



Inside the Undergraduate Teaching Experience: The University of Washington's Growth in Faculty Teaching Study

Beyer, Catharine Hoffman; Taylor, Edward; and Gillmore, Gerald M.
SUNY Press, 2013

Book Review

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University of Washington colleagues and scholars Beyer, Taylor, and Gillmore began their work in assessment with a rather simple - but important - question: “Without external pressure to do so, do faculty make changes to their teaching?” (17). To answer this and the subsequent follow-ups (“If so, what changes?” and “Why?”), they engaged in an extensive, qualitative study that drew from a sample of fifty-five male and female faculty members and eight graduate students of various ethnicities and in different stages of their professional careers. The findings of their study, they argue, challenge the prevailing image of professors as disengaged from anything other than their research, and show that faculty remain deeply engaged simultaneously with both their research and with current pedagogical methods, best practices, new and emerging technologies, and - above all - the development of critical engagement for their students with their respective disciplines. Perhaps most surprising, they argue, is that the findings of this study demonstrate that professors exhibit a desire for improved teaching even though most have not received teaching-training and even in the absence of external pressures.

Then why change? A faculty member makes it through the semester, notes intact; what, then, stimulates the need for any change at all? Beyer, Taylor, and Gillmore’s findings reveal that even with increased interest in the development of “best practices” among faculty at institutions of higher learning (91), change in the classroom is driven by interaction between faculty and their students (91), and generally takes one of two forms: internal or external. In the case of internal change, faculty work to introduce methods that encourage greater, earlier,

and deeper engagement with their own course content. This type of change is often induced by assessment, observation, or conversation between faculty and student. External changes, on the other hand, are introduced as a result of workshop activity, collegial conversation, and observation. It is worth noting that external change accounts for the smallest percentage of reasons for change, a mere 12 percent (105).

This book is valuable for revealing in quantifiable terms what many in this field already know; that teaching is a dynamic and malleable activity. But what it also reveals is that the greatest changes in the classroom occur when professors are tuned into the intimate voice of their own discipline, within the context of their own classroom. External influences and opportunities are important, but what appears to be more important is the willingness of a professor to pay rigorous attention to the needs of particular groups of learners, at particular moments in time. And though it should not be necessary to provide evidence of how hard professors work and how much they care, it is nice to have this study as evidence.

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