

# The Importance of Undisciplined Thinking

Try ripping up the syllabus and other experiments to teach students how to think

**T**HIS COURSE made me realize that there are two ways to view myself and my life: From the outside looking in (how others see me), and from the inside looking out (how I see myself). Now that I'm aware of these two perspectives, I think about everything differently."

What discipline solicited such a thoughtful, life-changing reaction from an undergraduate?

Psychology? Religion? Philosophy?

None of the above. It was managerial accounting. And yes, that is an actual quote from an actual student. How did an accounting professor inspire such self-aware thinking beyond the limits of her subject? Simple: She decided to change her teaching.

This past year, Baylor University created a program to reward some of its best teachers and challenge them to do something truly daring: teach their students how to think—not just how to think *about* course material, but rather how to think *through* the material. The idea is to help students learn how we, as practitioners of our disciplines, analyze, make meaning, understand, look at the world, and create.

Such lessons on thinking will stay with students long after they have forgotten facts and figures, or the course itself—and forget they will. In fact, a focus on the thinking and creativity behind disciplines allows students (and colleagues) to discover that disparate areas of study are more alike than they are different.

**Institutionalize the art of thinking.** In fall of 2011, Baylor began honoring nine faculty members with the title of Baylor Fellow. Each received a modest cash prize and an anything-but-modest mission: to infuse the elements of thinking throughout their courses, and then assess the results. The details were left up to the fellows, who were provided with reading material as well as monthly lunch gatherings to share both triumphs and failures.

And the experiment worked. The faculty members not only inspired their students in a deeper way than in the past but also profoundly inspired one another. Here are five vignettes about what they came up with.

■ On the first day of an advanced-directing course, a professor of film and digital media handed out the syllabus, thoroughly reviewed the details, and then instructed his students to rip up the document. He then asked these startled senior film majors: "What do you need? Where are your gaps?" Together the class crafted its own syllabus, which not only filled those gaps but took the students (as well as the professor) on an intellectual roller-coaster ride.

"As directors," one student said, "we're supposed to create a space where actors can play safely. The openness and flexibility of this class allowed us to experience such a safe space within our learning environment."

At the close of the semester, the professor reported that it was the best curriculum he had ever offered. But as good as it was, he knows exactly how he's going to open that first class the next time he teaches the course—the prepared syllabus will be ripped up and thrown away.

■ An economics professor decided, for the first time in her teaching career, to give

no exams or quizzes. Instead she assessed undergraduates solely on their class presentations and the group projects and case studies they produced.

And unlike in previous years, when she would assign the experiments and methods for collecting data, this semester she had her students create their own theses and hypotheses as well as devise experiments to test their theories. They then executed those experiments, analyzed the data, and pre-

sented their results—and not just to the class, but also to a panel of faculty from other departments for critical review.

Her students weren't merely following instructions. Instead they were conjuring up their own original ideas and seeing where those thoughts led. Economics came to life.

■ A professor at the School of Education told his students that they not only had to do the readings but also were responsible for creating the questions that would spark class discussions. In effect, students had to craft lesson plans based on their readings.

By reversing the roles of student and instructor, he got education majors not only to come up with questions and answers, but more important, to think through the theories on their own.

■ A sociology professor asked his 250 students on the second day of an introductory sociology course to write a paper answering: Who am I? And how does sociology help me answer this question?

Students grumbled, feeling ill-equipped to respond. But uncertainty and angst are powerful teaching tools. At the end of the semester, the professor surprised his students by asking them to write a longer reflection on the prompt given on Day 2.

Throughout the term, the professor intentionally created disruptive disagreements to generate learning moments. Paradoxically, he also used *Sesame Street* as a recurring metaphor to answer the singsong question, "Can you tell me how to get, how to get to..." a utopian society, and if such a place could actually exist. His students discovered that disagreements can lead to deeper critical thinking—not just about self

or society, but about everything.

■ An accounting professor ended her managerial accounting course by asking students to prepare what she called a three-minute elevator speech: "If a stranger in an elevator asked you what managerial accounting is, what would you say?"

The professor brought in colleagues from outside the business school to meet one-on-one with each student and listen to those elevator speeches. I was one of those nonexpert colleagues who came in to help. I met with more than half the class members, at three-minute intervals, and was amazed at how much I learned from them. Apparently financial accounting is the mandated data that a company must share with stakeholders and other interested outsiders who want to look in, while managerial accounting is an internal self-assessment of the effectiveness of the company designed to improve its efficiency.

After the students' soliloquies, I surprised them with the follow-up question: "What life lessons did you take away from this course?" I was overwhelmed by the thoughtful and personal responses (which included the one that opened this essay). They all mentioned how they are thinking differently and have applied that thinking beyond the world of business. They got the message.

**Engineer creativity.** Here were nine faculty members who made an even greater difference by facing the basic question: What does it mean to think?

The students were not the only beneficiaries; the faculty members themselves were led to unexpected places, including new collaborations with colleagues from across the university, new scholarly projects, and new ideas for interdisciplinary courses that focus on thinking and creativity. Moreover, they inspired other members of their departments and schools.

With the appropriate inspiration, we all can provoke fresh templates for what we teach and how we teach it. In fact, perhaps the time has come to provoke a national conversation about our responsibilities to overtly offer students transformative modes of thinking that can be wisely and creatively applied throughout their lives. Even if we already embrace the idea of teaching thinking, we can all take greater risks, be more daring, and go even deeper.

This past spring at Baylor, we named the next crop of 10 Baylor Fellows. What those imaginative minds will come up with and attempt, no one knows. But one thing is for sure: They will change not only their students' minds but their own as well.

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## FIRST PERSON

By Edward B. Burger



BRIAN TAYLOR FOR THE CHRONICLE