

Chapter 7

Beyond Content and Pedagogy: The Importance of Social–Emotional Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The changing dynamics of higher education and societal experiences overall make it critical that higher education faculty and staff understand and embrace the importance of relationship-building and the social emotional needs of their students. The chapter begins by making the argument that teaching—particularly in higher education—should be embraced as a helping profession. A review of the literature on caring and mattering is provided, and social emotional learning strategies are presented to operationalize the constructs of caring and mattering. Five instructional teaching practices and four social teaching practices are described. An overview of the contemporary research about the strategies is presented, and a practical example of how each strategy can be implemented in the college classroom is offered.

TEACHING AS A HELPING PROFESSION

What comes to mind when the concept of a helping profession is mentioned? Individuals in the medical profession? Counselors and therapists? Social workers? First published in 1975, *The Skilled Helper*, is consider the seminal work in the field of the helping professions. Now in its eleventh edition, Loyola University of Chicago professor emeritus Gerald Egan (1981) described helping professions as those that strive to help individuals face some kind of problem. Egan listed nearly three dozen helping professions including dentists, lawyers, police officers, religious leaders...and teachers. Egan clarified that although professionals from varying fields have different kinds of technical expertise, they all work with people who might experience a crisis. Specifically describing the work of teachers, Egan described how teachers are prepared with the technical skills to teach mathematics, science, or reading. In addition to pedagogical skills, Egan furthered that teachers must be trained in human helping skills. According to Egan, teachers interact with students who are “*growing physically, intellectually, and social-emotionally, and*

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therefore struggling with normative developmental tasks and crises (p. 5). More recently, the American Psychological Association (2020) defined helping professions as occupations in fields such as psychology, counseling, medicine and nursing, social work, and teaching and education.

Teaching in the PK-12 grades may be more easily conceptualized and framed as a helping profession. Images of a kindergarten teacher supporting a 6-year-old who experiences separation anxiety may come to mind. Likewise, a high school science teacher who coaches students in academic competitions such as a debate or science fairs, assumes the role of a helping mentor. In contrast, however, teaching at the university level does not often conjure up the image of a nurturing and supportive relationship between professor and student.

There are a number of reasons why teaching in higher education has not traditionally been viewed as a helping profession. First, few graduate students pursue a Ph.D. and enter the professorate because of the allure coaching and nurturing college students as they emerge into adulthood from their teenage years. More likely, graduate students pursue advanced studies because of an interest in extending their knowledge and developing expertise in their content area such as mathematics, English literature, political science, chemistry, and so forth. They are drawn to the idea of conducting important and stimulating research that may have an impact on their professional field. When faculty earn large grants, it is their teaching load that is reduced. Certainly, many faculty do value and strive to excel as teachers. In this influential book *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, Ernest Boyer (1990) proposed a model of research in the academe that included the systematic study of the teaching and learning process. Boyer's work is considered to be the impetus of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), a movement in higher education that spawned conferences, journals, and professional organizations. Still, just as many faculty view teaching as something they must do. Second, few faculty have received training or professional development about effective pedagogy, including the developmental characteristics and needs of young adults. After years of experiencing the teaching-learning process as a student, faculty teach the way they were taught when they were college students; thus, perpetuating the role of 'sage-on-the stage' rather than that of a helping professional. Finally, although the ratio of full-time faculty to adjuncts has actually increased slightly between 2009 and 2020 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020), of the faculty at degree-granting institutions, just over half (56%) were classified as full-time, and just under half (44%) were classified as part-time. Part-time faculty experience professional stressors (e.g., low pay, less job security, lack of professional support, etc.) may seek support rather than perceiving themselves as the helper.

TODAY'S COLLEGE STUDENTS

The changing dynamics of higher education and societal experiences overall make it critical that higher education faculty and staff understand and embrace the importance of relationship-building and the social emotional needs of their students. Whereas faculty may perceive of their college students as adults – albeit young adults - Arnette (2000) proposed a new concept of development for individuals between the ages of 18-25, which he called emerging adulthood. Arnette explains how demographic shifts that have taken place over the last 50 years, “*have made the late teens and early twenties not simply a brief period of transition into adult roles but a distinct period of the life course, characterized by change and exploration of possible life direction*” (p. 469). Arnett and Tanner (2006) further posited that emerging adulthood is characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feelings of being in-between,

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