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College Focus: Jobs or Intellect?

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An article on the front page of Monday’s Charlotte Observer caught my eye: “College focus: Jobs or intellect?” That is certainly a stark choice! Here is the link to the article:

http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2012/11/12/3659586/unc-leaders-debate-jobs-or-knowledge.html#storylink=misearch

The lead of the article poses the key question: “Should college be a meandering journey of intellectual exploration or a straight line to a good job?” Leaders for the University of North Carolina system are pondering such questions as they set up an “Advisory Committee on Strategic Directions.” I think many of us would agree that the two poles of the question are not mutually exclusive, and that we ought to be able to do a combination of both—and more. I want to focus not on that issue, but on something else the article includes.

The writer, Jane Stancill, cites a 2009 survey of more than 300 companies and organizations, which, she says, “indicates that employers want their workers to use a broader range of skills and have higher levels of learning to meet the demands of an increasingly complex workplace.” Here are the top two items that employers want colleges to put more emphasis on: 89% say “effective oral/written communication”; 81% say “critical thinking and analytical reasoning.” I immediately thought of how Winthrop stacks up in that regard.

My first response would be that our Touchstone Core of WRIT 101, HMXP 102, and CRTW 201 are designed specifically and primarily to address those critical areas. All of our students are grounded in oral and written communication and critical thinking in those three courses—and our general education program, the Touchstone Program, is designed to continue that emphasis. In my view, we have an excellent framework in place, and as long as we carry through on it, our students should be in good shape in their preparation for future jobs.

My second response was to think specifically about something our students in CRTW learn. When we study the ten elements of thinking, I ask them to focus on two: information and concepts. I tell them that, in my experience, most students see their courses as being primarily about one of those elements; most instructors see their courses as being primarily about the other. They know immediately which is which: they know that most of them approach their courses as a series of facts to be covered, in many cases, crammed into their heads, then deleted after the test. And they realize that their professors are instead constantly talking about concepts.

How do students study for tests? Very often, by
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Continued from page 1

making flash cards of separate facts and bits of information, then going over and over those cards until they memorize them (temporarily). They also know that they don’t really learn much this way. Our discussions help them realize that the first way they can make their learning deeper and more meaningful is by switching their focus from information to concepts, to thinking about the course more like a professor than like a student.

I underscore this point by asking them to take out a textbook from one of their courses. I have them open up to the table of contents and read the headings aloud. In course after course, no matter whether it is biology or sociology or psychology or exercise science, the results are the same: the textbook is based on a series of concepts (which means that the course and the discipline are too). Then I ask them to think back to twenty or thirty years ago: how much has the information in that course changed? In almost all cases, it has changed a great deal, and in some cases, radically. Now, how much have the concepts changed? Not much, if at all. So which is more important to learn: information or concepts?

And that leads to a projection of their futures, and this is where the opening question of that Observer article comes in: ten or fifteen years from now, when you are well into the career you are preparing yourself for, how valuable will the information you are spending so much time cramming into your heads be? They see, and they realize that it’s the concepts they will be relying on, not the ever-changing facts. Learn the concepts, really learn and master the concepts, and the information, no matter how much it changes, will be at your command.

I think that is what employers are saying when they tell us how much they want us to teach students better critical thinking skills. I am proud we have a structure in place to do just that, and that a focus on critical thinking and analytical reasoning extends beyond the Touchstone Core to our entire curriculum, as does an emphasis on written and oral communication, in addition to the other skills employers value. Therefore, we know what we have to do, we have a good structure in place to do it, so all that leaves is the execution. The execution is a tall order, but I think we should feel good about our chances for success. And we didn’t have to set up an advisory committee to figure that out!

And a coda: I urge you to read the reader comments after the newspaper article. Many of them are quite perceptive, and all of them provide food for thought.
XXITE 2.0 ------ The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/
Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu
The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor’s request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don’t want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Thought for The Week

"Thanksgiving Day. Let all give humble, hearty, and sincere thanks now, but the turkeys. In the island of Fiji they do not use turkeys; they use plumbers. It does me to sneer at Fiji." —Mark Twain