

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 8 / NUMBER 2 • JANUARY 2004



Teaching and Mentoring Challenges in Higher Education

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I would like to thank the Harriet Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning for giving me the opportunity to address you today on the topic of teaching and mentoring at Brown.¹ When I was asked to speak at this Teaching Forum, I was posed two questions:

- What makes an effective mentor?
- What would impel a busy faculty member to take the time to be a mentor to colleagues and students?

I have to say I found this charge quite daunting, in part because I have never really thought of myself as a mentor in any formal sense of the word. In fact, at first I felt quite blocked in preparing my comments. However, recent discussions with a young colleague at Brown and with faculty at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, where I conducted an interdisciplinary seminar series, caused me to reflect further on what constitutes mentoring, how one becomes an “effective” mentor, the relationship between mentoring and teaching, and the meaning of mentoring in institutions whose primary missions are the two inextricably linked activities of educating students and the production of knowledge. What I realized on further reflection is that in general mentoring is an invisible activity, which is always in a dynamic relationship with – and inseparable from – teaching and learning. Mentoring is not something we set out to do consciously. Rather, mentoring is what all of us who take the job of teaching seriously do without even thinking about it.

The questions posed by the Sheridan Center are of critical importance at a moment when universities are under intense pressure from various forces to “commercialize.” Several books have been written about this topic, including the highly acclaimed *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* by Derek Bok, former President of Harvard. It is not difficult to imagine that a commercialized model of education is problematic for teaching and

mentoring, in part because such a model privileges the more visible – and potentially more lucrative – activity of research.

Today I will draw on my experiences as a faculty member in the Department of Pathology at Brown to reflect a bit on the local conditions that foster or undermine this largely invisible activity we call mentoring and how those local conditions relate to the broader political, economic and social context of education. In doing so, I would like to make the case that there is a spectrum of activities classified as teaching, as research, as mentoring, and as learning, and it is precisely where those boundaries are most blurred that some of the richest, but not necessarily most marketable, research and educational experiences happen – for students and for faculty.

What then are the most important conditions for effective and imaginative teaching and mentoring? From my experience, what is absolutely key – and I cannot emphasize this point enough – is that the institution at every level must see teaching as a scholarly activity, not as a mere “service.” Faculty debates endlessly whether teaching is “valued” at research universities, especially in the tenure and promotion process. Having spent more money than I care to think about paying for two daughters to attend Brown, I can assure faculty and administrators that the quality of teaching matters a lot to students and their parents. But, while the issue of the reward structure is important, it is not really the main point. Rather, the most important issue is how teaching and mentoring are conceptualized in relation to the other primary activity that faculty engage in – and that is research.

Let me briefly describe how the Department of Pathology, which I entered some years ago as a junior faculty, viewed and continues to view its mission of teaching medical students. Although I am also involved in undergraduate teaching, I emphasize medical education intentionally because medical school teaching is often seen by faculty within and outside of biology as a different sort of beast from undergraduate or graduate education – boring, unsatisfying, and thoroughly onerous. In contrast, I want to suggest that teaching, mentoring, and learning in medicine is similar to engineering, biology, social sciences or the humanities. In our department, the main goal of teaching medical students is to create an environment in which the students can become, not only well-trained professionals but intellectually engaged physicians, who are in that grossly overused phrase “critical thinkers.” That goal was, and still remains, impossible to measure, but it is, nevertheless, absolutely central to our teaching and mentoring.

I have come to realize that I was extraordinarily fortunate in joining a department whose chair, Nelson Fausto, was both a highly successful scientist and a gifted teacher. For Nelson, teaching medical students was not an onerous task but one that was stimulating, rewarding, and profoundly scholarly. More important than his gifts as a lecturer was Nelson’s ability to help students draw on what they already knew, what interested them, what they were reading in the news, as well as their imaginings of their careers in medicine. He recruited faculty for their commitment

to teaching and his standards of excellence were always of the highest order. As a young faculty member, often overwhelmed by what seemed to be conflicting demands, I learned from Nelson to view teaching and research as synergistic, mutually reinforcing, and intellectually engaging activities.

The values that informed Nelson's vision continue to shape the mission of the Department of Pathology under the direction of Agnes Kane. Faculty in the department are encouraged to talk with each other about their teaching, to experiment with methods to more effectively engage students, and to sit in on each other's classes both in the department and outside of the department, not as evaluators but as learners. This is not considered peer evaluation, although peer evaluation certainly does have its place. Rather, observing each other teach is considered a normal part of our intellectual work as faculty. Crafting a lecture that engages students is viewed as a scholarly and creative endeavor. Though I have learned a great deal from my colleagues in the department, none of us teach in precisely the same ways. For example, I am speaking from notes today, whereas many of my colleagues would not be caught dead using written notes.

The point I want to make in describing my initiation into teaching is that I was completely unconscious – and I suspect Nelson was not always conscious – that I was being mentored through the cultivation of these intellectual relationships. Furthermore, by engaging with colleagues and graduate student teaching assistants around pedagogical questions, I was also mentoring others, despite my status as a novice teacher. I do not want to glorify the process. Learning to teach and mentor did not happen by chance. It took hard work, careful if not compulsive planning, consumed an enormous amount of my time for years, and was often frustrating, especially at exam time.

But it was not only the culture of my department that encouraged excellence in teaching and mentoring. The culture at Brown was ideal for thinking about teaching in creative ways. This culture has been institutionalized in the Harriet Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning and in the Wayland Collegium, which sponsors interdisciplinary teaching and research projects. What was unique and exciting for me at Brown was the ability to cross what are normally rigid boundaries between medical and undergraduate teaching and to engage in interdisciplinary ways of thinking and knowing. Over the years, I have had the privilege to teach with faculty outside of my department, learning from outstanding lecturers as well as talented seminar and small group leaders. The list of these people is long: Anne Fausto-Sterling, Ken Miller, Harold Ward, and Sally Zierler, to name a few.

To integrate different perspectives into my teaching required time, planning, and an interest in listening to other faculty and, even more importantly, listening to students as they struggled to develop intellectually. Through these interdisciplinary experiences I was, again, being mentored and at the same time mentoring others in a way that could not have happened had I remained confined

to the ways of thinking and knowing of one discipline. My teaching of medical students was informed by what I learned about undergraduate teaching and conversely my undergraduate teaching, which now extends beyond biology into Africana Studies and Environmental Studies, was informed by medicine in ways that have been exciting and illuminating to me and my students. Not only did this help me to approach my teaching in unique ways but I also developed research interests that crossed boundaries that some think cannot be crossed – the humanities and life sciences, for example. Feeding into and enriching my teaching and research at Brown have been my experiences teaching science to breast cancer activists in the U.S. and asbestos activists in rural South Africa.

The challenges to scholarly teaching are many, not the least of which is time. Another challenge is epistemological. What choices will universities make about the knowledge they produce? How will they produce this knowledge? I would argue that teaching and research are both knowledge-producing activities that are in dynamic relationship with forces outside of the university. At this moment, there is extraordinary enthusiasm for a market-driven entrepreneurial model of university research. Of concern to many is how knowledge production – teaching and research – will be shaped by this contemporary fashion.

In his recent review of Bok's book in the *London Review of Books*, the science studies scholar Stephen Shapin points out that the current wave of commercialization of the university is continuous with the past. In other words, we should not be under any illusions about the contradictory social role of the university and how it has been shaped historically by the church, by political economy, and by democratic struggles. Yet, without doubt commercialization is currently being pursued with renewed vigor – and a lot of hype – by research universities in the United States and is increasingly being exported throughout the world. The most current example is GATS (General Agreements on Trade in Services) that defines education as a service and commodity in the free market. Norway, the U.S., and Kenya have recently demanded access to South Africa's educational "market" under the terms of GATS.

Efforts to commercialize distance learning notwithstanding, teaching does not generally generate large amounts of external funding; when funding is available, it is most often limited to short term implementation of new programs. Shapin goes on to warn that "to establish commercialization as a 'key' mission of the university on an exact par with its commitment to teaching and open inquiry, is crucially to confuse centre with periphery and to misunderstand what it is that universities can do which no other institutions in our society are able to do, or to do nearly so well."

Rather than conclude with an answer to the two Sheridan Center questions, I want to conclude by posing what I think is a critical question for us at Brown: how do we sustain and cultivate an environment that encourages open and critical inquiry and that nourishes the laborious and largely invisible mentoring and learning activities – of undergraduates, graduate students, and our faculty colleagues – so crucial to

excellence in teaching, in the face of strong and, at times seemingly unstoppable, pressures to commercialize universities nationally and internationally?

1 These remarks were presented at the Sheridan Awards Teaching Forum held on October 28, 2003. The 2002 winners of the Harriet W. Sheridan Award for Distinguished Contribution to Teaching & Learning at Brown were Prof. Braun and Prof. Martha Sharp Joukowsky (Anthropology and Old World Archaeology & Art). Prof. Joukowsky's remarks were related to slides of mentoring students on an archaeological dig site in Jordan. Prof. Braun is kind enough to permit us to print her remarks in this issue of *The Teaching Exchange*.