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ACADEMY FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

## Called to Teach: Brief Essays on the Meaning of Teaching

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### Subjective Objectives: Called to Student-Centered Teaching

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Much about academia is under scrutiny today. “Liberal” academics are accused of fomenting protest and lazy thinking. Tenured faculty are accused of taking their foot off the research/publication/teaching/contribution pedal and coasting to retirement. Christian religiously affiliated universities are accused of neglecting science and indoctrinating students. Non-sectarian universities are accused of inciting societal change and abandoning traditional values. Sports powerhouses are accused of contributing to abuse of women and abuse of power. Academic freedom is viewed skeptically as excuse for indoctrination. In this maelstrom, those of us who devote our lives to the pursuit and discovery of knowledge and the preparation of students for their engagement in society know better. We return again and again to the incalculable transformative benefit of higher education in the lives of students and the salient responsibility of our role in that process.

I knew as an adolescent, new Christian that God’s plan for my life included work with the poor, marginalized, and wounded. My parents were sure that I was destined to teach; I was called to be a social worker and did not see how the two could be reconciled. Almost twenty years later, when I got a call from a trusted mentor and the chair of social work at Baylor to teach for a year while the program searched nationally for a faculty member, the helper in me agreed I could fill in while they looked. I would be helping develop new social work practitioners, after all. What could be simpler than that?

Then I looked at the course syllabi for my teaching assignments and spent hours thinking about how the objectives, which someone else had written to meet another someone else's accreditation standards, connected to the readings and content and assignments and anticipated outcomes. Could those generic, standard objectives capture a student's passion and answer a student's "why" for taking the course? I could tell them my passion and stories from the field. I could cover the basic scope of the profession and the importance of evidence and best practices. I could *not* identify each student's strengths or address each student's needs and readiness to apply the learning to specific practice contexts. The press of time prevailed and I published the syllabi as written and worked through the semester with a gnawing awareness that there must be more to the experience. As I got to know the students through their essays and assignments, I discovered some students had clear learning needs and wishes related to the course, often connected to their call to the profession and the populations they hoped to serve. These became opportunities.

My one year as a temporary lecturer developed into an appointment as a standard lecturer, eventually a Senior Lecturer, followed by completing my doctoral program, a tenure-track appointment, and most recently appointment as a tenured faculty member. The opportunity to teach and learn more about curriculum development, mastery learning, and student-centered learning revolutionized my thinking. I discovered the importance of connecting the content to the strengths, passions, and call of students. I explored methods of teaching students to engage in their own learning and to become critical thinkers and discoverers of knowledge rather than consumers of information. My students taught me how important their own sense of call was and their ability to connect their passion to the course material and assignments.

As I pondered each year how to operationalize and maximize the students' capacity and the limited time we had for each course, my thinking was transformed by the works of educational masters and social work theorists. Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall (2009) wrote about deep learning, describing it as "typified by an intention to understand and seek meaning...to relate concepts to existing understanding and to each other, to distinguish between new ideas and existing knowledge, and to critically evaluate and determine key themes and concepts" (pp. 10-11). I wanted deep learning in, for, and from my students. The authors associated deep learning with both extrinsic motivation and experiential learning. Clark, Nguyen, and Sweller (2006) articulated the path to deep learning through experiential learning that builds and examines self-explanations for problems so that students discover and apply knowledge. McKeachie (1994) long contended that "students will learn what they want to learn" (p. 349) and suggested a teaching strategy that increases student expectation that their work in the course will help them achieve their own goals. This is consistent with Doidge's (2007) findings that motivation impacts significantly the neuroplasticity of one's brain and profoundly improves learning. Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall (2009) went so far as to suggest that student connection of course content to their own objectives provides both motivation and deep learning. In the profession of social work, these concepts are entirely congruent with Keith-Lucas' (1994) assertion that we are the best helpers when we do not help *so much* that we assume the client's responsibility for defining his/her outcomes. In education, that translates as: we are the

best teachers when we engage the student's passion and motivation to engage in and direct his or her own learning.

So, I started incorporating into syllabi the requirement/assignment that each student create his or her own objective for the course. Students identify what it is they most want to take away from the course and then articulate how they will measure whether and to what extent that has happened by the end of the semester. In the tradition of mastery learning, students develop and submit their own course objective(s) draft in the first two weeks of the semester. I provide feedback on the drafts, helping to fine-tune how the objective might connect to the existing course content and assignments and be measurable. Once the student's objective(s) is approved, we touch base about it in the applicable assignments and at mid-term. One essay question on the final examination asks the students to articulate whether and to what degree they achieved the objective and the evidence for that assessment.

Through the years, students have developed an interesting array of personal course objectives. Some take the most concrete method and identify a competency related to the course content. Others take it a step further and identify a competency they will apply in their field internship/practice experience or classroom presentation with a pre/post-test evaluation. Examples of student objectives in the clinical social work practice class are often specific to knowledge and skill development in their practice settings:

- Develop and apply knowledge about end of life care in at least three cultures different from my own

This student was able to examine the beliefs of clients from three different cultural and religious traditions to understand end of life issues and needs, the rituals around death, beliefs about life after death, and burial and funeral rituals. The student used that knowledge to engage in discussion with the client and family about their beliefs and needs and facilitated agency services to enhance the experience in ways familiar to them.

- Write a song of hope related to suicide that applies professional knowledge around suicidal ideation, assessment, and prevention and includes my faith perspective

This student was interested in the challenges of suicidal ideation and attempts particularly impacting persons who identify as Christian. Her lyrics and music identified not only the issues but the hope of health and life. This song may well appear on her next album.

Objectives written by doctoral students in the Ph.D. Teaching course:

- Develop, integrate, and evaluate two methods for student critical appraisal of literature

This student was able to develop criteria for literature reviews in social work with evaluative measures for critique of research articles and of conceptual pieces. These tools will inform her teaching and grading in the university.

- Demonstrate a thorough understanding of service learning pedagogy as it pertains to social work education

Several of the courses in this student's program include global studies and international service trips. The student examined the literature on service learning and developed criteria for establishing and evaluating learning outcomes specific to the cultural group and the professional services.

### ***Summary and Conclusion***

My evaluation of this assignment of students' design, implementation, and evaluation of their course objectives includes each student's evaluation of the impact of the assignment, student comments on course evaluations, and my assessment of the student's connection to the course assignments and pre-established course objectives. Anecdotally, I can say that students express more understanding of the purpose and importance of course objectives and express their appreciation for the opportunity to design some of their work around their own passion and interest in the course and content. Students do not all comment on this course objective assignment in the course evaluation, but those who do have been uniformly positive and have connected the assignment to their own professional passion.

The benefit for me has been an increased awareness that teaching is more than what I provide in the syllabus, in lectures, and in assignments. Teaching is about facilitating student learning, which begins with igniting or fanning the flames of student interest, passion, and calling. Transformational education begins with the student's self-awareness of the need for or interest in transformation and the commitment to do the work of change.

As I begin my twenty-second year as a Baylor University faculty member, I know that transformational education is not just about the students. It is about faculty who continue to be transformed by God's call in this place and who honor and nurture God's call in the lives of students. It is about transformation in the university as we covenant together to follow God's call to the discovery and dissemination of new knowledge while we develop graduates prepared to serve a hurting world—graduates who think critically, evaluate information, and commit to the processes that bring growth and health and human flourishing in the world.

I consider the challenges and opportunities in the academy today and the incredible journey of my years at Baylor to be reminders of our creator's plans and a reassurance of the Savior's love and provision. I am encouraged anew by the call of God, the light of student's lives, and the opportunity to serve. Being called to teach is a sacred trust. Being a part of student transformation is an incredible privilege.

**References**

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