

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Teaching to Prompt Transformative Learning: The Lone Ranger Problem

Tom Angelo co-authored one of the most influential books about teaching in college in the last two decades, *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (1993). Here's his post to a faculty development listserv in which he contributes to a lively discussion about responding to student resistance to active engagement learning strategies:

First, our colleagues who've already responded have made helpful points, which I might summarize as:

- Make sure we know/find out about our students (e.g., prior knowledge & skill level, interests and goals).
- Make the right first impressions to set productive expectations -- Engage students from moment one in the kind of work they'll be expected to do throughout. (First impressions last.)
- Make sure we have compelling reasons for our teaching & learning approaches and can explain them to students (and staff) in ways they'll find convincing -- if and when explanation is needed. (Not everyone wants to know ; -) (Angelo, 2012)

Dr. Angelo then adds a point of his own: the "Lone Ranger" problem encountered when one professor is the only one in the department using such techniques.

. . . the "Lone Ranger" problem often promotes student resistance even when an individual teacher does everything else right -- particularly if that individual, innovative teacher differs from the majority of the faculty in noticeable ways. That 'difference' might involve age, gender, race/ethnicity, personal style or other characteristics visible to students.

In my experience, students offer much less resistance when they can see that my approach is supported by the rest of the program faculty -- or at least not questioned or undermined by them.

If students see that "this is the way we teach X in this department/university," most of them are less likely to feel unfairly treated or that they are being used as my personal guinea pigs. (Angelo, 2012)

It's not lost on faculty who seek to build active learning environments and use other transformative-friendly strategies that doing so frequently requires students to function differently in class. Often, this means doing what students can perceive as more "work" in order for them to "learn."

It is student perceptions which are captured at the end of the course and reported to departments. That's why the surveys here and other universities include the word

“perception” in their titles. If students perceive having to “work harder,” some faculty may wonder if that translates to lower student survey ratings.

(UCO is addressing this situation: a task force is looking at our SPIEs, including the questions and the wording in them so that the responses being collected don't penalize faculty who are working to build transformative learning environments.)

When active learning approaches, flipped classroom structures, and similarly intentioned techniques are used, however, and students *do* perceive that they are “working harder” than in other classes, that does not automatically translate to lower student survey ratings.

See below.

Angelo's observation, though, that this problem is very likely minimized if the instructor using such teaching strategies is not a Lone Ranger, is a good one. A united front means there's no opening that would allow a student to complain that active engagement learning techniques are unfair because he doesn't have to do them in other classes in which he earns the same number of credit hours.

Of course, the entire point about learning is being missed when students complain about having to “work” to learn. Terry Doyle (2011) says that the one doing the work is the one doing the learning. Unless students are actively engaged in a lecture, the one doing the work is the teacher, not the student. (However, there are ways to make lecture actively engaging, but you must be intentional about it and implement specific strategies, including strategies that help students know how to learn from lectures.)

Likewise, student complaints such as, “She didn't teach me anything — I had to learn it all myself,” convey at least a hint of oxymoron. Indeed, the Dean of Southern Methodist University's College of Fine Arts, Dr. José Bowen (himself an active-engagement-in-the-classroom proponent; Bowen, 2012) distills Ken Bain's book, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004) into two points which summarize how great college faculty operate: 1) hold students to high standards, and 2) do so in a way that conveys clearly the message that the instructor cares about her students and their learning. In such a learning environment, working hard to “learn it myself” is not seen as bad teaching; it's remembered as happening under the direction and deft touch of a favorite teacher.

Avoiding Angelo's “Lone Ranger” effect here at UCO is probably far easier than at many institutions. There is a history of Transformative Learning initiatives here. Enough faculty in enough departments in enough colleges constitute a critical mass to support the message about active engagement teaching strategies.

It can never hurt, however, to have departmental conversations in which faculty share their teaching strategies, exploring with each other the ways that students within the department (or, in the case of Core curricula, across departments) actively engage with course content. At least those conversations can provide wonderful ideas for how to

respond to the, “I don’t have to do this in other classes,” argument about “working” to learn.

If you know that your colleagues *are* having students “work” to learn, you can help your complaining students understand that they’re lucky they’re taking your class because it will help prepare them to succeed in other classes where they will also have to “work” to learn.

Angelo, T. A. (2012, October 17). Re: [POD] Responding to student resistance. Listing posted to listserv of the Professional Organizational and Development Network in Higher Education; listserv hosted by the John A. Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning and the Office for Information Technologies at the University of Notre Dame.

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bowen, J. (2012). *Teaching naked: Moving technology out of your classroom will improve student learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Doyle, T. (2011). *Learner-centered teaching: Putting the research on learning into practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.