

Inspired College Teaching

A Career-Long Resource for Professional Growth

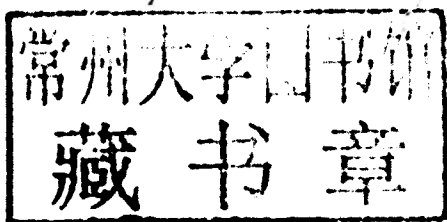
An abstract, artistic design featuring thick, dark purple, brush-stroke-like swirls and loops that overlap and curve across the lower half of the cover. The background is a light, textured lavender or pinkish-purple. The overall effect is organic and flowing.

Maryellen Weimer

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Honoring colleagues
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Preface

I recently received an e-mail from a student who had taken my class seven or eight years ago. The student was memorable for several reasons—his heavy accent, genuine interest in learning, and recent immigration from Russia. He was a first-generation college student and his parents expected much from him. The note was short. He'd been on the college Web site and decided to say Hi. . . . Actually he wanted to say thanks "for all that you did for me" and to say he still remembers things I told him in class. He's now graduated from college and from law school and is in practice for himself, an immigration lawyer.

A note like that and I fall in love with teaching all over again, even after more than thirty years in the classroom. When students succeed, they motivate all that good teaching requires: emotional energy, the will to keep caring, intellectual stamina, creative approaches, vigilance, faith in the power of feedback to prompt learning, and perseverance to find the way back from failure.

A few weeks earlier I had opened another e-mail—this one from a student floundering in an independent study. I had promised I would tell him when an A in the study was no longer possible. His e-mail announced he'd decided not to complete the study. This bright and gifted student has so much potential, but he's still cruising, doing everything at the last minute, dashing through assignments, having enough good ideas to save him from disaster but not enough discipline to make them anything more

than promising possibilities. I tried everything I could think of to get him working up to his capacity—positive reinforcement, cajoling, admonishments, negative feedback, gentle persuasion, forceful debate. Nothing worked. I felt like such a failure. Why hadn't I been able to get through to this kid? What had I done wrong? This should have been easy, should have worked well, should have led to much learning; instead I have another name on my failures list.

Teaching is a roller coaster of highs and lows, slow climbs, corners careened around on two wheels, and trips down at break-neck speeds. It's exhilarating, exhausting, frightening, and fun. This book is about the ride and what it takes to keep teaching inspired across a career. It's about getting started right so that disaster can be avoided before it's experienced. It's about the long midcareer stretch when so many grow tired, even burned out, and the advocacy needed from senior faculty at the end of their careers. *Inspired College Teaching* is about teachers taking professional growth and development seriously, understanding that ongoing instructional vitality is not something others do for teachers but something teachers do for themselves. It's not a book about how to teach in the sense of identifying preferred techniques and discussing how to execute them successfully. Although the book recognizes the value of techniques, it aspires to move faculty beyond them to conceptions of teaching that are more intriguing and intellectually rich.

Resources that explore the various aspects of career-long growth and development for college teachers are all but nonexistent. Authors (O'Meara, Terosky, and Neumann, 2008) of a recent ASHE Higher Education Report who thoroughly reviewed the literature on faculty careers report that they "found but few in-depth empirical considerations of faculty growth; nor was there much discussion of approaches for developing, sustaining or deepening it in academic lives" (vii–viii).

Not only is the literature in this area sparse; institutional support for professional development generally and instructional growth

specifically is not universally present. Many colleges and universities have teaching centers that are mandated to support faculty efforts in the classroom, and these units do fine work. However, too many of them are small, underfunded, and operate on the margins of the academic community. The decision to take advantage of any of the programs or services offered by the teaching center is one that faculty make, and many choose not to be involved. I regularly do workshops and programs for these teaching centers, and I am always a bit perplexed by raves about great attendance when 100 out of a faculty of 10,000 participate in an activity. Kudos to those who do show up and to the centers for their efforts, but why don't more faculty take advantage of these professional development opportunities? *Because there are no consequences if they don't.* Norms expecting ongoing growth and development for college teachers are not strong. Most faculty work diligently to keep current in their fields, but with teaching, the same beliefs, knowledge levels, and repertoire of strategies can be used from one end of a career to the other.

Even though institutions need to do a better job of creating climates conducive to the growth and development of teachers, the work of changing, growing, and improving can be done only by the teacher. One of the reviewers of my manuscript for this book noted that it takes a "lone ranger" approach to professional development. When making final revisions to the book, I tried to more clearly indicate how important collaboration with colleagues and professionals (say those in the teacher center) is to ongoing growth and vitality. I still argue that it is the teacher alone who decides to make changes and the teacher alone who implements them. Environment directly affects levels of instructional vitality, but when it's time to take those actions needed to remain vital and vibrant, it's the teacher who's in charge.

There's another reason I've chosen to write directly to faculty. Even though there are few expectations for profession growth, teachers do not want to stay the same throughout their careers.

Most teachers aspire to grow and develop, at least in theory. They know that most academic careers are long and can be even longer if things never change. However, few teachers have given much thought to how they might go about making that happen in a systematic and purposeful way. They'd prefer for it to just kind of happen automatically, and that it not be yet another one of those things they *have* to do.

Some growth and change do occur as teachers mature and gain experience. Much of it happens early in the career. After that, change may or may not occur, and it may or may not be change that results in better teaching and more learning. One of the main messages of this book is that teachers can grow and develop more purposefully. They can do things that will keep their teaching fresh and invigorated across the years. And the ways they accomplish growth objectives are not onerous—not always easy either, but the results of their efforts can make teaching inspired, not just occasionally, but regularly over the years.

Although the book is about the growth and development of college teachers, it devotes much space to learning and the kind of teaching that facilitates it for students. The reasons are twofold. First, given the absence of expectations for professional growth and the lack of consequences when it does not occur, what motivates faculty to become better teachers? Learning—that's the motivation. If teachers can be shown a strategy, approach, policy, practice, and the evidence that it promotes student learning, most are motivated to make changes. The vast majority of college teachers care deeply about how much and how well their students learn.

Second, the emphasis on learning can be used to reorient how faculty think about teaching and learning. Because they haven't been trained to teach and have little knowledge beyond what has been learned experientially, too many teachers think development is about technique acquisition. Effectiveness in the classroom does start with solid techniques, but sustaining and growing it across a career requires that faculty do more than collect techniques.

Somehow faculty must discover the intellectual intrigue that can be a part of developing as teachers who effectively promote learning. They must be moved from simple conceptions of teaching to deeper orientations that explore the intricate relationships between teaching and learning. Elbow (1986) offers an example. He describes how teachers must

get the subject matter to bend and deform so that it fits inside the learning (that is, so it can fit or relate to the learner's experiences). But that is only half the job. Just as important is the necessity for the learner to bend and deform himself so that he can fit around the subject without doing violence to it. Good learning is not a matter of finding a happy medium where both parties are transformed as little as possible. Rather, both parties must be maximally transformed—in a sense deformed. There is violence in learning. We cannot learn something without eating it, yet we cannot really learn it without being chewed up. (p. 148)

Elbow's insight applies whether it's a teacher working with students or whether it's the instructor learning about teaching.

Inspired College Teaching is about learning to teach, not once and for all at the beginning of the career, or sometime shortly after tenure or at a boot camp in midcareer. This learning is an ongoing, never-ending process. It's about the journey to teaching excellence, not the destination. It's about how to travel well, finding purpose and pleasure in the process.

Overview of the Contents

Chapter One presents the philosophy on which this approach to growth and development rests. It does so with a set of pragmatic principles that can guide teachers' growth and make this

development a positive process. Chapter Two is about reflection—three levels of knowledge teachers need if growth is to be ongoing and sustainable. Growth across the career depends on developing a certain objectivity about teaching as well as the ability to look at beliefs and practices critically. What teachers discover about themselves reflectively needs to be verified, elaborated, possibly even corrected with feedback from others.

Chapters Three to Five deal with feedback from students and colleagues, focusing on ways that make the involvement of others part of the growth process. Chapter Three looks at end-of-course ratings and how their use does not always (could we say usually?) contribute to faculty growth. It attempts to show ways teachers can rewrite the end-of-course ratings story to make it something more useful and positive. Chapter Four makes the case for student feedback that improves teaching and learning. It includes a wide range of examples for collecting input from students and offers suggestions for dealing with the results. It shows how to collect feedback from students and how the process can benefit both teachers and students. Chapter Five looks at what peers can contribute to a teacher's quest for ongoing growth and development. The chapter objects to some of the ways peers are currently involved and proposes a variety of new roles and activities they can profitably assume.

After having engaged in self-reflection and having received constructive feedback from students and colleagues, teachers are ready to make some changes. Chapter Six tackles the often fly-by-night approach many faculty take to implementing changes in their teaching. It lays out a more systematic and thoughtful way of making changes—one that increases the likelihood of making good change choices and one that gives change a better chance of positively affecting student learning.

The final three chapters address the three main faculty career stages. Chapter Seven explores a set of beliefs that can position faculty for growth early on and throughout the career. These are

juxtaposed to beliefs (some widely held by new and not-so-new faculty) that inhibit growth. Chapter Eight addresses issues of instructional vitality. If instructional energy is going to flag, this is the time when a variety of factors and forces increase the likelihood of that happening. The chapter suggests ways to refresh teaching that is tired as well as ways to sustain and grow instructional vitality. Chapter Nine focuses on that final career stage. It identifies a series of activities senior faculty are uniquely qualified to undertake and shows how they can help keep teaching vital and vibrant right up to the end of a teaching career.

Intended Audience and Who Should Read What

The development of faculty as teachers generally follows a time trajectory—most usually this is a move from being content centered to being more student centered. But teacher maturation (like most other forms of development) does not happen automatically, nor is it inevitable. Some teachers mature more and do it faster than others. Regrettably, some teachers never mature. This is why I note several times in the chapter for new faculty (Chapter Seven) that the material isn't just for new teachers. Some of the beliefs about teaching and learning that inhibit and outright prevent growth are held by midcareer and senior faculty. Likewise, Chapter Eight, which delves into refreshing and maintaining instructional vitality, is most, but not exclusively, relevant to midcareer faculty. Tired teaching can be a problem for new faculty, especially if they do not learn to pace themselves and set realistic expectations for themselves and their students. Chapter Nine explores issues most relevant to senior faculty, but faculty at any career stage can be instructional advocates, mentors, and risk takers.

The transitions between career stages are also variable and not fixed, which means it's not always easy to decide whether one's current career stage is beginning, middle, or end. That makes the content of these chapters generally as well as specifically relevant.

All three stages overlap, and what happens in one career stage influences what happens in the next. Those influences are more easily understood by reading about all three career stages.

Although this book regularly refers to issues of promotion and tenure as they relate to teaching, it is not a book addressed only to faculty in tenure-line positions. An increasingly large number of college teachers now fill part-time or contract renewable positions (Gappa, Austin, and Trice, 2007). The main, often the only responsibility of these jobs is teaching. Almost any new teacher will find teaching four, maybe even five courses—some of which are new preps—a daunting introduction to college teaching. Almost any teacher will find that teaching semester after semester, often without breaks in the summer, can be an exhausting endeavor ripe with potential for burnout. I aim for content relevant to any teacher, beginning or experienced, tenure-track, part-time, full-time, or tenured, who aspires to approach college teaching in ways that promote growth—both theirs and students.

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Working with David Brightman at Jossey-Bass is a privilege. He is an equally fine editor and friend. Jessica Egbert and Erin Null at Jossey-Bass are also great supporters of my work. Final revisions of this book were very much helped by the detailed and thoughtful feedback provided by three anonymous reviewers.

Dave Bender and I worked on a project exploring how faculty make and implement changes. What we learned and our interac-

tions over the project greatly influenced my thinking about the change process as it is described in Chapter Five.

I have wonderful support from my family, starting with my husband, Michael, who worries that I work too much and regularly wonders if novels might not be more profitable and easier to write. Thanks to my dad, John Robertson, and my brother, Mark Robertson, for their love.

Because this book is about instructional vitality, I dedicate it to four colleagues who have made especially important contributions to my development and ongoing growth as a teacher and pedagogical scholar. Gene Melander was my mentor when I first started working at Penn State. We regularly went out for lunch (Gene always paid), during which I enthusiastically gushed about everything I was doing. Gene asked questions. He wondered. He suggested. He brought stuff for me to read. I never got the sense that he was telling me what to do, but as I look back on my early work his fingerprints are everywhere. Chris Knapper has been a part of my career for years. Chris's view of teaching and learning is global and his vision correspondingly expansive. He's worked with teachers and faculty developers around the world. Early on, Chris was my model—the professional I aspired to be. Over the years that has not changed. Larry Spence and I have known each other for years, but since Larry retired from his full-time position we started having breakfast more or less regularly. We meet at a small mom-and-pop place where we carry on over coffee. Both of us are a bit angry, and breakfasts are punctuated with a fair bit of ranting about the place we used to work, about faculty, hapless administrators, about books and articles, about ideas. Larry can parse an idea like few people I know. One morning after an especially vigorous exchange, I found myself driving home to a house I hadn't lived in for ten years. I usually introduce Ike Shibley as the person I'm proudest to have mentored. It was one of those mentoring relationships I'd read about in the literature in which the mentor gained more from the relationship than the mentee.

After one of many mentoring sessions, I remember thinking that I loved teaching more than anybody I had ever met. As colleagues and friends, we continue a rich exchange of ideas, information, and insights about teaching, learning (and wine).

January 2010
Marsh Creek, Pennsylvania
Bluff Island, Tupper Lake, New York

About the Author

In 2007, Maryellen Weimer retired from The Pennsylvania State University as a professor emeritus of Teaching and Learning. For the last thirteen years of her career at Penn State, she taught communication courses, first-year seminars, and other courses for business students at one of Penn State's regional campus colleges. In 2005, she won Penn State's Milton S. Eisenhower award for distinguished teaching.

Before returning to full-time teaching, Weimer was the associate director of the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment, a five-year, \$5.9 million, U.S. Department of Education research and development center. Prior to that she spent ten years as director of Penn State's Instructional Development Program.

Weimer has numerous publications, including articles in referred journals, book chapters, books reviews, and service on the editorial boards of journals. She has consulted with close to 500 colleges and universities on instructional issues. She regularly keynotes national meetings and regional conferences.

Since 1987, she has edited the *Teaching Professor*, a monthly newsletter on college teaching with 15,000 subscribers. She has edited or authored nine books, including a 1990 book on faculty development, a 1993 book on teaching for new faculty, and a 1995 anthology edited with Robert Menges, *Teaching on Solid Ground*. She was primary author of a Kendall-Hunt publication,

Teaching Tools, a collection of collaborative, active, and inquiry-based approaches to be used in conjunction with *Biological Perspectives*, an NSF-funded introductory biology text, created by Biological Sciences Curriculum Studies (BSCS). In 2002, Jossey-Bass published her book, *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*, and in 2006 her book, *Enhancing Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning*.