

SWAP SESSION NEWSLETTER

None of us is as smart as all of us. -Roy Disney

**SWAP SESSION TOPIC: "The Dimensions of Teaching Excellence,"
by Dr. Dan Bernstein, University of Nebraska-Lincoln**

No. 17

Swap Session held: 4-21-00

Sponsored by the Faculty Exchange for Teaching Excellence,
Dr. Ann Stalheim-Smith, coordinator.

Dr. Daniel Bernstein is in the Psychology Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and he is a University Distinguished Teaching Scholar. He has been selected as a Pew Scholar by the Carnegie National Teaching Academy, and for a Fullbright Fellowship for Teaching and Research. Dr. Bernstein has developed a successful program of Peer Consultation at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Dr. Bernstein began by informing the Swap Session participants about the Peer Consultation project he has been developing with faculty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Kansas State University and three other universities (Pew Charitable Trust Grant).

The Peer Consultation project is focused on intellectual inquiry into teaching in addition to student evaluation. The participants agree that we need to find ways to support faculty's reflective work about teaching. We also need to provide an audience for faculty who have taken time to think and write about ways they have combined their teaching practice and their interest in student learning. Participants want teaching to remain a scholarly activity.

In the first year of the project, faculty are asked to think about what they mean by excellence in teaching. They are asked to think about what kind of evidence they could gather to represent the intellectual part of what they do.

In the project's second year, a conference of participants from different universities is held. Experiences with Peer Consultation are expanded in the form of exchanges of teaching portfolios between KSU and Nebraska faculty in the same discipline.

In the third year, faculty share ideas with faculty at other universities about what they think of the quality of the students' work. Faculty can learn from the critiques written about their course.

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In the fourth and final year, participants get the Provost's Office involved to consider how to take evidence such as teaching portfolios into account in the campus personnel systems. Those involved should consider to what extent each person has a mission that includes teaching and that teaching should be important. Participants must think about how the intellectual qualities of teaching can be added into the mix along with student voice and experiences gained from workshops.

How do the aims of the Peer Consultation project fit into the overall way of representing excellence in teaching?

Dr. Bernstein asked the audience to think about what indicates excellence in teaching. The audience members shared the following ideas on what represents excellence in teaching:

- 👤 Students do well in relation to the objectives that were set out for a course
- 👤 Students show the ability to apply what they've learned in different situations
- 👤 Students show initiative and curiosity
- 👤 Feedback from students who have graduated
- 👤 High attendance
- 👤 Active involvement of students
- 👤 The types of activities that are going on in the classroom
- 👤 Student performance on professional licensure exams
- 👤 Voluntary interaction of students
- 👤 Students seek further interactions with the instructor
- 👤 The instructor provides opportunities for students to integrate information with other courses
- 👤 Best students, average students and poor students are all motivated
- 👤 Trust is established in the classroom so that students feel safe so that active engagement and openness exist
- 👤 Diverse learning styles are addressed

Dr. Bernstein shared the following questions we should ask ourselves in reflecting on the dimensions of teaching developed by Barbara Walvoord, University of Notre Dame, Indiana:

- 1) **Is the material being taught consistent with the goals of students?** Is it relevant and useful? We should look at the syllabus, the text and exams to arrive at the answer to the question: Is this material worth learning?
- 2) **How well are students reaching goals?** Evidence of student learning should be gained from classroom tests, standardized tests, professional exams, and student perceptions of their own learning. Whether students are learning has increasingly become part of the picture of the dimensions of teaching.
- 3) **Do students perceive themselves to be well taught?** Is there trust and openness in the classroom? Is there something that engages them? Do students come to see this teacher outside of class?

- 4) **Do teachers exhibit teaching methods that are believed to be effective?** According to Bernstein, this factor should not be weighted as much as the others. However, if a teacher is using only one teaching method and getting poor results, this calls for some re-evaluation. Bernstein suggests that, if good learning is going on, the methods being used are working.
- 5) **Do teachers engage in reflective and self-improvement activities?** Does the teacher write about, think about and consider his/her work.

Campuses need to decide if the very best teaching is at least as important as the best research.

For purposes of promotion based on teaching, the following guidelines need to be set:

- ✓ **What are exemplary versions of teaching?**
- ✓ **What are completely acceptable professional levels of teaching?**
- ✓ **What are levels of teaching that need work?**

Dr. Bernstein asked the audience members to read through example Course Portfolios and to think about what they have learned from this evidence. Audience members shared the following reflections:

- 👤👤👤 The portfolios showed attempts to innovate and to alleviate weaknesses in a course.
- 👤👤👤 Within the portfolios, faculty did self-assessment even in cases of success.
- 👤👤👤 The portfolio provided affirmation of context, independent of the syllabus.
- 👤👤👤 In one portfolio, the instructor indicates that he/she wants critical writing from his/her students, so instead of assuming that students have the necessary skills, he/she taught students the skills.
- 👤👤👤 Portfolios show the intentionality of the instructor.
- 👤👤👤 Creating a course portfolio takes more instructor time.
- 👤👤👤 The portfolio involves an analysis of outcomes.
- 👤👤👤 It is good to see self-reflection on what has changed/evolved in a course over time.
- 👤👤👤 Portfolios allow faculty to spend time taking risks and investigating the course rather than defending their actions.
- 👤👤👤 We've done the evaluation of students. The add-on work is thinking about it.
- 👤👤👤 It is useful to see that the second half of a portfolio can be evidence of student work.
- 👤👤👤 For evidence of student work, you can include a test you have given and the best student's work on that test.

Dr. Bernstein shared some guiding questions from Dr. Barbara Walvoord's guide, "How to Assess Student Learning: A Brief Guide for Faculty:"

- ? How well can my students do X at a certain point? (e.g., at the end of the course/major/program)
- ? What is the difference in student performance between the beginning and the end of a course/major/program?
- ? What effect does X have on student performance? (for example, how does my use of small group interaction affect student performance? How does SAT score affect student performance in my class?)

Although it may feel like we are discovering more questions than answers, this is the reason for the dialogue involved in Peer Consultation.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Opportunities to write on your calendar

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- Workshop: "Appraising Teaching Effectiveness: Beyond Student Ratings" by Dr. Bill Pallett, IDEA Center, May 17, 1:30 PM - 4:30 PM, K-State Union, Big 12 Room.
- Workshop: "Teaching Portfolios" by Dr. Peter Seldin, September 14, 8:30 - 11:30 AM.