



Improving Student Evaluations with Integrity

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Oh, how the tables do turn! Each semester, after quizzing, testing, and otherwise grading our students, they get to return the favor and rate their professors, and some of them can be harsher than we are on our most critical days. Because administrators incorporate these ratings in their evaluations of us, they can't be ignored. Rather than wallowing in the sorrows of negative reviews, we must accept it for what it is: feedback. And although we should not in any way compromise our principles or the course content to get better ratings, there are actions that don't undermine our integrity and do positively influence the end-of-course ratings. I'd like to suggest several that have improved my ratings.

- **Be transparent about your grading methods.** It's my opinion that students should never be surprised by their grades in a course. Whenever I give an assignment, no matter how small, I provide instructions in writing, a point value, and a due date. I'm a huge fan of rubrics and always take time to help students understand and interpret them. Examples posted on the course website can demonstrate what you're looking for in assignments.
- I work hard to return papers in a timely manner and share my deadlines with students so that they know when to expect the feedback. Most online grading systems make it easy for students to monitor their progress throughout the semester. By removing the mystery from my

grading system, I have consistently received high scores from students on the applicable questions on the evaluation form.

- **Make lesson planning a top priority.** "Winging it" may work for some, but it certainly doesn't work for me. I need to walk into the classroom with the learning objectives clearly in mind

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and my materials prepared. Granted, teachers need to be flexible and able to take advantage of those unexpected teaching moments, but I believe that preplanning still allows for wiggle room and spontaneous responses. If students see us organized and ready each day, they will likely evaluate us highly on those questions.

- **Use the language that appears on the course evaluation forms.** While this may sound like selling out, it's not. You're not begging students to give you better reviews (shudder). You're using language that helps them understand how your teaching methods will be described on the course evaluations. When you talk about "course objectives" and "learning outcomes," students will become familiar with the terms and can more easily connect the dots between what you do and what the rating form asks if you've done. Obviously, this

language should only be used where and when it's appropriate; don't use the words without the proper context.

- **Be open to suggestions, but also take criticism with a grain of salt.** Although my first semester's ratings were generally positive, a few of the written comments really got me down. Sure, some were silly complaints. I remember one student recommending that I allow students to keep a diary about their lives rather than reflect on writing experiences and reading selections in their learning journals. Um, that's a hard no. However, after reading several comments that I treated college students more like high school students, I really had to reflect on my behavior. After all, I had come straight from teaching high school. Although I initially found this critique hurtful, it motivated me to make some adjustments. For example, I still stress punctuality and make a note of tardiness in attendance records, but I don't comment in class when a student arrives late. And since I've made these adjustments, I no longer receive student complaints

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How Should I Study for the Exam?

It's a question on every student's mind, especially those just starting their college careers. Sometimes they ask other students, peers they can speak to without feeling foolish. Rarely do they ask the teacher, but they occasionally ask a tutor or other learning professional. And generally they decide to study the same way they usually do for exams.

However, the question is most accurately answered with the ubiquitous, "It depends." Amanda Sebesta and Elena Bray Speth write that the answer needs to take into account the course context, its learning goals, the instructor's style, how the knowledge will be assessed, and the individual characteristics of the learner. They recommend teachers start by asking students this question: "How do you study?" "We need information about the basic toolbox of strategies students are equipped with and comfortable using" (p. 3).

Furthermore, the answer depends on what study strategies work best, given the content students need to learn. And that's something expert learners (such as teachers) can share with students. However, teachers don't always know whether the study approaches that work best with the given content differ from those in other fields. If they do know, their ideas tend to be pretty generic.

To better answer the question of how to study for the exam in their large introductory biology courses, Sebesta and Bray Speth surveyed their students. Based on the well-known work of Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons on self-regulated learning, they developed a survey that included questions about metacognitive processes (study plans, goal setting, monitoring learning, and self-evaluation), motivational processes (self-efficacy, intrinsic interest in their studies, control over their learning, and accepting responsibility for what they learned), and behavioral processes (seeking information, structuring study environments, and adopting effective strategies). They wanted to learn which

study strategies their students were using, which (if any) of those strategies were associated with higher exam scores, and which strategies students planned to adopt to prepare for future exams. Almost 400 students took the survey after the first and second exams in the course.

"We need information about the basic toolbox of strategies students are equipped with and comfortable using"

In both surveys, the most commonly used strategies were (1) seeking information (reported by over 90 percent of the students); (2) environmental structuring (e.g., finding a good place to study); (3) reviewing the textbook or screencasts; (4) seeking assistance from peers, and (5) keeping records and monitoring (e.g., taking notes in class). Over 80 percent of the students reported using these last four strategies, with only 77 percent saying they sought the assistance of peers after the second exam. The two strategies students reported using least often were seeking assistance from the instructor (with less than 20 percent of the students reporting that they did) and seeking assistance from other resources such as TAs and tutors (with only about 35 percent of the students reporting that they sought assistance from these sources).

Six strategies were significantly associated with grades on both exams: (1) self-evaluation (checking over work before submitting it and trying to understand why answers were wrong), (2) seeking information, (3) keeping records and monitoring, (4) seeking instructor assistance, (5) reviewing exams, and (6) reviewing graded work.

Student Ratings of Instruction: What about Those Written Comments?

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Many faculty dread that end-of-semester email informing them that student evaluation feedback is available for viewing. Even instructors who routinely excel on numerical ratings find themselves struggling with students' responses to open-ended questions, where inevitably one remark stands out in its harsh tone or content. Sadly, the phenomenon of negativity bias—the tendency to focus more on negative than positive stimuli—ensures that faculty will be most likely to remember that particularly mean-spirited comment.

In a recent article in *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, Linse summarized the extensive literature on student ratings, offering information and advice for the interpretation of quantitative items. While less is known about written comments, Linse noted that they are often the source of unfair attention from both faculty and administrators.

Is there a way to build some perspective regarding written comments? Short of ignoring them altogether, here are some suggestions for faculty eager to minimize the emotional distress they can create.

1. Calculate participation rates. Students who complete the quantitative ratings section of evaluations may or may not opt to provide written feedback, which can result in low response rates. In four studies conducted in the past decade, the percentage of students who answered one or more open-ended questions ranged from 39 to 67 percent. Consider a course of 30 students: If 55 percent complete the overall course evaluation (a typical rate at U.S. universities), and 60 percent of those provide written comments, just 10 students (one-third) are now representing the

entire class.

Before reading any of the comments, count the number of responses for each item, divide by the total number of students in the class, and write the corresponding percentage next to each question. Keep this participation rate in mind to maintain some perspective as you dive into the prose.

2. Organize responses by student or by other relevant variables. Most course evaluation summaries present the written comments by item rather than by student. While helpful for spotting trends, this format prevents instructors from discerning, for example, whether a highly critical response to four different items comes from one disgruntled student or four different students. You may also choose to organize written comments by variables assessed in the numerical items that are potentially associated with overall evaluation trends, such as majors vs. nonmajors, expected grade, perceived workload, or how much time students report devoting to the course.
3. Solicit an unbiased review. Qualitative researchers note the importance of “perspective management” in data interpretation, with investigators urged to recognize and minimize their own biases. Try giving written comments to a trusted colleague; when written comments aren't about one's own teaching, it's easier to look at them objectively. Or share comments with professionals in your campus's faculty development center. Having encountered a broad sample of written comments over time, they can help you place yours in context.
4. Perform a content analysis. Another option, also borrowed from qualitative research (which is, after all, what we are doing when reading written comments), is to perform a systematic evaluation of the

responses using the procedures of a standard qualitative analysis. Focus on representative rather than unique comments, and try to identify themes or categorize around standard areas of teaching emphasis (e.g., organization, feedback, accessibility). Combine written comments across several courses and semesters for a richer and more representative pool of data.

5. Consider tossing the outliers. Why not delete, or at least ignore, the nonrepresentative responses, a common practice in quantitative research analyses? In a 2011 article in *Quality Assurance in Education*, Wongsurawat offers an interesting strategy. Assess every comment for its reliability and representativeness, based on correlations between the individual comment and the class averages. Similar to the outcome of item analyses performed in test construction, responses that do not correlate can be discarded. Not all comments merit scrutiny.
6. Add your own questions. There's an argument that open-ended items explicitly directing students to identify faculty weaknesses or strategies for improvement encourage negative feedback that would not be elicited with broader prompts. In any case, you can probably do better. What do you want to know, and what would actually help you to improve? Most course evaluation forms permit adding supplementary questions.
7. Instruct your students in the art of giving feedback. Talk with students about the type of responses that are helpful and that motivate teachers to make changes. In a study published in 2014 in *Higher Education*, Tucker found that when students were explicitly instructed in how to provide constructive, professional feedback, the rate of abusive or unprofessional comments was less than 1 percent. 🌱

New Perspectives on Studying

There's no question that how we teach is important. An abundance of evidence supports the power of approaches that actively engage students in learning. But there's also no question that how students study (or don't study) has an equally important effect on their learning, and that's not an area to which we devote a lot of attention. Yes, what students do once they leave the classroom or log off the course website is mostly beyond our control. But teachers do have some influence over what students do when they aren't in class. If there's an announcement about a test on Tuesday, that will affect the behavior of many students.

To influence study behavior even more, we need to know when, for how long, where, with whom, and how students study. So far most of the research has looked at each of these factors individually. We know that despite good intentions, many students procrastinate and finally get serious about studying the night before an exam. We know from studies such as the National Survey of Student Engagement that students (even those with good grades) are not studying for a long as we think they need to. We know that students collaborate with peers, often to discuss what they think will be on the exam. As for what students do when they study, consistently a large percentage of them report that they reread the text and "go over" their notes. Unfortunately, an impressive review of research (highlighted in the January 2016 issue) that looked at 10 learning techniques rated these two approaches among the least effective study strategies.

A lengthy and detailed analysis of study habits by Matthew Hora and Amanda Oleson proposes that the subject is better understood from a holistic perspective. Student decisions regarding when, where, and for how long they study are not isolated, unrelated acts, nor are the behaviors that result from those decisions. "The literature on study

skills, strategies, and habits is limited by a tendency to reduce the complex and multi-faceted behaviors that comprise studying to metrics that cannot capture how and why students study. . . ." (p. 3). In contrast, Hora and Oleson conceptualize studying as "the discrete behaviors of individuals (e. g., reviewing notes) as they unfold within specific contexts and that implicate particular artifacts and resources." Their work on studying rests

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on a straightforward question: "How can we best support student success if we do not understand how they study?" (p. 2).

Their analysis of studying is exploratory. They analyzed what 66 students said about studying when they were interviewed in 22 focus groups. The students were enrolled in biology, physics, earth science, or mechanical engineering courses and were asked the following: "Imagine for a moment how you typically study for this course. Can you describe in as much detail as possible your study situation?" (p. 4).

The researchers did not provide a definition of studying and found that student definitions varied. Some consider attending class as studying, some think completing assignments constitutes studying, and others said studying is what they do outside of class but did not associate it with completing an assignment. Furthermore, before discussing how they study, these students talked about what motivates them to study. And here 40 of the 66 reported that they study based on cues from the instructor, mostly related to

upcoming exams. Only four participants reported that they study when they don't understand or fully grasp the material.

Regarding when they study and what resources they marshal, 11 said they start studying a few days before an exam, 14 said the night before, and 15 said they study throughout the course. They use digital resources, starting with the course website, followed by Google and Wikipedia. An even larger group identified the textbook and their notes as resources. Very few mentioned human resources, such as the instructor or tutors. Nineteen reported that they are regularly disrupted by their electronic devices. Twenty-one said they have developed strategies for dealing with the disruptive nature of these devices. For 39 of these students, studying is a "solitary affair" (p. 8); 35 study with others and 24 said they study both alone and with others.

As for how they actually study, the researchers note, "The participants often described these strategies using imprecise or idiosyncratic terminology such that it was not possible to align them with those discussed in the literature" (p. 8). For example, when students talked about reading the textbook, frequently they "did not specify if they were re-reading it, reading it for the first time, or if they were skimming" (p. 8).

Beyond using their notes and the text to study, students (in varying numbers) reported making cue cards, doing problem sets, using practice (often old) tests, reviewing PowerPoint slides, completing study questions, looking at online resources, and reviewing weekly quizzes. The strategy reported least often was watching or rewatching lecture videos or podcasts. The researchers also looked at the strategies used in the context of when students studied, the level of course, whether the studying occurred in groups or alone, and the discipline of the course.

Is It Relevant to Students?

If what we're teaching is relevant to students' personal lives, future careers, and current success, that's motivating, Leah Hoops observes and documents with references. If it's not, students either don't learn what we're teaching or don't learn it very well. Of course, from our vantage point, all of our content looks very relevant. It's hard to imagine how that relevance isn't equally obvious to students.

But Hoops writes about finding out that something she considered very relevant didn't appear that way to students. And, it was one of those in-your-face encounters. Hoops had started working part time in her campus learning center. Specifically, she was working with a team of undergraduate coaches who met individually with students and conducted the usual "how to study" and "how to succeed in college" workshops. Two of these students were working with Hoops on one of these workshops that she'd had a "pretty heavy hand in creating," both in terms of the content and format. She didn't divulge that to the students.

Almost immediately the two students started talking about how the content in the session was irrelevant. "This part is so stupid! Why in the world do we need to tell students to be confident? Like they don't already know that. . ." Hoops tried to explain, but the two students remained unconvinced and proceeded to criticize the inclusion of Kanye West as an example.

Hoops was clearly taken aback but then describes how she used the experience to revisit relevance. In this case, she decided that her content was not irrelevant. There's lots of research supporting the role confidence plays in success in college, and also a lot of evidence documenting that many students lack confidence. They don't tackle course content as confident, empowered learners. So sometimes the issue isn't the relevance of the content but how that relevance is communicated to students.

Hoops recommends being transparent about our content and pedagogical choices. We need to explain—clearly, explicitly, and sometimes more than once—why the content is important and why it matters. We need to talk about why we've decided on a particular pedagogical approach. Problems arise when we assume that the relevance of what and how we teach is obvious. And that problem becomes even more serious when we assume that the reasons something is relevant to us are the same reasons that content should be relevant to students. The age gap between teachers and students widens quickly. Shortly after we begin teaching, we can no longer assume that students are having the same educational experiences we had. Their lives have been and will be different from ours.

When reassessing the relevance of what we are teaching, Hoops asks how we can find out whether what we're teaching is perceived by students as

irrelevant. "We may be teaching from expert blind spots" (p. 143). Hoops' method of discovering was accidental. Soliciting feedback from students is a more purposeful approach. Why not a short reaction paper that asks, "Out of what we have covered so far in this class, what is the most relevant concept to your life?" (p. 143). Or provide students a list of the concepts covered in the course and ask them to rate the relevance of each. And there's no harm in asking students one-on-one, provided you don't become defensive when they report that the most important concept in the course doesn't seem all that relevant to them.

Most of what we teach students is relevant, although perhaps not everything. But irrelevant content is much less an issue than failing to show students the relevance of what we're asking them to learn. They may not believe us now, but they may well subsequently discover the importance. A faculty member posted this comment from a former student on his course website: "You can learn how to write arguments in this class. I didn't. I didn't think I needed to know how. I was wrong. First week on the job, I had to write four arguments against a plan submitted by one of our large clients." Comments like that may be more persuasive than anything the teacher could say.

Reference: Hoops, L. D., (2017). That awkward moment I became irrelevant. *College Teaching*, 65 (3), 142–144. 🌱

INSIGHTS FROM PAGE 2

Student responses about proposed study plans did indicate a willingness to make changes in how they were preparing for the exams. Regardless of the grade received on the first exam, students most commonly reported that they planned to do more goal setting and planning and to improve time management. They aspired

to avoid procrastination and cramming.

In outlining implications for instruction, Sebasta and Bray Speth point out that most beginning students are not expert learners. Instructors need to "become cognizant that (1) students are still developing their learning strategies and (2) self-regulation can be fostered in concrete ways" (p. 10). Surveys make students aware of potential study approaches. If students find out that

certain approaches are associated with higher grades, they may be motivated to try them out.

Reference: Sebasta, A.J. and E. Bray Speth. (2017). How should I study for the exam? Self-regulated learning strategies and achievement in introductory biology. *Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education*, 16 (2), 1–12. 🌱

Afterthoughts

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In face-to-face courses, learning is compartmentalized into blocks that meet a prescribed number of times per week across the term or semester. It's a format that's simultaneously efficient and inhibiting. It effectively facilitates sequenced and accretive design but regularly loses opportunities to maximize deep learning *between* class units. To some extent technology, with the use of texting, email, blogs, and wikis, makes it possible to sustain the learning that started in class. Even so, much of the learning that happens after class or between class sessions is left to chance.

I'd like to share one way to encourage more learning between class meetings. I've devised something I call "afterthoughts," and they're ideas pertinent to any aspect of the course that anyone can share. I typically don't describe the idea in the syllabus. Instead, in the second or third week of class, I introduce and explain the concept. I talk about how an afterthought can take many forms and follow with examples such as these.

- **The follow-up that returns to an important point:** "For the past few classes we've discussed how Shakespeare often employs double plot structure in his plays. Well, yesterday I was watching a TV program that uses exactly the same technique ..." I then play a cut from (or describe or outline on the board) a double plot structure from a current TV show that is similar to what we've been doing for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- **The intriguing idea that can link learning over a weekend (as well as demonstrate how much student comments can matter):** "After our last class I was thinking about Jake's comment on the emotional power of words. And it occurred to me that while our culture manages

quite well with words that wield bold power—for instance, we defend freedom of all kinds of speech, even the offensive—we grant far less value to words of subtle emotional power. Do you agree? Why or why not? What examples would you give from our readings or from pop culture or media sources? What are some of the consequences of the loss of subtle expression in literature or in life?

Regardless of what students contribute, I can usually turn their ideas into an important point from a prior class or segue into the agenda for the day.

- **The chance to correct, adjust, or extend:** "In thinking about our last class, I had an afterthought: During our lively discussion of *Gatsby* in the last class, we didn't consider how the narrator's point of view might affect the characters' ethics. Before we take on ethics in the reading for today, let's go back and take a look at that."

Student afterthoughts fit—less tidily—under these same examples. Their afterthoughts emerge in peer conversations after class about a topic broached in class; from connections to TV, film, music, and the Internet; out of references to similar topics or readings from their other courses (or from high school); and from their own thinking about something they'd like to discuss more.

Once students understand what qualifies as an afterthought, I invite them to contribute theirs. I use this strategy to encourage them to think metacognitively. Perhaps they haven't considered that academic insights and learning are not

confined to the limits of a class period, and that much learning occurs *between* classes—even between semesters and across disciplines. Afterthoughts are a way to capture and share these new insights and connections.

Students are free to email or text me with an afterthought—to avoid losing it, or in case they want to run it by me first. If they choose to bring it directly into class, I urge them to write it down so that they'll remember it. The only requirements are that they (1) describe what they encountered and thought about and (2) explain how it relates to something we've been learning. I also make clear that afterthoughts definitely count toward quality participation points.

Occasionally (but regularly), I'll start class by asking if anyone would like to share an afterthought, pausing for a moment to see if there are any volunteers. The pause is important because it reminds students of the opportunity, validates thoughtfulness, and creates an incentive vacuum. On the other hand, if someone has emailed me beforehand, I'll begin class by asking that student to share the afterthought. Regardless of what students contribute, I can usually turn their ideas into an important point from a prior class or segue into the agenda for the day. Occasionally I make afterthoughts a warm-up exercise, asking everyone to write a one-minute paper about something from last week's classes that they would like to return to, and to briefly explain why. Their papers give me insights into the ideas that had staying power and what might bear returning to as the course moves forward.

In addition to serving as a discussion starter and an incentive to connecting ideas, the technique of afterthoughts encourages independent student thinking, as they link course-related ideas and connect them to the world beyond. For those who don't volunteer,

IMPROVING FROM PAGE 1

that they are treated like high school students.

- **Let students know what it takes to succeed in the course.** Yes, I know, it's in the syllabus! But students, especially beginning students, need reminders and gentle encouragement to take advantage of resources, both those I provide and those available elsewhere in the institution. During each class, I quickly display my course website and use it to remind students of upcoming assignments, deadlines, and supplementary materials. On

average, I spend less than one minute doing this, but it helps reinforce my expectations, keeps them aware of resources, and reminds them I'm available to help.

We all list office hours in the syllabus, but many students are shy about one-on-one time or unsure of its benefits. I let students know they're welcome and give examples of what can occur during these sessions. One of my colleagues requires each student to come to her office for a five-minute appointment at the beginning of the semester. In this way students know where to find her and discover that they can talk with her. She reports these initial appointments

have increased the number of students she sees during office hours. Being available in our offices, ready to help, and knowledgeable about resources shows students that we care and want them to succeed. That counts when they complete their course evaluations.

Student evaluations, good or bad, are only a small reflection of our overall service as educators. However, they *are* a part of academic life, and when we make small changes that help our students anyway, that may come back to us as higher scores. And, we've earned those higher scores with integrity. 🌱

PERSPECTIVES FROM PAGE 4

What's particularly noteworthy about this work is the idea that studying is not one thing but a combination of decisions and behaviors in response to particular situations. "By recognizing that studying involves multiple states, resources, strategies, and actors, it becomes necessary to move beyond simply providing 'how-to' guides for studying or recommendations for students to use high-impact practices to instead think about the role that cue-seeking, resource acquisition, and distraction management play in shaping students' study habits" (p. 15).

The article concludes with a section that explores how instructors can deliberately design courses in ways that promote good study habits. They recommend providing students with a variety of resources and tools they can use to explore course content. Course websites make it easy to access these resources, and this group of students reported going to course-related digital resources first. Teachers can also influence how often students study with regular quizzes or weekly practice question assignments.

This excellent article merits reading and discussion for this reason:

"The relationship between teaching and learning is anything but direct, linear, and unproblematic. What students decide to do in terms of when and how to study act as critical intermediaries between what instructors do in the classroom and students' ultimate performance in college" (p. 17).

Hora, M.T. and A.K. Oleson. (2017). Examining study habits in undergraduate STEM courses from a situative perspective. *International Journal of STEM Education*, 4 (1), 1-19. [Note: this is an open access journal.] 🌱

AFTERTHOUGHTS FROM PAGE 6

the technique at least models such behavior. And for everyone, the strategy cultivates the skills of description, comparison, and analysis, any of which a teacher can further develop in the

subsequent discussion. Finally, it honors recent research into the neuroscience of learning, providing a self-generated opportunity to learn through repetition, significantly enhanced through students' (and peers') own intellectual connections and emotional engagement. 🌱



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A New Metaphor for Teaching

Even though metaphors for teaching abound, there's always room for another, and Kim Paffenroth presents a novel one—Glinda, the Good Witch of the North in *The Wizard of Oz*. He starts by ruling out the other characters in this much-loved tale. Dorothy is the student along with peer learners Scarecrow, Tin Man, and the Lion. They encounter the Wicked Witch of the West who's good at discipline, giving orders, and enforcing them. Paffenroth notes that those characteristics can be seen in some teachers, and they're not inherently wicked, but they're not what make master teachers. The three students also encounter the great Oz, who is loud and authoritatively impressive—a “sage on the stage,” according to Paffenroth. “But mere authority and outrageous spectacle simultaneously close off some avenues of communication and learning; they may be good for emboldening or brow-beating, but are not as good for introspection and enlightenment” (p. 259).

That leaves Glinda, “the goody-two-shoes who is barely in the movie and who does not display any particularly strong magical powers” (p. 259). But Glinda responds to Dorothy in ways Paffenroth believes illustrate the characteristics of master teachers:

- **The master teacher always treats the student as a peer (or at least a peer in training).** Glinda greets Dorothy with a question: “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?” The question assumes Dorothy is a witch, therefore an equal of Glinda's. Students should not be treated as underlings; they should be considered junior members of the community, not followers or subordinates. There are important things that Dorothy needs to learn: what her shoes do, that trees talk, and that not all witches are old and ugly. But Glinda isn't concerned about all that. She sends Dorothy on her way with an admonition about fellow witches. “Begone! Before somebody

[another junior witch] drops a house on you.” Master teachers do not treat students like children, protecting them from every potential danger and answering their every question.

- **The master teacher acknowledges and encourages students' abilities but lets them learn how to exercise them on their own.** “Glinda tells Dorothy that her red slippers must be very powerful but does not tell her what they do” (p. 260). In fact, Glinda gives Dorothy very little in the way of instructions for travel down the yellow brick road. Not only is it important for Dorothy and her friends to learn for themselves what they can do, it is

*Teaching is a complex act
that veers out in
multiple directions.*

important that teachers (if they want to be master teachers) let go of their egos “and know the student's ultimate goal or success is their own.” (p. 260) Master teachers do not attempt to mold students into shapes the teachers see as useful and valuable. They “let students grow into and realize the shape they were meant to be.” (p. 260)

- **The master teacher is often not equivalent or even similar to anyone the student has encountered before.** Glinda's comments reinforce the idea that Dorothy is skillful and powerful. It is Dorothy who needs to learn how to be on her own, how to trust and believe in herself. Paffenroth writes, “I am beginning to see how college is like Oz: it is a place where qualities and skills that went unrecognized back in Kansas are now displayed and cultivated and amplified” (p. 261). Students are not used to teachers who believe in them and focus on their potential.

- **The master teacher is not a surrogate parent but a more distant figure.** Glinda is like a set of missing parents. She's mostly absent in the story. But like parents, she's still powerful and mysteriously present. The master teacher is also not a replacement parent but like a parent provides inspiration and motivation. “You have the ruby slippers, now go do stuff” (p. 261). “I think . . . Glinda shows us in a way we may at first find disappointingly unheroic and bland: distant but still present, powerful but not domineering or forceful, empowering but not doting or interfering. . . .” It's a quiet, mostly hidden path that requires dedication and bravery, but it's a path that helps students “grow into what they were meant to be—independent, virtuous thinkers and actors, ready to surpass us in all things” (pp. 261–262).

This is a different view of teaching and a bit unconventional, but still worthy of our consideration. Teaching is a complex act that veers out in multiple directions. It's good to let our thinking go to new places every now and then, and this piece is delightful to read and full of humor and intriguing comparisons.

Reference: Paffenroth, Kim. (2017). The best teacher is like a famous mage everyone knows—just not any of your favorites. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 20 (3), 257–262. 🌿

Next Month's Topics

Can students effectively complete research projects in groups? The results of a large study say yes!

Authentic and inauthentic teaching can be described behaviorally.

Finally some research on student resistance to active learning!