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CHAPTER FOUR

Learning to Not*Teach

Given my firm belief that you can't teach individuals to make decisions and take actions that are central to their lives and the lives of others, one of the most important skills that I have learned as a university professor is how to not*teach. In fact, I gave up trying to teach long ago. Fortunately, I have never given up trying to learn.

This chapter, then, is about teaching, not*teaching, and the process of learning. Please note that here and in subsequent chapters my use of an asterisk between words is not a typographical error; nor does it reflect my incompetence as a speller. It means that the prefix actively negates the stem. Not*teaching, therefore, is a disciplined, active, energetic process of creating an environment that encourages learning.

As you will find, the chapter consists of a series of personal statements, questions, hypotheses, conclusions, descriptions, and observations about learning, teaching, and learning to not*teach. As best I can tell, the series doesn't

follow any logical sequence. Not*teaching and learning seldom follow any logical sequence. Teaching does. I hope you find the material to be of interest.

1. The longer I am employed as a professor, the less sure I become as to what a teacher is supposed to do. When students say, either explicitly or implicitly, "Teach me," I become confused, because I seldom feel as if I have anything to teach.
2. Whenever I do think that I have something to teach, I generally am disappointed. Most of the time, others already know it or don't find it useful, interesting, relevant, or profound. And neither do I.
3. I agree with the sentiments Carl Rogers expressed in "Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning" (1952). In essence, he contends that nothing of value can be taught but that much of value can be learned. I suppose that's one reason I find teaching so unsatisfying and learning so much fun.
4. I find it ironic that many constituencies of higher education—including students, teachers, administrators, and parents—worry so much about teaching. I suspect that their concern has the purpose of diverting attention from the difficult job of learning, which my colleague Peter Vaill defines as making changes in oneself (1996). Instead, they focus their energy on obsessing about teaching, a process that assumes that the capacity to grow depends primarily on someone else.

5. "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." It is a hostile comment, to be sure, but one that for some reason is very popular among those who fancy themselves as doers. Try substituting the word *learn* for the word *teach*. The aphorism now reads, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, learn." When stated this way, the comment loses its hostile quality. In fact, it makes much more sense. I wonder why. Maybe the answer to that question says something about the relative importance of teaching and learning.

6. It also occurs to me that teachers require learners in order to survive, but learners don't require teachers. Maybe that's why teachers emphasize the importance of teaching so much. They are attempting to create a market for their nonessential services.

7. In my discipline, there is a journal called *The Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal*. What if it were called *The Organizational Behavior Learning Journal*? I'll bet that the content of the articles would be very different and a lot more interesting.

8. As a professor, I don't accept responsibility for what others learn. I do take responsibility for what I learn, though. In fact, one of my basic objectives as a professor is to learn. What students learn, if anything, is up to them. I'm always pleased to try to help them learn something if they want to and if I can be of assistance to them in doing it, but I won't accept responsibility for what they learn or whether they learn it.

9. In fact, I am struck by the bizarre willingness on the part of my colleagues to accept responsibility for what their students learn or fail to learn. I know they accept such responsibility, because they frequently ask students, colleagues, and administrators to evaluate their teaching for purposes of promotion and tenure. They get depressed if students don't perform well in their classes. They go into purple funks if their students don't increase their scores on standardized tests. They read books, study journal articles, and attend seminars focused on how to improve their teaching effectiveness. They worry about how to motivate students in the classroom. Each of those acts indicates that, in some way, they believe they are responsible for what their students learn—or fail to learn.

10. Many teachers have the following maxim on a sign atop their desks (or buried in the deep recesses of their brains): "If the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught." That maxim is quite peculiar, because it clearly implies that the basic responsibility for learning belongs to the teacher. Consequently, if the student performs incompetently, the teacher is at fault. But, following the same logic rigorously, if the student performs competently, the teacher must then get the credit. For all intents and purposes, the student doesn't exist, except as a sort of inanimate, passive receptacle for the teacher's competence or incompetence.

11. In my opinion, any time a teacher accepts responsibility for students' learning, the teacher denies the students' humanity. Stated differently, the teacher doesn't

respect the students very much, if at all. Likewise, if students permit the teacher to accept responsibility for their learning, they respect neither themselves nor the teacher. That's why I always make it clear to my students that I'm a professor, not a teacher. I do that because I have found that I don't gain a lot of satisfaction from being either disrespectful or disrespected.

12. When I take seriously the proposition that I am not responsible for what and whether my students learn, I become very anxious, because it forces me to ask, "What is my job?" I wish I could say I've developed a satisfactory answer to that question.

13. I find that grading students is never a satisfying experience. Grading cotton or soybeans makes a lot of sense to me, but grading students does not. Grading deals with teaching, evaluation, accreditation, indoctrination, control, un*thought, dis*thought, and re*thought. It doesn't have much to do with learning. It's demeaning to all parties involved. I get ulcers on the inside of my bottom lip every time I do it.

14. Teachers frequently tell me, "I'm not grading students. I'm grading their work, not them as human beings. There is a difference, you know." If you actually believe that normal human beings can separate themselves from the work they produce, particularly work that is important to them, then I have a suggestion. The next time you receive a performance appraisal and your boss says, "I think that your work was lousy [or great], but please don't take my

comments personally," then don't take them personally. Take them impersonally, because your boss's comments apparently don't relate to you as a living, breathing human being. And don't get upset (or pleased) with your boss. Your boss probably was taught to do performance appraisals by a teacher who believed that you could grade students' work without grading students.

15. By the way, Bleuler, a famous psychoanalyst, points out that anyone who splits one's self off from one's self, in the manner that is required to divorce one's self from the quality of one's work, generally is deemed to be schizophrenic (Campbell, 1981).

16. I very much enjoy responding to my students' work. I write them letters, correct their grammar and punctuation, critique the quality of their thinking, curse their ineptitude, applaud their creativity, frown when they do work that is beneath their capacity, and cheer their victories. I learn a lot from responding to them. From everything I hear, so do they. It's just grading them that doesn't make sense. I prefer to stick with grading soybeans and cotton.

17. For their exams, my students are free to express their understanding of the literature and experiences of the course in any way they desire. Historically, they have written poetry, done scientific research, produced essays, sung theories, made movies, danced analyses of variance, presented plays, (literally) juggled constructs, cooked concepts (which the class ate), composed music, brewed

beer, created works of art, and welded nails. In short, they have learned to work, a process that, according to management theorist Elliott Jaques, is the exercise of discretion and decision making in carrying out a task (1989). Assuming the students are employed or will seek employment in roles that require them to work for a living, I am convinced that their examinations are relevant to carrying out an activity that is required for successful living.

18. Given such freedom, most students have produced extraordinarily competent work. Some have produced work that is very incompetent. Very few have produced anything mediocre. I have thus come to understand that bell-shaped distributions of performance in academia are artifacts of an environment in which teaching is stressed. In learning environments, performance tends to be bimodally distributed, with most participants, including professors, performing very well, a few performing very badly, and almost none falling into the middle. (For further discussion of performance distribution curves, see Chapter Seven.)

Stated differently, in a learning environment, both students and professors either perform very well or fail miserably. In a teaching environment, the great majority of students and teachers fall into the pedestrian middle. Maybe that's the purpose of teaching—to ensure mediocrity on the part of everyone involved. Dysfunctional bureaucracies have to be staffed from somewhere, and no one is more mediocre than a well-taught student or an outstanding teacher.

19. Learning environments are not for everyone. As one student complained to me, "I am not paying my tuition to learn anything. I am paying for you to teach me something." Clearly, she had been taught a lot.

20. In one of my classes, I require participants to work on their examinations with at least one other person. They can work with as many others as they like. Even then, they don't have to work together on a single project. For example, Student X may write an essay, and Student Y may sing. Alternatively, they may collaborate on a single project, such as doing formal experimental research or writing a play. Regardless of the structure of the organization in which they elect to do their work, they have to share their grades.

21. The reason for the policy described in paragraph twenty may be found in my work and the works of Wilfred Bion (1961), James Lynch (1977), Rene Spitz (1946), and Dean Ornish (1998); all of us have pointed out that emotional connection with others is a requirement for survival. Consequently, any organizational policy, procedure, or action that requires people to work alone, in psychological isolation from one another, contributes to illness, both mental and physical (see Chapter Six).

22. The more I have learned to not*teach, the more I realize that connection with others is a requirement for survival, and the more I become interested in learning, the more I become enraged when people cheat. I define

cheating as the failure to assist others on exams if they request it.

23. When I was a youngster and would moan and groan about not having anything to do, my grandfather would say, "Quit moping around and go learn yourself something." For a long time, I thought that his awkward use of the word *learn* indicated that he was both unlettered and not very bright. Now I realize that he may have been unlettered, but he sure as hell wasn't lacking in intellect.

24. I never read or discuss or pay attention to the data collected from the formal feedback systems that students and faculty frequently employ to evaluate faculty performance. Evidently such systems are useful to teachers, but they aren't useful to me. If I were to use those systems, I would be inviting both myself and my students to be taught the skills required to not*confront one another directly about our concerns and our delights as we attempt to work together. Ultimately, I would be teaching my students and myself how to develop the skills of passivity and non*risk-taking, which lead to interpersonal incompetence and irresponsibility when coping with human problems of organization. I am always willing to deal directly with my students about their compliments, concerns, or criticisms; but I have no interest in interrupting or breaking prayers or conducting training programs for organizational Sidestabbers (see Chapters Five and One).

25. The more I learn, the more I enjoy competence. The less I teach, the more I experience my own competence and the competence of others. I love to be around competent people, because I learn a lot from them, and I'm more competent in their presence.

26. The more I learn to not*teach, the more anxiety I experience in the classroom. I think my anxiety stems from the fact that I don't know what will happen from class session to class session and generally can't do much about what happens whenever it occurs.

27. Although I am more anxious in a learning environment, I also have a lot more fun. More events in the classroom are genuinely funny.

28. That reminds me: Have you ever wondered why textbooks aren't funny? Have you ever wondered why the Bible isn't funny? Probably because they were designed to teach you something.

29. Likewise, have you ever known a competent professor, preacher, politician, manager, employee, or student who *wasn't* funny, who *didn't* have a sense of humor or an appreciation of the absurd? I haven't. For example, did Jesus ever tell jokes or pass gas in church? He must have. (He drove the money changers out of the temple, didn't He?) When He did, I'll bet that the disciples roared and God laughed. I just wonder why His biographers forgot to tell us about it. Probably because they were trying to teach us something; but, by doing so, they destroyed part of His essence.

30. One last thought: if I've learned anything from being a university professor, it's that I try to teach only those whom I don't respect. And, God knows, if anything is in short supply in many contemporary organizations, it's a sense of shared respect.

Do let me know if you feel that I've tried to teach you something. If so, I will be glad to apologize.