
May-June 1997 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

From the Office of Associate Dean and Director

MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL MOMENTUM IN YOUR TEACHING

From an essay by L. H. Newcomb, Associate Dean for Resident Instruction,
College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences, Ohio State University

Dimensions of Professionals Who Maintain Momentum

What are the dimensions of individuals who maintain professional momentum in their teaching? The thesis of this paper is that such professionals are up-to-date with the science they profess. Not only do these professionals generate new knowledge, but they also use the new knowledge generated by others. They maintain authority in their role; they have great credibility; and they generate a high level of energy and commitment. When they speak, advise, instruct, and report, people listen because something worth listening to is being said.

Another vital sign of professors who maintain their momentum is that they care for their role, whether it be research, teaching, or extension. Likewise they continue to care for their clients and gain much from the helping relationship that they have with their clients.

These professionals are not "in a rut" in any of their endeavors. They maintain a fresh perspective and a continuing commitment. They are not satisfied to go about their professional life as they always have, merely maintaining the status quo. Instead, they reach outward and upward.

In summary, such professors are capable of delivering, and they do deliver. They do not become stagnant and give out.

The Current Environment

A frequently occurring phenomenon is the tendency of faculty to experience "burnout," which has received increased attention in the literature. Burnout has been variously defined as "complete exhaustion," "a response to circuit overload, the result of unchecked stress caused by the institution's impersonal and unyielding demands and by the immediate environment in which...(professing) is done." It is "the feeling of being locked into a job routine."

Kahn suggests that one of our biggest problems is overload. He says we do not object to what we are asked to do -- we feel the requests are very appropriate-- but we feel we cannot meet all the current demands. Kahn feels there are two dimensions to overload: qualitative overload, when we feel the request is too difficult; and quantitative overload, when too much is asked.

To the extent that professionals face an environment with any of the above components, they will probably find it difficult to maintain their professional momentum and will need to work diligently at self renewal.

Symptoms of a Need for Self Renewal

It is impossible to provide a complete list of symptoms of a need for self renewal. However, the presence of any of the following conditions could indicate a serious need for an individual to pursue self-renewing strategies.

For some individuals the need for renewal begins with a general feeling of uneasiness. The joy begins to slip away. Self concept diminishes, and one begins to question the meaning of what one is doing.

Another indication of problems, especially in the case of burnout, is a gradual loss of caring about people they work with. When professors begin to resent being bothered by their students, advisees, or other clients, they are headed for real trouble. Professors cannot allow themselves to write off the very people they are trained to serve.

In other instances the people who are affected feel overworked. They sometimes feel that they are not able to complete their responsibilities as well as they would like. There is a loss of zest. People begin to dread going to the office. Others find themselves counting the days until Friday or the end of the term, and still others begin to anxiously await retirement. Still others become so repetitive in their work that they become bored with much of what they do. Whatever the symptoms, their presence indicates the need for self renewal.

The Nature of Self Renewal

Perhaps no one has addressed the issue of stagnation and the need for renewal better

that John Gardner (Gardner, 1964). Gardner reminds people that in order for there to be renewal there must be growth as well as decay. He says, "In the ever renewing society that matures is a system or framework within which continuous innovation, renewal, and rebirth can occur." Renewal is the process of bringing results of change into line with our purposes. Nevertheless, "as we mature we progressively narrow the scope and variety of our lives... We become caught in a web of fixed relationships. We develop set ways of doing things" (Gardner, 1964). Obviously this leads to "doing it the way we always have" even when those ways are no longer defensible.

Change and self renewal are in fact very difficult. John Gardner contends that most of the obstacles to self renewal are in the mind of the person rather than in the environment. Most people, professors included, tend to have many self-defense mechanisms built up, and they use these defenses almost without thought. The very nature of being defensive is quite an obstacle to change and renewal.

Another big obstacle to change and renewal is vested interest. People like to protect what they have created, who they are, where they are. This kind of mind set is natural and good in many cases; however, it also gets in the way of considering innovation or even the possibility of the need for change.

Change generally does not occur unless the person who needs to change has a personal felt need to change. Until individuals personally feel uncomfortable with their current state of affairs, there will be no effort to change -- to renew themselves. Therefore, either the individual or those around the individual must create a situation wherein the individual becomes uncomfortable with what is (when appropriate) and begins to seek new ways of functioning.

Alternative Strategies for Maintaining Professional Momentum

Clearly, strategies for self renewal must include self-help, peer support at the work place, and enrichment of one's personal life. The idea of renewal has to involve the total person and cannot be confined to a narrow concept of professional improvement. Consider the following strategies.

1. Try Something New and Daring. The literature from education, higher education, social work, nursing, personnel, and psychology all agree that an overall strategy has to be to stop doing "it" the same old way. One writer suggests that the mind, like automobile tires, needs to be rotated. Whatever your major responsibility, if you seek renewal, then experiment. Develop new research interests and methodology, new curriculum and teaching approaches, and new contacts.

2. Create a Support System at Work. Kahn believes that professionals need social support on the job. He says he "mean(s) the expression of positive affect -- liking, respecting, admiration. (He would also include expression of affirmation, letting our colleagues and those we supervise know that we recognize and appreciate the

strenuous situations with which they are working.) We in the agricultural sciences must renew our pride in collegiality and close-knit professional support of one another.

3. Hold Retreats with Colleagues. Get away from the campus in an atmosphere conducive to reflecting, examining, and sharing. Recreate together, dream together, and share the responsibility of being a loving critic. Give one another ideas as well as assistance. Suggest new ideas and follow through with personal assistance.
4. Return to Industry. a stint in the industry we serve is a good change of pace. It reacquaints us with reality and offers fresh perspectives while at the same time reaffirming existing accuracies.
5. Analyze the Mix of What Makes Up Your Job. When you have completed your analysis, work with those to whom you report to alter that mix. For example, move to a new instructional level. If you are primarily conducting research, build in a good proportion of resident instruction for a term or change roles with an extension specialist. Others may want to add more advising or research or service. The idea is to try a new focus for a while. It revives, and that is essential to all professionals.
6. Work for Greater Movement Among and Between Colleges. Faculty mobility is fast becoming a thing of the past. Many faculty used to move to another university to keep themselves stimulated. We may need to exchange positions for a term with people in other colleges in our university or with faculty from community and technical colleges. The insights gained and new ideas shared can be extremely helpful to all cooperating units.
7. Research Your Teaching. Attempts to study and improve college teaching seem to be viewed as involving great risks for those who are the objects. All academic disciplines cloak themselves in their own mysteries about the manner in which they are best taught. To examine these mysteries and make them public is to expose the act of teaching to scrutiny which strips away myths and identifies illusions. Most professors, after a while, feel strongly about their approaches to teaching. Such tentative hypotheses need to be empirically verified. The very quest for truth should renew.
8. Decompress Between Work and Home. While it is easy enough to say one should not take work home, practicing it requires a continual effort. It must become a learned habit. Maslach (1978) reports that "burnout rates soar when separation between work life and home life falls apart."

Summary

The "ball" on the issue of self renewal is always in your court. No one can maintain your momentum for you. Once you feel the need to renew yourself, you must then invest the time, energy, and risk needed to make the change happen. There is

always an alternative: you can "die on the vine" before you are ripe!

Faculty Awards for Teaching Excellence

Congratulations to additional ACES faculty who have received college and campus recognition for outstanding teaching.

Collins Award for Innovative Teaching, College of Engineering

J. Bruce Litchfield, Agricultural Engineering

Everitt Award for Teaching Excellence, College of Engineering

Yuanhui Zhang, Agricultural Engineering

Finalist, Graduate College Award for Outstanding Mentoring of Graduate Students

Janice M. Bahr, Animal Sciences

Finalist, Amoco Foundation Award for Innovation in Undergraduate Instruction

John Edgington, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences

Finalist, Oakley-Kunde Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Education

Charles Graves, Animal Sciences

Neil Shay, Food Science and Human Nutrition

Preparing Instructional Objectives,

Part 3

This is the third and final part of a three-article series on preparing instructional objectives. Mager's Preparing Instructional Objectives is the major reference used.

In March, we presented the basics of objectives: Performance, Conditions, and Criterion. In March and April, we addressed performance and gave lots of ideas about action verbs in the cognitive psychomotor and affective domains (Bloom's Taxonomy). We conclude in this issue by adding to what the student will do the conditions under which the activity occur and the criteria used to determine quality or level of performance.

Conditions - the important conditions under which the learner is expected to perform.

Mager writes that to state an objective clearly, you will sometimes have to state the conditions you will impose when students are demonstrating their mastery of the objective. Here are some examples:

Given a problem of the following type....

Given a list of....

Given any reference of the learner's choice....

When provided with a standard set of tools....

Given a properly functioning....

Without the aid of references....

Without the aid of tools....

For example, instead of simply specifying "be able to solve problems in algebra," we could improve the ability of the statement to communicate by wording it something like this:

Given a linear algebraic equation with one unknown, be able to solve for the unknown without the aid of references, tables, or calculating devices.

How detailed should you be in your description? Detailed enough to be sure the desired performance would be recognized by another competent person, and detailed enough so that others understand your intent as YOU understand it.

Continued on next page

Here are some questions you can ask yourself about your objectives as a guide to your identifying important aspects of the target, or terminal, performances you wish to develop:

1. What will the learner be allowed to use?
2. What will the learner be denied?
3. Under what conditions will you expect the desired performance to occur?

4. Are there any skills that you are specifically NOT trying to develop? Does the objective exclude such skills?

Criterion - the quality or level of performance that will be considered acceptable

Mager writes that having described what you want students to be able to do, you can increase the communication power of an objective by telling them HOW WELL you want them to be able to do it. If you can specify the acceptable performance for each objective, you will have a standard against which to test your instruction; you will have the means for determining whether your instruction is successful in achieving your instructional intent. If, for example, your best experience and wisdom tell you that you must not consider a student competent until that student can perform within a strict time limit, then you know that you will have to instruct and assist that student until the desired performance level is reached. You would

know--and the student would know--the quality of the performance to work for or exceed. What you must try to do, then, is indicate in your objectives what the acceptable performance level will be by adding words that describe the criterion of success.

The criterion can specify speed, accuracy, and quality, whichever one or ones are appropriate indicators of level of performance. Examples of the criterion portion of objectives include:

...with solutions accurate to the nearest whole number

...with no more than two incorrect entries for every ten pages of log

...so that no more than one request for repeated information is made for each customer contact

...with a presentation lasting no more than eight minutes

Summary. In writing instructional objectives that will be clear for students, use these four questions to test your work.

1. What is the main intent of the objective?
2. What does the learner have to do to demonstrate achievement of the objective?
3. What will the learner have to work with, and what will the learner have to do without?

4. How will you know when the performance is good enough to be acceptable?

Objectives become guiding lights for our instruction and for our students. Well-written instructional objectives are the foundation for student achievement.



ACADEMIC PROGRAMS is a publication of the Office of Academic Programs, College of ACES, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office of Academic Programs College of ACES 104 Mumford Hall, MC-710 1301 W. Gregory Drive Urbana, IL 61801