

Center for Teaching Excellence

This is the fourth of a series of newsletters encouraging faculty enrichment and excellence in teaching by announcing opportunities, sharing ideas, and promoting collaboration.

Best Wishes with Final Exams!

It is not too late to sign up!

Using Blackboard Effectively

Wednesday, December 12 (during exam week)

8:00 to 10:00 a.m.

Computer Training Room

Payson Library

If you have not already signed up, just send me an email if you would like to attend.

If you are interested in attending one of these conferences, please let me know; I will provide funding for you!

A Lilly Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning will be held March 20-21, 2008, at Cal Poly, Pomona, California. Go to the website <http://www.iats.com> or Google Lilly Conferences 2008.

The Teaching Professor Conference will be held May 16-18, 2008, in Kissimmee, Florida: Go to <http://www.magnapubs.com>. Click on Conferences at the top of the page and then on The Teaching Professor. At this website you may also sign up for a free newsletter about teaching called *Faculty Focus*.

Faculty
A free electronic newsletter
for those involved with
teaching in Higher Education
Focus

Conceptions of Teaching: The Specifics

Since the early '90s, researchers (mostly outside the U.S.) have been exploring different conceptions of teaching. At this point a number of different researchers, using different faculty cohorts and different methods to analyze findings, have identified a continuum of conceptions. Not all of them agree as to the points along the continuum, but they do agree about what anchors each endpoint.

On the one end are the **teacher-centered conceptions**, those beliefs that focus on the teacher and on the act of teaching and see as the primary objective the transmission of information to students. On the other end are the **learning-centered conceptions**, those beliefs that put the student and his or her learning at the center and maintain that the goal is to develop conceptual understanding of the material. Most researchers portray the teacher-centered conceptions as being the simpler of the two. Some research has shown that this orientation compromises learning outcomes. Students with teachers who focus on information transfer tend to use learning strategies that do not result in long-term retention or the ability to apply what has been learned. (We have highlighted related findings, most notably those of David Kember, in previous issues.)

An article by Samuelowicz and Bain contains hypothetical descriptions of two faculty members who represent these two different approaches to teaching. The stories make real the differences between the two conceptions, and they also show how practice (what the two faculty members do in the classroom) reflects these underlying beliefs about the role and functions of teachers.

As the faculty member who is teacher-centered describes about the role of teaching, “the teacher is the main character [in his story] who tries to get students to understand, and who contributes much effort to make it happen.” (p. 312) This teacher explains that he is the one to provide the structure—in a variety of different ways, if necessary—that students need to gain an understanding of the content. He gives examples that aid in understanding, and he tests student understanding by “dragging” answers from them. Asking questions to gauge understanding is the role he sees for interaction with students.

Students need to understand and reproduce the content the way the instructor understands it or the way it is explained by the textbook. In other words, knowledge is defined by the discipline, and there is no room or reason for students to find their own way to this knowledge. Why have students spend time reinventing the wheel?

This faculty member is concerned when students do not understand. He uses an example of how he offered 10 different examples to illustrate one concept. He read the lack of student response as boredom and decided that next time he would use only three examples. In other words, he did not investigate why students did not appear to understand, but instead concentrated on finding better ways to communicate his understanding.

The second faculty member, whose story is recounted as an illustration of learning-centered teaching, believes that students must become independent learners and that her job as a teacher is to help them achieve this goal. “It is students who take center stage when she talks about teaching and learning... She does not see teaching...as a simple affair where knowledge is dispensed to the students by the teacher. Rather, it is a challenging two-way process.” (p. 315)

She cares about the process of learning and thinks students come to understand the process when they are given authentic tasks, those tasks that enable them to begin to “feel” how a professional in the field works. She sees the ability of students to judge their own work and that of

their peers as part of what it means to be a professional, and gives students opportunities to develop these skills.

In her view, students are expected to develop their own knowledge. They are “the ones who unpack and repack it, the ones who analyze and synthesize it, the ones who transform it, the ones who make it their own.” Her role, then, is to work with the students, not doing the learning for them but creating an environment that is conducive to learning, one with clear expectations and high standards. She interacts closely with students and sees those exchanges as vital to the learning process.

In sum, the researchers write, “Although in both cases the academics want their students to gain a thorough understanding of the subject matter, their beliefs about the nature of understanding and learning and roles in knowledge organization and teacher-student interaction differ substantially. In the first case the academic provides ready-made understanding and methods for students, shows them how to apply knowledge, and interacts with them to ensure that the understanding has taken hold. In the second case, the teacher assists the students, through extensive interaction, to personalize their understanding of the material and to use their new understandings to interpret the world in an altered way.” (p. 320)

Reference: Samuelowicz, K., and Bain, J. D. (2001). Revisiting academics' beliefs about teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 41, 299–325.



This article first appeared in *The Teaching Professor*, a newsletter written for everyone involved with classroom instruction in higher education. See for yourself what a great tool *The Teaching Professor* is - [sign up for a free 3-month, no-obligation trial subscription.](#)

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Happy Holidays to you and yours!