

# Encouraging the Campus Focus on Learning and Teaching: Read My Lips

Invited Keynote Presentation at the Grand Valley State University  
Second Annual Conference on Teaching and Learning  
August 21, 1996  
Joan North, Dean

Journey back with me, if you will, to a mild Wisconsin April in 1992. I am working late to prepare some remarks for a state meeting the next day. My topic is how academic administrators like myself encourage and support teaching excellence. I'm hungry but confident that completing these remarks will only delay my lasagna a short time. After all, prior to becoming dean 10 years earlier, I was a guiding light in the faculty development movement and I knew my way around teaching support. As my stomach growled, I noticed that these remarks were taking longer than I anticipated. "What's the problem," I asked myself. The problem, I realized, was that I couldn't think of much I had done as dean to advance the cause of teaching.

What had happened to me over that ten years? How had I apparently lost my commitment to teaching as a top priority? Are there many of us out there concentrating our efforts on other aspects of faculty life, while we take teaching for granted? How many of us are espousing the virtues of teaching, saying "Read My Lips," while we act otherwise?

## Johari Window

	I KNOW	I DON'T KNOW
THEY KNOW	"I support teaching," I say	My actions don't support my words
THEY DON'T KNOW	I really mean it	What's behind the gap above?

The Johari Window provides an insight. It intersects two continuum lines: what you know about yourself and what others know about you. In the upper left box, we see that everyone knows that I say I support teaching. What they don't know is that I really mean it. What I don't know is that they observe that my actions are not supporting my words. My guess is that this Johari Window would describe most of us.

What's behind the gap between our intentions and actions, our actions and words? How have we come to appear that we do not focus on teaching anymore?



## CULPRITS

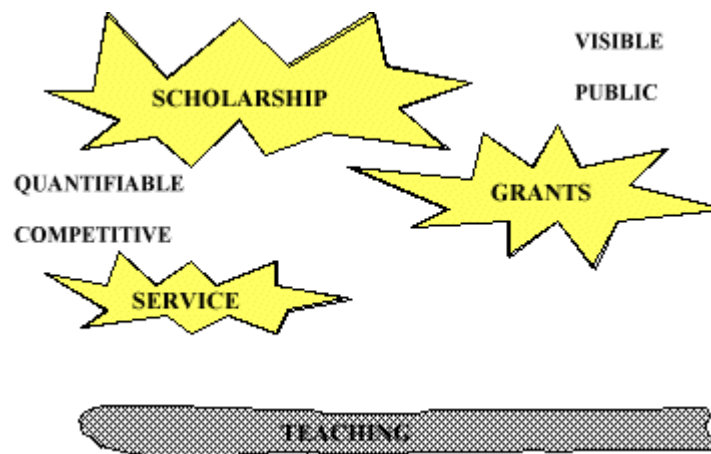
1. LACK OF VISIBILITY
2. OVERSIMPLIFICATION

I would like to point to two culprits which I believe are largely responsible for campuses sliding away from their primary focus on teaching: (1) teaching has become less visible than other things we do and (2) we tend to oversimplify it.

## TEACHING VISIBILITY

First is teaching's invisibility. Teaching has become so private, even secretive, compared to other things we do in the halls of ivy. Teaching is treated like a private act, an exchange among consenting adults behind closed doors. Teaching has become so private that peers give several days notice before slipping quietly into the back row for a twenty-minute observation. Teaching has become so private that faculty members speak about it mostly with their confidantes or at private faculty development retreats.

Scholarship on the other hand, has become more public, available at any hour, stackable, countable, and shiny; in a word: visible. And scholarship is associated with the upscale universities. Grants are trophies in our reputation rooms, evidence of our intellectual prowess. While we dare not slip into the back of a classroom unannounced, scholarly articles are published for the world to see. Even service activities are performed in the presence of peers and are easily counted and evaluated, if one had a mind to do that. While we carefully guard the privacy of faculty behavior in the classroom, we let it "all hang out" in the faculty senate.



Our campuses, especially state universities like Grand Valley and Stevens Point, have become addicted to visibility and external evidence of success. We have gradually modified our role from serving a local clientele to competing in a global marketplace. Our athletic teams (especially at the Division III level), once content to trounce the rival up the road, now face fans who would desert them if they lose national ranking. We once devoted enormous attention to excavating the talents of our local students and now we spend more time developing the potential of our faculty members, as THEY compete in the international game of who's best.

In fact, we seem to look for faculty who will enhance our reputation, not necessarily our students' comprehension. One dean at a state university boasted to me that more emphasis on faculty scholarship had enabled the campus to recruit what he called really top-notch faculty, which he defined as faculty who would stay a few years and then move on, to flagship campuses.

We all get sucked in, deans and departments alike. Campuses need good reputations: their fund raising is dependent upon it; recruiting high quality faculty and students relies upon it; successful positioning in marketing strategy demands it. We all bask in being well thought of.

I believe that deans and department chairs are especially vulnerable, because they get caught up in their

campus's need for prestige. One of the responsibilities of a dean is to nurture and enhance the reputation of her college. Along with the other deans, I did my best to highlight our "mosts and winners and bests," primarily with whatever was numerical, competitive, national or at least regional. Our meetings began with recitations of "good news," each dean trying for bigger stories, like old fishermen at a bar. "Forestry has received another grant." "The latest theater production won regional awards." And so forth. In none of these fish tales did we hear much about classroom teaching.

One might imagine that our own internal newsletters would be full of good teaching stories. Not so. They are dominated by congratulations about publications and grants and announcements about committee meetings. Several years ago, one UWSP professor attempted to focus our newsletter more on teaching. His entry read: "Leon Lewis stayed on campus, spent time in the library, and taught all his classes well during the month of February."

## **OVERSIMPLIFYING TEACHING**

A second factor affecting the status of teaching is a perception that teaching isn't really very difficult. If you know something about a topic, you just tell the students what you know. If you know a lot, you're a better teacher. Under this paradigm, legislators and others are baffled, and sometimes belligerent, about faculty class loads at 12 hours a week. "What do they do the rest of the week?" they ask.

A friend of mine told me that he taught his dog to talk. I rushed over to see this amazing dog perform. After listening to the pooch "arf, arf, arf" for a long time, I said, "I thought you said your dog could talk. "I didn't say he could talk, I just said that I taught him to talk." The process we call "teaching" is much more complex and demanding than simple one-way communication. The hardest part isn't in the teaching, but in the making certain that learning has been achieved, moving from "arf" to "is it time for our walk yet?"

There was a time, maybe back in the Mr. Chips era, when we ourselves and the public felt more reverent about teaching, awed by the mysterious elements, which produced learning in both eager and reluctant students. Teaching was seen as artwork, created between a patient professor and his young student, a Norman Rockwell, one-on-one moment. Picture it. You can see the emotion in the exchange: the professor is trying to convince the young man that he has real aptitude for chemistry, using stories from his own farm background. Or the young student is shyly asking why Emily Dickinson never married. This is complicated stuff, full of interchange and potential. Today, when people talk about teaching, all too often the image is not a one-on-one, deep encounter, but a class full of nodding students in front of yellowed lecture notes. The emotional tone is gone and the wind of action is one-way with no suspense lingering in the air. Without the suspense, teaching seems more mundane.

What's happened over the years to the Norman Rockwell picture? Some global trends probably shed their dandruff on us, trends like the gradual demystification of all professions. The public is as skeptical about what we do and our lofty perch in society as they are about lawyers and doctors. Nowadays you can get a CD ROM that writes your will and another one to cure your ills. So why should college teaching be spared?

Another trend is the shift from concerned local communities to global economic centers, which not only softened the glue that binds us together in our towns, but shifted our values from altruism to economics in higher education. It seems that we are less concerned about each other and our students than we used to be, along with most of our neighbors. The mood shift from cooperation to competition fit in smoothly with the rise in the importance of scholarship over the past 20 years, as we spent less time helping individual students mature and grow and more time competing with our colleagues in the world arena of scholarship. I am reminded of a New Yorker cartoon, which shows the three musketeers, swords waiving in unison. But instead of the familiar "All for one and one for all," we read: "Every man for himself!"

The boom of the 1960's long faded, campuses found themselves able to choose only the very best for their tenured positions. And increasingly, we defined the very best by their prowess in scholarship, not teaching.



Serious evaluation of teaching did not seem to distinguish very well among faculty; most people taught just fine. The true variation came from counting professional contributions, so professional contributions became the most important expectation for success on campus, leaving teaching as a kind of low hurdle easily jumped. Virtually every survey of campuses in recent years shows that faculty believe that scholarship is the one achievement which will make or break a person in every personnel decision. If that is so, it is no wonder we don't always see faculty totally immersed in the mysteries of their classes when they are in the race for their lives to the publishing house.

Don't misunderstand: I believe that for most of us renewing our professional passion with scholarship can help us renew our vows with the classroom. And it is hard to deny the joy of being on the front line in one's beloved field. But, this newer activity brings with it less time to spend developing student learning and dealing with those suspenseful classroom moments. The net result is that teaching becomes oversimplified and undervalued.

So, what can we do to return to the culture of teaching?

First, let's talk about visibility. Teaching is not intercollegiate academics. It does not easily lend itself to the spotlight of the victors, so we have to find new ways to create visibility. Visibility requires a conscious focus by top level administrators, as well as faculty. I have heard far too often from administrators that they wish the faculty would take teaching more seriously, and from faculty that they wish that the administrators would take teaching more seriously.

Visibility comes from focus. When the early industrial researchers at the Hawthorne Plant tried to isolate what work factors would make the employees more productive, they were puzzled because everything they focused on seemed to produce a difference. We can conclude from this that whatever you focus on gains importance and people pay attention. When our Wisconsin system administration was concerned about the number of class sections we offered, section counts were swimming in our heads. When they switched to tuition income, we all became entrepreneurs.

Focus creates importance. It is the spotlight, which illuminates some things and by necessity, darkens others. When I worked in Iowa, I heard a story about a pig farmer who spent the day feeding his pigs by lifting them up one by one to his apple trees. When a passer by asked why he used such a time consuming approach to feeding his pigs, he said: "What's time to a pig?" Focus on one thing and you overlook others.

On a campus that is firmly focused on teaching/learning everyone--faculty and administrators alike--talk

about learning, read new theories about learning, celebrate learning successes, and encourage teaching experimentation. Much like the weather, teaching is a universal topic of conversation on a campus deeply preoccupied with teaching.

On such a campus, teaching stories are traded, embellished and even polished into mythical life. Teaching stories can evoke memories of deep beliefs in the power of transformation for college students. We all know or were the young female, first-generation college student who discovered in an English course that worries of a long-dead poet could make you cry with gratitude that you are not the only one with those thoughts. I know a national consultant whose rowdy life took a sharp turn when a history faculty member told him” “if you keep it up, you might turn out to be a good student after all.” You know these stories; you starred in some of them. But over the years, we let them lie in the dust of our memories or we miss out on them while they bud in our classes. Perhaps we don’t think that they are as notable as a national presentation or perhaps we are embarrassed to share with others the miracles that occur in our classrooms or perhaps we think it just doesn’t matter anymore. As we veered to more competitive stories, we overlooked the thousands of small incidents that used to define us.

These stories won’t make movie scripts, but they chronicle pieces of powerful learning. And they are surprisingly hard to find, from faculty members who awkwardly pull out cards and letters from over the years. I asked a few of my colleagues at Stevens Point for some of their learning stories. I have changed the faculty members’ names, but here are a few stories.

“Dr. Steward will not, I’m sure, remember me in 5 years. We only met a few dozen times and I was only 1 of a class full of students. But I can assure her that I will never forget her. She opened me up. She has given me a gift of self-awareness/She has taught me how to be an insightful person and teacher.”

“This class was like sailing a boat. I had to deal with many emotional and personal issues just like the captain weathering storms. The boat might go off course and arrive in a different harbor. This was my voyage and I ended up somewhere other than the expected and final destination. “

Stories about teaching should be shared internally because they reinforce us in pursuing our most basic mission and provide inspiration and celebration for our efforts. The stories should be sung externally because they define our campus in terms that legislators, parents, children and neighbors understand. In an era where teens are fearful that their generation will be the first in America not to achieve more than their parents, stories about potential and discovery and hope will keep our doors open.

We must signal the visibility of teaching by spending as much money on teaching and its development as we do on scholarship and its development. This is not a simple shift of focus from research to teaching, but a more complex elevation of teaching to the same esteemed level as scholarship. Activities, like this workshop testify to a focus on teaching. Because we have operated with a different focus for so many years, we might find it revealing to do a financial audit both at the university and at the college level to compare our spending for teaching versus scholarship. Travel subsidies, release time policies, renovations are areas where discrepancies frequently pop up.

One caution: let’s don’t rely entirely on visibility “at the top.” For example, on more than one campus, the creation of a teaching learning center coincided with an unanticipated overall reduction in the campus emphasis on teaching, because colleges and departments deferred to the new center to take initiatives with teaching or to toot the teaching horn. The visibility of teaching cannot be sustained unless academic departments create their own focus on teaching, along with the campus-wide commitment.

To fight the second culprit downsizing teaching’s reputation, we must reemphasize the complexity of teaching, specifically by (1) focusing more on learning than on teaching, (2) by concentrating more on

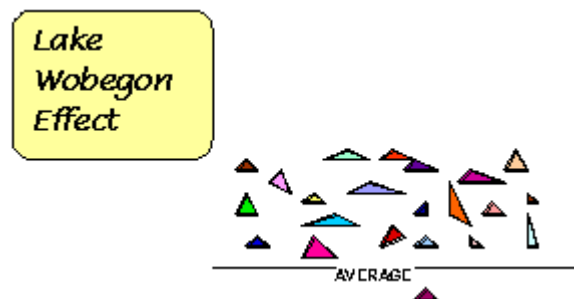
teaching excellence than teaching adequacy, and (3) by requiring complex evaluations of teaching.

First the focus on learning. We have to revise our lexicon and with it consider on which end of the teaching learning process we focus our efforts. Looking at our qualifications, our teaching style, our knowledge is looking at the givens and givens are by their very nature are not the challenging part of any equation. A "gimme" in golf is a given and isn't even played out. The part of life and teaching that tests us and excites us--and that others take note of--is the unknown part. Do our qualifications, teaching styles, knowledge stirred together with the qualifications, styles and knowledge of 30 individuals in our class create the chemical result we intend? That's the hard part, the part which should create respect and awe among the public and thank you cards from students for years. Don't assume that we are the independent side of the equation and the students either make it or don't. Some students learn a lot, to the 10th power; some only to the 4th power; some not at all.

Instead, assume that their success is the non-moving variable and we mix, match, study, attempt, and create until we find multiple ways to unleash that success. Now there's a vision, which would lead legislators to demand fewer students in our classes, so that we could achieve 100% success with all of them. There's a vision, which sits square in the middle of the true complexity and challenge of teaching.

It's not that we haven't been interested in students' learning all along. Just last week I ran across David Berlinski's 1995 book, *A Tour of the Calculus*. Listen to his introduction and you can hear his focus on learning. He says: "The fundamental theorem of the calculus is the focal point of this book, the goal toward which the various chapters tend. The book has a strong narrative drive, its various parts subordinated to the goal of enabling anyone who has read what I have written to experience that hot flush that accompanies any act of understanding, saying as he or she puts down the book, 'Yes, that's it, now I understand.'" Individually, we confront learning issues daily, but our campus structures, our schedules, our lexicon, our organizations were created to support teaching, so it is easy for us and for outsiders to mistake the means for the end.

The second factor contributing to the oversimplification of teaching is that most concentrate most on the lower half of the continuum line between poor and great teaching, as if achieving acceptable performance is our main goal. Naturally, we want to be sure that our tenure track faculty pass muster in the teaching department. We attend to those who are judged below average until they hit the acceptable mark or get non-renewed. But, we spend very little time on the vast majority of us who have made it through tenure. We devote most of our focus to our smallest group, leaving the majority of us wondering if teaching is all that important. We seem to operate under a Lake Wobegon effect, where all of us--with tenure, that is--are above average teachers once we hit the acceptable mark.



That kind of minimalist, lowest acceptable standard distracts us from examining the many stages beyond acceptable and as a result, contributes to the devaluing of teaching. As Stanford's Lee Shulman puts it: that's like judging restaurants on Board of Health Standards rather than on the travel guide's recommendations. A society, which uses mouse counts to make distinctions among restaurants, surely has no high expectations for its chefs.

I don't know how many stages there might be between acceptable and unbelievable teaching, but I know that there is great variation which is almost universally neglected. Faculty want to continue the development of their teaching and would enjoy passing some additional milestones, if we had them, to better and better teaching achievements. If we allow "satisfactory" to be the norm, instead of pushing the continuum to "excellence," teaching will remain a second cousin to scholarship.

The third force pushing a simplistic view of teaching is our simplistic way of evaluating it. There was a time prior to the widespread use of student evaluations when faculty personnel decisions were made on a case by case basis, no doubt with some variation in consistency. In more modern times, we looked for ways to treat people more uniformly. And so we sought small, common denominators and standard, simple ways of measuring quality, a six-question peer evaluation form or the now ubiquitous student evaluation form. When we focus on consistency and fairness, it's like throwing a rock into our neat flywheel to take into account the messy, complex interplay among the peculiarities of the teacher, the students, and the field. And so, we keep it simple.

Student evaluations of teaching, once opposed with professorial passion, have now developed a virtual monopoly on the assessment of quality teaching. While I support the use of student evaluations, I am dismayed that over the years what students say about quality has been eclipsing what faculty say about quality.

Students are accurate and reliable observers, but are too easily influenced by conflicts between the instructor's goals and their own expectations, especially as we make the transition from teacher-centered pedagogy to active student learning. We must listen to students in our classes, because they have the front seat in observing the drama play out. and because we need to know how they feel about the interaction. But the students are also players, and as such, lack some of the distance to provide a more comprehensive picture--not to mention that they are inexperienced with the content.

Peers can be an excellent source of information to round out the picture drawn by student evaluations, but too often peer evaluation has devolved into brief comments about audio visual aids. Evaluating one's peers has always been a strain for faculty as they struggle: with the difficulties of passing judgments on friends, with the notion that one way to teach may not be better than another, and with worries that vacated positions may not be filled. So, over time, faculty have too often deferred to student evaluations of teaching, and spent their evaluation dollars on scholarship and service.

And so, the rich, complicated, deep process of teaching and learning in many cases has been reduced to a set of numbers, which cut across campus but provide little depth. This equal coverage of everyone reminds me of a cartoon, which was circulating in 1982 when Congress was (again) trying to simplify the federal tax process. The form asks one question and has only one direction. First, it asks: "How much money did you make this year?" And then it says: "Send it all in."

If teaching evaluation is going to match teaching complexity, we should study each personnel case, deeply, on its own merits and resist the pull of treating everyone exactly the same. We should expect depth in peer reviews, enlisting the help of faculty to delve into content issues, not just the blurring of the overhead projector. Only colleagues know the scent of stale subject matter. We should encourage the use of student comments as well as "scores," because these comments create a clearer context than the number 2.7 does. 2.7 suggests that the students were mildly displeased. About what? Being belittled or being challenged beyond their expectations? We should find ways to use student achievements to document the effectiveness of the faculty member's strategies. Did the students learn what we hoped? We should encourage faculty members to write brief reflections about their classes, which provide the readers with the teaching context and often reveal the instructor's struggle to make her goals a reality. What kind of classes did you teach? What kind of students and their challenges did you have? What did you hope for your students and did it work out?

I admit to you today that I never fully grasped the heroic undertaking of faculty members, especially new ones, pushing to influence student learning until I began to read their reflections in personnel files. Says one faculty member: “This makes the third time that I have taught this class and each semester students comment that I rush the class, and I do. This semester I didn’t rush the course, but I could not cover all the course content I had planned. I feel like I have let the students down; they will really need that material in the next course. Why can’t this be a three hour course?” How can we judge this person without knowing this core piece of information or other core pieces of information which characterize the complexity of the teaching learning process?

At my end of the food chain, deans all too often receive personnel files, which have scant information on which to base a personnel recommendation. How do we know--how do you know--if we have enough information to be both fair and accurate?

Let’s sit in a dean’s hot seat for a moment. Assume that you are the dean in the midst of annual personnel recommendations. One case is bothering you. Professor Jane Reilly, in her second year of teaching at Grand Valley is assigned to four sections of ED 390 in which she received the following student ratings on a four point scale in the most recent semester: 2.7, 2.2, 2.5, 2.8. compared to departmental averages of 3.4. Three peers have visited her classes and give her A’s with only minor suggestions. The departmental personnel committee and the department head recommend a two-year retention. What is your recommendation?

Now, let me expand on the story. The details have been changed to protect the innocent, but the story is true and is repeated every semester. From the faculty member’s written reflections and information from the department, we find that the course is required for all secondary education majors, who don’t think they need it. We read about her deep thinking on her teaching goals and on her struggles to try different ways to engender passion about learning in the students. She includes some very moving excerpts from student journals, which show the struggle and eventual victory of some students. One student says: “I hated this course and I resented all the time I had to put into writing journals, but you know, in the end, I’ve learned more than I ever have before about why I want to teach.” The complexity thickens and with it, our appreciation that a few numbers can’t tell the whole picture. In fact, the story behind the numbers could also be someone with no aptitude for teaching. The moral? Complex activities require complex evaluations.

Well, we are getting to the end of what psychologists tell us is the outer limit of sitting and listening, so I’d better quit before your admirable patience sneaks away. We do some pretty wonderful things in higher education, among which teaching is probably the crown jewel. Let’s find ways to take this jewel out of its hidden case so that we can share it with our publics and ourselves, so that we can polish it and make it brighter, so that we can celebrate it.

I have a story about my Dad who is in his late 70’s. This is a true story, which I think has a lesson for us facing these challenges. After my Mom died a few years ago, he began seeing a young woman in her 40’s. We were all concerned about this relationship for any number of reasons. At one point my brothers tried to broach with him the delicate topic of the physical strain associated with some romantic elements of a relationship, if you know what I mean. They talked about heart attacks, sprains and so forth. He listened for a while and finally said, “Well, if she dies, she dies.”

I hope our outlook on the task of focusing on teaching is as bright as my Dad’s was on his new marriage. If we work together, we can return teaching to its pedestal in the courtyard. And if Yogi Berra, is right, most of our future is ahead of us.