Finding Our Souls Through a Radical Classroom Milieu:

Professor Explications and Students' Reactions

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Abstract

This article suggests that innovation in the higher education classroom can come only through a change to the classroom milieu. The article offers a definition of learning that can serve as the basis for meaningful innovation. Four needs for an innovative classroom milieu are described: The need to (a) amplify student voices, (b) allow room for spiritual rumination, (c) integrate assessments constantly and informally, and (d) eliminate the giving of grades. Each need is discussed and defended. Student data from end-of-semester evaluations is included.

Many articles about teaching and learning in higher education involve what we call in the south "preaching to the choir"—dramatizing negative teaching practices from the "average classroom" in order to convince progressive pedagogues (the very individuals who will be reading our theoretical forays) of the benefits of their own instructional strategy innovations. This is not such an article. In fact, a primary piece of the conceptual framework that underlies this paper is the argument that advancements in instructional practices and strategies have not substantively changed higher education for the better.

Certainly, this article does not denigrate the value of pedagogies that go beyond lecture and testing. Writing as a way of knowing (Fulwiler, 1982), during-class discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999), learning communities (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), problem-based learning (cf.,

Knowlton & Sharp, 2003), classroom assessment techniques (cf., Anderson & Speck, 1998; Angelo & Cross, 2003), and other advanced strategies can be useful. As a means of promoting innovation within higher education classrooms, however, a change of instructional strategies lacks substance. What accounts for the limitations of strategy change as a means toward innovation? First, institutions often advocate strategy change through workshops, book clubs, and other short-lived faculty-development interventions. Without support that extends beyond these interventions, faculty members often become uncomfortable with the strategy and therefore regress toward a "teach as I was taught" framework (Nelson & Knowlton, 2005). Usually, this framework consists of lecture and exam-giving, which are the antithesis of powerful instructional strategies. Second, even when faculty members successfully implement a strategy within their courses, the strategy does not always penetrate all course components. For example, a professor might implement a pedagogy of problem-based learning, yet that professor still will assess students by way of matching, multiple-choice, and true/false exams (Anderson & Puckett, 2003). In such a case, the implemented strategy is not congruent with the assessment. Similarly, a professor might implement innovative writing approaches within the classroom, yet that same professor will retain the practice of dominating classroom discourse (Thomeczek, Knowlton, & Sharp, 2005). In this case, the voice that students find within the writing assignments is stifled during class.

More broadly stated, instructional strategies have not led to true innovation in higher education because strategy change has not been based on a shift in epistemological stances—beliefs about the nature of teaching, learning, and knowing. Indeed, many within higher education still view learning as a function of memorizing content and solving well-structured problems. An epistemological shift would allow professors to more properly value progressive

instructional strategies and view learning as a complex process (Anderson, 1998; Bain, 2004; Knowlton, 2003). Furthermore, a shift in epistemology would require a reconsideration of learner needs, even when those needs are beyond the scope of what is commonly accepted in higher education (Knowlton & Thomeczek, 2007). In short, any classroom that aims for learning must aim to prepare students for the workforce, instill the type of thinking skills that are indicative of a liberal arts education, and help students come to understand themselves as human beings (Knowlton, 2003).

To summarize the argument, substantive change in the classroom must be driven and motivated by a more progressive view of learning and learners. Spinning out of this change in epistemology must be a reconsideration of the classroom milieu. A change in instructional strategies, then, becomes the logical conclusion of a change in epistemology and milieu. Strategy change, then, is the end point, not the starting point, for true innovation in the higher education classroom.

The remainder of this paper illustrates the ways that a reconsideration of epistemology can lead to a change in milieu. Any shift in strategies occurs as a means of operationalizing the new milieu. In the next section of this paper, a definition of learning is offered. Following a discussion of this definition, this paper describes adjustments to the classroom that will create innovation.

Definitions of Learning

Progressive views of learning are common, and many can be useful in helping faculty members broaden their epistemological stances; but I recently encountered a view of learning that I find particularly powerful toward the goal of changing the classroom milieu. The

definition comes from noted author and business guru Stephen Covey, as he was responding to a question about the "horizon regarding the personal effectiveness with today's new college grads" (Covey, 2006, p. 56). His complete answer is provided in Table 1. In summary, Covey responded by pointing to the need for conceptual, strategic, and interdependent thinking skills. Furthermore, Covey said that higher education should aim students toward their unique talents and passions. Personal effectiveness comes from always striving to learn and facing new challenges in a confident way.

Insert Table 1 about here

Prima facie, this definition may seem to be a pat answer from a business leader. A closer examination, however, can illustrate that, among other things, Covey (2006) is offering a view of learning that can motivate changes at the classroom milieu level. For example, consider that Covey's answer encompasses a variety of perspectives on learning. It offers a perspective on learning as preparation for the market place in an ever-changing economy. Covey's statements about the nature of learning also are indicative of liberal arts perspectives. Like Covey, one arguing for liberal arts perspectives would point to students staying on a "high learning curve" (p. 56) through conceptual, strategic, and interdependent thinking. To stretch the boundaries of learning even further, consider that Covey's references to students' humility and finding their own unique passions are quite consistent with transformative personal change (Palloff & Pratt, 1999) and notions of "learning about the self" (cf., Knowlton, 2003, p. 8). In this respect,

Covey's view of learning addresses the central question of "what will all this [education] do to me" (Holmes, 1996, p. 24). The point is that Covey's broad views of learning can motivate professors to rethink their own beliefs about teaching and learning. To operationalize Covey's view of learning, professors cannot depend on changes to instructional strategies. Rather, professors must reinvent the classroom milieu.

Further reading of Covey's (2006) perspective seems to support the need for a change in classroom milieu. For example, creating situations in which students can "develop a character of deep substance and integrity" (p. 56) seems to transcend the scope of traditional classrooms. Furthermore, in traditional classrooms students often are not expected to find substance and security from within. Rather, in many classrooms, the sense of substance comes externally through professorial grading. Most startling, Covey argues that students must be taken out of their comfort zone. These types of higher education outcomes cannot be achieved through instructional strategies. The milieu of the classroom must be reconceptualized.

As I have suggested, Covey's (2006) statement actually provides a definition of learning that is surprisingly robust. Specifically, his definition can serve as the basis for overcoming myopia in considering learners' needs. It also serves as a starting point for innovating the higher education classroom away from its traditional roots. These innovations require a change in milieu; and importantly, as professors move their classroom milieus beyond students' comfort zones and toward high learning curves, students will discover stronger opportunities for substantive learning.

Adjustments to Classrooms

Using Covey's (2006) views as a starting point, an important—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 the university classroom. My approach moves beyond implementing strategies and focuses, instead, on changing the classroom milieu, which can be uncomfortable to both students and me. By stretching all of us beyond our comfort zones, we move toward the apex of a steep learning curve. My intention is to provide arguments in support of these four and to describe how I implemented each into an undergraduate Educational Psychology course. These arguments and descriptions can serve as useful to other faculty members who may wish to experiment with changing their own classroom's milieu. Within a discussion of these four, I include students' opinions from end-of-semester evaluations.

Amplifying All Voices

Faculty members often seem progressive in embracing diversity. Provocatively, though, I think that we faculty members often define diversity in very narrow, limited, politically-correct, and intolerant ways. Worse, we often do not recognize our own intolerance. For example, several years ago, I was attending a workshop on embracing diversity that was sponsored by my university's Provost's office. During the workshop, one participant stood up and proudly announced her state of enlightenment as one who respects all people from all backgrounds; and then she praised the workshop as a step toward "setting aside the farm boy mentality." Coming from at least three generations of farmers, I was incredibly offended by such a statement.

More to the point of this paper, I would argue that both her own implicit prejudice and her lack of recognition of that prejudice will influence her willingness and abilities to hear students' views. By not hearing students, she is oppressing the opportunity for learning-based

dialogue. All faculty members have biases (whether they know it or not) and privilege some classroom voices (often their own) over others. The biases lead to a sense of privilege that is extended only to some within the classroom community. 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, we constantly should be asking ourselves how to enhance and amplify the voices of those who bring dramatically different perspectives, experiences, and beliefs from our own. Without the amplification of those voices, we surely will fall short of Covey's (2006, p. 56) vision for "interdependent thinking" as a means of helping future college graduates become comfortable operating outside their comfort zones.

I try to accomplish this amplification of other voices through creating a classroom milieu that diminishes my own formal authority as the course professor. Toward this goal, I regularly send students a message about the importance of social learning among them; it is a message that routinely appears in my course syllabi as well as in other course documents: "You have significantly more to learn from each other than you have to learn from me." Similarly, I often have included in my syllabi the statement that "the sooner that I can remove myself—as course professor—from the learning situation, the more substantive that [student] learning will become." Such statements only struck me as controversial (and, indeed, "radical") when senior faculty members in my department suggested that I remove those statements from my tenure and promotion dossier. They were concerned that such statements would raise concerns among various committees about my ability as a pedagogical "professor."

To further diminish my own role as formal authority, I send students a message that they should feel obligated to interrupt my lectures with their own contributions. I guide lectures away from "teacher talk" and toward interactive and free-for-all events. During the free-for-all class

sessions, I try to adopt a stance of vigorously challenging students' views and raising the best arguments that I can muster against the perspectives that they offer. Along this line, I somewhat forcefully try to push unpopular and counter-intuitive perspectives, but I leave plenty of opportunities for students to push back. One peer reviewer of my classroom recently suggested to me that my manner 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, and I indicated to her that I was delighted that she noticed.

One way that I ensure that the during-class free-for-all events are productive is by formalizing homework assignments that prepare students to reply to my vigorous challenges. Even within the homework, though, I abolish many notions of formality in an effort to amplify students' voices. 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 homework and other written 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! Your own culturally-appropriate vernaculars? Absolutely! Profanity? If that helps you!" My agenda is to hear students' ideas in their own authentic language, 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* that voice should sound.

Do my attempts to "hear" students result in students feeling comfortable sharing their views and beliefs? On end-of-semester evaluations, I regularly collect data to determine if students are sharing their actual 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 [the course professor] 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 2. 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). I view students' willingness to honestly articulate their beliefs as an important step toward learning. Until a classroom milieu fosters students' willingness to share their beliefs, pretense will take precedent over learning.

Insert Table 2 about here

Do my approaches for amplifying student voices result in learning? Table 3 shows a comparison of formal lectures with more open-ended class discussions across twenty-five sections of the course. Students marked these items using an informal "learning report scale." This scale obligates students to mark each 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).

Insert Table 3 about here

As can be seen from Table 3, the averages for open-ended discussions where all students had the opportunity to participate are higher than the averages for formal lectures. This suggests to me that, on average, allowing students' voices to be heard within the context of the classroom does contribute to student learning in ways that formal lectures do not.

Inclusion of Spirituality within the Curriculum

Covey (2006) notes that students' sense of substance must come from within. Covey also notes the need for students to find their own passions. Both finding one's own sense of substance and passions requires a spiritual focus (Holmes, 1996; Knowlton, 2003; Murphy, 2005). If finding one's own substance and passion is inherently spiritual and if finding substance and passions is inherently related to learning, then a conclusion is clear: To not provide room for spiritual rumination within the classroom is to hinder learning.

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 "act-oriented meaning making" (Nelson, 1987, p. 334), which is inherently "exploratory" and "perspectival" (Holmes, 1996, p. 59) and based on "raising questions and doubts" through "dialogue" (p. 74). These religious perspectives about learning are strikingly similar to commonly-held secular views of learning. 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 constructions are in fact very analogous to religious conversions (p. 388).

While I personally value these connections to religion, I am not arguing that overtly religious perspectives and modes of inquiry should be integrated into secular classrooms. Perhaps spirituality in classrooms "welcomes, but does not require, religious beliefs" (Bento, 2000, p. 653). Still, my point remains unchanged: Eliminating room for the spiritual hinders student development and learning. Consider, for example, 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 content.

More practically, consider the popular practice of service learning. One cannot meaningfully implement service learning without discussions of students' civic duty and responsibility to others (Murphy, 2005). Such discussions have spiritual components. Some literature is beginning to broach the subject of spirituality within secular classrooms (e.g., Hoppe & Speck, 2005), but practical advice within this literature is quite thin. Because of Covey's (2006) reference to inner-substance and the need for college students to find their passion, I have attempted to create room for students' spiritual selves. Part of the space for the spiritual is created through curriculum decisions; more space is found through a pedagogical approach. Both the curriculum decisions and pedagogy work together to activate students' egos. As one of

my mentors recently said to me, “True learning begins when we, as faculty members, can get inside of students’ ego circles.” Within that circle, the spiritual realm is found.

In terms of curriculum, I share with students various literature that offers ethereal treatment of course content. For example, I regularly read to students excerpts from the cult classic novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1981). Throughout that novel, Pirsig offers discussion of “care” as a part of the learning process. These passages, in my judgment, provide students with insight as to how learning in a classroom should activate their own egos and develop an ethereal sense of self. 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. Once I introduce the notion of genius within us, I routinely refer to it both during class and as a part of assignment guidelines, course rubrics, and other handouts. 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. I aim to help students 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. I am attempting to involve their ego as part of the course, and this involvement can be found in most course activities.

Do these curriculum additions influence student learning? I have asked students to consider the contributions of Pirsig (1981) and Dyer (2001, 2004) toward their learning. Using the earlier-described “learning report scale,” students respond to the following prompt: “[The course professor] reading to the class excerpts from *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

and from *The Power of Intention*." Table 4 shows the results over the four sections in which I have used Pirsig and Dyer as classroom readings.

Insert Table 4 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—meeting six hours a day for three weeks. Perhaps the higher average can be explained by the fact that the course was condensed and thus references to the content-in-question were more focused and intense.

Pedagogically speaking, I am coming to discover that requiring students to be alone with their own thoughts can promote learning in a more ethereal and spiritual sense than can collaboration with an instructor or classmates. To this end, in recent years, I have followed the advice of Brookfield and Preskill (1999) and announced moments of silence within a lecture or discussion. For example, 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, volunteers can 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. Writing-to-learn activities allow students solitarily to set aside their own egos and discover a more vulnerable, honest, and true self—to find the creative genius within themselves.

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? Because my use of silence is a recent innovation to my classroom, I have collected data about its value in only one course section. The item was a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The prompt read as follows: "[The course professor] 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 5. The averages do seem to suggest the educational benefits of writing-to-learn assignments. All of the averages in these five sections were higher than a four, which indicates agreement with the prompt.

Insert Table 5 here

Importantly, it is questionable whether students recognize the spiritual component of my course. Because the innovations that I describe of integrating spiritual components into the classroom are relatively new, 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 (with a standard deviation of 1.20), indicating response closer to "neutral" than to "agree."

Continuous and Open-Ended Assessments of Content and Metacognitive Skill

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'?" Many students answer in the affirmative. 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 routinely are negative.

I have implemented these informal polls in my courses over the last ten years as a part of the first-day discussion about the syllabus, and the anecdotal 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. If evidence suggests that tests and exams do not create and demonstrate meaningful student learning and if the professoriate is committed to student learning, then the professoriate is remiss (if not unethical) to support exam-based classroom assessment systems. Alternatives exist; and in what follows, 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 report to me close-ended answers to convergent questions. Occasionally, I will give a short ten-question "quiz" to check students' most basic level of comprehension. Mostly though, assessments in my course are writing intensive and require students to develop their own views of truth—their own thoughts, ideas, understandings, analyses, and judgments. 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 are consistently and informally integrated into my courses. Assessments that are integrated throughout instruction, as opposed to being tacked on to the end of an instructional unit, are more likely to help change the classroom milieu. In fact, students sometimes do not even recognize the writings that I assign as assessments. On end-of-semester evaluation questions about the quality of assessments, students sometimes respond 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). The one minute paper and muddiest point papers are two examples of CATs that I use consistently. These approaches, as well as many other CATs, allow professors to constantly assess learning throughout a course.

Third and most radically, I balance content-based assessments with metacognitive assessments. That is, assessments can promote the types of learning advocated by Covey (2006) only when those assessments are balanced between ones 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? Erring toward requiring students to consider their own learning provides a metacognitive (thinking about thinking) perspective and shifts the emphasis from only content acquisition toward the types of thinking skills that Covey (2006) advocates.

Do these three points of direction for assessments limit students' learning in my courses? The answer seems to be "no." 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 6 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 6 about here

Some evidence suggests that, though radical, the approach to assessment that I describe in this paper actually contributes to student learning. For example, I ask students about the degree to which they have learned about themselves as learners in my course. Table 7 shows results. Across twenty-five sections, the average ranges from a 3.85 (between "neutral" and "agree") to a 4.75 (between "agree" and "strongly agree"). Only in 25% of the course sections shown in table 7 did the average drop below a 4.0, which would indicate "agreeing" with the statement. To some extent, then, the metacognitive assessments seem to promote learning.

Insert Table 7 about here

Along the same lines, I recently began asking students about the degree to which my 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." Such a question addresses Covey's (2006) notion of conceptual, strategic, and interdependent thinking. See Table 8. With table 8, 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."

Insert Table 8 about here

In spite of the lack of success as shown in Table 8, tables 7 and 8 together, show some degree of learning gain. 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.

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 my university's dining facilities 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. Instead, 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 exam points and grades 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 completed calculations in long hand. From the conversation, I infer that their calculations included already-completed points and an unknown variable of exam points. I wondered the obvious: What if these students had invested that time toward 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.

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 withheld 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. They do see markings of various types that I draw on their work as a summary indication of my perceptions of quality:

smiley faces and frowns; and check marks, plus signs, and minuses. Students 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." 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 excerpts from 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 9 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. These results seem to suggest that students are more interested in learning than a grade. Furthermore, it seems that students feel that, on average, my withholding of grades does not negatively influence their learning. Importantly, 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 9 about here

Implications

In this paper, I have shared Covey's (2006) view of learning in higher education. This definition transcends disciplinary distinctions and brings together liberal arts and utilitarian perspectives on the purposes of higher education. I have primarily offered a theoretical defense of four radical ideas for changing the milieu of a college classroom. I also have offered an explanation of how I have translated theory into practice. The primary purpose of this article is not quantitative analysis; still, I have supplemented the practical and theoretical discussion with data from end-of-semester evaluations. While not empirically robust, this data is consistent with research on student evaluations to the extent that the research suggests that students are not 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).

The most obvious implication of this paper is that a shift from traditional views of learning—such as memorizing factual truths—toward more modern views of learning—such as 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)—is not substantive toward classroom innovation. Faculty members must contemplate reinventing the entire milieu of a classroom if they believe that such reinvention will enhance opportunities for student learning. Certainly,

these approaches may not make professors 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 will resist the creation of a milieu like the one that I have proposed. The creation of such a milieu leads to conflict and the need for additional considerations by faculty members. The first additional consideration 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 our own ethics.

A second additional consideration 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.

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The future and success of today's college grads lies in training them to think strategically, conceptually, and interdependently. The key is to inspire them to find their unique talent and passion. I would encourage them to develop a character of deep substance and integrity so that their security comes from within and they're not afraid of leaving their comfort zone and facing new challenges. I also encourage young people to be humble and opening to gaining experience and staying on a high learning curve. Because we have moved to a new knowledge-worker economy that is influenced by the world-class competition of a global, digitized economy, they have to go full-speed to catch up and add value.

Table 1. Covey's description of the horizon of today's college graduates

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 2. "On opinion-based writings, I tended to tell [the course professor] what I thought he wanted to hear, not what I really thought."

Semester & Section Number	**Number of Students**	Formal Lectures (with PowerPoint Accompaniment)	Discussions & Activities where everyone participates
Spring 2003	32	3.89 (1.01)	4.34 (.78)
Fall 2003	25	3.32 (1.03)	4.36 (.70)
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	3.89 (.89)	4.44 (.70)
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	3.70 (.95)	4.03 (1.00)
Summer 2004	26	4.15 (.78)	4.77 (.65)
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	3.50 (1.01)	4.65 (.68)
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	3.79 (.82)	4.38 (.75)
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	3.73 (1.12)	4.67 (.47)
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	3.70 (.87)	4.27 (.79)
Summer 2005	26	4.15 (.72)	4.58 (.57)
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	4.60 (.58)	4.64 (.64)
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	4.08 (.63)	4.69 (.47)
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	4.17 (.65)	4.42 (.72)
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	3.65 (.75)	4.27 (.72)
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	3.50 (1.06)	3.88 (.99)
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	3.00 (1.10)	3.77 (1.27)
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	4.00 (.85)	4.47 (.64)
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	3.95 (1.13)	4.32 (.99)
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	4.04 (.69)	4.21 (.79)
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	3.78 (.74)	4.21 (.93)
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	3.86 (.71)	4.82 (.39)
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.13 (.80)	4.83 (.48)
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	3.73 (1.03)	4.36 (.95)
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	3.91 (.87)	4.45 (.91)
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.81 (1.02)	4.31 (.93)

Table 3. Comparison of formal lectures and free-for-all activities

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 4. The educational value of the course professor "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 5. "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
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 6. "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	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 7. "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 8. "Because of this class, I tend to 'think like an Educational Psychologist.'"

Semester & Section Number	Question Averages (Standard Deviations)		
	Number of Students	**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 [the course professor] 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 9. 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.

Let me offer a few 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 √) 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, 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.