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(Dis)Orientation

A new faculty member digs out from the avalanche of jargon and teaching theory that buried him during his first weeks on the job

By GRAHAM BENNETT

Like every new member of the faculty, I was required in my first week on the job to attend three days of (dis)orientation. It included a series of goofy "icebreaker" activities, overly enthusiastic booster speeches from administrative faces I will never see again, and insufficiently detailed introductions to the essential yet incomprehensible bureaucratic processes and computer "tools" that will be a part of everything I do here at Big South University.

That first week was devoted to introductions to the various individuals, departments, and procedures that drive the giant machine that is BSU. For my own part, I consider those introductions the most important information I received.

But for those in charge of the university's welcome brigade, the introductions were just one small piece of what new faculty members should know as they embark upon their careers. Beneath that tip of crucial information lies a much larger mass, the crushing weight of which grinds against everything that we know about our own strengths and talents, and plunges us into the murky depths where lurk such frightening creatures as "the learning-centered syllabus" and "discussion facilitating."

I see those phrases on my screen and groan with the memory of interminable orientation sessions, each of which was designed to transform teachers into "facilitators," classrooms into "technologically enhanced educational environments," and learning into "information transfer and intellectual integrity enhancement." Students had become "partners in a discursive exchange of ideas and perspectives," or, even worse, "clients" in a decentered, diverse community of individuals, each of whose demands were to be intuited, appreciated, and promptly and creatively met by knowledge-acquisition facilitators, those bewildered folks formerly known as teachers.

We endured a full two hours about the nuts and bolts of the "learning-centered syllabus." It was to be a dynamic document, full of wisdom and wit, not merely informing but engaging and encouraging our students. We were given — no joke — a three-page, single-spaced list of all the items that might be included in this dazzling document. The "schedule of readings" was the last thing on that list. Above it were bibliographies, Web sites, study tips, discussion questions, jokes, word puzzles, maps to buried treasure.

It was a recipe for constructing a massive syllabus that would run to dozens of pages and weigh in at several pounds: a hefty tome that our students would never actually bother to read, even if they could be persuaded to drag it home and not deposit it — as I would — in the trash bin near the door.

To counter that predictable objection from students, our orientation coordinators suggested posting the syllabus online, turning that massive document into an interactive Web experience. There would be active

links and pictures, even video and sound files. The coordinators even suggested recording an audio greeting for our students, welcoming them to the class.

I tried to imagine what such a greeting might sound like: "Hello, Dave. This is the voice of Professor Graham, your guide on this semester's thrilling learning adventure."

What a creepy, self-flattering, and wholly useless invasion of my students' private time. I decided my students would hear my voice — if they came to class. Besides, chances are, most of us would sound more like Al Gore in the famous Simpsons parody: "You are hearing me talk."

Aside from displaying our trivial mastery of technology, what would an audio "welcome" on an online syllabus accomplish? And why stop there? If the goal is to make our students feel truly welcome, perhaps we should show up at their dorm-room doors at 10 p.m. to deliver hot cocoa, turn down their beds, and leave a fresh mint on the pillow.

Granted, I'm projecting a ridiculous extreme, but all this talk of a "student-centered learning environment" makes me wonder how far I'm supposed to go in my quest to ensure that my students feel welcome, secure, and motivated. I work at a Research I university. I expect my students — adults all — to be responsible and, indeed, professional in their approach to their own education.

That is the "learning community of discursive partners" I want to create, and I do so on my own terms, through the way I present myself and the way I conduct my classes.

I always wear a tie when I teach (no jackets, because I tend to gesture big when I speak and find jackets just too confining). I do that not simply because I feel I ought to look like the professional I am but because I feel comfortable and at ease — like my very own authentic self — when I put on the slacks, starched shirt, and tie.

And yet I have been told, more than once, that my tie is an authoritarian emblem that silences student discussion and creates a visual obstacle to learning.

Of course I have my own prejudices as to what constitutes appropriate dress in the classroom. During the faculty orientation, a session on "facilitating discussion" was led by a woman who wore a belt made out of condoms. Where my tie visually binds and strangles students, the condom belt apparently embraces them and draws them into an active circle of intellectual engagement.

To my mind, the condom belt is a cheap gimmick, a somewhat desperate advertisement of one's "hipness," and the sort of "look at how cool your teacher is" trick that would have set my own eyes, when I was an undergrad, rolling as I filled out the form to drop the class.

I'm not saying I am a better teacher because I dress conservatively or that Ms. Condombelt is inappropriately engirdled by her own creativity. The point I'm making is that each of us has his or her own style, and we would be well advised to be our own authentic selves in the classroom.

We would also be well advised, I think, to remember that our students are all very different, and for every student who revels in funky, creative edutainment, there is a student who is totally put off by anything resembling a game or gimmick.

As part of the session on improving classroom discussion, participants were asked to imagine what their teaching philosophy would look like if it were the vanity plate for their car. We were allowed 12 letters with which to represent ourselves. For five minutes, people silently scribbled on — or, like myself, hostilely stared at — the sheets of paper that had been given to us for this little exercise.

When the person sitting next to me (who was similarly not writing anything down) asked why I wasn't participating, I explained that this was exactly the sort of activity I loathed as a student, that I found such activities useless and annoying.

Two other people at my table sighed with relief and nodded their heads in agreement. It seems I'm not the only one with little patience for "out of the box" exercises (so many of which turn out to be recycled from the same irritating, warm-and-fuzzy, "I'm pretending this activity is original even though it's completely derivative" edutainment box).

Time was up, and it was our turn to share our "license plates" with the larger group. There were no real surprises. I heard various versions of "passion8tchr" and "luv2teach." There were several that identified themselves as "femnistprof" and one who identified himself as "divrsityguy."

I was slightly troubled by how easy it was for everyone to express their teaching philosophy and professional identity in fewer than 12 letters (aren't people with vanity plates universally mocked?), but I wasn't surprised that so many of them employed tired clichés and buzzwords. The clichés and buzzwords were greeted with celebratory applause, while those of us who opted out of this exercise in silliness were silently scorned.

In the end, under pressure to participate and with the helpful suggestion of two of my table mates, I offered "hatesgames" as my philosophy-turned-license plate.

Ms. Condombelt was not impressed.

Of course, I wasn't hired to impress BSU's prophylactically clad edutainment enthusiasts. I was hired to teach my students what I know, and that's exactly what I'm doing, with my plain-paper syllabus, my undigitized voice, and my conservative classroom attire.

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