

CVM TA members and friends,

Below is a very short essay from Maryellen Weimer, who I think always writes so thoughtfully and beautifully.

Today, she writes about the challenges of teaching someone a skill. What she's really writing about are EXPERT BLINDSPOTS, something many of us read about in our TA book club selection last summer. These are the blind spots most of us don't even recognize when it comes to our specialty areas, and they commonly get in the way when we try to transfer the skills we've perfected over years to NOVICE LEARNERS.

I've often worried that many CVM instructors, myself included, start with unrealistic expectations for our students when it comes to the higher ordered skills we value most – like integration, application, and synthesis. It takes practice, feedback, and time to do these things well. I know I forget this sometimes, and then I get frustrated. "Why don't they take to these things faster, and do them better? Arrrggg."

At this time of year, I expect we can celebrate a bit as we watch another group of students who have mostly achieved some level of mastery head to graduation. Sure, they're really only getting started on the real learning curve – but they've come a long way and we have reasons to feel some justifiable pride. Of course, this also means that a brand new crop is about to enter stage right. A fresh cohort of 4th years in clean, shiny white coats is about to invade the VTH. In the fall there will be new group of vet students and CVM undergraduates. What awaits us is more of the "in your face teaching experiences" that Maryellen Weimer discusses.

I hope you enjoy. Some good reminders ...

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May 7, 2014

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Teaching Encounter Provides an Up-Close Look at Learning Something New

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

I just taught a dear friend how to knit, and in doing so I revisited how very challenging it is to teach something you can do easily.

Knitting, like so many of the skills we teach, including concrete skills like running a lathe and abstract ones like critical thinking, cannot be learned in theory. They are learned by doing. "Now you try," I say after several slow, deliberate demonstrations of the motions. Oh my, such clumsy confusion. "Here, let me show you again." I slow down even further and talk through the movements needed to make a stitch. Good gracious, I can hardly watch these tortured, truncated movements, so far from the peaceful, rhythmic flow of knitting. As the confusion continues, thoughts start going through my mind. How many times am I going to have to show her? It can't possibly be this hard? And why am I feeling frustrated?

I worry about order and pacing. Knitting starts (and ends) with two basic stitches, knit and purl. She has those, sort of. Is it time to move on? What's next? Common combinations of the two basic stitches? Or should I work on her technique? She's got to stop propping the needles up on her belly. And we need to move on to something other than this scraggly "sampler" (as she calls it). The needle size and yarn weight are creating something less than lovely. It's not the kind of knitting that inspires continued effort and she still has lots to learn. I search for something that she can do. It needs to offer challenge but also the strong possibility of success.

Then there are the mistakes. I have forgotten how many ways there are to do it wrong. I aspire to learner-centered teaching, which means she needs to take the lead in identifying and fixing her mistakes. Great in theory—hard in practice, I quickly discover. She fixes things slowly, laboriously, and that takes time away from knitting. She focuses with intense ferocity, which is not only tiring, but it seems to lead to even more errors. And some of the mistakes are serious. Whole rows must come out. I step in and make some of the corrections, wondering if that's a good idea.

My mind whirls. What feedback do I need to provide? How many corrective messages? I think I'm offering too many and they're worded so negatively. "No, not over the needle, the yarn goes between the two needles." "No, that's not a purl bump." I should be more positive. I should be asking more questions, offering hints, and making helpful suggestions.

She's trying so hard. Will she notice if I laud the effort and not the knitting? She is improving but more slowly than I expected. I look at her work and know it would be dishonest to call it good. "Look here, see these four stitches? Wow! They are so smooth. That's exactly what you want. Good job." She sighs. I sigh. This is hard work.

We have four days together with books to discuss, walks to take, and a friendship to celebrate. Despite working diligently on the knitting, we are running out of time. I'm afraid she isn't ready to do this on her own. I buy her books and talk about online resources. She will need the help of a couple friends—people she tells me aren't good teachers. I feel like I've failed.

My flight leaves early. I'm getting the coffee on and there on the counter sits her project—or is it her project? Oh my God, she has done 12 error-free rows! I look more closely. Yup, there are no mistakes. She's beside me now. Joy dances from her face to mine. "I did it!" "Yes, you did and it looks beautiful!" We hug, celebrating the learning and the teaching.

It's good to have these in-your-face teaching experiences, I decide. With so many students and too much content to teach, it's easy to miss the struggles of individual learners and not notice how

teacher actions aid or confound the process. It's easy to be perplexed by a learner's confusion and quickly draw conclusions about ability. Most important, it's easy to forget that what now seems simple, straightforward, and perfectly obvious is usually not that way when it's first encountered. Teaching takes a lot of patience; learning takes a lot of persistence.

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2718 Dryden Drive • Madison, WI 53704-3086 • 1-800-433-0499 • For customer service, contact support@facultyfocus.com.

For editorial, contact mary.bart@facultyfocus.com.

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