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ON COURSE

An Education in Education

Our new column on teaching offers a summer reading list to start you thinking about what you do in the classroom, and why

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By JAMES M. LANG

Last summer in *The Chronicle's* online forums, a faculty member posted a question about how to respond to a bright new star in her department whose fun and easy classes were making her own seem much harder and less enjoyable in comparison.

The woman who posted the message was earnest and friendly, seeking guidance from her fellow academics. But the first response she received was rather unhelpful: "You seem to be in education.

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My first piece of advice: Find a real academic field."

Close to 90 responses followed, including many more that argued against the worth of education as a discipline. Since then, that topic has made many repeat appearances on the forums and never fails to draw some spiteful remarks from academics who believe one or more of the following propositions:

- That students pursuing doctorates in education are morons;
- That institutions hand out advanced education degrees with Happy Meals;
- That research in education is shoddy and useless; and
- That a deep knowledge of a real discipline, and a big brain, are the best qualifications for successful teaching.

I'll tip my hand at the outset here to say that as the son, brother, brother-in-law, husband, and friend of many schoolteachers, I would argue that the hostility toward education as a discipline seems to evince a lazy disregard for resources on teaching and learning that could help many academics grow and develop.

Many faculty members seem to think that their own experiences in the classroom — both as students and as instructors — provide all they need to become competent teachers. Those experiences help, and no doubt a few lucky and loathsome faculty members have been born with the teaching gene and can intuit exactly what their students need based on only those two factors.

But for the rest of us, I'm going to repeat what I tell my students when they argue that some famous writers have been capable of writing perfect prose on the first crack and never needed the extensive revision process I impose: Such geniuses may exist, but we're gonna assume you ain't one of 'em.

I'm surely not one of those teaching geniuses.

I bombed my first year or two in the classroom as a graduate student, as I suspect many of us do. It took me a long while to discover the vast resources that are available on teaching and learning in higher education, and even on teaching within our own disciplines.

My introduction to those resources has convinced me that all of us engaged in the teaching enterprise owe it to our students to do two things: Consult experts on teaching and learning, both in print and in person. And talk with each other as much as we can about what works in the classroom, what doesn't, and why.

In this new monthly column, I hope to help achieve the second of those objectives: Fueling a conversation about teaching and learning among the readers of *The Chronicle*, a conversation I hope will take place in your responses to the columns, in the forums, and

with your colleagues.

I'll do my best to help achieve the first objective by drawing on the work of researchers and writers in the field of education, as well as on the experiences and opinions of faculty members in the trenches in all disciplines.

This month, while you still have some time to read and think before you have to shake the sand out of your shoes and head back into the office to start putting together those syllabi, I want to persuade you to devote a few hours — if you haven't done so already — to the vast and growing body of literature on teaching and learning in higher education.

To help provide a short reading list, I asked Greg Light to recommend a couple of classic works that a faculty member new to such material could try out this summer. Light directs the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University and helped write *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: The Reflective Professional* (Sage Publications, 2001). Many faculty members, he tells me, have a teacher-focused, content-oriented conception of their jobs. Teaching is the "transmission of a set amount of content in a set amount of time to students," he says. "Their learning is then measured with respect to how much of that material sticks."

Light believes that delving into the literature will move faculty members toward a more student-focused, learning-oriented approach. Put most simply, he says, "the focus is on what the student needs to learn rather than what the faculty member needs to teach."

I asked Light for a couple of starter pieces that he would use to nudge a new faculty member in that direction. He pointed to a recent essay as well as to a classic monograph in the field of education.

The essay, "A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," by R. Barr and J. Tagg, originally appeared in the November/December 1995 issue of *Change* magazine. "A classic by reputation," according to Light, it offers a succinct argument for the sort of student-oriented, learning-centered instruction he advocates.

Just about everyone who has stepped in front of a college classroom will probably have heard of the monograph that Light recommends. At the very least, you will have heard its key concepts bandied about in educational conversations. Benjamin S. Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* first appeared in 1956 and remains in print today. You shouldn't need to buy it. You will either find a copy in your library, or you should find a new library.

The taxonomy that Mr. Bloom created helps identify the specific kinds of knowledge and skills that we try to develop in our students, from asking them to memorize facts and information to the most complex tasks of asking them to synthesize and evaluate ideas and theories. Mr. Bloom describes each type of skill in detail and gives examples of the kinds of questions that will test students' ability in that area.

I'll finish with a couple of recommendations of my own: two newish books from Harvard University Press, both of which rely on extensive surveys, interviews, and observations of students and teachers in higher education.

Richard J. Light's *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (2001) stems from the Harvard Assessment Seminars, a continuing project that has mined interviews of more than 1,000 Harvard students to discover what kinds of experiences, both in and out of the classroom, had the most lasting and positive impact on their education. The results are enlightening and often surprising — and not limited in their value to Harvard faculty members by any means — especially in a series of chapters on the value of diversity on campuses.

*What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004), by Ken Bain, relies on extensive interviews and observations of a few dozen outstanding faculty members whom Mr. Bain has encountered over the course of his long career, and distills the secrets of their successes into a compact guide to help faculty members become more thoughtful and effective teachers.

Best of all, both books are extremely well written, free of jargon and technical terminology, and full of memorable anecdotes and details; you won't regret for a moment toting them along to the beach. And I predict you will see an immediate payoff once back in the office, as you prepare your fall courses.

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