

September, 2004 – Frederick Bonato, Psychology

Teaching Tip *and* Research Tip

This month the teaching tip and research tip are one and the same. Different philosophies exist regarding the relationship between teaching and research. One view is that they are separate and opposing activities. According to this position, if one spends too much time teaching, research will suffer. Likewise, too much time spent conducting research will cause teaching to suffer. I am combining the teaching tip and the research tip to stress a different philosophy. It is this: at the higher education level teaching and research are not so much separate as they are two sides of the same coin. Teaching can enhance research and research can enhance teaching.

I think it is faculty research that makes college professors different than other educators. Ideally, professors contribute to their fields of study, not just teach what others have done. It is certainly possible to conduct research, attend and present at conferences, publish in journals and books, and engage in other research related activities without any of these things spilling into the classroom. Some professors may feel that their research areas are too specialized or uninteresting for students to appreciate. When this happens it is unfortunate. Opportunities for learning may have been missed.

I think professors should talk about their research in classes whenever the time is right. Several benefits are gained by doing this, all of them important.

#1 – Students may come to appreciate that all knowledge is not gained from books. Textbooks are important and necessary, but they should never replace independent and creative thinking. Student thinking can become expanded when they come to realize that there are people (professors) who try to stretch knowledge and creativity beyond what is already available. This realization alone can impact students.

#2 – Another benefit of bringing one's research into the classroom is to add to material that has already been covered in other ways (books, films, lectures). Books and papers are often outdated and often do not contain the latest developments in a field of study. Sometimes, recent developments may even challenge existing concepts. A professor who is actively engaged in their field will be able to help students understand the importance of the latest research. Conference attendance is valuable in that the latest developments in a field are often presented years before they reach the textbooks.

#3 – Bringing research into the classroom can also have an energizing effect on students (and professors). After learning what their professors do outside the classroom, students may be intrigued. Classroom interaction can be

jumpstarted. When someone else's work is covered in a textbook students cannot ask that person about their work. However, when you discuss your own work in a class, students' questions can be directed right to the source: you.

Teaching can also help energize a research program. Students sometimes ask me questions that I have not thought about. Students in lab classes often have interesting observations about my work and techniques. For me the division between the classroom and the lab has become blurred. I have found this to be a good thing for my students and me.