ in your course!” In addition, the students who do buy into my approach seem to love it. They embrace the freedom to learn and the responsibility it entails. As one student recently shared with the entire class, “I feel so much more empowered this way!” Not all my experience has been positive. Last summer I had a student voice through frustration, “I don’t want to think about this stuff, I just need you to tell me what I need to know!” I thought a lot about that statement, for it revealed a great deal to me. It could very well be that the low retention and success rates are as much an attitude issue as an issue regarding learning skills. Students having this type of attitude are basically refusing to take responsibility for their own learning. When it comes down that that ingredient, learning is obstructed and it does not matter much what I try to do in the classroom. So now I wonder about how much different the college experience would be if more faculty members “didn’t teach anything”! Perhaps with a more unified effort, the students who “don’t want to think about this stuff” would begin to grasp the currency required of meaningful learning. At that point, I am convinced that we would all see student success rise dramatically.