

'Serving time': The relationship of bad and good teaching

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Abstract: *This paper explores the relationship between bad teaching and good teaching. The central argument is that bad and good teaching are symmetrical. If that is true, then eliminating bad teaching does leave behind good teaching. To make this case there is a discussion of good and bad teaching and efforts to promote the latter. The argument is supported by descriptions good and bad offered by graduates of an earlier generation.*

Keywords: *good teaching, bad teaching*

Introduction

What is the relationship between bad teaching and good teaching? The paragraphs that follow first consider, with reference to the distinction between teacher-centred and student-centred teaching, the link between bad and good teaching. The argument is that the concepts of good and bad teaching have different foci. Eliminating bad teaching does not produce good teaching. This conclusion is supported by descriptions of good and bad teaching offered by long term graduates. While the argument is conceptual it is important to note that it is supported by some empirical evidence to withstand scepticism and criticism.

Are bad and good teaching connected? Bad teaching seems obvious. The very phrase "bad teaching" conjures images in the minds of one and all. If we know what bad teaching is, then is its opposite good teaching? 'Yes,' cries common sense, but can we trust that voice? Of course, that conclusion begs the definitional question of what is good teaching and what is bad teaching?

The final arbiter for both good and bad teaching will always be students themselves. It would be a safe bet that students complete ever more questionnaires evaluating teaching today than at any previous time. Students' evaluations of teaching have an authenticity, a freshness, and a directness that makes them unique. Yet the continual administration of questionnaires is repetitious. Students soon learn not to invest much into these routine questionnaires (Narasimhan 2001). To supplement them we need other insights. Another additional perspective is students' more mature reflections on teaching after graduation.

My thesis is that good and bad teaching have different foci. In this case, eliminating the negative of bad teaching does not leave the positive of good teaching, but rather the in-between, to paraphrase Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen's and 1940 tune 'Accentuate the Positive,' which playfully asserts that eliminating the negative does not accentuate the positive, but only arrives at Mr. In-Between.

The argument rests, in part, on the distinction between teacher-centered and student-centered teaching (Prosser & Trigwell 1999, Garvin 1991, 5). A teacher-centred approach concentrates on presenting information, and doing so in a way that is well organized, current, and coherent. Once the information has been presented – in lectures, in demonstrations, in PowerPoint slides, WebCT links, or SMS notes - it is the responsibility of students to learn it. How many teachers have said something like this: ‘I taught the material, but the students didn’t learn it’ (Christensen et al. 1991, xii)?

In contrast, the student-centred approach focuses on what students do, why they think they are doing it, and what they learn by doing it. It is an approach aimed at challenging and changing students’ conceptual frameworks. Dewey (1915, 152ff.) advocated this approach to education nearly a hundred years ago and similar themes were reiterated by Hight (1950).

In contrast teacher-centered teachers concentrate on what they do on the assumption that presentation leads to knowledge. The heart-felt confession of one conscientious teacher-centered teacher makes the point. Tompkins (1991 and 1996) reflected on her own obsessions with teaching ‘(a) showing the students how smart I was; (b) showing them how knowledgeable I was; and (c) showing them how well prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help students learn but to act in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me’.

Whether it is called a seminar, a tutorial, a discussion section, or a lecture most of the time the teacher does the talking, or as one student said: ‘in most classes you sit quietly around a table and get lectured at’ (Walker & Warhurst 2000). It was ever thus, the teacher does the talking even in tutorials (Powell 1973). Instead, a student-centered teacher concentrates on what students are doing, why they are doing it, and what they are learning from it. This distinction between student-centred and teacher-centred informs the remainder of the discussion.

What is good teaching? Many experts promote models of good teaching (Schoenfeld & Magnan 1994, 182-182; Biggs 1999, 72-96). In addition there is empirical research on good teaching. Eric Saunders and Christine Saunders (1995) asked nominated expert teachers to analyse video tapes of other teachers and score them. They emphasized organization, punctuality and the like. Since the video tapes were of the teacher, this study is completely teacher-centred.

A much more valuable resource with special for the Australian context is *Recognising and Rewarding Good Teaching* (Ramsden et al. 1995), a national study commissioned in the hope of influencing approaches to teaching in Australian universities. It includes a list of the features of good teaching:

- Listening to students
- Enthusiasm for the subject
- Adjustment to students
- Encouragement of deep learning approaches
- Setting clear goals
- Offering feedback
- Respect for students

Accompanying the list are forty-six citations drawn from twenty-two sources. Only five of these twenty-two sources rest on any empirical evidence. Let it be clear, these features may be the features of good teaching, but in arriving at that conclusion evidence from students must be considered, and not merely the authority of experts.

These themes recur in other research. According to Brodie & Dorfman (1994, 246) students cite enthusiasm, knowledge of subject, integration, and application of the knowledge to the world, and that the instructor hears and heeds them by forming a relationship and rapport with them. Smith & Cranton (1992, 761) had similar responses. Ballantyne, Bain, and Packer's (1999, 240 and 244; 1997) extensive study returned again to enthusiasm for teaching the subject, getting student interest and holding it, valuing students' perspectives, caring about students, making material accessible at students' level, and referring to everyday experiences that students can test. Patrick and Smart (1998) found that respect for students, interest in the subject, and feedback scored highly.

At the margins there is overlap between the descriptions of good and bad teaching in empirical studies (Marsh 1987 and 1984), which qualifies the argument (McCannon & Ghodes 1995; Leach 1996). However in each of these the points that overlap score lower than the distinctive features of good teaching. The overlap can be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps there are students whose approach to learning is focussed on information transfer and is itself teacher-centred (Biggs 1987, 75; Prosser and Trigwell 1999, 91). That approach seems implicitly affirmed when classes are called lectures. Lecturing is what the teacher does and listening is what the students do. It may also be that respondents talk at the same time about both good and bad teaching and so mention together items that can be analytically distinguished.

Method

To shed more light on the relationship of good and bad teaching, I asked graduates with a Bachelor's of Economics degree from the University of Sydney before 1974 to reflect on their experience of good and bad teaching. There were 1,086 names of Bachelor of Economics graduates on the University's mailing list. They returned 165 replies. Given that the list includes very elderly graduates, and some who were dead, this was a pleasing response.

The questionnaire asked them to describe themselves as students; and it asked them if their opinions about good and bad teaching had changed over the years. Those that replied are not a representative sample, but their voices are authentic and they do not have many features that set them apart from the total. Graduates of the faculty before 1974 include the chairman of the World Bank and a Nobel Prize winner in Economics. To dismiss the voices of our graduate son methodological grounds mistakes means for ends.

Descriptions of bad and good teaching. There were 176 separate comments on bad teaching. More than two-thirds of them (69%) concerned communication, knowledge, and discipline in the class room. Communication includes statements about mumbling, not projecting one's voice, dictating, using no examples, making no application to the world, unclear exposition, and so on. Knowledge includes comments about disorganized lectures, late appearance, and lack of command of subject, poor notes, and such. Discipline refers to failing to keep order in the tiered lecture theatre. Examples of each kind of comment are in table one below. The proportion among them is roughly reflected in the table.

There are no surprises here but the clarity, intelligence, vigor, and, in some cases, the anger in the words of these graduates is compelling, the more so when noting that all of them graduated at least twenty-five years before writing. Many of respondents described the tiered lecture rooms, seeming a rather grim memory. The title of this essay comes from one graduate who described a bad teacher as reluctantly 'serving time' in the classroom. In the presence of such an approach to teaching, students, too, must have felt they were serving a sentence, sitting there on the fixed benches that trap everyone in the middle of a row. When nearly all of these respondents were students there were no tutorials, seminars, or discussion groups. All instruction was in lectures. Assessment was a 100% final examination.

In table one C stands for communication, K for knowledge, and D for discipline.

| C | Seemed to take pride in how many blackboards he could fill with handwritten text to be copied |
|---|--|
| C | Dull delivery of what seemed like research notes, not lectures for students |
| C | Patronising, unnecessary jargon that made subject more, not less, complex. |
| C | Buried himself in the blackboard. Mumbled and missed steps in explanation. |
| C | Mumbled, spoke too quickly, spoke looking down, used abstruse language. |
| C | A monologue presentation without moving from behind the lecture bench. Ineffective interaction with students – appeared to be ‘serving time’ or not interested in teaching. |
| C | Lectured on complex subject in statistics without considering whether the students could comprehend the direction of the reasoning, combined with a bombastic style of presentation. |
| C | Filled the blackboard with ‘material’ requiring us to copy it out. |
| C | Whenever he walked into a lecture room a number of students walked out. He presentations were poor. |
| C | Spoke over our heads, using big words and never explaining. |
| C | Seemed to lecture by rote. |
| C | All detail and no overview. Never why these details were important. |
| C | Strident and bombastic delivery. |
| C | Subject taught by talking non-stop with the board being covered with unexplained information. |
| C | Filled six blackboards with equations and then walked out. The students in the lecture room were never acknowledged even by a glance. |
| C | I never knew what he was lecturing on. He just talked and we guessed what the point was. |
| C | Archetypically vague. Sentences left incomplete. Lists of five points became two points. |
| C | So nervous that could not speak sometimes. |
| C | Refused to use the microphone despite lecturing to 1,000 students. |
| C | A mumblor who did not express himself well |
| C | Dogmatic. He was always right. I didn’t understand so I learned it by rote. |
| C | Mumbled incomprehensibly |
| C | Disorganized |
| C | Missed one lecture in three with no notice or apology, leaving students sitting in empty rooms until realization dawned that he wasn’t coming |
| C | All over the place, i.e., disorganized and slap dash |
| C | Late arrival, going over time at the end, leaving me one minute to cross the entire campus for the next lecture. |
| K | Out of date material. |
| K | Easily lost the thread and then unable to remember the main point. |

| | |
|---|---|
| K | Often appeared inadequately prepared |
| K | He did not follow the logic of his own arguments |
| K | Made a fetish of pedestrian minutiae in a pretty simple subject. |
| K | Didn't know his subject. |
| K | Did not seem to have confidence in his own knowledge. |
| K | Much of the material I studied in the 1960s was not really practical value to my business career. I might as well have done Greek. |
| D | Always late to class, late returning assignments |
| D | Lost control of the lecture theatre from the first minute of the first lecture. The attentive students found it hard going. |
| D | Unable to command respect of students |
| D | Lost control of the room in first five minutes of the first lecture |
| D | No class room control. Ignored flying paper planes. Poor use of technology. |
| D | Lost control of the lecture hall. |
| D | Just continued to lecture despite the babble. No effort to control the room so that the students who were trying could get something from it. |

Table 1. bad teaching.

Trusting to intuitions, someone aiming at good teaching might learn quite a lot from Table 1. Come to class on time, offer well organized presentations, project clearly to the back of the room, always give an overview before details, define technical terms, assert a civil atmosphere in the lecture room, and the like. These kinds of tips for new teacher fill many books (Eble 1988).

On the other hand, when these same respondents described good teaching they used a significantly different vocabulary which reveals an alternative conception of what is good about teaching. The most noteworthy example of this was entirely unintended and unexpected. Many of them wrote down the names of good teachers, but not a single one wrote down the name of a bad teacher. These good teachers made a mark, as Adams (1973 [1918]) said a teacher never knows where the influence stops. Yet in many discussions of quality teaching, teachers are absent (Jones 2003).

In the 165 returns there were 244 descriptions of good teaching. Note also that respondents put more effort into describing good teaching than bad. They described behavior that:

- Cared about students and showed enthusiasm for teaching.
- Pitched material at the students' level and had relevance to students' experiences.
- Focused on information presentation
- Addressed classroom discipline.

The last two overlap with bad teaching and will be addressed in a moment. The relative frequency of descriptions is implied in the order of the list. Each of these categories is illustrated below.

The modal response on good teaching was the first, caring about students and zest for teaching students: 109 of the 244 statements describe those behaviors. I say it this way to make clear this is zest for teaching

the subject to students not just a zest for the subject. Next were eighty statements that describe behavior that put material at the students' level and had relevance to students' experiences. Another 44 responses describe information-presentation as good teaching. About a dozen statement described behavior aimed at keeping order in the classroom. Table two summarizes the results.

| Behavior described | Responses |
|--|-----------|
| Cared for students and showed enthusiasm for teaching. | 109 |
| Pitched at the students' level with relevance to students' experience. | 80 |
| Presentation. | 44 |
| Discipline. | 11 |
| Total | 244 |

Table 2. Behaviors described as good teaching

Each category is best understood by examples. Table three offers comments about relationships with students.

| |
|--|
| Treated students with respect |
| Obviously liked students |
| Approachable |
| He seemed to care if we learned |
| Always seemed to be glad to be in the classroom with us |
| Keen to teach. Really interested in students. Enthusiasm was infectious. |
| Ability to develop empathy with students stood out. Cared about you. |
| Encouraged students to draw their own conclusions. Only then would he set the record straight. |

Table 3. Cared for students and showed enthusiasm for teaching (N = 109)

Students appreciate recognition and they like someone happy in the work of teaching. This category includes statements that describe someone enthusiastic about seeing students learn the material. Equally palpable is that the good teaching is as emotional as much as it is intellectual. Long before the cognitive comes the affective and long after the cognitive fades the emotional remains. An instructor serving time poisons a classroom and another still glad to teach enlivens it. Table 4 lists comments about that enrichment through effective communication. Here we see some asymmetry. Earlier when students complained about ill communication in bad teaching, they spoke of mumbling and other mechanical aspects of projection. Here though the generic term communication seems best, they speak of making the material alive within their horizons of meaning. They speak of meaningful communication, not merely audible communication.

| |
|--|
| For every point there was a story |
| Showed how theory and concepts applied to the real world |
| Always referring to examples from the news |

Table 4. Communication (n=80)

The emphasis in these remarks about communication always relates to getting students' attention by showing how theory explains practice. It means taking time in class to do that, not simply telling students to think about it for themselves later. It means valuing students' life experiences. It is not the opposite of being disorganized, as students complain about in bad teaching, rather it is building bridges from students' life experiences to the theoretical material taught by making it accessible.

Students do commend good lectures that are easy to follow and which yield good notes, and this is evident in table five. But when they think of good teaching they are far more likely by a factor of five to one to mention enthusiasm and meaningful communication than presentation.

| |
|----------------------|
| Lucid |
| logical and concise |
| Detailed explanation |
| logical exposition |

Table 5. Presentation (n=44)

In this set of comments there is some overlap with one dimension of bad teaching. As students complain about incomprehensible lectures so they praise comprehensible ones.

Though many teacher-centered lecturers argue that current and well organized lectures are the essence of good teaching, especially when making cases for promotion, there is limited support for this conclusion from these graduates. Finally, there were a few comments about social order of the tiered lecture room that are also symmetrical with the complaints about bad teaching.

| |
|--|
| Didn't let some students disrupt lecture |
|--|

Table 6. Discipline (n=11)

It is very limited overlap as predicted.

Discussion

That some of these graduates remember their education a generation ago fondly in tiered lecture theatres with 100% final examinations is noteworthy itself.

It is sometimes said that students' perceptions of teaching change with time. I asked if respondents had changed their perceptions of teachers over time. An overwhelming majority of 108 said 'No' as against 31 who said there was some change.

Among the 165 respondents there were thirty who described themselves as Honors graduates. Their responses were similar to the others.

Some responses are humbling. Five said they had no recollection of good teaching. Three others answered the questions about good teaching with remarks about bad teaching. One Honours graduate said, hard though it is to believe, 'I never got to know a lecturer personally'.

What conclusions does this evidence and argument support?

Conclusion

Does eliminating bad teaching leave good teaching? There is some overlap between the two as noted above. However, to focus on ridding the classroom of bad teaching is itself teacher-centred, while the qualities of good teaching are focused more on students. Good and bad teaching are conceptually distinct and the evidence is clear that these graduates describe good teaching in a largely different vocabulary than that with which they describe bad teaching. They describe good teaching as student-centred, focused on the learner. Eliminating the negative does not accentuate the positive, despite the plethora of web sites, manuals, and development programs that promise to eliminate the negative. Nor does the reverse follow: a student-centred teacher may not be particularly well organized.

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