

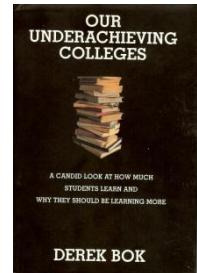
Creating Significant Learning Experiences

Dee Fink

Dee Fink and Associates

HETL: Dr. Fink, in your book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, you ask an important question faced by all educators who are interested in improving learning: Should we make the effort to change, or not? Some would say that major change is not necessary because the traditional model of higher education has worked well; it has helped create an explosion of new knowledge and has established a standard of living never seen before. So, why do you believe change is necessary?

Dee Fink [DF]: There are two major observations that make me believe change is necessary. The first is all the evidence, using multiple criteria, that we are not currently doing a good job in higher education. One of these is a study by [Derek Bok](#) [i], the former president of [Harvard University](#). He did some careful research on how well American students were achieving eight kinds of learning we would all like to see in college graduates, e.g., how to communicate, how to think, how to live with diversity, preparing for a global society, etc. His conclusion for all eight kinds of learning was the same: Students are achieving each of these desirable kinds of learning to a degree but nowhere near what they *could be* and *should be* achieving.



The second source of concern is the new kinds of learning that are being identified as important in the 21st century. [AAC&U](#) (Association of American Colleges and Universities) recently asked a major set of civic and corporate leaders what kinds of learning they thought were essential today. They identified, among others: Information literacy, teamwork and problem solving abilities, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning, integrative learning, preparing for lifelong learning. These are similar to the kinds of learning in my taxonomy of significant learning.

The problem is that most professors are so focused on communicating the content of their discipline, that they do not even see these additional, possible kinds of learning. Our students, though, are going to live their lives in the 21st Century, and it is already quite clear that life in this century is going to require more than just “knowledge of the various disciplines.”

HETL: Dr. Fink, what specific types and levels of change are you referring to, and do these changes require an investment by educators?

DF: We need changes at three levels: the classroom level, the organizational level, and the national level.

At the classroom level, college professors need to learn about and use the many new ideas about teaching and learning that have been developed in the last two decades. The scholars of teaching and learning in higher education have generated a number of concepts and theories that can make a major difference in student engagement and student learning. These include active learning, learning-centered course design, effective use of small groups, educative assessment, reflective writing and learning portfolios, a deeper understanding of how people learn, deep learning, and others.

If we want our students to achieve **more powerful kinds of learning**, college professors need to learn about and use **more powerful kinds of teaching**.

For this to happen, we will need the second kind of change, at the organizational level. First and foremost, this means colleges and universities need to find ways to support and encourage college teachers in their effort to learn and use new ideas about teaching and learning. This is likely to involve new ways of evaluating teaching, evaluating faculty work, and rewarding faculty – all challenging tasks.

A third level of change must occur at the national level. Organizations involved in higher education that can influence individual universities – disciplinary associations, accrediting associations, quality assurance organizations, and ministries of higher education in the countries that have them – need to use their resources and leverage to encourage greater attention by universities to good learning and teaching.

In the USA, there is growing interest in such changes. In Europe, the [Bologna Process](#) has begun to encourage institutions to set learning outcomes for the whole institution; they call them “campus-wide competencies.” In other regions of the world, I see a steadily increasing realization that better kinds of learning by university graduates are needed, more than just so many hours of seat-time and the ability to pass traditional tests.

HETL: Dr. Fink, how can resistance to change be overcome?

DF: The most effective way to deal with any resistance to change is to help people understand that a particular change is what they already want.

When working with professors, we need to recognize that they obviously do not enjoy seeing disinterested students in their courses, or the evidence of lackluster learning in the final exams. If we can help them see that new ways of teaching can make dramatic changes in both these situations, it would go a long way toward helping professors take a more positive attitude toward learning about new ways of teaching.

At the university level, we badly need a means of measuring the general quality of the educational programs at different institutions. Institutional leaders are well aware that they are competing for students, faculty, funds and prestige. If they could be “incentivized” to focus institutional attention on creating better curricula and promoting better teaching and learning

across the whole campus, this would make a huge difference in higher education, nationally and globally.

HETL: Dr. Fink, if the reward system for faculty is based upon the research they do, i.e., “publish or perish”, and not specifically on the quality of teaching or on learning outcomes, then how will faculty be motivated to invest in developing student- centered learning?

DF: This is part of the institutional change that I just mentioned. Institutions need to find a reliable way to evaluate teaching, and then to give more weight to that in the overall assessment of faculty work.

Some institutions do a good job of evaluating teaching with procedures going beyond that of just collecting student questionnaires. But there also needs to be a culture-change on most campuses. When faculty vote (as is typical in most institutions in the USA) on annual merit raises or tenure questions, they need to put weight on the quality of teaching done and the learning outcomes – as well as on the traditional criteria of publications and grant dollars. To do this, they have to have faith in the way teaching is evaluated locally.

In an article published in 2008 [ii], I outlined a way of evaluating teaching that is focused on four major performance areas:

1. The quality of the professor’s course design, e.g., learning & assessment activities aligned with good learning goals;
2. How well they interacted with students, e.g., enthusiasm, clarity, fairness;
3. The quantity and quality of student learning; and
4. Efforts to get better each year as a teacher, i.e., learning new ideas, changing the way they teach.

Universities would need different sources of information and criteria for each of these. Having standards for good teaching would accomplish two things. It would alert teachers that this is what they need to pay attention to if they want high teaching evaluations, and it would allow the university recognize and reward those teachers who really are performing well in these areas.

HETL: Dr. Fink, you make a distinction between a content-centered approach to course design versus a learning-centered approach. Can you briefly describe the differences between the two approaches, and why you believe a learning-centered approach is more effective?

DF: When we design a course using the content-centered approach, we basically do two things only: Identify the major topics, and then decide how much time we are going to spend on each. Our attention is focused on the relative importance of the different aspects of content.

When we use a learning-centered approach, the first thing we need to do is identify the kinds of learning we want our students to engage in. Then we need to identify the learning and assessment activities needed for each kind of learning:

- What will students need to do, to achieve that kind of learning? And,
- What will they need to do, for them and us to know how well they are achieving each kind of learning?

One major problem with the content-centered approach is that it tends to put teachers in an “information dispensing” mode of operation. We organize lots of information about the content of the course, and then try to “dump it” into students heads. Unfortunately, after the course is over, they often “dump it out”, i.e., they have the retention problem I mentioned earlier.

Another major problem is that content-centered learning only supports one kind of learning, what I call “Foundational Knowledge”: A basic understanding of terms, concepts, principles, possibly with some basic application knowledge. Students today need a lot more than that.

HETL: Dr. Fink, when you say students today need “a lot more than that”, you are presumably referring to the concept of *significant* learning. What exactly is significant learning?

DF: Significant learning, as I use that term, refers to learning that meets two criteria: (1) learning that lasts beyond the end of the course, i.e., students retain the learning, and (2) learning that has an impact on their personal, professional, social or civic life, i.e., it changes how they think, feel, or act in their lives.

For several decades, I have been asking students: “Have you ever had a course that had a major impact on your lives, and when it did, what was it you learned that had an impact on your life?” When I did my own ‘factor analysis’ of their answers, I came up with the six categories in the taxonomy of significant learning.



Sometimes students said there was some content and basic application skills that were important. But more often, they referred to the following kinds of learning (my label for each kind of learning is shown in parentheses):

- complex application skills (Application),
- how to connect one kind of knowledge with other kinds of knowledge (Integration),
- understanding themselves and how to interact with others vis-à-vis a particular kind of knowledge (Human Dimension),
- the values and interests that can be associated with new kinds of knowledge (Caring), and
- how to keep on learning about a subject after the course is over (Learning how to learn).

HETL: Dr. Fink, you contend that traditional instructional methods are not very effective in achieving important kinds of student learning. Why do you believe this to be so and what are some of the problems faced by teachers using traditional instructional methods?

DF: First, let me identify what I mean by “traditional” ways of teaching. In general, this refers to a predominant reliance on lectures, homework and textbooks. In the humanities, this is often augmented by whole-class discussions, and in the sciences and engineering, by labs. Good things can happen with these methods, but student learning can and needs to be made even better. Here are the problems that teachers face when they cling to the traditional methods.

First, there is a serious problem with students retaining their knowledge. In one study [iii], students’ performance at a “final” exam dropped 50% only two weeks after the initial taking of that exam. In another study [iv] it was found that students who had completed a particular course performed only 5-10% better than people who had never had the course (on a test on the course topic, taken one year after finishing the course).

Second, traditional teaching runs a serious danger of being boring. We see evidence of that in professors’ complaints about how often their students are reading newspapers in class, or checking their email. But think about it from the students’ perspective: How exciting can it be, to sit in a class day after day, where they only listen to one person and see nothing but the backs of other people’s heads?

Finally, teaching aimed primarily at conveying knowledge is simply outdated in the 21st century. Students can look up all this information on their cell phones faster than we can talk about it! They need to be doing something else, both in-class and out-of-class.

HETL: Dr. Fink, what is this “something else” that teachers need to be doing? That is, if teachers accept your challenge of formulating learning outcomes for their courses such as you describe above, how can they achieve these new and ambitious kinds of learning? They have difficulty achieving their current learning goals, which are more limited than what you propose.

DF: You are absolutely right in raising this question. To achieve more powerful kinds of learning, teachers will need to use more powerful kinds of teaching. The good news is that the scholars of teaching and learning have developed an extensive set of new ideas about teaching and learning in the last two decades. Let me mention some. Some of these are theories dealing with how students learn (e.g., learning styles, how the brain works; see also the recent book on the 7 principles of how students learn [v]). Others pertain to some of the fundamental tasks of teaching:

- Learning-centered course design
- Classroom Assessment Techniques
- Service learning
- Collaborative learning
- Active Learning
- Educative assessment
- Assessment rubrics
- Learning portfolios
- Teaching strategies, e.g., problem-based learning, team-based learning, project-based learning, and inquiry-based learning.

Others deal with some of the special situations and needs in teaching, for example:

- How to deal with large classes
- How to deal with beginning students
- How to teach creativity.

Any teacher who can learn about and apply one or more of these educational ideas will see a substantial positive response from students. If they can use two or three of these ideas, the impact will be even more dramatic.

Anyone who aspires to the kinds of learning in my taxonomy will definitely need to start using several of these new, more powerful ways of teaching. And if they do, they will start to see more significant learning start to happen - and for many professors, the joy of teaching will come back. This is what many people who have read my book or taken my workshop report back to me: "Teaching is exciting again. This is why I wanted to be a teacher, to see students excited about learning."

HETL: Dr. Fink, some might contend that this approach is culture-specific. What is your experience in implementing it in countries with different cultures?

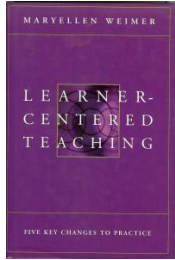
DF: One of the exciting aspects of my consulting experience have been the invitations to do faculty workshops in 13 countries around the world, in Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, New Zealand, and in several countries in Asia.

I can say, without reservation, that faculty members have responded enthusiastically to such things as learning-centered course design, small group work, and educative assessment. I have also had feedback from teachers in all these regions that, when they tried these ideas in their teaching, students responded very positively. Sometimes, especially in countries with strong traditions of lecturing, the teacher had to explain to students why they were doing what they were doing. But when they did that, students liked the new ways of learning much better. They liked the higher level of engagement and they could see the value [i.e., significance] of what they were learning much more clearly.

HETL: Dr. Fink, you state that learning should be an experience and not just a set of activities and that the teacher plays a critical role in shaping that experience. So, what should be the proper relationship between teacher and student in achieving significant learning outcomes?

DF: Obviously both teachers and students must fulfill their respective responsibilities for good learning to happen. The teacher structures the learning experience initially but it is the student who does the work of learning.

In her book [vi], Maryellen Weimer made the important suggestion that teachers can both empower and motivate students by sharing some of the decision-making power with the students.



In addition professors need to learn how to use their expertise, not just to make an organized presentation of what they know, but to formulate valuable learning outcomes, create learning and assessment activities that embody authentic tasks and standards of performance for a particular subject, and develop a positive, supportive relationship with students.

Students, the other major party in this process, need to develop a better understanding of what constitutes good learning and good teaching, and develop the skills for good learning. This will require help from their teachers and from university programs for beginning students.

It then becomes the responsibility of university leaders to find ways to encourage and support both faculty and students in the proper fulfillment of their respective responsibilities.

HETL: Dr. Fink, in summary, you contend that improving student learning starts with developing a new way of thinking about teaching and learning. How do we begin to do that?

DF: The first thing that has to happen, obviously, is that someone has to care, to care about the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Then whoever cares has to develop a vision of what would have to happen to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Finally, whoever has this vision has to find a way to promote that vision; this generally will require both “top-down” and “bottom-up” processes.

For the bottom-up part, individual professors need to spend more time learning about the many new ideas about teaching and learning that are now available, and then use them. This is what faculty development programs are trying to achieve, where they exist.

The problem with many of these programs, though, it is often only the people inclined to be “early adopters of change”, i.e., 15-20% of all faculty members, who participate. To increase the proportion of the faculty who regularly and continuously engage in instructional development, there also needs to be change at the organizational level; this is the top-down part of the process.

Campus leaders need to send a message:

“This matters. This is not optional; faculty improving their capabilities as professional educators is essential for this institution to fulfill its educational mission.”

This can be done by promoting a change in the campus culture and/or by changing campus policies for things like evaluating teaching.

Institutions that succeed in making these changes are seeing a clear shift in the quality of teaching and, as a result of that, in the level of student engagement and the quality of student learning.

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Interview date & place: 9 September 2011 via Skype

HETL interviewers: Patrick Blessinger and Krassie Petrova

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Dr. Dee Fink currently works as a consultant in higher education ([www.finkconsulting.info](http://www.finkconsulting.info)). In the last several years, he has led numerous workshops on integrated course design at conferences and campuses in the US, Canada, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. He served as the founding director of the Instructional Development Program at the [University of Oklahoma](http://www.unl.edu) (1979-2005). He received two awards for teaching excellence: He





was the University of Oklahoma recipient of the national teaching award presented by the American Association of Higher Education ([AAHE](#)), the [Jaime Escalante](#) “Stand and Deliver” Award, April, 1989, and the recipient of the Outstanding Faculty Award, College of Liberal Studies, University of Oklahoma, 1992. Dr. Fink has been active for thirty years in the [POD Network](#) [Professional and Organizational Development] in Higher Education. He served as President of POD in 2004-2005. Dr Fink can be contacted at [dfink40@gmail.com](mailto:dfink40@gmail.com)