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Personal Reflection: We Will Teach Them ... How?

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Abstract

Excerpt: A few years ago I attended a Faculty Development Conference sponsored by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. One of the keynote addresses was given by Dr. Robert Weisbuch, President of Drew University. At the time of the conference, Dr. Weisbuch was the President of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and his talk focused on the role of liberal arts in higher education. Throughout his talk he paraphrased a quote from William Wordsworth. Dr. Weisbuch words were “Others will love what we have loved, and we must teach them.” I had never heard that quote before and hearing those words brought back many fond memories. They reminded me of the chemistry experiments in my grandmother’s bathroom, my own undergraduate education and the many late nights in the laboratory during graduate school. My teachers and mentors had an attentive student on their hands as I loved my discipline and wanted to learn about all aspects of the chemical sciences. Since becoming a teacher and a research mentor, I have encountered many students with a love and passion for my discipline and it has been a pleasure working with these young men and women.

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We Will Teach Them... How?

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A few years ago I attended a Faculty Development Conference sponsored by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. One of the keynote addresses was given by Dr. Robert Weisbuch, President of Drew University. At the time of the conference, Dr. Weisbuch was the President of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and his talk focused on the role of liberal arts in higher education. Throughout his talk he paraphrased a quote from William Wordsworth. Dr. Weisbuch's words were "Others will love what we have loved, and we must teach them." I had never heard that quote before and hearing those words brought back many fond memories. They reminded me of the chemistry experiments in my grandmother's bathroom, my own undergraduate education and the many late nights in the laboratory during graduate school. My teachers and mentors had an attentive student on their hands as I loved my discipline and wanted to learn about all aspects of the chemical sciences. Since becoming a teacher and a research mentor, I have encountered many students with a love and passion for my discipline and it has been a pleasure working with these young men and women.

After the conference, I found the actual quote by Wordsworth. I was pleased to add this quote to my archive of inspiring words. However, I was a bit surprised when I read this quote in *The Prelude* by Wordsworth. The actual wording used by Wordsworth at the end of the quote was "...we will teach them how." At the faculty development conference, Dr. Weisbuch did not say the word "how" in his paraphrasing of the quote or I simply did not hear him say it. At this point, you may be curious why I am making such a big deal about one word in this quotation. However, my interpretation of Wordsworth's quote changes dramatically when the word "how" is removed from the end of the quote. Teaching students the fundamental and advanced aspects of a discipline they already love or in which they have a keen interest can be quite different from teaching them how to love a particular discipline or convincing them that a particular area is worthy of study.

It is interesting that my interpretations of the two forms of this noteworthy quote can be extrapolated to my typical teaching schedule. I teach a few courses that are mainly biology or chemistry majors where many of the students already have a deep interest in science or medicine. I also direct the research of students interested in chemistry or biochemistry who usually attend medical schools or graduate schools in the sciences. The form of the quote that had me so excited at the faculty development conference (without "how") applies to these teaching situations. These students love what I love and I can help them understand and experience the details and intricacies of our beloved discipline.

On the other hand, I also teach an organic chemistry course for non-majors that is required in a variety of programs on campus. I truly enjoy teaching this course and I encounter many talented students who work very hard to learn the material. From a teaching perspective, this course can be frustrating because the students are not generally excited by chemistry. Although I want very much to teach them "how" to love chemistry, it is usually not very productive.

In an effort to redesign this course, I turned to the teaching literature and was particularly inspired by the work of Dee Fink and his book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (Jossey-Bass). As a result, I began to spend a greater amount of class time discussing the application and integration of chemical principles into other disciplines and students' daily lives. For example, I developed an alternative assessment exercise where students assumed the role of news reporters to produce a short "news" clip in PowerPoint that covers a topic discussed in class and has relevance for the general public. The Action 10 ChemNews clips have covered such topics as low-toxicity antifreeze and trans-fats (Cox, J. R., 2006; "Developing an Alternate Assessment Exercise for an Introductory Chemistry Course"; *The Teaching Professor*, 20[9], 5).

To date, I have not had anyone switch to become a chemistry major, but the students have a greater appreciation for the content of the course. Moreover, student performance on a standardized, content-focused examination given at the end of the semester has improved since the redesign.

Overall, reading and contributing to the teaching literature has improved my teaching practices and allowed me to better engage a diverse range of students. Our job as teachers puts us in contact with students who have widely different levels of interest in our disciplines. Others may not ever love what we love, but an enthusiastic and respectful invitation into a discipline can be the formula for a meaningful course for most of the students.

Many faculty members do not value the scholarship of teaching and learning as much as disciplinary research. As a result, there is still a great deal of pedagogical isolation within departments and throughout the academy. Lee Shulman, outgoing President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, once said that "Teaching is like dry ice; it evaporates at room temperature unless gifted and courageous teachers take the initiative to go public." Indeed, taking good teaching public in the form of scholarly journal articles or talking to colleagues down the hall is the only way to end the pedagogical isolation and develop a large community of practitioners who can work together to improve teaching and learning.

* See Dee Fink's "What is Significant Learning" at <http://www.ou.edu/pii/significant/siglearning.htm>.