

# The Inconvenient Question

Reid Cornwell

Recently I was invited to speak on the subject of educational reform. During the Q&A a person asked a question that I have been struggling with for the last 30 years. I now pose the question to you.

## **If Universities train teachers are they complicit, directly or indirectly, for many of the shortcomings in public education?**

Since that time I have asked every teacher I meet, "did your school of education prepare you for what you encountered in your first teaching assignment?" I am yet to find one teacher who responded with a "YES". All of my research has led me over and over again to the same conclusion. The inconvenient question is:

### **Do schools of education prepare teachers to teach?**

Before poorly trained and inexperienced educators can learn the job, many become disillusioned, frustrated, and unappreciated. With their initial optimism and altruism dashed, they leave teaching, most within the first five years. The exceptionally smart and more capable young teachers seem to do it quicker. This is a national trend and tragedy. Those that remain rarely violate the culture of the school that employs them. If that culture is flawed, you can guess the rest.

The problems in education were spotlighted in the 1950s. Over the next 55+ years the problem has only gotten more profound. The university's reaction was to create more education Ph.D.s than have existed in all the rest of human history; most of them are in educational administration; more than educational practice and curriculum combined. This is understandable since, in education, administration is where the money and power lies.

Schools of education then staff with these administrative offspring. Most are equipped with little real-world experience, an advanced degree, and tons of theory. Veteran public school educators are rejected in favor of publication oriented Ph.D.s.

Is the administrator's skill set the right ones for the training teachers? Judging by the recent track record of public education, I suggest not.

The premise is simple.

### **Teacher training that doesn't model best practices is of dubious value.**

Students report that the classroom practices of their professors typically ignore lessons of good pedagogy, learning theory, and common sense in favor of what is expedient or tradition. Even when the lesson content suggests alternatives, discredited top-down lecture methods are the rule rather than the exception. For example, one Indiana University reports that the average college professor spends only 2 hours in open discussions per semester.

The above criticism and analysis suggests straight-forward reforms. Professors of education should listen to and practice their own messages. Schools should hire more in-the-trenches professional teachers. If schools of education were to adopt

these and internally reform accordingly, would better teachers be trained and would the necessary reforms of public education occur in years rather than decades?

Moreover, the culture of most Universities and colleges give preference to research and publication rather than skills in communication or educational praxis when making selections for advancement. The benefit of tenure is awarded for the "quantity" of papers published rather than skill in the classroom. Furthermore, the issue of "quality" is only indirectly addressed by rating the journals of publication rather than the content itself. Restated, a scholar who writes a few high quality papers might not do so well when it comes to tenure. The scholar who writes large quantities of mediocre works will more often receive the benefits. The practitioner of high quality teaching runs a distant third on the promotion list, if at all.

This practice begs the question, "is there is any direct relationship between publication and the quality of instruction?" If there is, it is not readily evident. Teaching and publication are worthy goals and not mutually exclusive, but it takes time and effort to be a good at either. In most cases there is not enough time in the day to be both, even when a person has the ability to be both.

This creates a potential contradiction. Why does the academy place research/publication at a higher priority than teaching when the purpose for the institution's existence is teaching and learning? I suggest that this priority is about the reputation of the school. The quality of the academy itself is measured by the number of Nobel laureates on the faculty, financial grants, and/or the body of publications generated by the institution. It is not about how many thinking, caring, motivated instructional leaders they employ or train.

Donald Kennedy, former president of Stanford University, wrote, "I hope we can agree that the quantitative use of research output as a criterion for appointment or promotion is a bankrupt idea." Despite this admonition it remains entrenched in most Universities.

This policy puts authors/researchers in control of instruction and in reality they may not be the best teachers. Instruction not simultaneous with practice is of dubious value. When soon-to-be teachers model and imitate poor faculty practices, those impoverished methods are given legitimacy. New teachers learn and will behave in their own classrooms by modeling the examples provide by their professors. I think we can presume that if professors provide good examples they will have a positive impact on developing better teachers.

Logically, should a person be able get a college teaching position without rigorous training in instructional methods in addition to rigor of their discipline? Sadly, it happens more often than not.

Should Schools of education endeavor to model the highest aspirations of teaching and learning? Should they rigorously apply the best of what we know about the psychology of learning? Shouldn't the content of instruction and practice of teaching be wedded?

It is often said that the problems in education lie with the political realities of communities and the nation. I assert it is the responsibility of the Universities to

understand those realities and to prepare teachers to face them. Isn't this a tacit responsibility to the society that gives them the privilege of being professors?

I know that my academic colleagues will say that my criticism is unfounded and this failure does not happen at their schools, but if they are reflective and honest with their appraisal they will know the truth of it.

The next time you hear of an exam not given back for 3 weeks, remember my comments.

I welcome being proven wrong, but come with more than just disagreement. Show me! Tell me where there are pockets of excellence, so that we may praise and exploit those successes.

One of the roles of a professional, in any discipline, is to police the ranks of their profession. I suggest that this role, in education, is largely ignored. Professional failure is best judged by a profession's members. In the end, as Eldridge Cleaver put it, "If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem."

There, I've said it. I have finally admitted to myself that our Colleges and Universities of education are significantly complicit in the problems faced by public education. **After all, they train teachers.**