

NEW FEATURE **Pedagogy Column**  
**Faculty Opinion on Pedagogy:**  
**How we teach matters most**

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The measure of the effectiveness of one's teaching is not necessarily captured by a teaching observation or student evaluation and its effects are not always quantifiable.

It is no wonder that teaching's true value is not often recognized or even acknowledged. The reality though, is that teachers do play a key role in shaping our world. We transmit the knowledge and wisdom of the ages to a new generation, shaping young minds so that they might seek and find new knowledge and fashion a better world. With goals so lofty, and tasks so general, how do we know how best to undertake such efforts? To find some answers, it might be worthwhile to consider how teaching happens informally.

Before children are ready to walk, we work on preparing them to walk. We ensure that they are properly fed so that their muscles develop and their bones continue hardening. Then when they start to crawl, we clear spaces where they can crawl safely and cheer them on. When they attempt to stand, we extend a hand so they do not fall. Sometimes, they try standing when our hand is not out, or there is nothing to hold on to and they fall. We then comfort them and encourage them to try again. In time, there is

a natural progression and we hold their arms as they tentatively put one then another foot forward. It becomes a daily routine with slow progress and sometime mishaps, even tears and pain. However, this process culminates in pure joy the day the child takes those first unassisted steps. In reality, we do not teach a child to walk. A child follows his or her natural instincts. We merely provide support, guidance and encouragement.

In the same way, students come to us with natural curiosity and a desire to learn, but often with inadequate preparation to take the first steps on their journey of higher education. Our first task is to connect with each student in our classes and to gain some understanding as to what their individual knowledge base is, what misconceptions they bring into the classroom and what their aspirations are. Such a daunting task is not easily accomplished by delivering lectures, but by creating a nurturing, non-threatening environment in which each student can share his/her knowledge, ideas and projections about the course. Instructors are largely responsible for creating such a classroom environment, ensuring their interaction with individual students promotes a sense of trust and openness. However, special efforts are also needed

to manage a classroom so that there is mutual respect among students. Creating the right classroom environment is but a first step; it is akin to providing an uncluttered space in which children can safely crawl. Learning comes from connecting new ideas and concepts to knowledge a student already has so that a student's natural curiosity propels him/her to explore these ideas further and apply them toward problem solving. Various alternate strategies can be used instead of, or in addition to, a traditional lecture. These may include inquiry-based labs or exercises, case studies, problem based learning and writing-intensive activities. Regardless of the strategies used, the idea is to tap into the natural curiosity of students so they are compelled to find out more about a concept and put the concept to use. It is a tall order.

Good teaching is what comes naturally. Poor teaching might be what we learned from instructors who bombarded us with incessant lectures during our extended years of schooling. Such experiences might have eroded our natural teaching instincts. As such, we should constantly examine how we teach, studying how students learn and how best we can tap into their natural curiosity. Introspection and reflection on our methodology helps us become better at teaching students to learn on their own—perhaps ultimately the measure of one's effectiveness.