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TOWARD TEACHING EXCELLENCE: THE SEIDMAN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS TEACHING SEMINAR

Gregg Dimkoff

Since its founding, Grand Valley has considered teaching to be its most important mission. Indeed, the present catalog states, "Grand Valley prides itself on being a teaching institution dedicated to providing the highest level of quality instruction possible," and "Grand Valley State University is a learning community where close student-faculty interaction enhances both teaching and learning." Furthermore, an Admissions Office recruiting brochure proclaims that "GVSU is committed to excellence in teaching. . . ." and "we are committed to creating an excellent environment for learning and teaching that will help bring out your best."

Consistent with Grand Valley's mission, good teaching is the primary objective in the Seidman School of Business. All Seidman faculty are evaluated by their students in each class every semester. Results of these evaluations are major determiners of raises, contract renewals, promotions, and tenure decisions. In addition, individual faculty members use these evaluations to identify their strengths and weaknesses in order to improve their teaching. SSB has many fine teachers, two of whom have received the GVSU Teacher of the Year award.

The old adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" might have been good enough in the past, but not in today's environment of intense competition in the global work place. As we make our way toward accreditation by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, we are keenly aware that this body gives considerable weight to a demonstration of the school's continuing attempts to improve teaching.

Toward this end, a few years ago, the SSB Teaching Committee, which I chaired, recommended that a new program be instituted to improve, recognize, and reward good teaching. Thus began, in fall, 1993, the SSB Teaching Seminar, which continues to be offered every fall. All new full-time faculty members, no matter how extensive their teaching backgrounds have been, are required to attend this seminar. Others, including adjuncts, are invited. About a third of the faculty complete the seminar each year.

At the initial meeting, the Chair and the Dean explain the goal of continually improving teaching. They also warn newcomers that they may experience culture shock during their first few semesters at Grand Valley. New faculty members with excellent teaching records may get below-average teaching evaluations at the end of their first semester, because our students expect a higher level of teaching quality than is found at many other colleges.

At the next session the seminar participants hear about teaching-related do's and don'ts: for example, do meet for the entire time scheduled; don't miss a class without

finding someone to cover it; do give students a complete course syllabus; don't change it once the semester begins, and so forth. The discussion centers on the norms at Grand Valley: what students expect, and how to avoid problems.

Each participant is given a list of SSB teachers whom students consider to be very good and who have given permission for seminar participants to observe their classes. Approximately twenty-five classes give the participants a choice of time (morning, afternoon, or evening), location (Allendale, Muskegon, or Grand Rapids), delivery (lecture or discussion) and type (case, quantitative, or behavioral). Participants attend two classes, during which they jot down what they see as good teaching techniques and whatever else impresses them. At the end of the semester, we all meet to share our experiences and to talk about what makes for good teaching.

Although teaching techniques and styles are highly individual, the same comments about why our good teachers are good keep appearing. Generally, these comments fall into five broad categories: class participation, reinforcement, organization of class time, delivery, and pace.

Good classroom participation is the characteristic most noted in successful classrooms, often the result of the professor's frequent questioning of the students. Specific comments follow:

"The instructor developed fine points by asking questions."

"The instructor made students feel it was OK to ask questions."

"Even if the answer to a question was totally wrong, the instructor made the student feel good about asking."

"The instructor called on everyone to get their opinions."

Second in importance is the reinforcement of important points by repetition. Reinforcement can be summarized by a variation of another old adage: "Tell them what you are going to teach them, teach them, and then tell them what you taught them." In addition to this type of reinforcement, some good teachers give students sample exams prior to the class when a real exam is scheduled, review the previous class at the beginning of each class, and ask for questions before starting a new topic.

Good organizers of class time write on the board a brief outline of the topics to be covered during that day's class and do not stray from the topics. They may end the class by explaining what will be covered during the next class.

Concerning delivery, two comments appear again and again. First is the KISS principle: "Keep it simple, Stupid." This is not to say that the topic should be trivialized, but that teachers should strive to make complex issues understandable. Second is the importance of knowing the students' names and using them in class. Other comments point out that good teachers make use of humor, current events, and the blackboard, and do not over-rely on overheads.

Finally, participants are usually impressed by the maintenance of a pace that allows students to take good notes, by a teacher who does not rush through the

material. Teachers often face the dilemma of whether to present less material and have the students learn it well or to cover more material and have the students learn a greater amount less well. Seminar participants' comments about the pace of classroom teaching suggest an answer to this dilemma: teach at a reasonable pace; if there is too much material to cover at a reasonable pace, some of it should be covered in other ways, outside the classroom.

From my experience as coordinator of the seminar, I can say the observations we shared provided us with new and useful insights. Because each of us was reminded, by sitting in on classes, of what it is like to be a student, by combining how we felt as students with what we do as teachers, we were able to agree on the teaching techniques that seemed worth emulating: asking lots of questions; teaching at a pace students can keep up with; and reinforcing topics by repeating, summarizing, and reviewing.