

What the Learning Paradigm Means for Faculty

by George R. Boggs



The new focus on student learning in higher education promises positive change. First introduced in the early 1990s, the ideas behind this “learning paradigm” or “learning revolution,” as some have called it, do not seem to be a passing fad. Articles, books, and even national conferences are bringing more clarity to the tenets of the learning paradigm and how it is being implemented. Yet in these discussions I frequently hear voices of hostility from members of the teaching faculty.

Faculty members are often offended by the language of the learning paradigm. They see a false dichotomy in expressions that seem to pit teaching against learning. They believe that effective teaching causes learning. They constantly strive to improve their teaching, and they schedule extra review sessions and individual appointments to help their students learn. They get their greatest reward when their students learn and when their former students are successful. They change approaches when the students have problems grasping the material. They cannot understand what is really new in this national attention to student learning. Certainly, they do not see something as significant as a paradigm shift.

Some faculty members are concerned about the loss of teacher control advocated by proponents of the learning paradigm. In the traditional “instruction paradigm,” teachers are subject-matter experts who dispense and explain information to students, primarily via lectures. In the learning paradigm, students are more in control of their own learning, often learning from peers in small groups. Information is more widely available.

Other faculty members equate a focus on learning with becoming so student centered that academic standards drop. They believe

that there is a danger of becoming overly concerned about maintaining student self-esteem to the detriment of preparing students for a “real world” that is complex and not always fair.

An Institutional Perspective

Faculty members who question the ideas of the learning paradigm do not understand that its primary focus is at the institutional level rather than at the individual faculty member level. In fact, their attention to effective teaching in an environment that is sometimes hostile to their new ideas was one of the major factors that led to the proposition that a paradigm shift was needed. It is not an accident that the ideas of the learning paradigm are getting the most attention at institutions that have teaching and learning as primary missions.

There are four important tenets of the learning paradigm. First, the mission of colleges and universities should be student learning rather than teaching or instruction. Second, institutions should accept responsibility for student learning. Third, supporting and promoting student learning should be everyone’s job and should guide institutional decisions. Fourth, institutions should judge their effectiveness and be evaluated on student learning outcomes rather than on resources or processes.

Most commonly, the mission statements of colleges and universities set forth the purposes of research, service, and teaching. Rarely, if ever, do mission statements refer to student learning. A 1993 study by Robert Barr, director of institutional research and planning at Palomar College, found no focus on learning in 107 California community colleges’ mission statements. In the few

instances when the word was used, it was almost always bundled in the phrase "teaching and learning."

Traditionally in higher education the student is responsible for learning. The institution is responsible merely for establishing curricular standards and for providing instruction, support services, and resources. But calls for accountability from parents, public officials, and accrediting bodies have changed this notion. With the recent attention to increased educational costs and poor results has come the demand that institutions become accountable for student learning outcomes in exchange for financial support. In a 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey, the Educational Testing Service reported that only about one half of four-year college graduates were able to demonstrate intermediate levels of competence in interpreting prose such as newspaper articles, working with documents such as bus schedules, and using elementary arithmetic to solve problems involving costs of meals in restaurants.

Kay McClenney, vice president of the Education Commission of the States, in an August 1998 issue of *Leadership Abstracts*, said that the inescapable reality is that policymakers and the public are through signing blank checks for higher education. Institutions are expected to perform, to document performance, and to be accountable for producing return on taxpayer and student investment. McClenney predicts that this dynamic is going to be reflected in performance indicators, performance funding, performance contracting, and performance pay. In fact, several states either have instituted some of these measures or are studying them. Proponents of the learning paradigm argue that institutional responsibility for student learning, rather than just providing instruction and services, has the potential to respond to these new demands with significant positive change.

Under the learning paradigm, everyone in an institution is responsible for student learning — teachers, librarians, counselors, secretaries, custodians, food service workers, president, trustees. Limiting employees' jobs to traditional roles does not allow employees to identify with the institution's mission and may keep them from noticing institutional problems and barriers outside of their area or from helping students. This shared responsibility for student learning does not relieve the student of responsibility, but it means that everyone has a stake in student success.

Planning and operational decisions must be made with consideration to their potential impact on student learning. Robert Barr and John Tagg, in their article "From Teaching to Learning" (*Change*, Nov/Dec 1995), argue that institutions should restructure to produce better student learning. The instruction paradigm, they say, confuses a means (instruction) with an end (learning). McClenney put it directly when she said that every choice, every decision —

about staffing, resource allocation, everything — gets subjected to a simple screen: How does this improve learning?

Popular magazine ratings of colleges and universities are the subject of a great deal of controversy. These annual ratings evaluate institutions primarily on the basis of resources and processes rather than outcomes. Institutions with the most exclusive student admissions standards, the largest library collections, and the largest endowments are usually ranked at the top. Under the learning paradigm, colleges and universities would be judged on the basis of student learning outcomes. Continuous improvement of these outcomes would be a goal.

Implications for Teachers

McClenney predicts profound changes in the roles of faculty and their relationships to students and to one another. She sees traditional instructional methods as ineffective, unaffordable, and infeasible for meeting future demands. Traditionally, college teachers have assumed that students learn through lectures, assigned readings, problem sets, laboratory work, and fieldwork. However, these assumptions are being challenged by new research about how people learn. Evidence from a number of disciplines suggests that oral presentations to large groups of passive students contribute very little to real learning. Faculty members who promote interaction among students in and out of class are rewarded with improved student persistence and success.

In *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (1997, Oryx Press), Terry O'Banion reports that nursing programs in community colleges have some of the highest success rates in all of education, at least in part because a cohort is guided through a rigorous competency-based curriculum. Nursing students study together and support one another, and there is no disincentive for all to succeed at high levels because students are graded not relative to one another (as on a curve) but relative to a given performance standard. Learning communities, in which a group of students take a common set of courses, usually designed around a theme, have also proved their effectiveness in developing a collaborative and cooperative learning environment, which promotes student achievement.

Technology is being used in many new and exciting ways to enhance student learning. Multimedia presentations engage students with different learning styles. Electronic mail provides an avenue for more frequent and more timely interaction between teachers and students. Online chat rooms or discussion groups encourage student interaction. Advances in technology have made information much more available. Teachers will no longer have to function as storehouses of knowledge, keeping up with an explosion of information. Instead, teachers can help students use resources to evaluate information wisely.

Teaching must be viewed as a scholarly activity with its own body of research. Faculty members in the learning paradigm will be concerned not only about keeping up with their disciplines but also about keeping up with what is being discovered about learning and effective methods to promote it. They will be encouraged to experiment with teaching, to study it, and to evaluate it in much the same way they would evaluate other scholarly activity.

Implementing the new learning paradigm does not lessen the status of the teacher or of any other professional. Instead, it focuses the resources of the institution on the outcome of student learning. Shifting control of learning to students should not be seen as a threat. Teachers will be responsible for more important activities than just dispensing information. They will be the designers of the learning environment, constantly assessing and seeking improvements. They will continue to guide, mentor, and evaluate the learning of their students.

The Student as Customer

Many faculty members disagree with the new paradigm's "student as customer" analogy. This analogy is more appropriate when viewed from an institutional perspective. Competition for students is high. Many colleges and universities have developed extensive enrollment-management and marketing programs to attract students and thus to survive. Tuition costs and the availability of sufficient financial aid have received greater attention. Colleges and universities have expanded student services to retain students and have developed nontraditional schedules to be more convenient. The development of online courses is supported as a way to compete with institutions that offer most of their instruction electronically.

Institutions, particularly community colleges, are attracting older students who do not have time to stand in long lines registering for classes or buying textbooks. Bureaucratic processes and excess paperwork are being replaced with more convenient processes, often making good use of technology. At many institutions, students can now apply for admission, register for classes, and even receive grades using the Internet. Counseling and tutoring, along with coursework, are now available electronically for students who find it inconvenient or impossible to come to campus.

While institutions have been working to attract students and to provide more efficient and more convenient services in much the same way that a business establishes a relationship with a customer, the relationship between a teacher and a student is more complex. The teacher is the designer, the instructor, the guide, the advisor, the motivator, the taskmaster, and the evaluator. Students must listen, observe, take notes, read, write, speak, respond in class, study, and take examinations. Students must work to achieve the

very outcomes for which they or their families are paying. Yet the best teachers treat students with the respect due a customer and make extra efforts to help them succeed in their classes.

Faculty and Institutional Change

The efforts of faculty members will be essential in the transformation of colleges and universities to become more learning centered. As influential players in the governance of their institutions, they are in positions to help revise mission statements so that they clearly define the institution's purpose as student learning. Faculty members can help ensure that planning and operational decisions are made to impact student learning positively. When designing new facilities, for example, faculty members can insist on the flexibility necessary to support new teaching and learning methods, rather than accept architectural designs based on tradition.

Perhaps the most important institutional activity for faculty in the learning paradigm is to take the lead in identifying learning outcomes for students and developing ways to ensure that graduates achieve those outcomes. Just what should students have learned, and how do we know that they have? These discussions can be valuable at the departmental level, but they are essential at the institutional level. Once learning outcomes are identified and measured, the next step is to set goals for improvement and try new methods to bring these improvements about.

Educators have a tremendous amount of time and energy invested in the current paradigm and may be resistant or blind to the need to change. Faculty members have been trained by example to provide instruction and grade students. Administrators hire and evaluate teachers on the basis of how well they present material. College and university policies often make it difficult for faculty to try new methods. Staff members have probably never been told that their jobs are to create an environment conducive to student learning.

Despite these barriers, educators must make student learning a priority. They must establish expectations for learning outcomes, assess whether the expectations have been met, and set goals for improvement. Policies must be changed to encourage new methods. The limitations of traditional methods of instruction will not be accepted much longer, and educators rather than legislators should establish learning outcome standards. This is a challenge that educators must accept.

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