Points of Encounter

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I am pleased to introduce, on behalf of the editors, the first issue of the electronic journal Positive Pedagogy: Successful and Innovative Practices in Higher Education. Following a brief account of the journal's purpose, I will, as a means of suggesting the breadth of ideas appropriate for consideration in the journal, take up the topic of course design. The article's title, "Points of Encounter", is meant to suggest the value of conceptualizing both the journal and higher education as locations designed to bring together people of differing interests and experiences for vital, productive exchange leading to positive action.

Positive Pedagogy

Positive Pedagogy documents the efforts of instructors in Canadian higher education to facilitate learning in their students. It does not promote any one pedagogical theory or technique. Rather it assumes that the diversity of situations within which instructors work and the diversity of goals that instructors address afford a multitude of positive pedagogical actions. While the term "positive" is intended to evoke multiple associations, important among them is the idea of optimistic action as opposed to pessimistic inaction in response to the challenges of facilitating learning. Positive Pedagogy recognizes that Canadian instructors have created and implemented a wide variety of pedagogical concepts and procedures with considerable potential to enhance the work of their colleagues. The primary goal of the journal is to place these ideas before the higher education community for further discussion and wider use.

Readers are invited to submit examples of their own initiatives to the journal as articles and to use the Comment feature (to be implemented soon) to respond to the published initiatives of others. Lengthier descriptions of an integrated set of practices or discussions of broader conceptual topics will also be considered for publication as Commentaries. In this first Positive Pedagogy commentary I wish to consider course design, and I choose that topic because I suspect that it is the activity that will most frequently lead readers to the journal. Further, I hope that discussion of the wide variety of ways in which one can conceptualize and implement course design will prompt submission of a wide variety of examples of positive pedagogy for future issues.

Course Design: Purpose and Points of Encounter

Course design is bound to benefit from a clear sense of purpose. Facilitating learning is a very broad purpose, and there are many metaphors one might use in conjunction with it to further guide one's work. Consider some well known examples—coach, gardener, sage, shepherd, factory manager, midwife, travel guide, performer, orchestra conductor, or one more often thrust upon us today, purveyor of information and opinions to student consumers. Many interesting teaching practices stem from reflection on how to enact or to avoid enacting such metaphors in the classroom.

My own practice is often guided by Kenneth Burke's "unending conversation" metaphor (Burke, 1941; Brent, 1997) wherein I imagine myself introducing students to participants and ideas within the heated, on-going conversations of the academic community I am inviting the students to join (Sheese, 2000). How can I actively facilitate their comprehension of and initial participation in these conversations beyond simply pointing them to the locations (the library, for example) where they occur? I have imagined myself as designing special locations where students can actively prepare for and encounter the conversation. These locations become such things as classroom lectures, reading assignments, writing exercises, small-group discussions and opportunities for applied practice. It is these that I call points of encounter, points where the students meet, try out and battle with the ideas and participants in the conversation.

Consider how well the practices described in the current issue fit with the idea of designing particular points of encounter. The lecture setting can become an opportunity for students to discuss and take a tentative stand on an important and timely aspect of the broader conversation under consideration (Slavin, 2001). Reading disciplinary articles can become more active, more conversation-like, when guided by examples of the kinds of questions that experienced participants in the written academic conversation routinely ask (Rehner, 2001). Writing exercises can become authentic points of encounter when they involve careful reading, focused discussion with other students and an audience that will continue the conversation (Katz, 2000). It is not my goal here to argue for the superiority of the conversation metaphor or the points-of-encounter idea. Rather I only wish to suggest that formulating such concepts can lead to a productive re-vision of one's practices and serve as a stimulus to interesting new ones.

Course Design: Some Dimensions to Consider

As a young professor I believed that I was well on my way to perfecting the art of university teaching. I assumed that within a few years I would have the perfect plan, the perfect design for university instruction. That view didn't fall away easily, but experience is a good teacher and today I have a much greater appreciation for the diversity of approaches that an instructor can draw on when designing a course. I have attempted to schematize some of this diversity as a set of dimensions that might influence the design process. Again I make no claim for the superiority of this categorization—I am sure it reflects my particular experience with various initiatives, rather than some grand organization of nature—but I hope that it will suggest to others further ideas for positive pedagogical practice.

1. **Structure and Flexibility**

   How much structure should one build into a course, an assignment, a point of encounter? How much room should there be for flexibility as the situation develops? The first instructional model with which I became enamoured was highly structured in terms of course content. It was originally described by Fred Keller (1967) in the article "Goodbye, Teacher …" and is best known as the Keller Plan. Keller Plan instructors build small modules within their courses and provide mastery quizzes on each unit. Students follow the predetermined sequence of modules at their own pace with the support of student tutors. There is little room for flexibility in terms of the content, though the self-pacing and individualized tutoring do allow some flexibility in the delivery of instruction. I taught various courses using the Keller Plan, but found it more successful with Statistics than with other courses. Students in Introductory Psychology, in particular, were asking for more latitude to go their own direction. Perhaps it was this criticism that made me responsive to the educational ideas of Carl Rogers as presented in his book *Freedom to Learn*. Rogers (1969) favours a student-centred approach that puts the instructor in the role of facilitator, assisting students to reach self-established goals. Based on *Freedom to Learn* I designed a course that maximized student flexibility. Students were required to create their own reading list as well as projects demonstrating their understanding of the chosen material. My only concession to structure was a requirement to submit weekly journal reports on their progress and the provision of feedback on these reports. Class time was divided between small-group discussion of students' projects and reports on my own reading (in an attempt to model the way I wanted students to work, I forced myself to meet all the same requirements that I placed on the students). Perhaps needless to say, although a few students flourished, my model and the required journal were too little structure for the majority of students and they floundered badly.

2. **Replication and Creativity**

   To what extent should a course, an assignment, a point of encounter encourage a student to replicate the current information and ideas of the discipline? How much room should there be for student creativity? The Keller-based and Rogers-based designs could just as easily illustrate differences on this dimension. Sometimes this contrast is labelled as one of relative emphasis on

fact and opinion. I remember vividly a conversation with an English Department colleague who pointed out that by relying so heavily in Psychology on textbooks rather than the psychological literature, we were implicitly telling students that only the facts mattered (J. Brown, personal communication, October, 1988). On the other hand he felt his discipline's practice of favouring novels over literary critics implied that forming one's own opinion was of highest importance.

Today, with a more postmodernist sensibility, I recognize that fact and opinion are not so readily separable; but the same may not be true for our students. William Perry (1970) suggests that students are at various stages of intellectual development during their university years and that dualism is a prominent feature of early stages. Dualistic students are inclined to rigidly divide subjects and ideas into fact or opinion, a division that may lead them to view memorization as the only appropriate study technique. They seek to remember the words of the authorities, rather than understanding or developing their own view. Multiplistic students, on the other hand, are in danger of falling into an extreme relativism in which all of the ideas they meet are viewed as opinion and, thus, one's own view is as good as any other. Group projects and collaborative learning techniques would seem to have potential to assist students as they move towards Perry's more mature stages. These methods have the potential to create situations that combine attention to acknowledgment of the ideas and views of others with a need to examine assumptions and the criteria for one's evidence. Similarly, case-study and problem-based approaches to teaching (for example, Problem-based Learning, Woods, 1994) provide room for individual creativity without ignoring the givens of a particular situation.

3. **Product and Process**

Courses and assignments that emphasize acquiring the fundamental information of a discipline often assume that the students know how to go about their assigned tasks. Instructors specify the product they expect from their students with little or no instruction in the process to be followed. I first became familiar with this product-process distinction in the teaching of essay writing. Flower (1993) emphasizes that it is not enough to show students examples of the products of good writers; they must also become familiar with the cognitive and social processes and the associated strategies that lead to those products. The process approach to teaching writing led me to create a sequence of writing assignments in my first-year courses in place of a single library research essay at the end of the year. The sequence addresses one by one various aspects of the writing process—brainstorming, library searching, reading journal articles, summarizing articles, contrasting author's views, creating a point of view. Tutorial time is reserved for students to discuss their progress at each step. The product-process distinction seems relevant to other areas, mathematics for example, in which students are expected to understand problem solutions without necessarily having good problem-solving skills. More generally, the processes involved in critical thinking and other critical skills have become a focus of instruction for many teachers. It is important to note, however, that these teachers are sometimes criticized for not paying enough attention to whether their students are able to put the steps together and actually produce a final product of quality.

4. **Challenge and Support**

I associate the terms challenge and support with Nevitt Sanford (1966) who argued that university instruction should focus on the individual student's general development (rather than knowledge acquisition), providing appropriate challenges, but offering sufficient support to facilitate meeting them. In my career I have certainly offered courses that were almost all challenge and no support—the material and/or the tasks were too difficult and the students gave up in frustration. And at least once I know that I was guilty of the opposite, accepting almost any efforts proffered by my students without challenging them to improve or to tackle more difficult material. I particularly like the metaphor of scaffold (Rosenshine & Meister, 1992) which suggests that when constructing knowledge, as when constructing buildings, one needs supportive scaffolding to

complete the higher levels of the work. I think, for example, of the sequencing of writing assignments as a scaffold supporting the preparation of a library research essay. Rehner's (2001) Critical Analysis Strategy Sheets can be seen as a scaffold supporting the challenging task of interpreting novels. Of course, some may argue that these supports remove the challenges and are better seen as crutches. This argument is an important one to face when attempting to build supports into a course. However, I would defend the specific examples cited on the basis that their use engages the processes to be learned rather than compensating for their absence.

5. **Mental Effort and Engagement**

I have been inclined in past years to put a great deal of faith in the assumption that if I can design points of encounter that engage the students, then I can be sure that learning will follow. At times I have argued that with engagement learning will not seem so effortful, and at others, that with engagement one will not mind expending the necessary effort to learn. On this basis I have often concerned myself with students' likely judgments of the relevance of various course aspects, believing that relevance will lead to engagement and, ultimately, competence with respect to the material. However, recent attention to students' problems with procrastination and balancing priorities in complicated lives has shown me that interest and motivation is only one part of the learning process. In several cases upon following up with students who had failed to complete what I had considered to be highly engaging assignments, I found that they agreed with me about this characteristic. However, despite their interest, other aspects of their lives claimed the mental effort I would like to have seen going to the course. This result has led me to put more thought into designing features that will enhance the likelihood of mental effort being applied in the course. For example, I am no longer hesitant about giving reading quizzes prior to small-group discussions on assigned topics. I am reminded here of one more metaphor—the carrot and the stick, engaging topics for discussion preceded by a quiz. I don't find this outcome very satisfactory, but that fact leads nicely to my concluding comments about the never-ending nature of course design.

Design and Redesign

Experience teaches us that no design is ever completely satisfactory. Just as we discover unexpected problems and constantly re-evaluate the content organization of our courses, we discover unexpected problems requiring redesign of our instructional methods. Consider some possibilities. Having decided to put more emphasis on techniques for reading academic articles, one encounters the problem of getting the students to do the reading. Having decided to put more emphasis on techniques for writing research essays, one encounters the problem of plagiarism. Having decided to emphasize class discussions, one encounters the problem of coping with the conflict engendered by the discussion. And sometimes the design that has worked well for several previous courses suddenly seems insufficient to maintain our own enthusiasm.

The perfect course is certainly elusive. It is not possible to please everyone or to insure that everyone learns. Our goals change, our emphases change and we look for new methods to address them. Positive Pedagogy is designed to assist its readers to find and to create those methods. On behalf of the editors, I would like to invite you to comment on the ideas you find in this first issue and to consider submitting examples of your own practices.

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