

Reflecting upon a Semester in the Shoes of a Student (Shoes Returned!)

**David Wright, Faculty, Business Department, Kwantlen University
College**

After teaching sixty sections of classes in Canada at a few universities and colleges, including thirty-five at Kwantlen University College, I found myself reflecting more fully on my evolving style, methods, different educator-learner roles, evaluation approaches, and expectations of student quality. Without some level of external benchmarking or input of new knowledge, such exercises could just revolve around 'navel-gazing' and perhaps lead to reinforcement of current (good or bad) practice without the opportunity for a step-change or 'out-of-box-thinking' (Fink et al, 2005; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Wright, Rudolph, Hanna, Gillingwater, & Burns,1997).

Thus new knowledge was needed, but that wasn't enough. In business we teach marketing students to take a customer viewpoint (Wright, Rudolph, Hanna, Gillingwater, & Burns,1997). In engineering we teach designers to take an ergonomic approach to human-equipment interfaces (Fink et al., 2005); (Wright, et al., 1997). In the same spirit, I wanted to re-experience current frustrations, challenges, and fun of learning first-hand (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) rather than through a rose-tinted lens of my own prior student days. Hence, the decision was made to register for four distance courses in adult education, and be a full-time student juggling working teaching sections and moving house(!). At the same time I volunteered for extra student evaluations.

So the purpose of the exercise was to benchmark (Wright, et al,1997) my teaching approaches to those currently being taught, learn a few teaching "tricks" for use in my classes, and avoid repeating any instructional design mistakes that I might encounter.

Now after finishing the semester with 16 assignments each about 10 pages long (double-spaced), reading a range of text books, watching videos, listening to audio tapes, completing workbooks and exercises, and getting instructor feedback and grading justifications, the experience certainly highlighted a few points.

A few course content perspectives, include;

- much from the area of quality management strategic, tactics and measures apply to educational settings at different levels in program planning (Fink et al., 2005);
- the English as an Additional Language (EAL) (Brown, 2001)field has perhaps both deeper and broader content (at this level) than other areas such as facilitating adult learning, and organization and staff development; and
- Brown's EAL text (Fink et al., 2005) is of great value across all subjects, as a very rich resource of information applied in a creative manner (it's not just a literature search like some other texts that were encountered).

However, apart from EAL (Fink et al., 2005), the substantive lessons about the scholarship of teaching were from understanding more about contemporary multi-

tasking pressures, and variability of instructor guidance, feedback, and assignments. It really is a people-business, and great instructors are unfortunately not the norm.

Thus, some key lessons learned include:

- most importantly have some content that is worth learning and appropriate for the level of student, rather than a re-hash ad infinitum of basic materials;
- make it fun, through assignments, workbooks, activities, varied media, as well as an interesting "alive" textbook;
- allow students the opportunity for customized assignment scope choice, as well as stretch (and do not penalize the "keeners" who actually implement something rather than just meander in the theory);
- always adopt positive tones for feedback, be correct rather than wrong(!), and be respectful of student fragile egos, especially if interactions are not face-to-face;
- ideally have instructors with credible professional designations, and advanced education, as well as work experience outside academia (Fink et al., 2005; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, Wright, et al,1997);
- respectfully, American Psychological Association (APA) format is not always appropriate in more visual fields like engineering, design, and business which also have perhaps more active and concise writing tones;
- avoid vague guidance on assignment formats and strict narrow assessment criteria, which are not helpful in isolation, but doubly troubling and student de-motivating if used in concert;
- finally, it seems to be true - educationalist re-label much of what educators do in jargon that is sometimes confusing and contradictory (as with every field)!

From my perspective, as a student I really didn't care how difficult I made the instructor's life, but wanted to either just pass and get the course over with (because of some or all failings from the list above), or excel and learn something that I will hopefully use in my future career and in life. By the way the overall ratio was something like 60:40 (bad:good) for my four courses. Even as this is being written, the dichotomy hits - I hope my voluntary student evaluations are better!

Overall the experience was worthwhile, with a definite impact on future teaching. Separately, in the past, I have had experience where management encouraged me to attend training that really was a waste of time - theoretical, basic, and generic, no real-world anchors, lack of learner-centeredness, a backwards step, and time-consuming. Thus, I will be more selective about any future courses taken, and focus on those that add value.

References

Brown, D.H. (2001). *Teaching by principles - an interactive approach to language pedagogy* (2nd Edition). Addison Wesley Longman, New York.

Fink, L.D., et al. (2005). Becoming a Professional Engineering Educator: A New Role for a New Era, *Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol 94 No 1, pp.185-194.

Pfeffer, J., Sutton, R.I. (2000), *The knowing-doing gap: how smart companies turn knowledge into action*. HBS Press, Boston.

Wright, D.T., Rudolph, M.M., Hanna, V., Gillingwater, D., Burns, N.D. (editors), (1997). *Managing Enterprises - Stakeholders, Engineering, Logistics & Achievement (ME-SELA'97), Proceedings of The First International Conference at Loughborough University, 22-24 July 1997*. Mechanical Engineering Publications, IMechE, London, ISBN 1 86058 066 1.