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Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

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Climbing the Stairs: Observations on a Teaching Career

MY OFFICE IS ON the first floor of the education building. I have spent 27 years in this building. Unless I have a meeting in another department, I rarely go upstairs. Recently, however, I started a daily routine of climbing the four sets of staircases in the building. Trying to slow the progression of osteoporosis in my right hip, I go up one set and down another three times as I make my way around the building. This physical activity has given me a chance to engage in some mental reflection. Here I will briefly share five observations on a career spent teaching in higher education with an eye toward encouraging newer faculty to achieve longevity in the profession.

1. **Adaptability is key.**
On the first day of stair climbing, I passed by the classroom where I taught my very first class as a newly "hooded" faculty member. As I looked in the room, a smile came across my face as I thought of those thirty graduate students—most of whom were older than I was. While I remained at the university, they went on to become school principals, district superintendents, and curriculum coordinators. Seeing this classroom now made me think about the changes in my teaching. The large chalkboard once mounted on the wall is long gone. Even though I always liked using chalk (and had a special stainless steel holder for it), other tools have definitely replaced the infamous dust producer. Technology has been the greatest change in my delivery of instruction. Yet no matter what the innovation or new requirement (e.g., reporting assessment data, using iPads in the classroom, etc.), maintaining flexibility and being open to alternative approaches will serve faculty well over time.

2. **Become resourceful.**
As I walked the hallways, I noticed the office directories at the main entrance to each department. So familiar, these are easily ignored. Actually looking at them each day reminded me that people are the most valuable resource available to us as faculty. Whose expertise complements ours? Whose interests are similar to ours? With whom can we bounce off ideas for teaching a new class preparation? Furthermore, a large part of being successful in any professional endeavor is knowledge of whom to call for which dilemma. Aging in the profession reinforces that knowing where to get help surpasses knowing all the answers. Sometimes teaching faculty must let pride subside and not hesitate to find out where to get assistance. As we seek out and use the multitudinous resources that surround us on a college campus, we can become more effective faculty members.

3. **Connect across departments.**
On my fifth day of stair climbing, I saw two colleagues from another department on the second floor. I had last seen them on campus the previous semester. From the brief hallway encounter, they asked me to help with a research project. Had I not been upstairs, this opportunity may have not been extended. My simple exercise strategy prompted me to realize (again) how isolation within one's own department may stifle growth and development. This incident also reminded me of the need for faculty to be visible and available. On several other recent self-guided building tours, I have seen past and present students in the halls or on the stairs. This too strengthens our connections and enhances efficacy.

4. **Be observant.**
On each stairwell there are bulletin boards. Opportunities abound for campus involvement. In the deluge of email messages, it is easy to overlook some of these options that are available to us on campus. Even if not personally interested, sharing posted information with students is a possibility. Additionally, the content of stairwell bulletin boards contains significant clues about what is currently relevant to students. Flyers with information on upcoming comedy acts and anxiety support groups serve to remind us of the lives outside the classroom that our students lead. We can then incorporate this information into lesson planning and perhaps better reach students.

5. **Take regular breaks.**
The whole stair-climbing experience has reminded me of the importance of building in short breaks during the workday. After each stair climbing endeavor, I have returned to my office and computer in a more refreshed state of mind. I gained a new perspective on my work. As faculty we must try not to spend all our time in our office. Leave the building at lunch or mid-afternoon. Breaks offer a chance to recharge.

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University Opens - January 5
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Is Praise Undermining Student Motivation?

WE THINK OF PRAISE as a good thing, even admirable. Don't we praise our kids when they show us the drawing that they made in art class? To be anti-praise is almost like being anti-good person. We praise others in order to motivate them to improve achievement, as well as increase self-esteem. What can possibly be wrong with that?

The failure of praise

Research has found that praise can actually undermine performance and self-esteem in many contexts. One study found that praise for intelligence leads to the belief by the recipient that their intelligence is fixed, and thus not something that they can influence through action or effort (Dweck, 2007). This is critical because intelligence is in fact malleable, and improved by taking risks. Students grow when they try something difficult that might lead to failure. Because failure is one of the most important tools for learning, growth requires a mindset that embraces challenge and the potential for failure.

But students who are praised for intelligence do not seek challenges. When given the option of trying a difficult task that could lead to failure and growth, or an easy one that will not risk failure but produce no growth, those offered praise for their intelligence tend to choose the latter, thus undermining their growth. Worst yet, when forced to do a difficult problem they will quickly give up if failure appears on the horizon (Dweck, 2007).

In essence, these students are becoming dependent on praise because it is wrapped up with their self-esteem. They start thinking that the goal of school is praise, or grades, rather than learning. They become risk-adverse in an effort to prevent blows to their self-esteem. They will even lie about their achievements in order to avoid the appearance of failure. Dependency on praise stunts growth, creates a fragile psyche, and even a sense of helplessness that undermines achievement (Kamins and Dweck, 1999).

Praising one's intelligence and achievements also can undercut performance by muddling the real message needed for growth (Hylanda, 2001). One of the most common mistakes instructors make is to use the "feedback sandwich" with students. Their feedback starts with the good, then stating the real issues with the work, and ending with something good again. Here again, the model is used under the belief that it keeps up the student's spirits, but in reality it only confuses the message. The student reads only the positive at either end and ignores the real message in the middle that they need to hear in order to improve, or they recognize the dissonance between the conflicting messages and wonder how they really did. "Gee," they say to themselves, "the beginning and the end tell me this is great, while the middle says that there are all sorts of problems, so which is it?" The feedback sandwich can even reduce respect for the instructor since students will soon learn that no matter what they hand in, the instructor will praise it along a predictable formula, making the feedback meaningless and something to be ignored.

How to give more effective feedback

So what should an instructor do? The first thing is to switch from praise for intelligence or achievement to praise for effort. People have control over their level of effort, and if they see that the effort will be recognized, they tend to give more of it (Dweck, 2007). "You are putting a lot more time into your work and it is showing" will lead to even more effort and better performance.

Another option is to praise the process, rather than the product (Halverson, 2014). It is easy to forget that the product we receive from students is the result of a process to produce it, and failures in product are most likely failures in process. Thus, feedback directed at process will be more effective than feedback directed at the product, and not surprisingly, praise for process is far more effective than praise for product. How does the student research a topic, plan the work, collaborate with others, etc.? These are the areas that should be the focus of feedback anyway, as they are the areas where improvements will do the most good, and praise for process—which again is under a person's control—is far more effective than praise for the final product.

Second, switch from giving praise to giving positive feedback. Praise is an expression of approval for another person's characteristics or behavior. It gives the appearance that satisfying the teacher is the goal of education. By contrast, positive feedback is information on what the student did well, while negative feedback is information on what the student did poorly (Wiggins, 2012). Together they tell the student what he or she needs to continue to do and what he or she needs to work on in order to improve. Positive and negative feedback are tied to objective standards of excellence, and give the message that the goal of education is to reach standards of excellence, not gain teacher approval.

So pocket the motivational praise, and focus instead on providing students with the information that need to grow.

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Dr. John Orlando is the associate director of faculty training at Northcentral University and serves on the Online Classroom editorial advisory board.

John Orlando, PhD; Educational Assessment; "Is Praise Undermining Student Motivation?" Faculty Focus; January 5, 2015; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/educational-assessment/praise-undermining-student-motivation/]; January 5, 2015.

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I believe that longevity for teaching faculty boils down to risk-taking and resilience. Be willing to try new things, say "yes" to opportunities, and aim to bounce back after disappointments. Taking these factors to heart, perhaps I could step it up a notch by enrolling in a tap dance class as a way to combat my deteriorating hip!

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Patty H. Phelps, EdD; Teaching Careers; "Climbing the Stairs: Observations on a Teaching Career;" Faculty Focus; November 10, 2014; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-careers/climbing-stairs-observations-teaching-career/]; January 5, 2015.