

Evidence-based theories of good teaching

The Cranky Professor

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Professors, most of them, anyway, take teaching seriously. They want to be good at teaching, for they care that the students in their courses rise to their potential as learners and, indeed, as fellow intellectuals.

Part of taking teaching seriously is to understand what works and what doesn't.

You would think that because professors take teaching seriously and part of taking teaching seriously is to understand what works, professors would be concerned to know the empirical research on teaching. Strangely, few of them are.

Professors will, of course, observe what they do and observe how students react to what they do, including how students perform on assignments and tests. Professors will also occasionally trade experiences with other professors and, sometimes, ask their colleagues for new ideas to try out. This is empirical research, certainly, but it's on the anecdotal side.

What explains why even those professors who would like to teach in evidence-based ways lack knowledge of empirical teaching theory? One factor is that professors, especially those outside the sciences, don't know where to find empirical research on teaching. Another is that many of us (again, outside the sciences) would be unable to read with understanding a research paper on teaching even if we had one.

We need some help. We need popular digests of research on teaching. That is, we need easily-locatable newsletters and magazines that contain articles giving us the gist of what particular researchers have been studying, what conclusions they have come to, and why they think their research supports their conclusions.

Newsletters and books on teaching, as well as talks and workshops, are plentiful, but all the ones of which I'm aware are anecdotal (or hortatory). Perhaps our Centre for Academic and Instructional Development could look around to try to find something that brings rigorous research to the ordinary professor. If it finds nothing, perhaps the Centre could take the lead in creating something.

Another factor that explains why professors who would like to teach in light of empirical research don't know much of it is their suspicion that whatever research exists, it won't be relevant to them. The researcher, after all, is looking into how best to serve some specific goal in education, and that specific goal might not be one a particular professor is concerned to serve.

At least a few professors suspect that whatever solid research is out there, it's irrelevant to what they want to do. I suspect this, at least.

Is this suspicion warranted? Well, let's consider teaching evaluations, our own Instructor Course Evaluation form. The ICE form does not reflect the teaching goals I set for myself.

Indeed, it's inconsistent with them. Yet it is our university's official form, our sole official form, and Saint Mary's is happy to use it to judge professors' teaching. (Saint Mary's is keen to use it. Part-time professors at Saint Mary's, in violation of their academic freedom, must include their ICE results in their applications for renewal.)

Yet the psychologists tell us that the ICE is pretty good at measuring a professor's teaching effectiveness. That's her effectiveness, of course, at attaining certain goals, the goals the form takes to be important.

The psychologists vouch for a form that measures how well professors are attaining goals about which I, in my own practice and as a teacher interested in teaching, couldn't care less. That's evidence that at least some of what the psychologists and other empirical scientists are discovering will be of little use to me, and I doubt I'm alone.

Nonetheless, professors, me foremost among them, would like to know what empirical researchers into teaching and learning have uncovered, despite our inability or disinclination to go searching ourselves. We would like people who know the research to explain it to us, either in popular articles or by visiting our campus to give a talk or two.

We would also like, though, to participate more often in university discussions about what teaching is for, what it should serve, what its goals should be. It would be as useful and exciting to us to investigate teaching philosophies (if that's not too grand a way to describe them) as it would be to discuss the effectiveness (with regard to what?) of various teaching methods.

In an ideal world, the psychologists and other empirical scientists who conduct research into teaching styles and methods would also be philosophers of higher education. They would be richly aware of a range of conceptions of university education, and of the key differences among them. Their empirical research would be informed by their well-considered conception of the ends of teaching.

Maybe this world is already ideal and I just don't know that it is. Perhaps right now an empirical scientist who happens also to be a scholar of Michael Oakeshott is preparing for publication the results of her inquiry into what sorts of physical space and what classroom and office methods best enable students to acquire the habits of disinterested participants in the conversation of humankind.

If you lay hands on a copy of this scientist's paper, forward it to me.