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Individualized Consulting to Improve Teaching

Richard G. Tiberius

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University of Toronto

Many of the readers of this volume are educational consultants or teachers whose primary interest lies in action. The first thing we want to know is how a method works and what it can do for us. Moreover, most of us are aware that methods are usually developed by trial and error and then justified within a set of assumptions about teaching and about human nature. Yet we often write about our methods of improving teaching as though they were logically derived from basic principles or suggested by a review of the literature. I will resist this tendency by relating the story first and discussing the underlying assumptions in the last few pages.

Let me begin with the telephone conversation I just finished before sitting at the typewriter. It was Professor Starr on the phone, reputed to be one of the star teachers of the Chemistry Department. I remembered his name from the teaching improvement workshop we had organized for his department last month. He told me that he was interested in the method that I had demonstrated at the workshop, the one involving the gathering of feedback from students, the observing of classes, and the summarizing of all the information into a report. Interestingly, he left out two of the principle steps in the method: the interview with the teacher and the discussion of the report with the teacher toward improving the teaching. He appeared to be more interested in having a report from me than in entering the process of teaching improvement.

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He was not the first teacher to selectively remember the method. Other teachers have called me with the equally mistaken notion that the method involves talking with them and visiting their class without interviewing their students. This type of distortion is often the perception of the frightened teacher, one who seeks an opportunity to convince me that he or she is really not so bad but who does not want to risk exposure to the students.

In contrast, it appeared as though Starr wanted a report to document the good opinion of his students. Fortunately I had already heard about him through my association with his Department. Obtaining advanced information of this sort is one of the benefits of remaining within one department for several months at a time instead of skipping around. Another benefit of concentrating on one department at a time is that it allows time for the ripple effect to wash in some of the deadwood. At first only the good teachers like Starr come forward, ostensibly to seek improvement, but more out of an interest in documenting their stardom either for use in tenure and promotion or for personal satisfaction. However, since Starr was the first to come forward from Chemistry, I thought that it would be wise to agree to work with him. If he were to emerge from the process happy, the word would get around. Of course, I could initiate calls to some of the problem teachers instead of waiting for them to contact me, but that could sour my relationship with them. Any initiative on my part raises their worst suspicions. It is better if they come to me.

I made an appointment to talk with Starr about his teaching and asked him to send me a schedule of his classes so that I could visit one. He said that he taught two courses. "Which one would you like to visit?", he asked. Without hesitation I answered "The one you are having trouble with, and possibly the particular lecture that you are having the most trouble with." This is my stock answer. It helps put teachers at ease by shifting the focus on their role from one of performing and covering their mistakes to one of disclosing their mistakes so that they can be detected and solved.

As I expected, Starr was still unable to decide which class I should visit since he felt that neither of them was really a problem. I stifled myself from asking him why he was wasting my time. We decided on the large lecture course of 250 students and several labs. I asked him

for a class list, broken down by lab section, so that I could draw the samples of students for the interviews from the labs instead of from the entire large group. It is a lot easier to take a random sample from a group of under twenty than from one of over a hundred. Besides, labs are a particularly easy place to meet students since there is often some free time near the end of the lab when I can talk to the group. Alternatively, I would have to make an appointment for a future date, taking my chances on their showing up, an especially risky procedure near exam time.

We hung up. I began to label a file folder "staff", realized that I had forgotten to ask for his phone number, and, before I could call him back to get the numbers, my phone rang again. It was a professor from Economics who was interested in the individualized consulting approach that she had heard about. I told her that I was concentrating on chemistry this spring but that in the fall it would be possible to work with her, especially if I could work with several other professors from her department at the same time. I asked her to contact the staff development committee of her department. In my appointment book I marked down a potential involvement for Economics for the fall. I would have agreed to consult with her if she had been in a desperate situation.

A week later Professor Starr and I had our meeting. A very dramatic fellow, he seemed to love teaching and wanted very much to get the rest of his faculty to enjoy it as much as he did and to do it as successfully. During our rather rambling conversation I learned what his intentions were for his students: i.e., what, in his view, the successful student should have learned as a result of his course. I also asked about what he did both in and out of class (planning the curriculum, handouts and so on), to help students succeed. Finally, I wanted to know if he knew whether his intentions for the students were realized. I was careful not to point out any similarity between my three questions and the educational cliche of "Objectives, Curriculum and Evaluation". One should try not to bore.

He became a little uncomfortable when he sensed a logic to our conversation which threatened to expose his teaching as somewhat less than perfectly planned. I explained that I was trying to find out what the aims were of his teaching because I did not think it would be

fair of me to observe his lecture outside of the context of his objectives. Also, I did not think I could learn very much from observing a lecture if I were not primed before hand.

When I visited his class I took a seat in the back row of the lecture hall so that I could observe student reactions as well as the Professor. Despite their large number, students quieted down as soon as he began to speak. His pauses, timing, voice were excellent. There were so many things to observe and note. I took detailed notes: the way he wrote key words on the overhead, the lighting, his handling of questions and students arriving late. Despite my feverish activity, and without very much prior interest in my task of observing his technique, at the question period I found myself wishing I were a student so that I could ask a question. I left with a feeling that both chemistry and I were his dear friends, and that he was delighted to have the pleasure of introducing us.

The first lab group that I visited was in the middle of a rather time consuming procedure which promised to take the entire period, according to the demonstrator, so I chose another one. In the second, students were just finishing up and were beginning to discuss the questions at the back of their lab notes. Since Professor Starr had neglected to tell the demonstrator of my visit, as he had agreed to, there were some awkward minutes where I had to explain who I was and what I was doing in the lab.

The demonstrator was only too happy to leave the room for a few minutes to have a coffee. Before he left, he asked the group if they would please give me their attention since I was there at the invitation of Professor Starr for the purpose of improving Chemistry 205. He introduced me warmly and sincerely, wishing me well in my attempt to improve the course. This kind of introduction is extremely helpful in establishing the students' trust in me. On other occasions, when I did not have such validation by the teacher, students saw me as the agent of the Dean, spying on their teacher, and they told me very little.

The first thing I told the group was that I was *invited* (an important word) to the class by Professor Starr because he was interested in improving the teaching of Chem. 205. Then I explained that I chose to talk with students instead of using a questionnaire because I found that the information from discussions with students is so much richer

and elaborate; it provides us with a much better indication of what to do in making useful changes. From questionnaires we find out only the answers to our questions, while I want to know what students are thinking about the course, uninfluenced by my question, in *their own vocabulary*. I also made the point that the students chosen would remain entirely anonymous and that they would be randomly chosen.

When there are no lab or tutorial sections attached to a lecture, or when the number of students in the lecture is small, I usually draw my random sample of students directly from the audience in the few minutes that the teacher reserves for me at the end. This procedure has the advantage of informing the entire class that there is an improvement process going on. It is important for students to know this, because they are more likely to look with understanding on changes in the teacher's behavior if the changes are seen as part of a deliberate effort to improve his teaching.

The actual drawing of the sample is done rather dramatically by the use of a class list which has been cut up into strips of paper, each containing an individual name of a student. I mix up the thin strips of paper as if I am tossing a salad, and then, while looking out at the students, away from the pile of names, I pick up one name at a time, and read them out, until I have six names. Each student, as his or her name is called, is asked to come to the front of the room. This is usually an occasion for general hooting and wisecracking. The more of this the better. Such group activity somehow invests the chosen students with a sense of obligation to represent their class. When I follow this procedure almost all of the students show up at the meeting as agreed.

I used to telephone the students before I caught on to the importance of public commitment. The phone calls were hopeless. After ten minutes of explaining to students who I was and what a random sample is and what I was trying to do, they would ask "why me?" Then, after reluctantly agreeing to participate (Some would ask me "Do I *have* to?") they would frequently not show up for the meeting.

Since I did not have the student list in this case—Professor Starr said he would send me one but apparently forgot—I simply referred to a table of random numbers, counting the students from left to right, and calling out those students whose number was selected by the random list. After choosing six I told everyone in the group that I

would be listening to these six students, summarizing what they said in a report, and that the teacher and I would then go over the report in an attempt to improve his teaching. Finally, I made it clear that I was not trying to exclude anyone by this procedure, that I would take any information I could get from any other student who had anything to add, and that I was trying to get a sample that did not contain only complainers or only praisers.

As it happened, the students said that they would be finished with the lab early, so they would be able to meet me directly. Usually, especially in the large lecture situation, I have to make an appointment for some future date, sometimes as long as a week away. I usually try for a place familiar to the students, preferably close to a previous class, such as "the student lounge right after the Econ 200". In that way, if one student forgets about the meeting, he or she may be reminded by others. Even so, I expect one or two drop-outs. By choosing six I have a little padding. Four is still enough for a discussions. Three cuts it close unless they are very interactive types. Two and one are really not acceptable for what I am trying to do, as you will see.

The students suggested the cafeteria as a meeting place since it was uncrowded late in the afternoon. They clustered around me at one of the tables, waiting for me to ask questions, a natural enough assumption to make since I was there to find out information. I told them that although I did have some questions, which occurred to me while I visited the class and talked with the professor, I was much more interested in find out their thoughts about the course, in their own vocabulary, than in hearing the answers to my own questions. If there were time at the end I might ask them some questions.

Since this explanation was not enough to convince them that I was serious about not asking them questions, I had to use another stock comment. I told them how the information would be used rather than telling them what kind of information I was looking for: "Please tell me anything you can which will be of use in improving the teaching of Chem 205; something which is helpful for your learning and should be maintained, or something which is not helpful and should be changed." Then, by writing a date on my pad, I made it clear that I was preparing to take notes as they talked.

Because of the rule in polite conversation against arbitrarily

changing the subject, there is a danger that the first topic raised will determine the subject of conversation for some time to come, resulting in other students forgetting the points that are uppermost in their minds. To overcome this problem I summarized the first student's point before anyone else had a chance to react to it. I wrote it down, and then I said: "I would like to hear everyone's reaction to this point but, if we pause now to do that, some of you might forget the points that are uppermost on your minds and those are the very points that I do not want to miss. So let me go around quickly at first, jotting down all the major points, and then we'll return to them one at a time and get everyone's reaction to each point".

Comments flooded in. I briefly restated each one to make sure I understood it properly. As we went back over them, eliciting every-one's reaction, a general discussion broke out over each point. I took notes furiously, only interrupting when students expressed discomfort over disagreements arising (since they had assumed that I wanted a consensus). One student said: "I don't really agree that the lectures were useful but don't let me spoil the consensus." At this point I told the students that I was not looking for a consensus. I reminded them that since they were randomly chosen from over two hundred students, each minority view probably reflected the opinions of a sizable num-ber of their classmates. "What I am interested in is the *range* of opinion rather than consensus. Besides," I told them, "since most teaching performances involve a trade off—if you do this you sacrifice that— I'm interested in knowing why someone feels unhappy about some-thing that others are happy about. I want to see all sides of the issue."

My goal was to end up with a number of paragraph length summaries of the issues that were critical to the success of Chemistry 205. That is a tall order requiring some group leadership skills such as encouraging all of the students to react to each of the major points, continually summarizing student comments, and repeating the sum-maries for confirmation or correction. Rarely do I get it straight on the first attempt. Moreover, corrections to my summary often stimulate other comments resulting in a much fuller picture of the issue.

Students' initial comments often take the form of displays of emotion which are not descriptive enough to be of much use to the teacher. There is no point in telling a teacher that the students are "put

off" unless I also describe whether "put off" means offended, bored or angered, and why they feel that way. One of the most important tasks of the small group facilitator is to guide the students from the emotional level of expression to the descriptive.

One student raised the issue of notes for the class, which she described as useless. This expression was typical of a first comment in that it was so devoid of descriptive detail that other students were not moved to respond. Not until a second student asked what she had meant, and she offered the substitution "antiquated" for "useless" did a third student offer a challenge: "But the articles were classics in the field." After tossing this one back and forth for a while, it became clear to everyone that a distinction needed to be made between parts of the handouts: although the journal articles were interesting, the syllabus notes badly needed revision. Such a distinction would have undoubtedly evaded the questionnaire which asked students to rate the usefulness of the materials. We went on to another issues.

Finally, I encouraged the group to search for solutions, not just problems. A number of suggestions for revision of the syllabus came from the group, including some offers to help.

There were only a few minutes before their next class for me to check out some of my own hunches and to ask some of the questions that Professor Starr had asked me to put to the students. I wanted to know why Starr had such high student ratings. The students said because he was so entertaining. "He really puts his heart into it, even though you don't learn very much." "You can't take notes", another student said, "the lectures aren't coherent enough, but they make you think."

I returned to my office with about seven pages of notes, thankful that I had the use of a word processor. Instead of having to organize all the material before writing the report, I could just type out quotes from students just as they appeared in my notes, rearranging them into appropriate sections as I went along. There were times when I wished that I had read the book that I borrowed on speed writing. Direct quotes from the students as well as concrete examples give strength and life to the report.

The report was five pages long. I pondered whether to give Starr a copy to read over before discussing it with him or to discuss it first

and then write the report. I always anguish over this decision. The former method is sure to get his attention. The latter will produce a more balanced and accurate report because it will be modified by my sensitivity to Starr's reaction. I chose the former in this case. Starr is going to need something to get his attention. He is expecting a confirmation of his excellent teaching reputation.

There were enough positive comments in the report to support Starr in his style of lecturing. Specifically, there was sufficient confirmation of his belief in enthusiasm and caring as important dimensions of teaching. He deserves his reputation. On the other hand, there were some surprises for him. Despite their enjoyment of the lectures, students expressed their anxiety in facing the exam without a coherent set of notes. What they needed was some definition of "core" material for the course. Starr's lectures failed to provide that. The syllabus was no help. And, although some of the other lecturers in the course were more organized, incoherency between various lecturers in the course made it extremely difficult for students to discern the level of detail that was expected.

It was interesting to me that although the definition of "core" material was the students' main concern, it was not even present in my own notes, based on my visit to the class, and from the discussion with Starr. Obviously, my notes were no substitute for student comments. However, the fact that my own notes raised different issues from those raised by the students did not invalidate my perceptions. On the contrary, I was confident that my notes would be useful because they would bring out aspects of the teaching that students were not attending to while they were busy attending to the content. The students and I live in two different worlds: students have to pass the exam, while I tend to view the lecture more as theater.

The teacher lives in a third world. Starr defended himself. He said that he had always believed that the role of a lecturer ought to lie in stimulation of students, not in providing information. I agreed that he *was* stimulating, and I agreed with the appropriateness of "stimulation" as an objective for a lecture. I did not draw attention to the fact that he was defending himself and certainly did not try to counter his defense. I consider it a serious mistake for the consultant to counter the teacher's defense with a series of "Yes but" rejoinders, although

it is tempting to do so because the defensive teacher appears to misunderstand or not accept the point.

The teacher is usually painfully aware of the strength of the criticism, so much that his or her own position may seem irrational. Since it is reprehensible to act without reason in our culture, the teacher must give a rationale, a defense, for why he or she has not, for example, provided students with an organization of the material. In my response to Starr, I attempted to recognize and to validate his defense. Then I waited. Just kept quiet for a little bit. And, predictably, he said: "But my point about stimulation really doesn't solve the students' problem of needing some outlying of the material does it? Maybe I could give them the page numbers of material to read, or sample questions, or rewrite that handout. You know, the handout is really not very well done as far as its major objective of giving the students some direction for their study."

This is the point at which input from me could be useful. I said: "If you do improve the handouts it may also be useful to let the students know what you consider to be the main function of your handouts and of your lecture. In that way they won't have false expectations for either." We compared the feedback from the students with my observations, and we set both against the background of Starr's own objectives and methods. These comparisons stimulated a very productive discussion. Not only did suggestions arise that might improve his teaching effectiveness, but the objectives of the lectures were reconsidered in the light of student objectives and of the stated aims of the course. This constructive dialogue with Starr followed naturally, without prompting from me, as soon as the feedback has been accepted and understood. But if I had not accepted his defense, he may have blocked out or rejected the feedback, and the creative phase that followed may have been replaced by an exchange of accusations and counter accusations.

Sometimes, this discussion is the last I see of a teacher. It is sad when I cannot see the results of my work. Fortunately, in the case of Starr, the situation was very different. He wanted me to repeat the process during the second semester. In the interim Starr said he would speak with students himself, discussing some of the suggested changes

with them and asking them what they might suggest of overcome certain shortcomings of the course.

This action was somewhat of a breakthrough for Starr, as he told me much later. Despite all his good rapport with students, he had never talked to them directly about teaching. He enjoyed teaching and feared losing his motivation through harsh criticism. But he found discussions were less threatening than he expected, when, as he said, it was he who initiated the criticisms (based on our talk and the report). Somehow it gave him a sense of control and confidence to be able to approach the students with a list of "his" criticisms (although, ultimately, they had come from the students) and ask for their advice.

Although names and courses have been changed, this is a true story, one which has been repeated with minor variations, since then. According to students, the teacher, and this consultant, the course has been enormously improved.

Now to make good my promise regarding theory. I have followed Hunt (1978) and others in viewing teaching as a *skilled performance* whose objective is the *facilitation of learning*. Teaching is improved in the same manner that other skills are improved whether it be dart throwing or bicycle riding: The performer specifies his or her objectives, selects a set of performances supposedly in service of these objectives, and then gathers some feedback designed to ascertain the extent to which the performances were successful in fulfilling the stated objectives. Modifications are then made to the performance based on the feedback.

The major difference between teaching and less subtle skilled performance such as dart throwing is the complexity and subtlety of specifying the objectives, selecting and executing the performances, and obtaining feedback in a form that is useful to the teacher. Since educational consultants help teachers in overcoming these problems, we are therefore facilitators of the skilled performance of teaching. In other words, we teach the teachers how to teach. It will be obvious to the reader that the method just described is focused on overcoming the problem of obtaining useful feedback.

Dart throwers receive immediate and specific feedback about the success of every performance just by looking at the position of their dart in relation to the target. Every throw is a learning experience. In

contrast, teachers are often put into situations more like a blindfolded dart player who is told that his or her performance was rated "poor" on a ten point scale from "good" to "excellent".

Moreover, since teaching takes place within the relationship (MacMurray, 1961), between the teacher and the learner, the feedback is often influenced by that relationship in ways that are not useful to the improvement of teaching. Students are often hesitant to speak frankly to the teacher who evaluates them, and teachers often block communication through their defensiveness. Finally, the critical issues, those controlling the success of teaching, are often not discoverable either in the mind of the teacher alone or in the minds of the students alone. The truth is "between" the teacher and the student, in the phrase of Martin Buber (1970). It emerges from the dialogue. The educational consultant can enter the area "between" relationships to facilitate that dialogue, by the use of group discussions and combining multiple perspectives.

There are at least a dozen educational consultants using variations of this method across the continent. It seems to have been invented in different forms and used toward slightly different aims in each place. At one point Joseph Clark, who has described his method (1979), began a newsletter with the catchy acronym of SGID (Small Group Instructional Diagnosis) as a forum for consultants interested in the method. Unfortunately for us Joe has gone on to other things and the newsletter has not been picked up.

The extent of use of this method also varies widely across institutions from the University of Dayton where it is apparently used through the University, to places like Purdue and Stanford where there are pockets of interest and to places like Toronto where is used with one faculty only.

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