

The Deep End

Welcome to The Deep End Gary Poole, Former STLHE President

My goodness, what an ominous opening. Yet, it may well be just the kind of welcome our students feel when they enter the halls of higher learning. What is more ominous is the fact that many students complete the metaphor by putting us in the role of swimming instructor. This is a metaphor that I have used on occasion to challenge colleagues attending my instructional development workshops. Presented in its most cynical extreme, the metaphor goes like this:

We carry out our role of swimming instructor by throwing our students into the deep end of the pool. Some will figure out how to swim. These are the "true university students." The rest will flail away madly and just get to the edge before drowning. They will get out of the pool and go somewhere else, somewhat shaken by the experience. As instructors, we console ourselves by believing that these people were never meant for university.

Thankfully, there is a growing body of instructors in higher education who do not buy into this metaphor. Rather than saying, "Either they'll figure it out or they won't," these instructors are refining their curricula and pedagogy in ways that provide just the right balance of challenge and support for their students. For example, instructors who assign group work are also addressing issues of group processes with their students. Web-based assignments are now teaching ways to assess the credibility of sources.

The skilful provision of that balance between challenge and support constitutes, for me, one of the defining characteristics of the scholarship of teaching. It is why I believe these are both exciting and daunting times to be teaching in higher education. As we come to accept our responsibility as teachers in the processes of teaching and learning, we recognize that good teaching has very few shortcuts, a message we have been giving our students for some time about good learning.

To teach well, we must talk about good teaching and learn from each other. I believe that is what STLHE is all about. It is certainly what Positive Pedagogy is all about. I applaud the editors of this electronic journal as they invite us to engage in these important discussions about our teaching.

I doubt, though, that the editors of Positive Pedagogy had swimming instructors in mind when they came up with the title, "The Deep End." Perhaps they were thinking of the depth of inquiry that is possible when talking about teaching - the ethical issues, the interpersonal challenges, the politics, and so on. I, too, like this interpretation of the title for this page. I hope that, from time to time in these missives, we can explore those depths, however murky they may be. I would like to explore issues related to tenure and promotion, cultural diversity, virtual classrooms, gender - the list goes on.

For now, I will conclude simply by inviting you to ponder, with me, the number of times we have tossed students into water over their heads and then claimed no responsibility for their welfare.