



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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BOOK REVIEW: *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* *L. Dee Fink. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003*

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To improve the quality of higher education, it is necessary to improve the quality of learning. This seemingly obvious point is central to the integrated, goal-oriented approach to course design advocated by L. Dee Fink in *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*. Traditional methods of teaching, he argues, are insufficient because they focus on information, not transformation, and on teaching rather than learning.

Due to the rapidly expanding and constantly variable amount of information now available in almost every field, Fink contends that it is both impossible and impractical to continue teaching according to a content-based paradigm. The most vital lesson students now need to learn is how to *continue* learning long after course-work is over—in essence, how to become “self-directed learners” (161). Fink avoids offering up teaching “tips” and instead outlines a new teaching “strategy,” which he believes can, over time, transfigure higher education from the foundation up. This process begins, according to Fink, where all courses begin—with the syllabus (130).

The concept of “significant learning” seems, at first glance, too subjective and slippery to be used as the measuring stick against which all higher education should be assessed and rebuilt. Perhaps anticipating this criticism, Chapter One is devoted to explaining exactly what Fink means by this

phrase and how he thinks it is possible both to create and measure “significant learning.” Learning, he maintains, requires both a *process* and a measurable *outcome*. “Significant” learning, then, indicates a student who is both engaged in the process and who experiences valuable lasting change (e.g., professional development, enhanced awareness, personal enrichment, leadership abilities, and so on). While his definitions of the proper goal or measurable outcome of learning remain somewhat abstract, Fink convincingly argues that an improved process necessarily leads to improved outcomes. The key then is to *design the desired outcomes into the process*

Alongside his argument for significant learning, a secondary goal of the book is to organize existing research on pedagogy into a coherent and practically applicable teaching philosophy centered on Fink’s notion of integrated course design. Chapters Two through Five define a new pedagogical taxonomy more appropriate to his proposed learning-centered paradigm (27). This taxonomy enumerates six dimensions of significant learning, and consequently, of integrated course design: Foundational Knowledge, Application, Integration, Human/Social Dimension, Caring/Valuing, and Learning How to Learn (30). Fink recommends that instructors begin planning their courses not with a list of topics, but by asking themselves, “What do I hope students will have learned, that will still be there and have value several years after the course is over?” (63). The answers to this question help define for each course what is most significant and become the learning goals around which the syllabus is designed.

The final chapter, by far the most abstract, delves into Fink’s own teaching philosophy and leaves readers with his thoughts on spirituality,

citizenship and community. The most helpful section of the entire book, however, is saved for the excellent step-by-step course “Decision Guide” to be found in Appendix A. These six pages are the distilled essence of Fink’s course design strategy. Modeling his own process, the appendix offers his readers an opportunity to peruse Fink’s desired outcome. In keeping with Fink’s concept of learning-centered backward design, I recommend starting with the appendix to help identify what you find most significant, then working your way backward through the book.