

A New Warp and Weft in the Classroom

By Deni Elliott

A DECADE after completing my doctoral work, I decided to reconnect with my students by learning something entirely foreign to my talents, education, and experience. I decided to learn to weave.

A loom, brought years before on a whim, had, until then, been nothing more than a substantial piece of living-room sculpture. But, once I registered for weaving class, I looked at the loom with a mixture of anticipation and fear. Although my fingers ached to produce intricate and elegant tapestries, I worried that my attempts would more likely result in a tangled web.

I chose something daunting on purpose. I wanted to match the psychological state of students who walk into my ethics class. I projected onto them my desire to learn and do well. I took up their own desire to learn and do well, as well as their concern that the material might prove too difficult.

While taking the weaving class, I shared the experience with my students. "That sounds so hard," they would say when I told them about a grueling lesson. I felt embarrassed when I realized how rarely professors provide that much empathy and respect to students as they embark on the humbling experience of learning something new.

That was just the beginning of the trials that encouraged me to revamp my teaching methods. Over time, the more I focused on the nature of my own learning, the more I understood why students find ways to avoid honest attempts to learn.

Sitting in the weaving class, I felt awkward. Our progress was public, immortalized on classroom looms for all to see. I was slower than the other students. My choices of warp and weft, colors, and textures seemed different. Was I imagining it, or were the others avoiding me? I was a university professor, yet I felt like a special learner.

The weaving teacher provided unflinching support despite my obvious deficiencies. However I might compare my progress with that of my fellow students, she worked with and reinforced each of us. For her, weaving was not a competitive sport.

I thought about how often I put students on the spot, insisting that they take intellectual risks before they felt ready. I realized that I wasn't doing much to make them feel safe when their responses were less than perfect. I mainly massaged the egos of the students who most quickly and accurately read my mind. I became impatient with the contributions of those less often on target. I criticized their comments without concern about how that might affect their learning.

As I wove, it became obvious that I had to embrace and dissect my mistakes before I could learn what was going wrong—and before I could consistently get things right. But what was I doing in my own classroom? Like every other teacher I know, throughout the semester I assigned grades to students' written attempts to learn. No wonder they avoided turning in their work, or even felt driven to cheat.

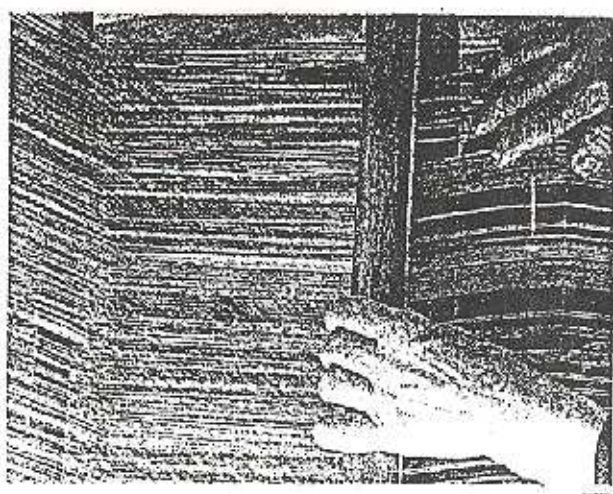
If my weaving teacher had assigned the series of F's that I would have deserved in my early attempts, I would have quit. When my teacher said that, had she graded, she would have given me higher marks because of my sincere effort, I gained a new understanding of grade inflation.

MY WEAVING CLASS also taught me that I was the only person who could definitively know when I had learned something. Sometimes my weaving teacher praised me with a note of surprise for doing something right. In those cases, she was no more amazed than I was. My successes, in those instances, were accidents, unlikely to be repeated. But when I had truly achieved new learning, I knew it. I felt it. I could apply the learning at home, on a loom of my own.

That's when I really saw the lack of connection between learning and grades. How often I had heard a student shout "Yes!" with surprise and delight when I returned a graded paper or test. In such cases, the A was more equivalent to winning the lottery than an affirmation of what a student already knew that she knew. Rather than demonstrating true learning, my students were gambling to produce just what they thought I wanted.

I began to consider what was going on in my own classroom, and finally understood that, in my grading, I wasn't evaluating learning. Instead, I was judging what were invariably point-by-number productions of my own making. I gave students required structures and materials, and hardly ever provided opportunities for them to color outside the lines. Whether multiple-choice or 20-page paper, short-answer test or essay, I designed the evaluation tool. I valued my own idea of what students should produce, rather than offering them an opportunity to demonstrate what they had actually learned.

Why is it not surprising that some students lack motivation for real learning? Most of them have never been asked to take responsibility for it. Long before college, they are indoctrinated to believe that the only evidence of learning that matters is the judgment of an external authority.



Since that life-changing semester in which I learned to weave, I've worked, with my students, to make each class a tapestry that stimulates and supports learning. I tell students that they are responsible for their own learning. I convince them that their demonstration of learning—including mistakes—will be noticed and rewarded.

WHEN my colleagues hear about my approach, many are skeptical. They cite unmotivated students, oversized classes, and their own crowded schedules as reasons for clinging to computer-graded tests and assembly-line assignments. But having students take responsibility for their own learning doesn't create new responsibilities for already overworked faculty members; it simply changes the faculty role from fountain of wisdom to facilitator. I continue to offer information and to search for engaging ways for students to gain new knowledge. But I am now more mindful that each student has her own agenda—or might develop one, given the chance.

Working to create environments for student learning—with assessment techniques that match—is the most delightful puzzle that I have confronted in 25 years of teaching. Every semester is a work in progress, and every class teaches me more about how to facilitate and coach rather than to judge.

Here is what I have learned so far: I must have clear objectives and must construct methods by which students can know on their own if they have achieved those objectives. If students are to be responsible for their own learning, they must also establish a learning objective or two for themselves. During the term, they write short essays in class about their progress. Or they bring in materials or journal entries showing that they are achieving their goals or recounting, with pride, mistakes that they have made and recognized.

I collect and file the materials, but don't examine the content unless a student has questions or requests that we review the materials together. At

the end of the semester, students read through the material that they have turned in throughout the term and return it to me along with something that demonstrates how well they have done in meeting our mutual learning goals. While an analytic paper is a common choice for demonstration, I now offer that as an alternative, not a mandate.

I still give exams that require students to write thoughtful essays on topics that I think that they should know, but now I distribute my questions well in advance of the tests. Because I am clear about what I expect students to learn, they don't have to try to read my mind. I used to accept without question the convention of hiding test questions. Now I can't find a reason that students should guess at what I want them to learn. Besides, providing the questions ahead of time allows students to tell me when those questions don't make sense.

An indirect benefit of my new approach to testing is that neither the students nor I can figure out what it would mean to cheat. What I am testing is their ability to write essays that apply concepts that I think are important. Some students have adequate knowledge of the concepts to do that before taking the course, some learn early on in the course, and others aren't able to write the essays until the night before the exam. I can't truly know how any student has achieved the level of understanding that I call adequate; I am just glad to see that they have.

As students and teachers communicate more openly, they can collaborate on creating teaching and assessment techniques that stimulate learning. Transforming the established system of teaching and evaluation in higher education is, of course, too big a burden for any one of us. But, as my loom has taught me, every teacher in every classroom has an opportunity to encourage and reward student learning—rather than simply judge teacher-centered products. We can change the rules, one classroom at a time.

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