Researchers Hooked on Teaching
Noted Scholars Discuss the Synergies of Teaching and Research
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RESEARCHERS HOOKED ON TEACHING:
Noted Scholars Discuss the Synergies of Teaching and Research
Rae André and Peter J. Frost
I remember the moment quite clearly. The emotional impact of that concluding sentence in my urban sociology class is as vivid today as it was back in the fall of 1969. I had just finished another hour of straight lecturing—which meant more or less reading out to the students the notes I had laboriously compiled the night before—when I turned to them and said, "But what does it all mean?" I shrugged my shoulders: "Who knows?" Momentarily stunned by this rather foolish revelation, the students did not respond, and I turned and walked out of the room. I knew something was wrong, but what? I wish I could say that I came up with a solution before the next class session, but alas, more than a decade passed before I finally came to my senses.

I want to tell you a story about my career as a teacher, using a simple life-course model. I’ve titled the first three sections of this chapter “Promise,” “Failure,” and “Redemption” because, as I look back, these periods in my life are so clearly demarcated. At the time I lived through
them, however, I was almost completely unaware of the transformation I was undergoing. Thus, this chapter is an opportunity for me to make sense out of those changes and to make a few more general observations about teaching and its place in academic careers. The editors asked me about the link between my teaching and research interests, but for much of my career, the two have had a tenuous connection. Some signs of change are apparent, however.

Promise

In high school, I was simultaneously a teacher’s dream and a teacher’s worst nightmare. I attended a very small school in the same corner of Ohio where Karl Weick (Chapter 17) enjoyed his formative years. Luckily, we never met as children, and so I can truthfully claim that my feelings about teaching developed completely independently from his! I was a teacher’s dream because I not only did all the assigned work for classes but also read widely, brought outside material into class, and volunteered for extra assignments. I was also a teacher’s worst nightmare because classes never went fast enough for me and my peers never got the point quickly enough. While my teachers lingered over fairly obvious points with my duller classmates, I was cutting up in the back row, drawing pictures of hot rods and spaceships and generally making a nuisance of myself.

Despite my disruptive behavior, several kindly teachers—perhaps they had taken courses in educational psychology?—spent time after class with me, suggesting additional readings and involving me in independent studies projects. Looking back now, it’s impossible to overestimate the effect of that extra attention I received. I remember being driven home after one late-night school club meeting by a teacher who talked matter-of-factly about an assignment she was giving me for the club; it involved putting together the high school yearbook and clearly conveyed the message that I could do the job regardless of my inexperience.

I went off to college, thinking teachers had a pretty good thing going but never contemplating that I could do their job. U.S. colleges in the early 1960s were on the verge of entering a tumultuous era of societal transformation. During that decade, the public image of undergraduates changed from beer-swilling, party-going, politically conservative
adolescents to politically radical, even dangerous, subversives who were a threat to the American way of life. The draft board sit-ins and the antiwar teach-ins at U.S. colleges in the mid-1960s now seem a lifetime away, and they are ancient history to today’s student generation. I have long since learned not to toss off casual references to events from those days. Instead, I search for more contemporary references when I need examples of turbulent times!

Even though I only traveled 50 miles from my hometown to my university town, I might as well have been entering a parallel universe. Philosophy, political science, journalism, history, psychology, economics, and other social science courses became an all-consuming passion for me. By the second semester of my sophomore year, I’d decided to major in sociology. By my senior year, I’d taken all the undergraduate courses available in sociology and psychology and was taking graduate courses and independent studies courses with senior professors. As had happened in high school, a few faculty took a special interest in my intellectual development, inviting me to office hours and sponsoring my independent studies projects. Somewhere along the way, my intentions to become a lawyer evaporated. I still remember that fateful day when I decided not to mail in my application to take the LSAT; instead, I signed up for the GRE and the advanced test in sociology.

But when did college teaching become salient to me as a profession? I remember being incredibly impressed, even enthralled, by how patient and understanding my professors were. Sherm Stanage, Art Neal, Joe Balogh, and others worked in their offices, with their doors open, and it never occurred to me that I might be turned away, no matter when I sought them out. In my senior year, all my professors assumed I would go to graduate school, and so I began assuming the same thing. But I needed funding, and so I began investigating the scholarships available for graduate study in the social sciences. The Danforth Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation offered two of the best deals, and I obtained applications from them. The Woodrow Wilson Fellowship was explicitly for people intending to become college teachers; the Danforth Foundation sought people with a broadly humanitarian commitment to public life. In the process of writing applications for these fellowships, I discovered that I could make a pretty good case for my potential worth as a college instructor.

Graduate school at the University of Michigan in sociology was, in a sense, more of the same experience I’d had as an undergraduate. This
was the mid-1960s, the federal government was lavishing money on the social sciences, huge survey research projects were being conducted at the Institute for Social Research, and Michigan formed a sort of "brain trust" for the social sciences. Talk of research and federal grants was always in the air, but talk of teaching was not. The incentive system was fairly clear, and I would have been a very dense graduate student indeed had I not realized that the best job offers were going to the students with the best research record in graduate school, not to those who'd done innovative teaching of undergraduates. Was anyone bitter about this? No. We all took it for granted; great scholars did great research and published great works and also gave a fair account of themselves in the classroom.

Michigan did have scholars who seemed to have extraordinary competence in both worlds. My classes with Ed Swanson, Dan Katz, Bill Gamson, George Katona, Phil Converse, and others were sometimes extraordinary learning experiences—and always interesting. As had happened to me as an undergraduate, several of my professors got me involved in their research projects, although very few of them maintained the open door policy I had enjoyed as an undergraduate.

But what of my own teaching experiences in all of this? Even though I turned down the Woodrow Wilson and Danforth Foundations to accept a National Science Foundation fellowship, I was still on their mailing lists and was invited to conferences, particularly by the Danforth Foundation. Thus, at least once a year, I engaged in rather abstract discussions with colleagues from other universities about theories of teaching. My only actual classroom experience, however, came as a result of my wife, insisting that because I would have to teach for a living, I ought to at least try it once before I left graduate school. As a teacher herself, she could see how unprepared I was, but she was amazingly good-natured about it. Accordingly, I volunteered as a TA for a large lecture class. Unfortunately, the class turned into the sort of free-form happening that, two decades later, would provide juicy examples for people like Bloom (1987) and Sykes (1988) when they wrote of the excesses of liberal education.

The class quickly spun out of control as the students took over the lecture stage or called out to the professor through bullhorns from the balcony. I stopped going to lectures and ran a guerrilla class on my own. As I was doing my dissertation on small businesses and how they were affected by the civil disorders of 1967 and 1968, I had plenty to
talk about. Indeed, I had too much to talk about. I suspect I talked about 90% of the time. For a few months, my research actually informed my teaching because I used my preparations for the dissertation in choosing readings for the class. Because Detroit had experienced serious civil disorders in the preceding summer, the students were very curious about my dissertation plans.

Did I learn anything about teaching from that experience? I remember being vaguely sick to my stomach each morning before class, but I also remember the exhilarating feeling of having students pass me on the sidewalk in Ann Arbor and actually say, “Hello, Mr. Aldrich.” As it turns out, I had learned very little that would be useful on my first job.

Failure

When I went on the job market, in my final year of graduate school, I went through a process very typical of those times. Everywhere I visited, I was asked to talk about my research and about my long-term plans for publishing it. A few department chairs asked me about my teaching experience but in a very perfunctory way, and none of them asked to see my syllabus or teaching evaluations or even implied that I might be carrying them around with me. Because I’d never designed a course from scratch, I had only a vague idea of how to put together such a syllabus, anyway, and the one time I actually went into detail, I simply described the reading list from my one teaching experience at Michigan.

Totally unprepared, I thus walked into my first teaching experience at Cornell University’s New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR). I actually knew what a syllabus should look like and so spent several weeks during the summer preparing one for my only course in the fall—Urban Sociology. I don’t recall any senior colleagues talking with me about what to expect, nor do I recall anyone actually making suggestions about what I might do in the course. A senior professor in another department had taught a course similar to mine, but no one sent me a syllabus, and my understanding was that I was on my own.

How shall I describe that first semester? The phrase “being thrown to the lions” does not quite capture my predicament because I went
willingly into the arena, albeit completely unaware of how poorly armed I was. Through my high school and undergraduate days, the teachers and professors I admired had simply stood up at the front of the room, effortlessly spinning interesting tales and leading engaging discussions. I’d never really thought about how they managed it. I quickly discovered that observing and remembering good teaching did not provide me with the actual tools for accomplishing the tasks.

Looking back now, I can see that my favorite teachers were not great lecturers, but rather great discussion leaders and facilitators. At the time, however, the principles they used were opaque to me. Despite my undergraduate minor in psychology and my graduate minor in social psychology, I just didn’t see the connection between leadership style, group process, and teaching outcomes.

Instead of thinking about how to facilitate discussions, I committed the cardinal sin of poorly prepared teachers everywhere: I lectured. For every class meeting, I prepared detailed lecture notes, often stretching to 10 or 15 single-spaced pages, completely scripting the hour. Worse still, these lecture notes were not prepared after serious reflection of what the hour ought to accomplish, but rather were a summary of what I had cobbled together from my outside readings. Preparing these massive lectures took me far into the night as my wife and infant son slept in the adjacent room. I had to find some material I thought was interesting and then copy the important passages out of the source into my lecture notes. I suppose the transitions between thoughts were mine, but they were often abrupt and disjointed.

My class meetings thus consisted of my walking into the class, asking about any questions from the previous class meeting, and then proceeding to “talk” my way through the lecture notes. My one saving grace was that I was a speed reader and could glance down at the page and absorb a paragraph worth of material at a time. I thus could give the impression—or so I thought—of actually speaking spontaneously, rather than of reading from a prepared script. Visualize, if you will, my situation: standing in front of 30 or so undergraduates who were mostly from the New York City or Long Island area, summarizing the work of authors who had written about happenings in cities I’d only briefly visited and completely unprepared to go a foot beyond the material I’d prepared. My alienation from the class was complete one day when I mispronounced a word and heard several students in the first row laugh.
Grading the class was a nightmare. Grade inflation at Cornell had pushed undergraduate expectations to incredible heights, with any grade lower than a B- eliciting howls of anguish and loud protests. I gave only essay exams, the one feature of the class that probably made some pedagogical sense. Because I had no idea how to objectively score such questions, however, the grading process took up just as much time as the lecture preparation process.

Rescuers appeared on the horizon several times, but after temporarily grasping the rope thrown to me, I always seemed to slip back into deeper waters. First, during my fall term, Lori, a very brave undergraduate woman, came to my office hours and more or less told me I was screwing up badly and asked if I realized what I was doing wrong. Lori's analysis was insightful, but she had no clear prescription for me other than loosen up a bit and try asking more questions in class. Her visit so stunned me that it has stuck with me ever since, and she is the only undergraduate from my Cornell teaching days with whom I still keep in touch. (She now owns her own small law firm in New York City.)

A second potential rescuer was William Foote Whyte, who was putting together his Human Affairs Program (HAP) that sent students out into the community to do fieldwork and public service. Through the HAP, my students did fieldwork-based term papers, rather than library papers. The HAP administrators did most of the initial contact work, but I also had to work with the voluntary associations and public agencies in which my students did their research, and I also had to meet fairly frequently with students to iron out problems. Fieldwork study was the most successful component of my undergraduate classes and is the only innovation I remember from those days that I've kept in my contemporary courses. Even though my own MA thesis at Michigan was based on participant observation, I never tried to turn any of the student projects into joint research that I could have written up. The idea occasionally occurred to me, but I didn’t know how to follow through.

Nonetheless, despite these hopeful experiences, I was still floundering. My ignorance of the fundamentals of good teaching was compounded by my total absorption in the publishing game. I simply had no time, or so I thought, to figure out what I was doing wrong and fix it. Indeed, except for the severe alienation I felt from my teaching, I was enjoying myself. My research was going extremely well. I designed
and carried out several large-scale surveys during my first few years at Cornell, and much of my time was spent in the field or at the computer center, collecting or analyzing data. I can’t recall even imagining a link between what I was doing in the classroom and what I was doing in my research.

My colleagues didn’t help. Many of my senior colleagues were quite cynical about the teaching process—William Foote Whyte stands out as a clear exception—and spent much of their time denigrating the undergraduate students. We had an Office of Resident Instruction, but its purpose was to keep records and counsel students on how to get jobs after they left Cornell. I don’t recall anyone in a position of authority ever talking with me about teaching, good or bad. By contrast, my research was going incredibly well, and funding supplied by the ILR School allowed me to collect data for several projects.

To spare the reader further agony, I’ve kept my catalog of teaching woes rather short, but there is no escaping one obvious conclusion: The promise, if not the hope, of my undergraduate days had become a distant memory. Intellectual arrogance, lack of a support system, and a reward system totally focused on research and publication rather than on teaching were about to consign me to the massed ranks of lousy teachers. Fortunately, my story has a third chapter.

Redemption

Should my tale end as a tragedy? I have painted a nearly unrelenting picture of my unreflexive obedience to a mode of teaching that was taking me nowhere. When opportunities came my way for possible changes in course, I let them slip through my fingers. And yet, I would never have accepted the challenge of being included in this book had matters not taken a turn for the better. Be forewarned, then; you are reading yet another example of selection bias in the literature on academic life. Scholars who go into their retirements living fragmented rather than integrated lives don’t usually bother to record their misery. And misery is exactly what lay in store for me, had the teaching muse not begun to smile on me about 15 years ago. Thus, let me complete the third part of my tale; I’ve chosen the term redemption because of its deliberately ambiguous stance regarding agency. I can’t claim to have pulled myself up by my own bootstraps, nor can I point decisively
to any particular person or event that altered my course. Nonetheless, over that decade and a half, I became increasingly aware that things were getting better.

Cornell was not an unrelieved disaster on the teaching front for me. Several things happened that made quality teaching more salient to me: (a) dealing with renewal and promotion decisions and (b) designing new courses.

First, curiously enough, helping decide tenure cases made me reflect on the nature of public universities and what we owe our students. The ILR School, as a public college within a private university, occupied a rather ambiguous place in the ivory tower of the Ivy League. Elite status seemed to require low teaching loads and small classes for faculty so that they could get on with their important research, but public funding seemed to require some acknowledgment that many students were the first in their families to attend college and that the state was expecting some public service activities from the universities’ land grant status. In debates over what standards to use in tenure cases, quantity/quality of publications dominated discussion, reducing talk of teaching competence to a whisper. Certainly, we carried out no systematic evaluations of teaching prowess for tenure decisions.

Second, because the administrative structure of the school was rather loose, faculty initiative played a large part in getting new courses onto the books. Accordingly, I was able to propose and teach a few courses for which I had no substantive preparation but a great deal of intellectual interest. Jane Weiss, a close friend who’d coauthored several papers with me, suggested I teach a course on World Systems Theory to follow up some ideas we’d worked on. I recruited a graduate student in geography for assistance, as well as the help of scholars in a few other upstate New York universities. I discovered that getting in over my head, acknowledging that fact, and asking other people for help can be a lot more fun than teaching the same old stuff over and over again.

The winter of 1982 marks the first time I was fully aware that I had become more concerned about teaching. The University of North Carolina had approached me about a possible job and invited me to make a visit to Chapel Hill. For reasons I cannot fully explain, I requested that I be allowed to visit several classes taught by senior professors. I recall only one clear motive: I was very concerned about the quality of students in North Carolina and whether they would measure up to the
students I’d taught at Cornell. (Discerning readers will be thinking about the obvious asymmetry in the situation; my potential employers probably ought to have asked me to teach a class or two so that they could see whether I measured up their standards!) I think the department had never had such a request, but once they got over the shock, they sent me to two senior professors’ classes. That was when another shock of recognition dawned on me: I had never sat in on any senior professors’ classes at Cornell! Although neither of the men whose class I visited was a spellbinding lecturer, the confidence they exuded was mesmerizing, their students seemed competent, and I was convinced. I took the job.

In my new environment, I discovered that my department was one of the first in the country to offer a full-fledged graduate course on teaching. All graduate students who wished to teach their own courses first had to take a semester-long course on teaching methods. The course was pioneered by Ev Wilson, and I read his book (Goldsmid & Wilson, 1980) on teaching during my first winter in Chapel Hill. I began using some of the ideas he proposed, and I also began subscribing to the American Sociological Association’s Newsletter on Teaching (since upgraded to a regular journal). I began experimenting in my classes with more in-class exercises and discussions and much sketchier lesson plans. I no longer walked into the classroom with my lecture already written out. Instead, following suggestions I had read in Goldsmid and Wilson and in other articles on teaching, I prepared discussion questions and general points I wanted to make. I began to understand the wisdom of the teaching tactics my wife had been telling me about and adapted them for my own classes.

After several years in my new department, I was asked to take over the teaching seminar that Ev Wilson had begun. In retrospect, that assignment was a rite of passage for me because I then had to take seriously my responsibility in helping educate future generations of teachers. Luckily, previous instructors in the course left me a strong legacy, and the university’s new Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) was looking for clients. In the first years of that course, Ed Neal, of the CTL, did many guest stints until I had the confidence to handle such topics as syllabus preparation, testing and grading, and instructor evaluation on my own. Colleagues in other departments who also cared about teaching quality set up “home and away” guest lectures with me. I talked about such things as constructing classroom exercises from an
active learning point of view, in exchange for their doing sessions on educational psychology or leading good discussions.

My research interests also changed during this time; I became much more interested in human resource management practices, especially in business start-ups. Team-oriented practices were increasingly recommended to managers interested in unleashing employees' creativity, and many of the recommendations resonated well with developments in collaborative and cooperative learning. One great irony in my change of heart was that, in all my years at the ILR School, I had never seen the connection between employee participation schemes and active learning in the classroom. Now, as I read more about active learning schemes, I finally realized the generic principles underlying the "new" human resource management orientation and the "new" methods of teaching.

My students and colleagues helped me realize that I was putting into practice a central tenet of the "active learning" teaching philosophy: An instructor doesn't teach people anything; they have to learn it for themselves. I also began developing a position on the integration of teaching into one's career that has become a mantra for me in my class and in discussions with colleagues; namely, being an academic, even in the most prestigious, big-time research university, requires that most of us teach to earn a living. And if that's all that teaching is—meeting one's obligations to one's employer—then a faculty member is in for a long and bitter journey. People can fool themselves in the short term into thinking that the trade-off is worth it—tolerance of bad teaching so that one's real job is supported—but can the delusion be carried on over a lifetime?

I tell my students they should look around at senior professors who obviously teach with no joy and who scheme for ways to get out of the classroom. "Can you imagine a life like that?" "Wouldn't it be better to find ways to teach well and be rewarded for it, if nowhere else than in your own psyche?" Rewards from teaching flow on a different schedule than those from research and publishing; they come more quickly and more frequently! Thus, finding ways to actually enjoy teaching is, in a sense, a way of diversifying the sources of satisfaction we receive from our activities. Why settle for positive feedback that arrives only a few times a year, in printed form, when every class day can be a rewarding one?

When people complain about not being rewarded for efforts spent on teaching, my immediate response is always, "Good teaching is its
own reward.” I mean that a person’s self-worth and sense of efficacy are bound up in what that person does for a living, and teaching consumes a large part of an academic’s job, no matter how much he or she tries to escape it. Years of falling down on the job will take their toll, and that’s no way to live.

The Future

In addition to the new university environment at North Carolina that enabled me to throw off the inertia of my old ways, I have spent much more time overseas since the mid-1980s. Many of my overseas trips involve giving lectures or seminars to graduate and advanced undergraduate students, rather than to just other scholars. I find that having to explain myself in another culture poses a fundamental challenge of the taken-for-granted assumptions I have made about the way people learn. I work to get “local color” into my seminars, and I try to set aside time at the beginning of each overseas assignment to learn more about what students are looking for in the classes.

I regularly give seminars in Western Europe and have begun teaching in Japan. One of the most satisfying aspects of these ventures is my discovery that many of the active-learning strategies I use in the United States also work well in other countries. Team work assignments work well everywhere, so far, because they allow students to learn in their own language by talking with one another. Rather than have them listen to me for an entire period, I turn over responsibility for learning to the students, and they usually rise to the challenge. Indeed, I think the principle of learning in their own language applies not just to instruction in other countries but also to teaching in our native tongue. Students should be able to link what they are studying to examples from their own experiences, as well as to other course work. Thus, by teaching overseas, I have learned something about why active learning works in the United States!

Has my research become more closely connected to my teaching? Yes, directly and indirectly. Directly because I am now studying human resource management practices in new, small firms, where teamwork, motivation, and rapid skill acquisition are essential for business survival. Many of the practices I use in teaching have direct analogies to the practices found in growing firms. Indirectly because I am offered
many opportunities to conduct research overseas through the seminars I offer. I discover a great deal about the flaws in my research designs and conceptualizations by trying to explain them to skeptical local students!

At last, more than three decades after starting college as an undergraduate, I can understand and appreciate those excellent teachers I had in my pre-graduate days. I think I can also now understand why they lived and taught as they did and why they had such a major impact on me. Although it took me more than a decade, I now see where I stand in the teaching lineage begun by those people. I’m doing what I can to pass on what I’ve learned about teaching to my graduate students and to my junior faculty colleagues. I must confess, though, I’ve just about given up on my senior colleagues, but that’s another story.

References