

# THRIVING *in* Academe

## REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education ([www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org)). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson ([drobert@fiu.edu](mailto:drobert@fiu.edu)) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery ([mflannery@nea.org](mailto:mflannery@nea.org)) at NEA.

## ■ What is teaching anyway? Our answers to this question may seem chaotic.

Chaos theory teaches that despite the appearance of chaos on the surface a deeper order can exist. Understanding that order can inform our conversations with each other about teaching as well as our own development as teachers.

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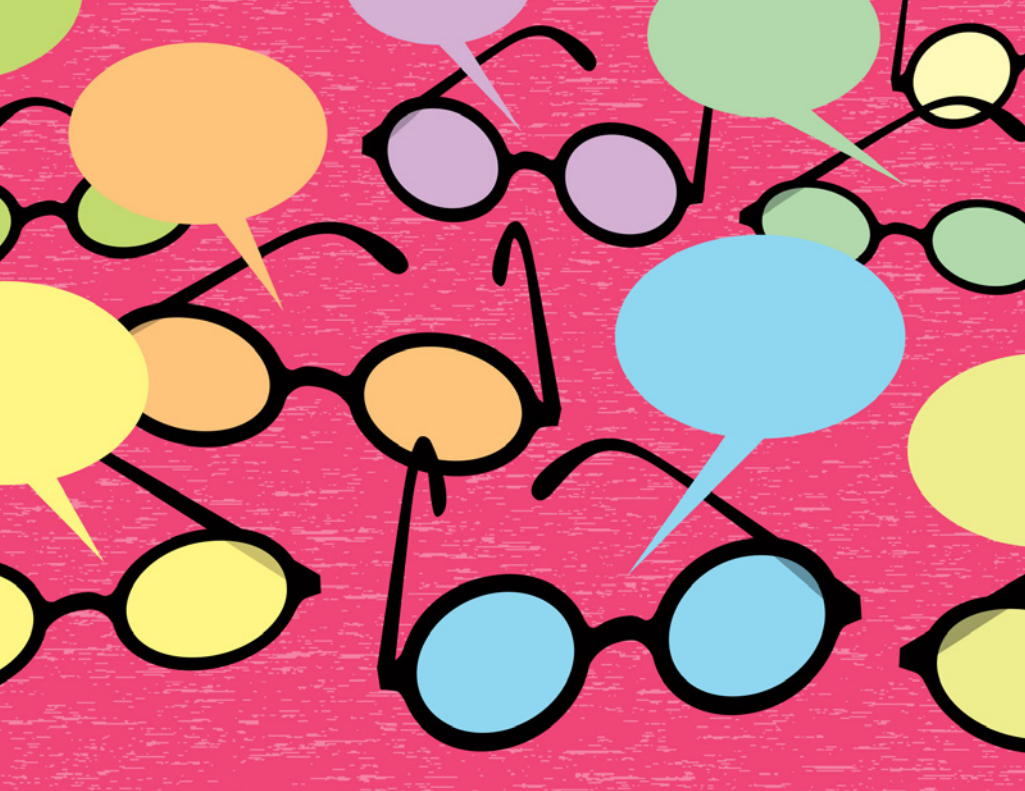
Perhaps you have been in a faculty meeting that involved a discussion of what good teaching is. You may have felt as if you were in a brawl in the Star Wars Bar. This article will be useful for you. In it, you will find an evidence-based description (Robertson, 1996, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2001-2002, 2002, 2003a, 2005, 2018) of how you and your colleagues construct your work as teachers and go about doing it. The developmental model of professors-as-teachers presented here provides a *lingua franca* for the important topic of teaching. With it, we can better communicate, develop, assess, and research with regard to college teaching.

### Perspectives on Teaching

I took an interest in teaching early in my career and taught my first class as a junior at the University of Oregon in 1971. I now know that I followed a typical pattern for actual or wannabe college professors who yearn to tell other people what they know. I had no idea then that what I really needed to do was help students make their own discoveries. Like many college teachers, I

learned the hard way that, when I focused on me, things went badly. When I focused on the students, things went better. I later realized that this picture with two perspectives was not complete, but I will have more to say about the third perspective in a moment.

In the 1990s, I conducted an exhaustive analysis of 350 scholarly works that examine the inner life of professors as they construct and go about their



work as teachers (Robertson, 1996, 1997, 1999a/b, 2000a/b, 2001, 2001-2002, 2002, 2003a, 2005, 2018). From this came a developmental model of how professors develop as teachers—if they develop at all, development not being a guaranteed outcome of a teaching career. Cited in 579 scholarly works and used in at least 34 countries (Google Scholar, December 26, 2019), this model appears to be the most comprehensive, evidence-based model available.

The secret is how each of us sees things, how we construct our realities. Based on

real teachers' lives, the model organizes these constructions. Let me build on this simple but difficult truth to address what use such a model is. The model has four significant utilities as I see it.

First, *communication*. When it comes to talking about teaching with each other, which is so important for all kinds of practical and developmental reasons, my observation is that painfully often we talk past each other. You think good teaching must involve group exercises; I believe its bedrock is a solid lecture. If I have a picture

of the primary teaching perspectives, I can understand my colleagues more readily and tailor my comments appropriately.

Second, *development*. Charles Dodgson (aka Alice in Wonderland's Lewis Carroll, 1832-1838) wrote, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." If I want to develop as a college teacher, it helps to have a developmental map. Years ago, I became utterly lost at night in the woods of Oregon. I came to a clearing in the moonlight and saw the Cascade Mountains. Then, I knew where to go. I was oriented. I had a mental map. An old riddle asks, "Which is more important, the sun or the moon?" And it answers, "The moon, because the sun is around when it's light, but the moon gives us light when we really need it, when it's dark." Having a good theory (a full moon) moves us from trial and error to developmental interventions that actually work.

Third, *assessment*. For eight years, I was a dean at Florida International University, and each year I developmentally evaluated 16 managers who reported to me and read the performance appraisals of the 250 employees that comprised undergraduate education. Apropos to our discussion here, I am currently an FIU department chair and will evaluate the teaching performance of 19 faculty this year, using the model to identify their developmental perspective and evaluating their performance within their developmental perspective. If I am teacher-centered (a disseminator of knowledge) and it is all about me, how am I doing

## TALES FROM REAL LIFE: MY TOWER OF BABEL

In 1999, I had the good fortune to be the founding director of the University Teaching and Learning Center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), and quite an adventure it was. UNLV had impressive resources, and the provost wanted to invest significantly in improving teaching. I reported directly to the provost, which helped amazingly. Rather than

being marginalized, I was at the center. The provost's small leadership team (including me) met regularly twice a week in an unusual problem-solving format that resembled a research lab aimed at university problems and issues. As a psychologist, the provost had participated or led many labs. So the format was familiar to him. At UNLV, one of my responsibilities was

to chair the university-wide committee to select the UNLV Teacher of the Year. I have issues with these kinds of awards for good reason, one of which is the fact that when I convened the committee with representatives (mostly senior faculty) from all colleges the experience was Babel-esque. According to the story, the Tower of Babel was intended to be a structure that

reached from earth to heaven, a presumptuous goal that offended Jehovah who then confused the languages of the builders so that they could not communicate with each other. In the meeting to select the university's best teacher, I watched the engineering professor explain with passion to the English professor that students simply must be graded on the curve. I was reminded

of Jehovah's success. Utter confusion. This experience has been repeated over and over for me in countless conversations among faculty about good teaching. Obviously, one's perspective is the key. With all due respect to Jehovah in this story, I set about to create a conceptual framework that would allow us to understand each other better when we talk about teaching.

## BEST PRACTICES: RECOMMENDED READING

If you want to read a book that is full of insights and best practices on how professors and students interrelate subjectively to form the most important part of a course learning system, you simply must see *Teaching and Emotion*, edited by Harriet Schwartz and Jennifer Snyder-Duch (2018). It is a volume in Wiley's series, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, under the editorial leadership of Catherine Wehlburg. The idea behind the third perspec-

tive in the development model, which is presented here, is that teachers accept their full humanness, including their emotions, and that the intersubjective system that is a course results from the interaction of their full humanness with that of students, and the students with each other. Emotionality is sometimes taboo in higher education—Mona Lisa without her smile. This book embraces the role of emotion in teaching and learning, the full Mona

Lisa. The book includes chapters on radical empathy (without doubt the most important skill in teaching, leadership, or any human communication), anger (when have you ever taught a course where anger—yours or students'—was not an issue?), joy (how about that for a topic for a book on college teaching?), emotional dimensions of advising (advising is teaching, so it figures that emotionality is involved), emotionality in online environments (the new

frontier), pacing grace and vibrancy fatigue (you must read this chapter about slow feeling and quiet being for women of color), organizational workplace bullying and organizational betrayal (the sometimes unfortunate context for our teaching). Lots of evidence-based practice ideas here.



as a master learner? Am I up to date on relevant scholarship? Am I working on my lecturing ability? If I am learner centered (a facilitator of learning), how current are my evidence-based, active learning activities? Am I practicing active learning religion, or actually assessing learning outcomes rigorously? You get the picture. It is important to avoid developmental chauvinism (my perspective is better than yours) and to hold ourselves accountable. This model provides a framework for doing so.

Fourth, *research*. Having consumed college teaching scholarship for four decades, I know subjects are rarely, if ever, sampled by developmental perspective. If we ask, is online learning better or worse than face-to-face learning, the samples of teachers do not take into consideration the developmental perspectives of those teachers. This developmental model allows us to compare apples to apples. For example, are the most developed teachers more or less effective in online or face-to-face environments?

So now that we have perhaps established the utility of the model, what is this developmental model of professors-as-teachers? Well, first, it is founded on a painstakingly thorough, five-year examination of every legitimate piece of scholarship that I could find on the inner experience of professors related to their work as teachers. This assembly of scholarship amounted to over 350 items. I went out of my way to make sure the data included scholarship on historically underrepresented groups related to sex, class, race, and ethnicity, as well as

teaching faculty at various types of institutions (associates, baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral). In preparation for writing this Thriving article, I reviewed the two publications that were the original and complete statement of the developmental theory and its application (Robertson, 1999b, 2000a). I was reminded how complex and nuanced the theory is. What I write here is an extreme simplification, and I recommend readers read the original theory.

**“THERE IS NOTHING  
SO PRACTICAL AS  
A GOOD THEORY.”**

– Kurt Lewin (1890-1947)

The theory can be stated simply. If professors continue to develop as teachers (which may or not happen, particularly at institutions that reward research publications and grants a lot, but teaching not so much), the data show that professors tend to go through three interrelated perspectives, each building on, not replacing, the previous one. I begin in Egocentrism (Teacher Centeredness), focused on my own content mastery (or even process mastery if my admired mentor was an active learning facilitator). The point is that I start out focused on me because I do not know what I am doing. I focus on my content mastery, and with regard to process, imitate what worked in my history. Then,

after a transition period, I may move to Aliocentrism (Learner Centeredness). I add and integrate (not replace) an interest in the learners and their learning process. Finally, after a transition period, I add and integrate (not replace) a focus on the intersubjective learning system of which I am a part. I realize that not only are the learners unique individuals who occupy the student role, but that I am a unique person who occupies the teacher role. We interact in a learning system that I set through my instructional design but also has a life of its own. Students are learning in the ecosystem I create, whether or not I am present. This recognition is huge, and many professors never make it. Personally, I think, but have not proved, that a lot of teachers are stuck in the second perspective (Aliocentrism, Learner-Centeredness), because of their own learning bias and personality. This leaves them focused on un-accessed, active learning exercises that privilege extroverts. (FYI: the data on the unintentional learning abuse experienced by introverts in the extrovert-dominated, active-learning postsecondary environments is shocking.)

Movement from one major teaching perspective to another is facilitated by a clear transition period with three predictable phases, each phase requiring work by the professor to progress through the transition. The three transition phases are: (a) Ending (developmental task: accept that the old way of thinking, feeling, and doing

is over; grieve; move on); (b) Neutral Zone (developmental task: accept the sometimes overwhelming new choices of how to think, feel, and do, and experiment with these new perspectives); (c) New Beginnings (developmental task: integrate the new way of thinking, feeling, and doing with regard to teaching, into self and relationships).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Gillespie, K. J., & Robertson, D. (Eds.). *A Guide to Faculty Development (2nd ed.)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2010.

Robertson, D. *Self-Directed Growth*. Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development, 1988.

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*Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 2000a, 11(1), 117-132.

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Robertson, D. Beyond Learner-Centeredness: Close Encounters of the Systemocentric Kind. *Journal of Faculty Development*, 2001, 18(1), 7-13.

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Robertson, D. Integrity in Learner-Centered Teaching. In C. Wehlburg & S. Chadwick-Blossey (eds.), *To Improve the Academy*, Vol. 21 (pp. 196-211). Bolton, MA: Anker, 2003a.

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Robertson, D. Generative Paradox in Learner-Centered College Teaching. *Innovative Higher Education*, 2005, 29(3), 181-194.

Robertson, D. *Making Change, Lessons Learned: A Primer for Change-Agents*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 2017.

Robertson, D. Emotion and Professors' Developmental Perspectives on Their Teaching. In H. L. Schwartz & J. Snyder-Duch (Eds.), *Teaching and Emotion*, New Directions in Teaching and Learning, no. 153, pp. 13-23. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018.

## Meet Douglas L. Robertson



### Douglas L. Robertson

was recently the university undergraduate dean (2008-2016) and is currently professor of higher education and

chair at Florida International University. Dr. Robertson has started or transformed five university teaching centers and has served as director or supervised four of them. He has written or co-edited eight books on change and faculty development, most recently publishing an intellectual memoir on change-agency, *Making Change, Lessons Learned: A Primer for Change-Agents* (2017). He has served on editorial boards of numerous scholarly journals related to college teaching. He taught his first college course in 1971, and has received several teaching awards along the way.

Schwartz, H. L., & Snyder-Duch (Eds.). *Teaching and Emotion*, New Directions in Teaching and Learning, no. 153, pp. 13-23. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018.

## ISSUES TO CONSIDER: WHAT'S NEXT?

Development is adding something to what already exists, and as that novelty is integrated, a transformation occurs. Development is not replacement. As development adds to what always will be there, the previous way of thinking, feeling, and doing becomes re-contextualized and reduced in power. Complexity, flexibility, stability, functionality raise to a new level. An important nuance is the scale at which this occurs. Is it a whole new perspective—say, from disseminator of knowledge to facilitator of learning? Or is it a transformation within an existing perspective—am I simply integrating a new way to present knowledge within the Egocentric perspective? Development occurs along two scales: within perspectives or, much harder, across perspectives. As the saying goes, “You cannot simply add the belief that the world is round to the belief that the world is flat.” Something has to give.

I have explored creating an inventory to provide feedback about the dominant developmental perspective of any teacher. Maybe soon! But until then, if I am the depart-

ment chair, faculty development consultant, or the professor herself, I have to apply the theory sans scientific instrument. I am OK with that. The more positivistic among us may not be.

We often assume the last (or highest) level in a developmental model is best. With regard to teaching, this would be a mistake. While the extent data suggest the most effective teachers are operating from Systemocentrism, the final perspective, I know from my own experience and others that learners and teachers match up in weird ways. In my youth, I wanted to be a cutting-edge research professor, and my favorite professors could have cared less if I lived or died. They only cared that they knew the most recent knowledge and delivered it eloquently. They were Egocentrism to the max, and I loved it. Other students went to the registrar's office to withdraw immediately from the course.

