
Pro Rege

Volume 21 | Number 4

Article 4

June 1993

Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership (Book Review)

John Van Dyk
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Van Dyk, John (1993) "Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 21: No. 4, 33 - 35.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol21/iss4/4

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Book Reviews

Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership, C. Roland Christensen, David A. Garvin, Ann Sweet, eds. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1991). 312 pages, \$29.95. Reviewed by John Van Dyk, Professor of Education.

Any college professor who feels occasional twinges of dissatisfaction with his or her classroom teaching style or teaching effectiveness ought to read this book. Put together under the auspices of a group of Harvard Business School faculty, *Education for Judgment* takes issue with traditional modes of university instruction and eloquently advocates a "discussion teaching" approach. The book in essence argues that teaching is "transformational activity which aims to get students to take charge of their learning and to make deeply informed judgments about the world" (xi). It challenges the deep-seated belief that "teaching is telling, knowledge is facts, and learning is recall" (xii), and proposes, instead, that "teaching is enabling, knowledge is understanding, and learning is the active construction of subject matter" (xii). Clearly the authors embrace a constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

The book's 17 chapters, written by various authors, are organized into five sections. Part I, along with a very important foreword by Harvard education professor Richard Elmore, lays out the theoretical underpinnings of the "discussion teaching" approach. This section considers some key principles. Fundamental is the view that discussion teaching "is essentially a systematic way of constructing a context for learning from the knowledge and experience of students, rather than exclusively from the canons of disciplinary knowledge" (xiv). This first part of the book also reports the latest research on human learning: new knowledge, studies have shown, is acquired by extending and revising prior knowledge, becomes meaningful when presented in the context of coherent relationships, and will be usable when applicable to concrete problem-solving (xiv). In addition, research shows that human learning is fundamentally a social act. The typical college classroom, however, emphasizes individual cognition over social interaction, and thus, according to the authors, hinders real learning in an important way.

The successful change from the traditional teacher-centered classroom approach to the "discussion" mode requires three fundamental shifts. Garvin, in the first chapter, explains as follows:

The first is a shift in the balance of power from an autocratic classroom, where the instructor is all-powerful, to a more democratic environment, where students share in decision-making. The second is a shift in the locus of attention from

a concern for the material only to an equal focus on classroom process and the learning climate. The third is a shift in instructional skills from declarative explanations, rooted in analytic understanding and knowledge of subject matter, to questioning, listening, and responding, which draw equally on interpersonal skills and a sensitivity to group development. (10)

Part I, in short, is a powerful analysis of the conceptual themes undergirding the discussion approach. It is probably the best and most convincing section of the entire book.

The second part of the book, comprising chapters 3 through 6, describes "personal odysseys" into the unpredictable world of discussion teaching. They present case studies of what it is like to teach in this way. The authors describe both their failures and triumphs, both the agony and the ecstasy of this kind of teaching. Two of the essays report the experiences of a first attempt at discussion teaching. Anyone who has attempted this approach will feel keen kinship with what the authors have experienced, especially the failures!

Of special interest is David Goodenough's essay "Changing Ground: A Medical School Lecturer Turns to Discussion Teaching." It's a story of "how a fourteen-year veteran of teaching histology forsook the pedagogical high road of lecturing to help blaze a trail in the uncharted wilderness of discussion teaching" (83). Goodenough, a professor at the Harvard medical school and recipient of numerous prizes for teaching, was a key participant in an experimental program known as the "New Pathways in General Medical Education." One reason for his switch to discussion teaching is that to him "it seemed crucial to confront the disturbing problems in modern medical education such as the absence of values from most curricula and the long-term inadequacy of rote memorization as a means of coping with the information explosion" (83). In his essay he describes his old lecture style, how his own educational experiences conditioned his teaching, what events triggered his decision to change, and, most important for college teachers, how the content he used to expound from the podium now emerges in discussion (84). Instead of lecturing on particular medical points, Goodenough introduces a case study from which his students extract all the necessary information. To be sure, the "New Pathways" program is not without "safety

nets": there are still some lectures given, either because the material doesn't lend itself to discussion, or because students request further detail (96).

Part III of the book, titled "Building Blocks," returns to the underpinnings presented in Part I, but now from a practical rather than from a conceptual point of view. Three chapters make up this section, emphasizing the developing of skills of questioning, listening, and responding. The reader will find a variety of useful information here. For example, chapter 8, titled "With Open ears" and written by Herman Leonard of the Harvard JFK School of Government, provides an interesting presentation of "diagnosis and treatment of listening pathologies" (140-145). Any teacher, whether given to lecturing or not, can benefit from studying this catalog of the problems which prevent students and teachers from listening to each other. Of similar value is C. Roland Christensen's typology of questions in chapter 9 ("The Discussion Teacher in Action"; 153-172; typology 159-160). The categorization of classroom questions into types such as open-ended, diagnostic, challenging, predictive, and so on, opens up new possibilities for the college professor.

Some "critical challenges" are considered in Part IV. The first chapter of this section discusses evaluating student participation, teaching technical material, learning from observation, discovering the usefulness of taking a semester-long perspective, and encouraging independent thinking. These topics will appeal to any college teacher who uses classroom discussion techniques. As in part III, the reader will find a variety of practical suggestions.

The final section, part V, is titled "Education for Judgment." Garvin, one of the editors of the book, summarizes as follows:

Part V explores the limits, dilemmas, and joys of our craft. The questions are timeless: Can an instructor know too much to be effective? At what point does a teacher's impact become so pervasive that it leads to undue influence? How should the delicate ethical dilemmas of discussion classes be resolved, as the instructor tries to satisfy competing norms of fairness? These are complex issues, for they involve paradoxes and trade-offs. Few have simple solutions (xxiv).

Indeed, the entire book makes it very clear that discussion teaching presents problems that have no simple solutions. In the final analysis, the solutions required will have to come from the teacher's personal judgment and sense of artistry. *Education for Judgment*, then, is not a book of recipes. It does not present a one-two-three-step model of easy techniques. It is not a handbook for discussion teaching. This makes the book a bit of a disappointment to the reader. The book builds the reader's enthusiasm for the discussion approach, but leaves us in the lurch when it comes to the how-to. True, the various chapters

offer numerous suggestions. Many of them, however, are repetitive and quickly acquire a *deja vu* character. For example, a number of authors stress the need of the teacher to get to know his or her students, or the need to establish the right kind of invitation-to-learn environment. This last point in particular requires more attention, especially because those of us who try various "discussion teaching" strategies frequently run into classes of students "programmed" to view education as lecturing, note-taking, and tests, and who are, consequently, impatient with the apparent inefficiency of the approach this book advocates.

In my view, *Education for Judgment* could have become more useful if the authors had considered the extensive literature available about group learning at the elementary and secondary levels. Much of this material may well be applicable to the college classroom. Cooperative learning strategies, for example, involving carefully structured heterogeneous groups, task assignments within groups, and planned opportunities for reflection on group effectiveness, could have contributed significantly to the usefulness of this book.

A major weakness of the book is the impression it leaves that discussion teaching is the only right way of teaching. It sets up an unhealthy contrast between lecturing and discussion, as if these were the only two choices available to teachers. On the elementary and secondary levels, attempts to eliminate direct instruction in order to be entirely "student-centered" have generally not been successful. True "active learning" is far superior to "passive learning"—indeed, active learning may well be the only way of learning—but active learning can be facilitated by carefully designed participatory (quick response) lecturing, by various inquiry and discovery strategies, as well as by discussion teaching.

Once we believe that a specific teaching approach is the single best approach, we have created another fad likely to be destined for the educational trash heap. I must be careful here, because nowhere does the book explicitly claim that discussion teaching is *the* single best way of teaching. But the impression that this is the case is nevertheless very strong.

These criticisms do not outweigh the merit of this book. Besides the excellent discussions in the early chapters of what active learning is all about, the fine expos of why college teachers are reluctant to give up a predominantly lecturing style, and the thorough critique of "teacher-dominated instruction," the book stresses many other important themes, such as building community in the classroom, students taking responsibility for their learning, and encouraging students to speak and listen to each other and learn from one another. These themes force us to reflect on our own Christian understanding of the nature of teaching. Especially noteworthy is the book's pervading view that teaching ought to be regarded as

enabling activity. These and similar themes, though not presented from a Christian perspective, are important for us, especially if we wish to develop a biblical approach to college teaching. We Christian teachers, called to

prepare our students to become knowledgeable, competent, and responsible disciples of Christ, can learn much from this book. At the very least, it will prompt us to examine our teaching practice more critically.

Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning: An Australian Case Study—The Peel Project, John R. Baird and Ian J. Mitchell, eds. (Melbourne, Australia: Monash University Printery, 1987, third reprint, 1989). 295 pages, paperback, Austr. \$17.00. Reviewed by John Van Dyk, Professor of Education.

This book addresses a timely issue. Where in the educational world of today do we not hear talk about improving teaching and learning? In North America, as one example, the current state of public education has generated vigorous debate about reform and school change. In many Christian schools, too, where theological and perspectival issues may for a time override instructional concerns, the question of teaching and learning remains high on the agenda.

Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning essentially chronicles the origin, development, and implementation of the "Peel project." The acronym PEEL stands for "Project for Enhancing Effective Learning." Conceived by educators at Monash University and the Melbourne College of Advanced Education, the Peel project was initially designed as a two-year research program at Laverton High School in Melbourne, Australia. However, the project soon began to draw such interest that within five years after its inception at Laverton, ten additional Australian schools as well as various funding agencies became associated with it.

What is the Peel project? John Baird, one of the editors of this book and a key figure in the program, describes the four specific objectives: "(1) To foster effective, independent learning through training for enhanced metacognition; (2) to change teacher attitudes and behaviors to ones which promote such learning; (3) to investigate processes of teacher and student change as participants engage in action-research; (4) to identify factors which influence successful implementation of a program which aims to improve the quality of students' learning" (17). Two keys to the project, then, are metacognition and the process of change. Metacognition in this case refers to student ability to understand how they learn. By making students conscious of their own learning processes, the Peel project hoped to clarify the ways in which teaching and learning can be changed for the better.

In the first chapter Richard White, a member of the Monash University education department, explains the background of the project. It grew out of the belief, he tells us, that in many Australian schools, student learning, especially at the high school level, is inactive. Students expect to take notes and memorize information presented by the teacher. Few students are really involved in their learning. They see schooling as a necessary evil

to be endured in order to enter universities and eventually obtain high-paying jobs.

These observations surely apply to much of North American secondary education as well. Think, for example, of John Goodlad's conclusions documented in his widely publicized study *A Place Called School* (1984). Goodlad reported that in the typical high school classroom the main activities are lectures, note-taking, and tests. Or think of the current preoccupation with teaching "critical thinking," a concern arising from the disturbing recognition that much of high school learning is passive and not internalized.

In chapter 2 Baird reports a number of important conclusions that emerged from his earlier research into the nature of learning. He found, for example, that learning outcome is determined by decisions made by the learner, that learners are often unaware of their learning problems, and that increasing awareness of the nature and process of learning leads to improved attitudes and procedures. These conclusions clearly belong to the area of metacognition. They served to stimulate the development of the Peel project.

The procedure by which the project was established at Laverton High School is detailed in Chapter 3. About a dozen teachers volunteered to participate, covering subjects ranging from science to history and English. This chapter is useful to anyone interested in designing and conducting research projects in a secondary school.

The next 11 chapters are titled "Theory into Practice." They were written by the participating teachers and describe the successes and failures of the project. One chapter was written by a student. The chapters depict teachers enthusiastic about the project but continually confronted by obstacles, student resistance, and just plain fatigue and frustration. The picture emerging from these chapters is one of struggle, of a growing awareness that to change expectations and patterns in classrooms is a most difficult task which can be accomplished only by persistent and sustained effort and carried by unflinching administrative and peer support.

In implementing the project in their classrooms the teachers used a number of strategies. First, they adopted a stance of "action research." Action research in education simply means that the teachers involved critically reflect on their own teaching practice in order to help