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“She Didn’t Teach. We Had to Learn it Ourselves.”

By: [Maryellen Weimer, PhD](#) in [Teaching Professor Blog](#)



Yesterday I got an email from a faculty member who had just received her spring semester student ratings (yes, in August, but that’s a topic for another post). She’d gotten one of those blistering student comments. “This teacher should not be paid. We had to teach ourselves in this course.” I remember another faculty member telling me about similar feedback, which was followed later with a comment about how the course “really made me think.”

So, the criticism is one of those backhanded compliments. The teacher is making students figure out things for themselves. They are doing the hard, messy work of learning. This is a style of teaching that promotes learning, but that’s not how students see it. Based on experiences in lots of other classrooms, they have come to believe that “good” teachers tell students what they need to know. If a teacher makes the students come up with examples when she has a perfectly good list she could be giving them, that teacher is not doing her job. My friend and colleague Larry Spence wrote about this same issue in April, 2004 issue of *The Teaching Professor* newsletter. “They expect a steady progression along a learning curve, which coincides with the amount of time they spend in classes. ... Everything else — their personal struggles to master knowledge and skills in sports, software, games, or music they take to be ‘teaching yourself’ and an inferior way of learning.”

In addition to violating expectations, students respond negatively to this style of teaching because most of them want learning to be easy. When they have to come up with examples, answers, or solutions, that’s more work than being told by the teacher, and there’s the added stress of not knowing whether the examples are good, the answers are right, or the solutions correct. When learning isn’t easy, a lot of students question their intellectual wherewithal, but that’s not a problem they have to face if the fault lies with the teacher.

Getting students to understand what we are doing and why starts by recognizing that what's obvious to us isn't obvious to them. When I took an introductory chemistry course with a group of beginning students, the instructor used an approach in the lab that drove us nuts. He refused to answer questions. If you asked him a question, he responded by asking you a question. The students (and me, for a while) thought he was being obstinate, or trying something he thought was clever. Then one day when the solution in our beaker changed color and started boiling like mad even though the Bunsen burner was set as low as it would go, he cruised over, sniffed our solution and asked us a question. Thinking the liquid might be about to explode, we shut down the Bunsen burner and started talking about what we thought was happening. After some discussion, we figured out what was going on with our experiment. It was then that somebody pointed out that we had just answered the question the instructor asked us 15 minutes ago.

The instructor's technique was good, but he should have explained what he was doing or asked us why we thought he wouldn't answer questions during lab. Some lab groups never figured it out. In the seminar section I taught that accompanied the course we had a heated discussion about whether teachers were obligated to answer student questions. Virtually all the students thought it was part of a teacher's job.

If teachers are going to refuse to do something students expect, especially if students think it's something they believe makes the learning easier, how teachers refuse to help is important. "I will help, but not until you've got some answers, part of the solution, a few examples." "I am not going to give you the answers, but I will give you feedback on your answers. By the end of class, we'll have a set of good answers."

Weaning students from their dependence on teachers is a developmental process. Rather making them do it all on their own, teachers can do some of the work, provide part of the answer, or start with one example and ask them for others. The balance of who's doing the work gradually shifts, and that gives students a chance to figure out what the teacher is doing and why.

It's unsettling when students make comments about how we aren't doing our jobs. It's easy to respond defensively or to think derisively about students. But those responses don't make students less confused about what it means to teach and what it takes to learn.

- See more at: <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/didnt-teach-learn/?ET=facultyfocus:e1110:337859a:&st=email#comments-section>