

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 12 / NUMBER 2 • JANUARY 2008



---

## *Reflective Teaching Practice, Student Outcomes, and Institutional Effectiveness*

Professor Kathryn T. Spoehr (*Cognitive & Linguistic Sciences*)

*Ed. note: This was originally presented as a lecture on September 10, 2007 at the Sheridan Teaching Seminar.*

There are many styles of reflective teaching practice and just as many different ways of accomplishing it. You have already heard from two exemplary practitioners this afternoon about how they go about it, and it is a daunting task for a final speaker to try to add anything important to what has already been said. So I'm going to spend hardly any time talking about my own teaching methods and how they have changed over the years. Rather, I'd like to spend my time with you today putting the concept of reflective teaching practice into a much broader context.

I am going to argue that the principles which underlie reflective teaching in a single classroom are exactly those which, when applied institutionally and nationally, will answer many of the criticisms that have been leveled at American higher education over the past 10-20 years. Indeed, those principles are the very ones that colleges and universities will need to employ if they are to survive in the face of changes in federal higher education policy that are likely to be enacted over the next twelve months.

What criticisms are we talking about here, and what federal policy changes are bearing down upon us? Let me give you a very brief history. In 1990 close to 80% of all U.S. college students were enrolled in public institutions; 85% of them enrolled in a public college or university in the same state in which they resided. The implicit "compact" between state government and higher education was that it was economically and civically beneficial to the state to provide an affordable college education to high school graduates who were capable of college-level work. Costs to in-state students were kept low thanks to state appropriations to public colleges and universities.

Beginning in the early 1990's, however, state legislatures began to feel a serious budgetary pinch; the cost of maintaining public colleges and universities rose at an annual rate that greatly exceeded inflation, and there were an increasing array of competing

demands on state revenues to provide increased levels of state services, entitlement programs, and so forth. Moreover, many state legislators had the sneaking suspicion that the public colleges in their states weren't all that good anyhow. After all, they had all heard from campaign contributors in the state's business community that new college graduates just didn't have the skills needed to succeed in a job. Indeed, one of the most persistent and troubling criticisms leveled at higher education by politicians and the public alike for the past 20 years is, that despite American higher education's pre-eminent position in the world, our colleges and universities simply are not educating young people well enough.

In order to insure that scarce state funding was being well used, most states initiated what have come to be known as "accountability" programs, which required each public college or university to report annually, to the legislature and the public, a set of statistical measures that documented the efficiency and quality of the institution. Many states adopted mathematical formulas by which the monetary allocation to each public institution was computed from the accountability data – enrollments, number of students per FTE faculty, and so forth. But one problem with these early forms of accountability was that virtually all of them were "input measures." They tabulated the SAT scores of admitted students, the number of faculty, the number of faculty with Ph.D.s, the number of students per section in a class, the number of contact hours per faculty member, and the like. Only occasionally were data reported on results or "outputs" such as the effectiveness of teaching (as measured, for example, by the rate of students passing licensing exams in certain fields such as nursing) or the quality of student outcomes (e.g., the percentage of entering students who actually complete a degree). And, of course, regardless of whether such measures provide any accountability at all for public institutions, private institutions like Brown remained untouched by state accountability legislation.

The public perception that higher education is somehow not doing its job, coupled with the poor quality of state-level accountability standards, has led recently to a fairly dramatic change in the federal government's stance toward assuring high quality post-secondary education. In the fall of 2005 the U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, appointed a national Commission on the Future of Higher Education that was "charged with developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America's diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country's future."<sup>1</sup> In September 2006 the Commission issued its report, modestly entitled, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*.<sup>2</sup>

The Spellings Commission made a number of very positive and useful recommendations. Among them are recommendations to promote greater access to higher education, especially among under-represented minority groups, and suggestions about how to make college more affordable for everyone. But the Commission recommendations that are most controversial and threaten the autonomy of colleges and universities are those bearing on student learning and accountability. Among the findings cited by the Spellings Commission are the following:

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy indicates that, between 1992 and 2003, average prose literacy (the ability to understand narrative texts such as newspaper articles) decreased for all levels of educational attainment, and document literacy (the ability to

understand practical information such as instructions for taking medicine) decreased among those with at least some college education or a bachelor's degree or higher. (p. 13) Employers complain that many college graduates are not prepared for the workplace and lack the new set of skills necessary for successful employment and continuous career development. (p. 13)

Despite increased attention to student learning results by colleges and universities and accreditation agencies, parents and students have no solid evidence, comparable across institutions, of how much students learn in colleges or whether they learn more at one college than another. Similarly, policymakers need more comprehensive data to help them decide whether the national investment in higher education is paying off and how taxpayer dollars could be used more effectively. (p. 14)<sup>3</sup>

The Commission's recommendations for fixing these problems were sobering. They include:

Higher education institutions should measure student learning using quality assessment data from instruments such as, for example, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which measures the growth of student learning taking place in colleges, and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, which is designed to assess general education outcomes for undergraduates in order to improve the quality of instruction and learning.

The federal government should provide incentives for states, higher education associations, university systems, and institutions to develop interoperable outcomes-focused accountability systems designed to be accessible and useful for students, policymakers, and the public, as well as for internal management and institutional improvement.

The results of student learning assessments, including value-added measurements that indicate how students' skills have improved over time, should be made available to students and reported in the aggregate publicly. Higher education institutions should make aggregate summary results of all postsecondary learning measures, e.g., test scores, certification and licensure attainment, time to degree, graduation rates, and other relevant measures, publicly available in a consumer-friendly form as a condition of accreditation.<sup>4</sup>

In short, we are being told that all students in all institutions should graduate having mastered the same set of knowledge and skills, that these skills can and should be measured by a standardized test, and that we can evaluate the quality of a school by how much its students' test scores improve between entry and graduation.

Interestingly, in order to implement this set of recommendations quickly before the Bush Administration leaves office, and without having to force the higher education equivalent of the *No-Child Left Behind* legislation through a Democratically controlled Congress that is unlikely to cooperate, the Department of Education has chosen to co-opt higher education's own accreditation system to do the work for it. While most of you probably know that professional associations like the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association accredit individual professional degree programs in their fields, you may not know much about the system of regional accreditation that accredits entire institutions and impacts most of higher education in this country.

There are six regional accreditation organizations, all of which began as voluntary organizations of colleges and universities formed as a way for higher education to monitor itself and improve its own quality – a form of self-regulation. After World War II the federal

government began to use the regional accreditors as gatekeepers to authorize individual institutions to participate in the many federal education grant and student aid programs upon which we have all become financially dependent. Very simply stated, if your college is accredited by an accreditor that is *recognized* by the U. S. Department of Education, your school can receive federal education program grants, and your students can qualify for Pell grants, federally subsidized loans, and work-study; if you are not accredited, or your accreditation comes from an organization that is *not* recognized by the Department of Education, no federal program dollars flow to you or your students.

In order to implement the Spellings Commission's recommendations quickly, the Department of Education has begun to change the set of regulations by which it recognizes accreditors. It can do this without consultation with or the participation of Congress. The changes it wishes to make, over the loud objections of the accreditors themselves and the institutions they represent, will force accreditors to require standardized outcomes definitions and testing, and to evaluate educational quality on the basis of value-added by these measures. If a regional accreditor does not enforce these requirements in granting accreditation to schools, it will not be recognized by the Department of Education and none of the schools it accredits will be eligible for federal programs. The regulation change process is on the fast track to put the new requirements in place for accreditation reviews that will take place during the 2008-09 academic year. In case you think this is all of only theoretical interest, let me remind you that Brown is up for its reaccreditation review during the 2008-09 academic year.

The reality is that if we in higher education don't like the way in which federal policy now defines student learning and achievement, we will have to propose something better. At very least, every institution will have to focus better on the goals it sets for its students, be more systematic in determining how well its students are achieving those goals, and be more open and consistent about reporting this information in jargon-free language that is transparent to the public. At first, this may seem hard to achieve. Fortunately, however, current accreditation policies and procedures provide a sound base from which to launch this effort. Ironically, the accreditation organizations which are being dragged kicking and screaming into being enforcers for the Department of Education have been historically one of the few sectors of the higher education community that has been firmly focused on assessing the quality of student learning. So the focus on student outcomes is hardly a new one to the regional accreditors, and many of the current accreditation procedures can be adapted to meet the accountability requirements of the federal government. To make this clearer, let me give you a concrete example from Brown's own regional accreditation organization.

Brown receives its regional accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), more precisely from NEASC's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE). CIHE accredits more than 225 institutions in New England which offer an Associates degree or higher. Each one is thoroughly reviewed and evaluated every ten years, with follow-ups as needed. Obviously the institutions accredited by CIHE span a wide range of institutional missions and types – everything from large public institutions like the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, to tiny private schools like the Conway School of Landscape Design, to church-affiliated schools like the Andover-Newton Theological Seminary. Recognizing that it is impossible to define a single set of student

outcomes that could be used to evaluate and accredit all of them fairly, CIHE instead seeks to determine whether the institution is living up to the educational mission it has established for itself.

CIHE's accreditation standards evaluate all of the major aspects of a modern college or university, such as finances, student services, libraries, academic programs, and so forth, but they primarily focus on the adequacy of the institution's own methods for monitoring and improving its own operations in each of these areas. In other words, each institution must demonstrate that it is *effective* in doing the things it purports to do and has in place the procedures that allow it to determine for itself how to remain effective. An example of CIHE's focus on institutional effectiveness is in its statement about effectiveness in academic programs:

"The institution's principal evaluation focus is the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of its academic programs. Evaluation endeavors and systematic assessment are demonstrably effective in the improvement of academic offerings and student learning."<sup>5</sup>

What our accreditors are asking us to do at the institutional level is to make a habit of asking and answering three of the most basic questions underlying all good educational practice:

- *What are we trying to do here?* or more formally: What are the institution's goals? What intellectual knowledge, skills, and habits of mind do we want our students to develop?
- *How well are we doing and how do we know that?* or more formally: What good quality information/data do we have that tells us how well we are doing in achieving those goals?
- *How can we get better?* or more formally: How can we use this evaluative information to make improvements in what we do?

When framed in these terms, the demonstration of institutional effectiveness and good student outcomes – the very core of accountability – becomes nothing more than the application of good, reflective teaching practice at the institutional level. The questions are the same three that I ask of myself almost every day of every semester I teach: What are my goals for the students in this course — and for this class period? Am I accomplishing what I set out to do, and how do I know whether I am or not? And if what I'm doing now isn't working as well as I want, how can I do better? The core of sound educational practice thus seems to take the form of what mathematicians call a Mandelbrot fractal set: a geometric pattern in which an object's structure or appearance at the finest-grained level of analysis, say under a microscope, is replicated at the next larger level of analysis, and at each successively larger order of magnitude. The same questions that assure quality teaching for a single instructor are the ones to ask to assure quality at the institutional level.

Regrettably regardless of how often individual faculty members ask the basic effectiveness questions of themselves, the questions arise too rarely at the institutional level at most colleges and universities, including Brown. Fortunately Brown, over the next two years, will have the opportunity, in fact the necessity, to ask and answer those three basic educational questions at the institutional level. Our institutional reaccreditation with NEASC will take place in March of 2009, and over the course of the current academic year

we will be writing the institutional self-study report that must be submitted six months in advance of the evaluation visit.

The preparation of Brown's institutional self-study will likely be just a distant spectator sport for most of you, and you may hardly notice how federal accountability policies play out nationally. But I hope you will not forget the three most important questions you can ask yourself as a teacher: What are my goals for the students in this course—and for this class period? Am I accomplishing what I set out to do, and how do I know whether I am or not? And if what I'm doing now isn't working as well as I want, how can I do better? If you get in the habit of asking those questions of yourself, you will be well on the road to developing a reflective teaching practice that will serve you, your students, and your institution well.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> U. S. Department of Education. Secretary Spellings Announces New Commission on the Future of Higher Education (press release), September 19, 2005. [<http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2005/09/09192005.html>]
  - <sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C., 2006. [<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html>]
  - <sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C., 2006, pp. 13-14. [<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html>]
  - <sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C., 2006, p. 24. [<http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html>]
  - <sup>5</sup> New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education. (2005). *Standards for Accreditation*. (section 4.51). [[http://www.neasc.org/cihe/standards\\_for\\_accreditation\\_2005.pdf](http://www.neasc.org/cihe/standards_for_accreditation_2005.pdf)]