

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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The Importance of Teaching

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One reason teaching is important for Brown University faculty members is that information is collected from students at the end of a semester about how each course was taught. I presume such information is used in tenure, promotion, and salary decisions. Such use implies someone, sometime, thought teaching was worth examining. One could use an economic model to show the importance of teaching—if our customers are not satisfied they will take their business elsewhere—but we are a popular school so this argument is not used, even though undergraduate tuition is the largest component of our revenue. The development of Internet based courses and degrees could have significant competitive implications on institutions like Brown University and could make high quality teaching essential for our survival. The remarks below, adapted from a speech about teaching, are intended to justify time and effort put into effective teaching. This is a subject not often talked about and I approach it with some trepidation.

It is striking how little University faculty members talk about teaching. We talk a lot about our subject, that is, the academic field we teach about, and we talk about students, both collectively and individually, but we tend not to talk about what happens in the classroom. Doctors, I am sure, talk about what has been effective in treating patients and lawyers about what has worked in particular cases in particular jurisdictions. Teachers appear to be different. Whether from embarrassment or fear of intrusion academicians seem reluctant to share classroom experiences.

Why is college teaching important? Partly because we deal with men and women at a significant and vulnerable stage in their lives—for most of them when they are breaking away from their families and the certitude of their early years. They are conscious at once of needing to be independent, of

wanting to do things themselves, but they are also conscious of how much they don't know, of how much help they need. We, I am speaking as a teacher, meet them at a time when we can be of help, when we can be useful.

Teaching is important because it allows the teacher to be a model, a mentor, to those needing such. One cannot help noting that at most institutions faculty are usually not trained or encouraged to think of themselves as mentors to undergraduates; instructors, yes, mentors not often. Graduate school and the people we meet expect us to be expert in the subject field. and rarely explicitly pay attention to the values we profess. We are trained to feel best about ourselves when we have delivered a terribly clear and beautifully organized lecture. We do not always realize that students may often learn more from other things we do—perhaps even things we do unconsciously, perhaps especially things we do unconsciously.

We can be useful because we can give our students both the confidence that they can learn (and, after learning, apply) and also the knowledge and the wisdom so that this confidence is not a delusion. We can be useful also in demonstrating fundamental values—concern for others, respect for the truth and for others, which is different from proselytizing particular points of view.

A teacher is important because he or she is an advocate for intellectual life. The student, any person in our society, is besieged with choices and advocates for those choices but few advocates duplicate what a faculty member professes. A glance at the newspaper, or evening TV, makes it obvious how badly our society needs people of intelligence, confidence and conviction. A good teacher is important also because he or she represents quality thinking. Students need to be able to recognize ideas that are incomplete or inaccurate or insensitive, whether in the popular press or from themselves. The thrill of accomplishment, of learning, is lost when discriminations are not made between high and low quality work. If any idea is respected then nothing is really respected.

Just as we are representatives of intellectual, moral and spiritual life we are also representatives of our society's culture—what our society appreciates and believes. Technological developments, television, transportation, medical discoveries, to name a few—have changed greatly the conditions in which people live, leaving them in many cases without a firm sense of what they are and where they came from. The passing on of cultural values is important especially since many of the institutions that give society its stability are presently having difficulty.

An obvious reason that teaching is important is that it helps the student learn. At the very least, good teaching makes learning more efficient. A good teacher can explain matters so a student gains understanding she or he would never have gotten on her own. Helping a student learn creates a virtuous circle—the easier the student finds learning the more attractive learning can be. A teacher can also give deeper understanding by presenting a context for what is being taught.

A good teacher can recognize a student's misunderstandings and remedy them. A difference between a good teacher and a great teacher may be the ability of a great teacher to adapt the material to the particular needs of a particular student.

Teaching can be thrilling because we get to see students come alive—to realize this poem is meaningful, this environmental analysis is something they can do. I fear I, personally, teach to the bottom of the class – the group for whom education represents high value added, the group that can blossom at a university—perhaps because of the opportunity to do so. I am so impressed and pleased when the less highly regarded students' learning does take off. Of course good things do not always happen to those in the bottom of the class and probably the most painful part of the teaching business is making clear what is valid and acceptable and what is not. Teaching can not only be painful, it can also be difficult and risky—one is putting one's reputation on the line every class. We are a profession, like major league athletics, where one is only as good as one's last performance.

Teaching does affect greatly, for good or bad, the lives of those we teach. People who have chosen teaching have chosen a profession with high rewards and high responsibilities. Good teaching is something that requires thought and commitment and practice. Too often it has been taken for granted—neither recognized or studied.