

## A Convincing, Not-So-Modest Proposal for Classroom Transformation

Review of: *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, by L. Dee Fink; 2003; 320 pp.; Jossey-Bass (San Francisco); ISBN: 0-7879-6055-1

Reviewed by Rae S. Brosnan, Center for Educational Resources, Johns Hopkins University

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Today's faculty face pressure from a number of directions: tenure committees and chairs expect regular grant awards and publications; administrators demand continued excellence in research while increasing teaching loads and responsibilities; students (and future donors) seek enjoyable classroom experiences and more personal interactions with faculty (despite growing class sizes); and educational policy makers and employers want improved student performance and better prepared employees. These demands on faculty are large and, when taken together, looming.

Despite the demands, faculty have a responsibility to educate students. Often, this means making up for students' inadequate preparation by our nation's primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, faculty must ensure that students garner the vocabulary and an operational, functional understanding of the specific subject matter. Faculty should also engender in students a sense of appreciation for how the content applies to other areas of their lives, usually by showing how specific content relates to other subjects. And lastly, faculty play a significant role in helping our young students grow into rational, informed adults and life-long learners.

Having articulated this message in Chapter One, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* successfully argues for a new paradigm in education. In doing so, L. Dee Fink tackles a myriad of issues surrounding educational transformation: basic educational concepts and vocabulary in Chapter Two, processes for designing significant learning experiences in Chapters Three and Four, examples of and suggestions for making such changes in Chapter Five, and organizational and infrastructure requirements to support the change in Chapters Six and Seven. Finally, in the appendices he provides various tools, templates, and resources that support faculty efforts to design and develop courses. All contained within 300 pages, the book makes for a relatively quick read while providing a valuable overview of each of these areas.

Admittedly, the range of topics Fink tackles is broad, but through them Fink reinforces his central message: Education is the process of *facilitating student learning* (i.e., active learning in the classroom) over *teaching to students* (i.e., lecturing),

and faculty should champion significant learning experiences in their classrooms. He argues that learning occurs when students wrestle with real problems to solve, and he posits that students can gain foundational knowledge while working with complex situations. The key to making sure students learn the subject through such problems lies in clearly articulated learning goals and desired outcomes. From these, faculty can then build appropriate educational problems for students to work through.

Rather than pummeling readers with this message through dense academic arguments, Fink uses the process of designing courses to illustrate and reinforce the message of significant learning. For example, Chapters Three and Four describe both the theory and the specifics of his 12-step process to designing courses. He answers the inevitable questions that arise by detailing real-life examples in the fifth chapter, pulling examples from geography, engineering, chemistry, biology, business, Spanish, and teacher education, to name just a few. These examples both encourage and reassure readers, as Fink conveys a sense that faculty—who likely have not undertaken this process before—do have the skills and ability to accomplish a feat that seems meticulous and daunting.

Throughout the process chapters, Fink cites numerous references and provides templates, tools, and regular overviews to support readers as they uncover and understand his concepts and steps. These serve readers well as they grapple with, in essence, the instructional design process. Fink condenses years of knowledge into two quick chapters. These chapters detail hefty activities, and readers may benefit from having pen and paper in hand to jot down notes about their class(es) as they read. Or they should reread Chapters Three and Four carefully after they decide to follow his process.

Finally, Fink sums up his discussion of significant learning experiences by touching on the individual and organizational change process that must occur to support this teaching shift and ensure its longevity in the classroom. He reassures readers that change is slow, and transformation will not happen overnight. Faculty need not feel pressured to achieve perfection in the classroom during the first go-around. Most faculty spend several semesters honing their strategies and approaches. However, faculty and universities must push forward in a holistic, multidimensional manner in order to improve education. Campus leaders—administrators and

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Corresponding author. E-mail address: rae.brosnan@jhu.edu.

faculty alike—must work jointly with national organizations to evolve our standards, expectations, and classrooms. Recognizing the weight of his call, Fink assures readers that change can happen. In fact, it is happening. We simply must work to ensure that it continues.

As I read, I simultaneously became convinced of Fink's points and grappled with certain questions. I wondered about the specific situations I face (and that I believe are an ongoing trend): How do you address large classes (100+ students) that have few TAs to help? What strategies should I use to mitigate the volume of thoughtfully completed assignments? The unique demands of large lecture courses require thoughtful solutions that lie outside the standard course construction process and typical classroom activities. Fink provides little support in tackling the distinctive features of larger courses.

Further, although I was convinced early on of the value of using real-world problems to help students learn the material, I wondered *How* does a faculty member write convincing problems? *How* do faculty test the effectiveness of those problems reliably and validly? Without the aid of a teaching and learning consultant or of an instructional designer, how do faculty learn how to develop materials that are engaging, thoughtful, and demanding enough that students acquire the knowledge expected of them? Fink convinces me that faculty should do this and shows me where in the process I need to do this, but he does not adequately describe how to write such problems.

To address these questions, I recommend that faculty have on hand a helpful supplement to *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*: Charles Bonwell and James Eison's *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*. This small and handy volume offers detailed descriptions of various teaching and learning methodologies to use in the classroom. Another helpful resource is the National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science (<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/case.html>).

While this Web site contains resources for science faculty, the extensive real-world problems provided there are helpful to all faculty who wish to learn more about how to write and conduct problems in class. Combining these resources with Fink's guidance for significant learning experiences, faculty will be well armed to address the structural and situational factors of their courses.

I approached L. Dee Fink's book, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, with a cadre of characters in my head: an enthusiastic junior faculty member, a skeptical tenured professor, and an instructional designer. Each character provided a unique reaction to the assumptions, assertions, and suggestions Fink posited. The new faculty member felt both excited and overwhelmed by the process of transforming a typical lecture course to one that provides significant learning experiences for students. The seasoned faculty member vehemently argued with Fink about the reasons behind and the responsibility for improving our classrooms. The instructional designer searched for tangible, step-by-step guidelines, tools, and materials that help faculty improve their courses.

All of the characters enjoyed reading this book and, in doing so, gained a more thoughtful appreciation for how to provide quality learning experiences. All expanded their repertoire of learning and teaching methods. While some of Fink's arguments and assertions are debatable, he deftly lures his audience to his core message: Providing students significant learning experiences in the classroom enables them to better understand and remember content, apply subject matter to meaningful situations, and use the material to enlarge their conception of the world around them. In essence, significant learning experiences created by educators prepare students to be informed, knowledgeable, thoughtful, and effective contributors to society.