If It Ain't About Learnin', I Dunno What We're Doin' Here!

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Running Head: I Dunno What We're Doin' Here!

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Stop any pedestrian on Circle Drive and ask them about our mascot. Without much trouble, they will be able to identify it as a cougar and even point to the statue outside the UC. Ask these same people about our university's colors, and they will easily be able to describe the colors in our marketing campaigns and the colors that create a visual tapestry across campus. Even when you ask the typical campus pedestrians about the past history of SIUE, many will fairly easily be able to identify the contributions of Katherine Dunham, the Vadalabene family, and others. But, ask any passer by how SIUE defines and views learning. You will, I would guess, be met with looks of befuddlement, giggles of embarrassment, and answers of incomprehension. SIUE has a shared history and culture that most of us know. Unfortunately, a meaningful construct of learning isn't a part of what we share.

My point is not to criticize the pedestrians that we may encounter on Circle Drive. It might be reasonable that these constituents couldn't respond to our questions. Students, for example, possibly never have been challenged to consider that learning is something that even needs defining. Indeed, many students are so well indoctrinated into the view that test-scores equal learning that they find questions about definitions of learning to be puzzling and unnecessary. My point is to wag a finger of blame at faculty members and administrators who are responsible for the development and implementation of curriculum and instruction. For these faculty members and administrators to be complicit in allowing definitions of learning to remain undefined and fuzzy is inexcusable. In fact, I have come to recognize that my own classroom practices early in my career at SIUE worked against sound learning. Particularly in the last four years, I've worked to redress the situation.

In an effort to promote dialogue about these issues and a classroom milieu that will support meaningful learning, I first offer a definition of learning that I think should be used as a starting point for discussion within SIUE. Based on that definition, the next part of the paper offers some radical recommendations that will allow faculty to support learning. The paper concludes with advice for both faculty members and students.

Definitions of Learning

In this section of the paper, I first address the problems and difficulties of establishing a clear definition for learning. Then, I offer a proposed direction for defining learning that overcomes some of these problems and difficulties.

Problems and Difficulties of Defining Learning

When faculty members are asked to address the concept of learning, disciplinary distinctions quickly come into play. For example, some schools at SIUE, such as the School of Education and College of Business, might tend toward a view that learning is a utilitarian construct and is designed simply to prepare people for the work force. I have heard arguments from some faculty in performing arts fields, such as theater and music, that learning is a matter of skill development. Once a student's "chops" are ready for professional performance, so this line of reasoning goes, that student can be said to be educated. Conversely, other faculty members—including some from the same performing arts departments—define learning more easily in light of a liberal arts view. These faculty members would point to skills of critical analysis, creative thinking, and a broad humanities-based education as important. I do believe that learning must be considered from a variety of perspectives and for a variety of purposes (cf., Knowlton, 2003; Knowlton & Thomeczek, 2007). I also believe, however, that we academics

often use disciplinary distinctions as a rouse for territory protection, to hide our own insecurities, and to avoid difficult and sometimes uncomfortable discussions about learning.

One territory that's protected is that of a comfortable pedagogy. I just can't force myself to accept, for example, that any faculty member actually can believe that a methodology of lecture and exam-giving creates learning. Yet, a chalk-n-talk method of teaching dominates in many SIUE classrooms—perhaps in some disciplines more than others. I can't help but wonder if these pedagogies are primarily chosen because of serious deliberations over learning or out of a sense of professor ease and comfort.

I also think that territory protection and faculty-member insecurity sometimes take precedent over student learning through hiring decisions. Over the past twenty years, I have been on many search committees looking to hire faculty members and administrators. Faculty diversity is, as it should be, central to most every search committee charge that I've ever seen; my experiences suggest that the conversations among committee members show that the committees take this charge seriously. But, almost all of the discussions are based on gender, culture, race, sexual orientation, with some occasional lip-service to religion. I am not begrudging the notion of "protected minorities," and I certainly think that faculty members who fall within the parameters of these minorities should be given careful consideration; still, my point is that this seems to be the *only* way that faculty members view diversity, and I can't help but wonder if such a narrow view hinders learning.

As I type this, I can't recall a single search committee that I've ever been a part of that discussed diversity of views, experiences, or ideological stances among candidates. In an Economics Department of Keynesians, surely there must be a serious search for a neoclassical in the name of diversity. In an English Department that's dominated by those who value expressive

writing and students' abilities to emote through language, wouldn't it make sense to search for a faculty member who brings the views of a current traditionalist? Within a Political Science program dominated by faculty members who have quite liberal views, wouldn't it best benefit student learning to balance those views by allowing students to learn under the tutelage of a conservative professor (if it's possible to find one)?

Proposed Direction

I recently encountered a view of learning that I find quite useful to redress this situation. The definition comes from noted author and business guru Stephen Covey. When asked about the "horizon regarding the personal effectiveness with today's new college grads," Covey (2006) responded by pointing to the need for "training them to think conceptually, strategically, and interdependently." Furthermore, Covey said that we should "inspire them to find their unique talent and passion." He said that they should not be "afraid of leaving their comfort zone and facing new challenges." It is necessary, Covey argued for them to stay "on a high learning curve" (p. 56). I like this definition because it does seem to offer a view of education as skill development, career preparation, and liberal arts thinking. Even more, it touches upon another view of learning that perhaps should be important in all of our university courses—helping students learn about themselves.

If Covey (2006) is right that these characteristics will stand students in good stead, then it seems to me that, by default, professors may be missing the mark of learning to focus solely on helping students view content through narrow lenses and prepare for the world of work. Learning, Covey seems to be arguing, should be more transformative, focusing on personal change through education (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Transformative education is consistent with notions of "learning about the self" (cf., Knowlton, 2003, p. 8) and self reflective processes

(Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Transformative education addresses the central question of "what will all this [education] do to me" (Holmes, 1996, p. 24). Such a view inherently involves social, civic, and ethical components that are inherent to transformative education (Brower & Dettinger, 1998). Certainly, the type of education that I describe focuses on "deep learning," rather than on broad content knowledge (Bain, 2004).

Adjustments to Classrooms

Using Covey's (2006) views as a starting point and extending that starting point toward a view of learning as transformative, a simple, yet startling, fact comes to light: Promoting learning is actually a fairly radical concept within the academy. Equally radical, in this section of this paper, I point to four ways that I have set aside a comfortable pedagogy in order to better promote learning within SIUE classrooms. Within a discussion of these four, I offer students' views from my own end-of-semester surveys in my undergraduate Educational Psychology course.

Amplifying All Voices

We faculty members often are given credit for embracing diversity. Provocatively, though, I think that we faculty members often define diversity in very narrow, limited, politically-correct, and intolerant ways, and I have been forced to ask myself about my own hidden biases and assumptions. Ironically, this self-questioning emerged from my own observations of other faculty members' biases. For example, I have heard faculty members on this campus liken capitalists to animals who grub in the mud and eat their own feces. Many of our students in classrooms are capitalists and will value the idea of a free-market system. Similarly, six years ago, as I was attending an SIUE workshop on embracing diversity that was

sponsored by our Provost's office, a workshop participant stood up and proudly announced her state of enlightenment as one who respects all people from all perspectives; and then she praised the workshop as a step toward (and I quote) "setting aside the farm boy mentality." Coming from at least three generations of farmers (if not more), such a statement was incredibly offensive to me. More to the point of this paper, what effect would such a view have on this professor's ability to hear and value all voices within the classroom?

I am not arguing that the views of capitalists and farm boys should go unchallenged in our classrooms. I am suggesting that we faculty members, whether we know it or not, privilege some voices (usually our own) over other voices in the classroom. I agree with Speck (1998) that pluralism is inherent to our classrooms regardless of how homogenous a set of students may seem. If Speck is right, I constantly should be asking myself how I can enhance and amplify the voices of those who bring dramatically different perspectives and beliefs from my own.

I first try to accomplish this by using critical questioning in my classroom. Regardless of whether I agree or disagree with a student, I try to adopt a stance of vigorously challenging their views and raising the best arguments against the student's perspective that I can muster. Interestingly (at least to me), I have had a much more difficult time with adopting this neutral stance in the last year or so. Even when I do let my own beliefs show, I usually do so on issues that my experiences suggest will be highly controversial. I then push my very unpopular perspective forcefully but with (I hope) plenty of opportunities for students to push back. One peer reviewer of my classroom recently suggested to me that my manor in the classroom almost "begs for" students to challenge my authority and disrespect my expertise. I think this peer reviewer meant that as a criticism. I viewed it as praise.

Second, I have tried to abolish many notions of formality in my classroom. One formality that I have become quite liberal with is the use of "correctness" in students' writings. It is rare that I include criteria related to formal argument in my assignments. Notions of a thesis sentence, APA citations, and the like are usually non-existent. Furthermore, grammar, spelling, and punctuation as criteria in writing assignments are rare. My message to students is clear: Slang? Sure! Profanity? If that helps you! My agenda is to hear students' ideas, not to ensure that students articulate ideas with a level of scholarly pompousness that will result in me feeling pleased. To best allow a student's voice to be heard, I have found that I must set aside my preconceived notions of *how* voices should be expressed.

Third, I simply try to provide outlets for amplifying student voices. I use discussion boards as a medium for allowing voices to be expressed outside of class. In many discussion boards, I allow students the option of contributing anonymously, if that frees them to have their say. During class, I send students a message that they should feel free to interrupt my lectures with their own contributions. I try to set aside my preconceived notions of "teacher talk" and make lectures more of a discussion. I regularly tell my students that they have significantly more to learn from each other than they have to learn from me. It only struck me that this statement was controversial when senior faculty members in my department suggested that I remove this statement from my tenure and promotion teaching narrative.

Do my attempts to "hear" students result in students feeling comfortable sharing their views and beliefs? On end-of-semester evaluations, I regularly have collected data to determine if students are actually sharing their ideas and beliefs, as opposed to conforming to the ideas that they think would gain my favor. I ask students to respond to the following prompt: "On opinion-based writings, I tended to tell Dr. Knowlton what I thought he wanted to hear, not what

I really thought." They respond to this prompt on a five-point Likert scale ranging from a "Strongly Agree" (5) through "Strongly Disagree" (1). See Table 1. While the standard deviations are quite large, I am pleased that across the twenty-five sections of Educational Psychology for which I have data, the number has never reached a standard of "neutral" (3).

Insert Table 1 about here

Perhaps, more importantly, do my approaches for amplifying student voices result in learning? I have collected data on the degree to which discussion boards serve as a medium for allowing voices to contribute to learning. Table 2 shows students results on a five-point scale. Specifically, students marked this item in one of several ways: as not contributing to their learning and being "a waste of [their] time" (1); being "vaguely useful and only contributed loosely to [their] learning" (2); providing them "with a moderate opportunity to learn" (3); contributing "more than moderately to [their] learning" (4); and being "extremely useful in [their] own thinking and learning" (5). (Throughout this paper, I will call this the "learning report scale.") As can be seen, the results are not particularly impressive. Only in seven of the fifteen sections has the average risen over a standard of providing a moderate opportunity to learn.

Insert Table 2 about here

Inclusion of Spirituality within the Curriculum

A view of learning that is consistent with Covey's (2006) notions and that is transformative must consider students' understandings of themselves as spiritual beings. Such an argument is not one of scholarly sacrilege. After all, historically speaking, many now-secularized institutions of higher education once were steeped in religious foundations (Burtchaell. 1998; Marsden, 1994; Murphy, 2005). More currently, from a religious perspective, "faith" often is defined as a verb, rather than a noun. As Nelson (1987) notes, there is a distinction between "faith" as the content of a subject and "faith" as "act-oriented meaning making" (p. 334). In pointing specifically at developing a Christian worldview, Holmes (1996) suggests that learners must adopt a stance that is "exploratory" and "perspectival" (p. 59) and based on "raising questions and doubts" through "dialogue" (p. 74). These religious perspectives about learning are strikingly similar to the secular view of learning as involving the creation of a "natural critical learning environment" (Bain, 2004) through critical analysis (Brookfield, 1987), collaboration (Brooks & Brooks, 1993), and discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

Lest one view this point as an argument from a scholarly heretic, the reverse is also true. Secular scholars routinely use religious metaphors to describe learning. Consider Welch's (1993) point that many modern models of education require students "to participate in a range of identity-changing . . . assumptions about . . . learning." Furthermore, Welch notes that both the "construction of knowledge" and the "construction of self" are important aspects of a true education. Welch points out that these things are in fact very analogous to religious conversions (p. 388).

I don't think that these connections to religion should be ignored. Nevertheless, I am not suggesting the integration of overtly religious perspectives or modes of inquiry into the secular classroom. Perhaps spirituality "welcomes, but does not require, religious beliefs" (Bento, 2000, p. 653); so within this point, I focus on a secularized type of spirituality. I am pointing toward the possibility that transformative learning transcends lecture, testing on content, and cognition. This transcendence is inherently spiritual. As one of my mentors recently said to me, "True learning begins when we, as faculty members, can get inside of students' ego circles." Getting inside requires a spiritual focus.

My campaign for a spiritual focus may seem quite radical, but consider a post-modern view that dominates many higher education classrooms—that knowledge and even truth itself are cognitive or social constructions. How can the social construction of knowledge be discussed in any meaningful way without addressing the spiritual realm, given the prominence of spirituality within many people's lives? Within a post-modern framework, students must ask themselves metaphysical questions about their own epistemological, ontological, and deontological stances. The answers are inherently spiritual and require a type of reflection that transcends materialism and content. More practically, consider the popular practice of "service learning" as a pedagogy. One cannot meaningfully implement service learning without discussions of students' civic duty and responsibility to others (Murphy, 2005). Doesn't such a pedagogy have a spiritual component? Some literature is beginning to broach the subject of spirituality within secular classrooms (cf., Hoppe & Speck, 2005), but practical advice is quite thin. There are several ways that I have attempted to get inside students' ego circles and allow room for the spiritual self in the classroom. Some of these ways are based in curriculum decisions. Others are based in pedagogy.

In terms of curriculum, I share with students some passages from the Cult Classic Novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1981). Specifically, I share Pirsig's notion of "care" as a part of the learning process. Similarly, I introduce some of the ideas of Wayne Dyer (2001, 2004), who argues that we all have a creative genius within us, and we can activate that creative genius through our powers of intention. Through these added elements to the curriculum, I attempt to lead students to embrace an ethereal view of themselves as seekers who are not confined by the physical realms of time, place, or classroom activity. Transcendent learning requires students to no longer see themselves as immediate and material beings in the here and now; rather, I aim to help them come to understand themselves as integrated spiritual beings, where the emotional, psychological, and intellectual all combine as they activate intention to attract knowledge into their lives. My experiences suggest that this does cause them to see themselves in new ways that are consistent with the spiritual realm. As one student wrote in my summer course after discussing Dyer's ideas, "I have to release my preconceived structured class ideas." I inferred that this notion of releasing had a spiritual and transcendent component.

Did these curriculum additions influence student learning? I have asked students to consider the contributions of Pirsig (1981) and Dyer (2001, 2004) toward their learning. In the most recent four sections of Educational Psychology that I have taught, I have asked students to respond to the following prompt using the earlier-described "learning report scale": "Dr. K reading to the class excerpts from *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and from *The Power of Intention*." Table 3 shows the results over the four sections.

Insert Table 3 about here

As can be seen from that table, one average was over a four, while the others were between a three (providing a "moderate opportunity to learn") and a four (contributing "more than moderately to learning"). The summer section that contained an average higher than a four was a very abbreviated semester—three weeks long. Perhaps the higher average can be explained by the fact that the course was condensed and thus references to the content-in-question was more focused and intense.

Pedagogically speaking, I am coming to discover that requiring students to be alone with themselves can promote learning in a more ethereal sense than can collaboration with an instructor or classmates. For example, in recent years, I have adopted the use of silence in the classroom during discussions by following the advice of Brookfield and Preskill (1999). Specifically, I regularly ask students a question that can serve as the basis for a discussion; before I allow discussion to begin, though, I insist on thirty seconds of silence to allow students to formulate an answer. After this period of silence, I'll ask for volunteers to respond. Similarly, while I have long been an advocate of the notions of "writing to learn"—informal writings designed to help students explore their own beliefs and discover what they really believe about content and about themselves as learners (cf., Fulwiler, 1982; Lindemann, 1995) —I am just in the last couple of years coming to see these writings as spiritual to the extent that they allow students solitarily to set aside their own egos and discover through writing what they really believe.

Do these pedagogies that try to pierce students' ego circles by leaving them to be alone with their thoughts contribute to learning in my classroom? Only in one course section has it occurred to me to collect information about the educational benefits of the use of silence. The item was a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The prompt read as follows: "Dr. K sometimes giving us 30 seconds to think about our answer to a question helped me figure out what I wanted to say." The average was a 4.75 (standard deviation of .44). More consistently, I have collected data on students' opinions of the educational benefits of writing to learn. I do collect data on individual categories of writing-to-learn assignments. An explication of this data is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I report findings on a single item that treats the educational value of writing to learn more holistically. The item read as follows: "I experienced 'writing to learn' in this class in that I did have times where I discovered what I was trying to say while I was writing. Writing helped me 'figure stuff out.'" The results on a five-point Likert scale are shown in table 4. The averages do seem to suggest the educational benefits of "writing to learn" types of assignments. All of the averages in these five sections were higher than a four.

Insert Table 4 here

The approach that I describe of integrating spiritual components into the classroom is something relatively new to me. Only once has it occurred to me to ask students if they recognize a spiritual component within the classroom. In one section of Educational Psychology during the summer of 2007, I asked students to respond on a five-point Likert scale to the

following prompt: "I think this course had a 'spiritual' component to it." The responses resulted in an average of 3.29, indicating response closer to "neutral" than to "agree."

Assessments that promote learning

When I discuss the syllabus with students early in the semester, I describe the ways that I will (and will not) assess their learning. As a part of this description, I regularly survey students through an informal show-of-hands survey: "How many of you have ever gotten an 'A' on a test or exam and as you were sitting there looking at that test once it was returned to you, you found yourself thinking, 'I sure pulled the wool over that professor's eyes, I didn't know any of this content.'" Typically, most (if not all) hands in the room go up. I then survey them with a parallel question: "How many of you have ever received back a 'D' or 'F' on a test, but as you were looking at the test, you found yourself thinking, 'But I know this content so well. I could tell the professor everything about it right now'?" Often, I extend this line of questioning even further and more dramatically: "If I gave you the exact same exam today that you made an 'A' on last semester, would you make an acceptable grade on it?" The answers are routinely in the negative. I've implemented these informal polls in my courses over the last five years that I've taught at SIUE, and the results have seemed consistent over time: Tests and exams, my students report, do relatively little to instill meaningful learning or to serve as a report that accurately reflects what they have learned. Perhaps, at best, exams offer some short-term benefit of allowing students to pass the exam. More realistically, they offer no benefit related to learning and certainly none related to transformative learning as defined by Covey (2006).

If evidence suggests that tests and exams don't create and demonstrate meaningful student learning and if the professoriate of SIUE is committed to student learning, then it seems to me that the professoriate is remiss (if not unethical) to support a classroom assessment system

that is based on exams and tests. What's the alternative? I offer three points of direction, each of which I have embraced in my classroom:

First, I have abandoned most notions of positivist assessments where students are obligated to only report to me close-ended answers to convergent questions. Occasionally, I'll give a short ten question "quiz" and hope for correct answers. Other times, I'll ask for a summary and assess the accuracy of those summaries. Mostly though, my assessments are radically writing intensive and not based on students' abilities to report correct answers to me. Instead, students must be using language to articulate their own thoughts, ideas, understandings, analyses, and judgments—their own views of truth. I have found that my response to these student assessments are more robust (and thus more instructive) than would be my responses to a test.

Second, these open-ended assessments must be consistently and informally integrated into a course. Assessments best promote learning not when they are tacked on to the end of an instructional unit; instead, assessments of student learning should be integrated throughout instruction. In fact, early in my career at SIUE, students would not even recognize assessments. It was not unusual on the end-of-semester evaluation for students to respond to a question about the quality of assessments with a "not applicable." Blurring the lines among learning, assignments, and assessments is not uncommon in the higher education literature (cf., Anderson, 1998; Knowlton & Knowlton, 2001). I use Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) as described by Angelo and Cross (1993) and as advocated by SIUE's Office of Assessment and its now-defunct Excellence in Learning and Teaching Initiative. The one minute paper and muddiest point papers are two examples of CATs that I constantly use. Furthermore, I have

experimented with single-sentence summaries. These approaches, as well as many other CATs, allow professors to constantly assess learning throughout a course.

Third and most radically, assessments of course content should be balanced with metacognitive assessments. That is, assessments can only promote transformative learning when they are balanced between assessments that foster students' learning of content and assessments that foster students' learning about themselves as learners. For example, in order to best promote learning, how might we define the job of, say, a music appreciation instructor? Would it be to teach the facts and figures of music history—a litany of who wrote what opera or symphony joined with the dates and composers? Or, is the job of that instructor to teach students *how* to learn about music—the learning process that a musicologist, music theorist, or performer engages in to better understand the nature of music? This approach shifts the emphasis from content acquisition to the very heart of student learning. It is an approach that makes learning more personal and thus more in line with the view of transformative learning that was offered earlier in this paper.

My students seem to confirm in a variety of ways that my assessments do promote learning. Here, I point to two questions that I ask on end-of-semester evaluations in an effort to confirm this. First, on a five-point Likert Scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree), I ask students about the degree to which they have learned about themselves as learners in my courses. Table 5 shows the results of that question.

Insert Table 5 about here

Along the same lines, I recently began asking students about the degree to which this course has changed the way that they think. Bain (2004) advocates the notion of helping students learn to think within the confines of the discipline. Specifically, I have asked students to respond to an item that gets at the degree to which they have come "to think like an educational psychologist." See Table 6.

Insert Table 6 about here

Both tables 5 and 6, show some degrees of success with the types of learning that transcend learning that could be reported on a test. Only in 25% of the courses shown in table 5 did the average drop below a 4.0, which would indicate "agreeing" with the statement. With table 6, it is clear that I have had less success in getting students to think in ways that would be indicative of professionals in the field. Only once has the average risen above a standard of "agree." The other seven sections in which I have collected this data show averages between "neutral" and "agree." Still, when taken cumulatively, these two tables seem to provide some evidence that the approaches to assessment that I have described result in learning that goes beyond what can be reported on a test.

Furthermore, I collect data on end-of-semester evaluations to determine whether students believe that my assessments *deprive them* of learning opportunities. I ask students to respond to an item that reads as follows: "I would have learned the course material better if there had been

a mid-term and/or final exam." Table 7 shows the results across twenty course sections from the fall of 2004 through the fall 2007. As can be seen from that table, only thrice did the averages rise above a standard of "disagree" (2.0). In these cases, it only barely surpassed that standard (average = 2.23). Interestingly, in two of the occasions where the average was above "disagree," the standard deviations were tied for the highest ones that occurred across the twenty sections.

Insert Table 7 about here

Combining tables 5 through 7, I believe that I have evidence to support the view that the blurring of assessments does allow for students to see their own learning. Furthermore, these tables seem to suggest that their learning is not based on memorization and regurgitation of content. Rather, their learning is based on Bain's (2004) notions of deep learning.

Removing Grades from Classrooms

I have determined that grades, in themselves, undermine learning. I have many anecdotes to support such a statement, but my favorite one was a conversation among a group of students that I overheard in the Cougar Den during the fall of 2006. About seven students were sitting around a table "studying" for a biology exam. As I eavesdropped on their conversation, however, much of their discussion was not about the content of the exam. Rather, they were discussing the number of points that they needed on the exam to reach the minimum threshold for a "B" in the course. After listening to this conversation for a few minutes, I wondered how

long the discussion of grades and points would take precedent over the discussion of Biology content. I started my stop watch. Twenty five minutes later, those students were still discussing point values and indeed had calculated point values in long hand. From the conversation, I infer that their calculations included already-completed points and an unknown variable of exam points. I couldn't help but wonder the obvious: What if these students had invested that time studying Biology? Would their learning have been more substantive?

I have been involved in similar anecdotes, such as students asking me what grade they need to earn on a project to get a "B" in the class. I am astounded, humiliated, and embarrassed at the number of times over my twenty-year teaching career that I have been complicit in perpetuating the emphasis on grades at the expense of student learning. At one time, I would sit in my office with students teaching them how to calculate their grade. On more than one occasion, I even distributed step-by-step instructions that taught students how to calculate their grade. It is behavior of mine that I now find obnoxious, wrong-headed, and educationally reprehensible. Perhaps I should take some solace in the fact that other professors are equally as complicit: As one former professor of Education here at SIUE has said to me, "I give all my graduate students an 'A' because they are expecting that credential in order to get an appropriate pay raise." Grades have taken on a fiscal role and they have an administrative function; neither fiscal nor administrative issues are related to student learning. I would further argue that such fiscal and administrative issues do not even fall under the authority of faculty members.

These experiences led me to a conclusion: If the goal is to promote student learning, then grades should be removed from classroom discourse and practices. In terms of discourse, I no longer discuss with students "what it takes to get an 'A.'" Rather, I offer feedback on assignments and engage in discussions toward the goal of helping students improve their own

learning. In terms of practices, I have implemented removing grades on some types of assignments for the last fifteen years. In recent years, I have become more radical: As of the summer of 2007, my undergraduate students no longer see any grades on any assignments until they log on to CougarNet at semester's end. They do see markings of various types: smiley faces and frowny faces; check marks, plus signs, and minuses. Students do routinely report to me that they impose a more familiar grade upon these markings—a plus sign surely means an "A" while a "check" equals a "B" type of logic. I go to great lengths to point out to them that they are making assumptions, and their efforts would be better placed on thinking about the course content, their own learning, and the qualitative feedback that they receive on assignments.

In appendix A of this paper, I have included my now-standard handout on grading that I include in my Educational Psychology syllabus. Perhaps it could serve as a starting point for other faculty members who buy my argument that removing grades from classrooms will rightly put a stronger emphasis back on student learning. Both students and faculty members have suggested to me that the approach that I outline within this paper and within Appendix A is unethical. On the contrary, I argue that by removing grades from the classroom, I am restoring a level of ethics to the extent that the emphasis is placed on learning, not on grading.

I routinely collect data about my students' attitudes on this issue of grading. Table 8 shows students' opinions on two five-point Likert-Scale items. These items reflect students' opinions about the role of grades in relation to their learning. In considering both of these questions, only once did students' averages rise to a standard of being "neutral" on the item. Now, in open-ended comments, students routinely tell me that they would *like* to know their grades, but I think that we must distinguish between what students prefer and what fosters their learning.

Insert Table 8 about here

Implications

As the title of this paper suggests, I believe that student learning and its assessment is SIUE's most important mission. All other functions and activities within the university should be subservient. In what follows, I offer implications, advice, and questions for students, faculty members, and administrators.

Advice to Students

Be grateful to professors who require you to write regularly and often. It is writing that will result in your ability to develop ideas that you did not think that you were capable of. It is the discipline of writing overtly and constantly that will change your thinking to something covertly rich and substantive. Approach writing tasks with zeal and understand that sitting down to pump out a paper the night before it's due might well get you a "B+," but it won't get you closer to the substance that you would find through a process of starting early and approaching the task toward the goal of learning, not earning a grade.

Work against the conditioning that you received throughout your pre-college education. Don't allow yourself to buy into the myth that I was told regularly and often throughout my undergraduate experience: "Just make good grades, and you can write your own ticket to success." I have friend who finished her two undergraduate degrees in four years with a GPA

higher than a 3.5. After now being out of her undergraduate program for ten years, she calls this message linking grades to success the "harlot's lie of higher education."

Instead, I would challenge you to follow the advice of Dyer (2004) and constantly search for the inner genius that you have within you. I would ask you to follow the advice of Covey (2006) and search for your own passions so that your feelings of substance will come from within and not be based on some pompous professor like a professor imposing a letter of the alphabet on your ideas.

Faculty Members

In response to this paper, I recognize that some faculty members will point to research as their top purpose. But, I would like to remind those faculty members that this is not a Carnegie status one institution. SIUE, as a premier metropolitan university, puts first the notion of student learning and its assessment. We faculty members should take an uncompromising leadership role in enforcing these points. All other purposes should be subservient.

I offer three points that I would encourage faculty members to consider. My first point is an urge for purposeful resistance of administrative initiatives that do not include rationales involving student learning. For example, arguments about the benefits of online courses in terms of fulfilling a marketing and recruiting mission should be of little interest or relevance to faculty members. I am proponent of online courses, but I believe that when they are designed poorly and implemented too quickly to meet the artificial deadlines of an administrator, then we compromise SIUE's mission to promote learning.

My second point is related to faculty governance over tenure and promotion criteria for teaching. If administrators insist on having end-of-semester student evaluations (and they will), faculty members should ensure that the questions focus on student learning, not on ancillary

issues. I reject the view that asking students to rate a faculty-member's likeability is related to student learning. I find it simply laughable that we should ask students to compare a faculty member to others that they have had. To ask such questions is a clear indicator that one has not considered the literature on student evaluations. Research on student evaluations suggests that students aren't particularly proficient in judging the value of professor behaviors; students are quite good, however, in examining and evaluating their own learning (Kaplan, Mets, & Cook, 2000; Seldin, 1999). In fact, as should be clear, I think faculty members should include evaluations that are idiosyncratic to their own courses.

Third, faculty members must contemplate approaches that I have offered within this paper if they believe that such approaches will enhance opportunities for student learning. Certainly, these approaches may not make you popular with students. In fact, Speck (1998) notes that when professors focus solidly on student learning "they will probably confuse students, even anger them, because the teachers will cease to dish out right answers to canned questions[, . . . and these professors] set themselves in opposition to much that . . . authority figures will say about the role of the teacher" (p. 36).

I would guess that many faculty members have a reaction to the pedagogical and curriculum approaches described in this paper that goes something like this: "But, this doesn't apply to me; my content is about objective facts and truths, and students must know those truths. Therefore, the ideas that have been proposed within this paper don't fit with my content." I respond to this line of thinking with a question: So, is that really what you do as a professional in your field—you sit around and memorize factual truths? Even if you really believe that steps toward competence in your discipline requires memorization as a precursor to more meaningful professional activities, are you really comfortable arguing that the truths of your disciplines can

be objectively known and measured?   Could it be that assignments and activities based in

problem-based learning (Knowlton & Sharp, 2003), writing-across-the-curriculum (Fulwiler,

1982; Lindeman, 1995; Thomeczek, Knowlton, & Sharp, 2005), discussions (Brookfield &

Preskill, 1999), and reflection (Brookfield, 1987) are more robust and educationally-principled

than the approaches that currently are being used in your classroom?   Such approaches add a

substantive workload and burden to faculty members. But, the highest purpose should be student

learning, not a consideration of what is "easiest" on faculty.

Administrators

Just so administrators don't feel left out—though leaving them out might be the exact

right course of action if the point is student learning—I have questions:

What happened to the Excellence in Learning and Teaching Initiative? How has

relegating that initiative to a basement office or (worse) to a rarely-opened filing cabinet

improved learning across the university?   Certainly, the Provost's office has the office of

Assessment and that office, in my view, does an excellent job of promoting student learning. In

spite of that excellence, I would argue that it's not enough. The Excellence in Learning and

Teaching Initiative should have a more prominent role on this campus. A lack of support for this

initiative seems synonymous with undermining the learning mission of the university.

What are your criteria for addressing student issues and complaints that come before

you? Is your key criterion to do what is in the best interest of student learning? Or, do other

criteria creep into the picture? In handling conflict and measuring crises has your own ego as an

administrator taken a more prominent place in decision making than student learning? Have

your handling of conflicts ever resulted in decisions that will keep students (and maybe even

their parents) "happy" at the expense of student learning? I believe that these types of questions should cross administrator's minds hourly.

Conclusion

I hope that this paper has suggested the value of reconsidering the virtues of a view of SIUE as a learning institution. Furthermore, I hope that this paper has raised questions for you regarding the definition and conditions of learning. Most of all, I hope that this paper reminds all readers to constantly ask questions about student learning. After all, if it ain't about learnin', I dunno what we're doin' here.

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Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2003	32	2.25	1
Fall 2003	25	1.80	.91
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	2.22	1.31
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	2.63	1.35
Summer 2004	26	1.69	.79
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	2.42	1.34
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	2.25	1.09
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	2.33	1.27
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	1.92	.85
Summer 2005	26	1.96	1.06
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	2.12	1.33
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	1.96	1.11
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	1.88	1.12
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	1.96	.96
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	2.75	1.42
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	2.56	1.39
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	2.00	1.31
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	2.50	1.34
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	2.46	.88
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	2.75	1.19
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	1.93	1.12
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	2.04	1.08
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.91	1.12
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	2.50	1.22
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	2.62	1.27

Table 1. "On opinion-based writings, I tended to tell Dr. Knowlton what I thought he wanted to hear, not what I really thought."

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2002	32	2.25	1.11
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	2.90	1.26
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	3.27	1.04
Fall 2006, Section 1	25	2.83	1.46
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	2.58	1.39
Fall 2006, Section 3	18	4.13	0.83
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	3.23	1.48
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	2.64	1.31
Spring 2007, Section 3	24	3.29	1.27
Summer 2007	26	4.25	1.15
Fall 2007, Section 1	22	3.86	0.83
Fall 2007, Section 2	23	3.73	1.20
Fall 2007, Section 3	27	4.04	0.92

Table 2. Students' perceptions of online discussions through discussion boards as contributor to their learning

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Summer 2007	24	4.04	.91
Fall 2007, Section 1	22	3.41	1.01
Fall 2007, Section 2	17	3.59	1.12
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.62	1.10

Table 3. The educational value of "Dr. K reading to the class excerpts from *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and from *The Power of Intention*"

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Summer 2007, section 1	28	4.75	.44
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.79	.41
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	4.43	.90
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	4.73	.55
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	4.62	.64

Table 4. "I experienced 'writing to learn' in this class in that I did have times where I discovered what I was trying to say while I was writing. Writing helped me 'figure stuff out.'

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2003	32	4.09	.89
Fall 2003	25	3.96	.73
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	4.19	.63
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	3.93	.98
Summer 2004	26	4.54	.51
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	4.00	.78
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	4.08	.70
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	3.87	1.06
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	4.08	.82
Summer 2005	26	4.69	.46
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	4.32	.69
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	4.00	.75
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	3.92	.93
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	4.23	.76
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	4.0	.75
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	3.85	.92
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	4.21	1.19
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	4.18	1.05
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	4.14	.85
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	4.0	1.02
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	4.57	.50
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.79	.41
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	4.39	.72
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	4.50	.51
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	4.35	.75

Table 5. "I have learned about myself as a learner in this class."

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	3.55	1.14
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	3.43	.96
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	3.42	1.14
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	3.89	.63
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.24	.72
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	3.83	.72
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	3.82	.73
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.54	.86

Table 6. "Because of this class, I tend to 'think like an Educational Psychologist.'"

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	1.63	1.04
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	2.23	1.35
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	1.82	1.08
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	1.83	1.11
Summer 2005	26	1.44	.57
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	2.11	1.35
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	1.81	1.23
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	1.73	1.20
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	1.78	.90
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	2.09	1.15
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	1.59	.98
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	1.32	.49
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	1.32	.78
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	1.68	1.09
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	1.58	.88
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	1.61	.83
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	1.33	.56
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.39	.50
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	1.73	1.20
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	1.85	.88

Table 7. "I would have learned the course material better if there had been a mid-term and/or final exam."

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Question Averages (Standard Deviations)	
		When it comes right down to it, I am more interested in my grade than I am in learning.	I would have learned the course material better if Dr. Knowlton had put actual grades on [assignments].
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	2.5 (1.1)	2.8 (1.43)
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	3.0 (1.28)	2.6 (1.24)
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	1.9 (.59)	2.3 (1.18)
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	2.45 (1.06)	2.41 (1.01)
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	2.46 (1.00)	2.25 (1.00)
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	2.54 (1.14)	2.33 (1.13)
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	2.43 (.84)	1.86 (.71)
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	2.30 (.76)	1.54 (.59)
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.74 (.81)	2.09 (.90)
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	2.73 (1.08)	2.55 (1.14)
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	2.46 (1.10)	2.54 (1.30)

Table 8. Students' Opinions about Removing Grades from the Classroom.

Appendix A

Grading in Educational Psychology

In a perfect world, we wouldn't have to worry about grades; we could just all assume that we'd each do our best work and aim for the goal of "learning" (which is very different from aiming for a goal of a high grade). It's not a perfect world, and part of my professional responsibility is to give you a grade at the end of the semester. So, how will we deal with grades in this class?

I've always been intrigued by a story of a college professor. The college professor's name was Phaedrus, and his story is told in a cult classic novel called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Bantam Books, 1981). Part of the story has to do with Phaedrus' approach to grading.

> "All (semester) long papers would go back to the students with comments but no grades, although the grades were entered into a book" (p. 177).

This is the approach that I will take in this class. If I do my job well, you will never see a traditional grade on an assignment until you log on to CougarNet at semester's end.

Why in the world would I take such an approach? Well, let's look at why Phaedrus took this approach:

> "Grades [according to Phaedrus] really cover up a failure to teach. A bad instructor can go through an entire quarter leaving absolutely nothing memorable in the minds of his class, curve out the scores on an irrelevant test, and leave the impression that some have learned and some have not. But if the grades are removed, the class is forced to wonder each day what it's *really* learning. The questions, What's being taught? What's the goal? How do the lectures and assignments accomplish the goal? become ominous. The removal of grades exposes a huge and frightening vacuum" (p. 179).

I think that being sucked into this vacuum is a good thing, and it can help us think differently about what we are doing throughout the semester. (It also can help us think about issues surrounding grading in k-12 classrooms, as well.) There was another reason that Phaedrus removed grades from his classroom:

> "He had wanted his students to become creative by deciding for themselves what was good [thinking] instead of asking him all the time. The real purpose of withholding grades was to force them to look within themselves, the only place they would ever get a real right answer" (p. 179-180).

Maybe some of you are thinking that this approach "sounds scary." Do you think that Phaedrus' students handled it well?

> "[Most students] probably figured they were stuck with some idealist who thought removal of grades would make them happier and thus work harder. . . . One student laid

it wide open when she said with complete candor, 'Of course you can't eliminate [grades]. After all, that's what we're here for'" (p. 174).

Is she right? Is that what you're here for—a grade? Are you really here for a little marking on a piece of paper that is shaped like the top of a pyramid with a line drawn perpendicularly across it? I hope that that's *not* why you are here.

I hope you are here to learn, and learning is what I hope that your final grade will reflect. Admittedly, it is hard (maybe even impossible) for a grade to reflect "learning." After all, I can't climb into your brain and see how your knowledge and thoughts have changed. Your course grade will represent my professional judgments of the degree to which you have "shown" your learning.

Now, let me offer a bit more guidance about how your grade will be determined for each category of assignments in this course:

- **Learning Logs (35% of course grade)**: Because learning logs come in a variety of formats, a grade in the gradebook will be determined in different ways. In the case of any Learning Logs that come in the form of "right and wrong" quizzes, your earned percentage will be entered into my gradebook. In the case of Learning Logs that are open-ended writings or other activities, I will make a judgment about your Learning Log's quality, and I will enter an appropriate grade in the gradebook. Most of the time, no credit is given for learning logs that are completed late. Zeros on Learning Logs do add up quickly. At semester's end, I will drop your lowest Learning Log grade. (Everybody has to miss class once or twice!)

- **Generative Strategies (25% of your course grade)**: I will read and offer a marking on your first generative strategy. The generative strategies that are assessed by classmates will be returned to you with a marking as described in the "Analyzing & Commenting on Generative Strategies" assignment guidelines. The marking will be reported to me, and I will translate that marking into a grade in the gradebook. The only way to fully maximize your grade on generative strategies is to submit a hard copy during class on the day that it is due. If you aren't going to be in class on the day that the generative strategy is due, then get it to me outside of class. If you get it to me before it is due (such as by e-mailing it with a "time and date stamp" prior to the class session in which it is due), then you can still get "most" credit. If your generative strategy is submitted to me up to one week late, then you will still get "some" (but not much) credit. After one week, you will receive "no credit." Do not take a zero on a generative strategy. One zero will keep you from receiving an "A" in this course.

- **Online Replies (15% of course grade)**: Sometimes online discussions will be graded through informal "spot checking," and thus you will receive lots of credit for simply completing the requirements. Other times, online discussions may be assessed closely against announced criteria, and your grade will be determined based on this assessment. Regardless of which approach Dr. Knowlton uses, you can maximize your credit by paying attention to the section in the online replies assignment guidelines called "Learning from Online Replies." Dr. Knowlton will assess your work against much of that advice. Do not take a zero on an online discussion. You will receive some—very little—credit for

contributions to the online discussion that are up to one week late. That "late credit" will be better than a zero. One zero can, and probably will, keep you from getting an "A" in the course. If your average in online replies is low because you are not completing them on time, then I assume that you will know that. If, however, Dr. Knowlton's judgments of your replies are deemed to be of an unacceptable quality, then he will either send you an e-mail (at your SIUE account) or he will approach you personally or through writing during class.

- **Commenting & Analyzing Generative Strategies (15% of your course grade)**: I will determine whether or not you met all of the responsibilities that you have placed upon you as a part of this assignment. Simply "doing" your responsibilities *on time* will earn you a substantive part of your grade. In terms of quality, I will consider your handout in light of the criteria listed in the assignment guidelines. I also will consider the self/peer evaluations. I will translate your marking of your group members into a grade that is entered in the gradebook. Your average on this assignment will be a combination of my marking on your handout and your markings on the self/peer evaluations.

- **During-class Contributions (10% of your course grade)**: Throughout the semester, I will keep a "running record" (albeit a highly informal one) of your contributions during class. At roughly each quarter of the class, I will translate this record into a grade for the gradebook. The grade will not be based on any one or two class sessions. Rather, it will be based on my impressions of your level of participation over the course of that quarter. If you regularly miss class and do not volunteer (which is a criteria for "average to good" contributions) when you are in class, then I will assume that you know that your grade in this category will be only "acceptable," at the very best. If, however, my judgments of your volunteered contributions are deemed to be of an acceptable or lower level, then I will either send you an e-mail (at your SIUE account) or I will approach you personally or in writing during class.

Let me offer a few more general comments for maximizing, monitoring, and understanding your grade:

- The "default" grade in this course is a "B." I assume that you will do "good work." The grade of an "A" is reserved for those rare individuals who do exceptional work and go above and beyond to communicate their preparation and show their dedication to this course.

- While feedback and various markings that you receive on your work (like +, √, —, and NCs) are not perfectly correlated with a grade, they do give you indication about the quality of your work, and thus an appropriate grade. Therefore, you should consider that at the point of your third minus or first NC on any category of assignments, the markings are starting to have some negative impact on your grade. (By about your fifth minus in a category of assignments, that negative impact on your grade is growing strong.) If after your third minus, you don't make an appointment to talk with me about the quality of your work, I can only assume that (a) you understand why your grade might be lowered based on the quality of your work and (b) you accept the judgments of your work as fair and accurate. Therefore, I'm guilt free when I give you a lower grade.