

Jeanne Nakamura & Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Engagement in a profession: the case of undergraduate teaching

“When I was at Yale, I overheard a conversation between two famous senior professors. The two were talking about the fact that they did not like teaching undergraduates and preferred to teach graduate students, and to do research. They were exchanging pointers on how to get out of undergraduate teaching. One of them was saying that he taught them badly: he reused his lecture notes and didn’t try to put anything into it.

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And so the dean didn’t make him teach that course very often.

I found myself getting very angry at hearing this, but I couldn’t quite understand why it mattered to me what these guys did in their teaching. And then I realized that I had [formed a conviction] that pedagogy was fundamentally important, especially at the undergraduate level. At that moment, something in me said, ‘I don’t want to be like them.’ It was then that I decided I would think about teaching at a small college.”

This event, described as a graduate-school epiphany by an engineer who went on to become an outstanding teacher at an outstanding college, illustrates the lack of support for taking undergraduate teaching seriously and aspiring to excellence in it. Yet isn’t it worrisome that few college teachers would find the vignette surprising?

Unfortunately it is not only university teaching where the central purpose of the profession appears to be compromised. Physicians find themselves increasingly in the role of administrators rather than healers, and lawyers complain about not being able to serve clients with the personal attention they expected to be able to give when starting their careers. In most professions, practitioners rarely spend more than a quar-

ter of the time on the job doing what they see as their main task. For instance, physicians treat and talk to patients about 23 percent of their working time; the rest is spent talking to coworkers, reading, writing, filing, and doing a host of other activities that are less and less related to their training and purpose. What makes this state of affairs difficult to understand is that the professions are supposed to be the most free and most satisfying ways to make a living. If doctors, teachers, lawyers, and engineers all have trouble doing the work they are meant to do, what about the great majority of people who work in even more constrained settings?

There are basically two threats to the professions. One is subjective, involving a loss of motivation and commitment. As long as workers experienced their jobs as callings, they were motivated to listen to the voice that pressed them to do their best. But who is calling them now? That voice has become a barely audible whisper, obscured by stentorian calls to do what's best for one's comfort, bank account, or social influence. Members of a profession can be compelled or intimidated into doing work that meets standards of quality and codes of ethics. But they cannot be forced into feeling *engaged*. It is when they enjoy and care deeply about the work they do, and wholeheartedly value the people and the ends it is meant to serve, that they are most likely to aspire to excellence and principled conduct.

The second threat to professional conduct involves more objective factors. For example, it has been argued that the diffusion of the automobile, which resulted in suburban sprawl, has made it uneconomical for physicians to make home visits. This has moved the interaction between doctor and patient from domestic to more impersonal settings,

contributing to the compartmentalization and bureaucratization of medicine. For each profession, dozens of similar factors have transformed how the work is done. Some of the time the resulting change in practice is sensible, even inevitable. Other times it is not – and professionals and the public they serve are the worse for it.

Consider the case of just one class of modern professionals: those who teach undergraduates. Undergraduate teaching is a profession that influences all others. Medical schools shape future doctors; law schools shape tomorrow's attorneys. Those responsible for undergraduate education touch the lives of students who go on to enter *all* the professions. As a result, undergraduate teachers potentially have a much wider impact on the future well-being of the professions and, through them, society as a whole. The point is not that undergraduate education lays the groundwork for absorbing a body of professional knowledge, or that it initiates students into a field's distinctive code of ethics. Rather, at its best, undergraduate education plays a special role in encouraging each student's engagement with a discipline and, in this respect, in preparing all students to do work that is 'good.' For while finding enjoyment and meaning in one's undertakings may be the most durable basis for good work, how to find them is not taught in graduate and professional schools.

We recently interviewed about a hundred leading teachers and administrators at ten highly regarded schools, including liberal arts and community colleges, research universities, and a major for-profit institution.¹ The picture of the

1 These interviews were conducted as part of the Study of Good Work in Higher Education supported by the William and Flora Hewlett

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profession that emerges from these interviews is an ideal that hardly represents what the job of teaching is like at most of the nation's colleges. But unless we occasionally examine what ideal professional conditions entail, it is unlikely that we will be able to improve the condition of the professions more generally.

Unrepresentative though they may be, these engaged teachers and administrators illustrate how it is possible to derive satisfaction from a profession today. One professor told us, "If I won the lottery, I would still be coming back here to do my job. There is nothing else I can imagine I would rather be doing." Such deep absorption is most likely to occur when the work holds clear challenges that fully utilize capacities without overwhelming them, when the rules of engagement are unambiguous, when actions receive timely feedback, and when it is possible to shape the process as it unfolds. A teacher who can still vividly recall her own teachers' infectious enthusiasm explained, "They put things in manageable pieces for you so you could understand it. And then as you gained some skill with it, you started to become passionate about it, to get excited about it, and it became fun." When the work's challenges are not only well defined and demanding but also aligned with what the individual values, the profession becomes a source of meaning as well as enjoyment.

Like any profession, undergraduate teaching offers several ways to become engaged in the job. For undergraduate teachers, four areas of possible engagement are key: educating students; preserving and advancing a specific domain of knowledge; serving the needs of the institution; and responding to the needs

of the broader society. Teachers become engaged in their work to the extent that they find enjoyable challenges in one or more of these areas, and to the extent that they find that those challenges are in line with their values. In what follows, we will explore the experience of teachers at outstanding colleges in each of these areas.

There is no question that *educating students* is the core challenge of the teaching profession. An engaged teacher enjoys and finds meaning in this central task, mediating between the students whose learning is the goal and the set of questions that animate the domain of knowledge.

Effective teachers choose pedagogies that allow them to enjoy the process and get their students involved. A teacher at a research university explained, "It's fun. In all my courses I try to do these sort of hands-on, more inquiry-based things. It keeps [the students] engaged."

A profession becomes a vocation when those doing it believe that its challenges matter, and when the work connects them to what they value most. As a teacher at a community college told us, "Education is supposed to be inspiring. It's supposed to be exciting. It's supposed to change your life. If education can't enrich, why bother?" The challenges of teaching are infused with meaning when the teacher cares about the students and about helping them meet their educational goals. "I don't know of anything that really gets my engine going more than watching the light come on for a student," one professor told us. Another said, "To see a student suddenly begin to question his own assumptions – not desperately, but excitedly – and with tools to understand. To see that same student come back the next year and seem to have grown five years

Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Atlantic Philanthropies.

older in terms of who that student is as a human being – that does it for me. It’s exciting, it’s unendingly exciting.” Many teachers – particularly those working with disadvantaged students – are profoundly moved to see their students receive their diplomas, and speak with pride about students who return years after graduation to share their accomplishments and express their gratitude.

While such rewarding experiences should be sufficient to keep professionals focused on their primary task, many obstacles may interfere. When a teacher is expected to face five hundred young people in an introductory class, for example, it is almost impossible to see an individual student question his own assumptions, or to see the light of understanding dawn in his eyes. Also, while some teachers love engaging underprepared students who are eager to learn, others feel frustrated about not being able to overcome the chasm separating too many students from the expectations of higher education. As in other professions, numerous obstacles make it difficult for teachers to be continuously engaged, even with the core aspects of their task.

The challenge of *preserving and advancing knowledge* provides a second form of engagement for college teachers. In this case, they are rewarded by knowing that through them something of value survives as a living part of the culture. “I just always loved learning. I loved school,” a professor told us. “It was the place in my life where I always felt most at home. [The university] just seemed to me a wonderful place to be and a wonderful way to live, constantly reading and asking complicated, deep, unanswerable questions.” Especially at research institutions, faculty may find excitement in researching and writing in

their disciplines, or in the life of the mind more generally.

True, the two most basic roles of college professors – teaching and research – often conflict. One professor at a liberal arts college recalled that during graduate school at a leading public university, “I had to sort of hide under a rug, in a way, my desire to teach. I got a terrific graduate education there, but the down side was it was clear they didn’t care one bit about teaching.” A study conducted in the 1990s showed that in all types of four-year institutions, the proportion of time dedicated to research rose and the time dedicated to teaching declined. Yet over two-thirds of the faculty outside research universities claim they are more interested in teaching than research. It is obviously not the case that devotion to one’s discipline has to conflict with doing good work as a teacher. Indeed, a teacher indifferent to his area of study is unlikely to engage students.

Serving the needs of the institution is an important element in any profession: doctors may become devoted to their hospitals, lawyers to their firms, journalists to their newspapers, professors to their colleges or universities. A distinguished scientist assumed the presidency of her research university to a large extent because of “a deep love of this institution.” She explained that “it would not have occurred to me to think about this job at any other institution. You have to fundamentally care about a university that you lead because it’s too much work if there isn’t a real passion.” She traced her own passion to “the respect with which [the institution] treats ideas, treats excellence, treats people . . . I deeply admired the way in which [my predecessor] ran the university based on a core set of values and principles that we were going to try and live up to. I think it made me al-

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ways proud to be a member of the community.” When professionals find a place in an organization that shares their values, a sense of vocation is more likely to flourish. A clearly defined institutional mission provides a compelling compass for action and a basis for judging if one is doing good work. The presence of such a mission is a sign that an ethos genuinely exists within the institution – an ethic that expresses the defining spirit and values of the community.

Although such commitment is common at outstanding colleges, the wider field is virtually silent about the rewards of engaging challenges of an institutional nature. In the Carnegie Foundation’s widely cited 1989 survey, faculty members were asked, “Do your interests lie primarily in research or in teaching?” – the survey did not measure administrative or institutional interests at all. The same survey revealed that “faculty identify strongly with their academic discipline, less so with their department, and still less with their institution.” Shaping a collective enterprise and participating in a community is perhaps the least recognized source of joy in academic life. Even to use a term such as ‘joy’ seems a stretch for a set of challenges that most teachers view at best as duties and at worst as outright burdens.

Enhancing the well-being of an institution one loves can of course become an end in itself; and efforts to burnish its reputation, build its coffers, or otherwise enhance it can come to be an enjoyable way of using one’s skills as a leader, fundraiser, or strategist. Service to the institution acquires meaning because of the values the institution represents. Good work gets done when serving the institution advances the profession’s core purpose of educating students.

The fourth area of engagement for teachers involves *servicing the needs of the broader society*. Many teachers hold values that shape their educational goals. When, for example, a faculty member describes the challenges and rewards of fostering diversity and openness to the perspectives of others, he or she is seeing beyond the classroom or institution to the society as a whole. An environmental studies professor we interviewed counts preserving the natural environment among her overarching goals. As she put it, “I realized that if I was worried about the trends in the environment ... [and] if I was going to make a difference, it would be that I need to be back in the classroom and talk to people about what was happening with the environment.” Many teachers engaged by social and cultural issues such as war and peace, globalization, and poverty share this belief that the classroom constitutes one front in a larger battle.

This kind of engagement can be consistent with one’s professional commitments but lie outside one’s daily job – as when doctors volunteer in such organizations as Doctors Without Borders, or when lawyers do pro bono work. For some professionals, such outside engagement may become the most meaningful part of working life. Of course, an activist approach to the profession can also be a detriment, as when a teacher uses his bully pulpit to indoctrinate students in partisan causes.

Most undergraduate teachers participate in the four key areas of possible engagement – educating students; preserving and advancing knowledge; serving the needs of the institution; and responding to the needs of the broader society – without necessarily deriving the same amount of enjoyment and meaning from each of them. Indeed, the very

effort required to negotiate multiple sets of challenges can diminish one's ability to engage any of them fully. Nevertheless, some rare individuals find all four sets of challenges to be a source of significant meaning and enjoyment.

One such individual is John T. Scott, who has taught at his alma mater, Xavier University in Louisiana, for thirty-five years. A historically black, Catholic college renowned for its success in training future doctors and scientists, the school has struggled with limited resources to serve underprepared students. As an art teacher, Scott has also had to struggle to interest Xavier students in his field of expertise. Yet he describes undiminished absorption in the challenges of pursuing his craft as sculptor and printmaker ("I am still discovering things and expanding the language of my craft"); helping students learn ("I developed this love for sharing information . . . teaching is as much a creative challenge as being in my studio"); sustaining the culture of his institutional home ("'Pass it on' – that is the philosophy here. And I think I'm one of the ones who continues that tradition"); and serving the broader community ("As a visual artist, part of my job is to be a spokesman for the community that I'm part of"). During his years of teaching, he built a foundry from scratch, constructed the critically acclaimed African American pavilion for the 1984 World's Fair, and garnered such honors as the 1992 MacArthur "genius" award.

How has he remained engaged despite the obstacles? His approach on all fronts creates the conditions for intense involvement, or 'flow.' His goals have a fine clarity. His nonnegotiable standard is excellence ("'Good enough' is never good enough. If it's not the best you're capable of, you're being dishonest"). He regards hurdles as challenges ("An

obstacle should not be something that slows you down, but [that] teaches you how to jump high"). Scott's work is also *meaningful*: each set of challenges matters to him; each endeavor connects him to something beyond himself. Making art, teaching students, meeting institutional challenges – each is at the same time a way of taking on challenges facing the human community in general and the African American community in particular. Through his teaching he aims to prepare students for life ("They [should] leave here with a sense of purpose – what they want to do with their lives – [and a recognition that] life is not separate from the community of humanity that you're a part of"). By serving Xavier University, he supports an institution he loves ("This place has been more like a family than like a school") with a mission in which he believes ("The success of Xavier has been that the student has been the focus for so many years").

Scott's case illustrates one way of being fully engaged by all four sets of challenges without feeling pulled in four different directions. For some, taking all four sets of challenges seriously could amount to a draining exercise in juggling, multitasking, and negotiating trade-offs and compromises. The resulting risk: all of the challenges may be met less well and provide less fulfillment than when a single one is engaged alone. For those like Scott, by contrast, it can mean that the effort invested in any of the four challenges also serves to meet the requirements of the other three.

A sense of vocation is critical to teachers' own well-being and to the continued vitality of higher education. When college teachers are uninspired, they may dishearten future professionals of all kinds. Conversely, when undergraduate teachers experience their work as a vocation, they may have a positive impact on

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the next generation of workers in *all* the professions. To inspire passion, one must feel it oneself. An outstanding teacher in our study remembers college “classes that I absolutely loved that had nothing to do with what I was studying. But I loved the class because the teacher was so excited about it If you don’t live it, it’s hard to teach it.” Engaged teachers are likely to find ways to draw students into the excitement of learning.

More broadly, they provide a model of engaged adulthood for their students. They show that it is possible to experience work as a calling rather than merely as a job. One of the teachers in our study suggested that ultimately students have only one question of their teachers: are you happy enough that I can stand to be like you? Through their conduct, engaged teachers answer the question affirmatively. Young people often see status and wealth as keys to adult happiness. Engaged teachers present a vision that grounds happiness in the pursuit of broader goals. For thirty-five years, John Scott’s students have watched him engage his profession as a way of life, approach it with intensity, rise to its challenges, and, through it, serve the communities to which he belongs. Undeterred by lack of resources and repeatedly achieving extraordinary results despite steep odds, Scott and his colleagues – like his own teachers at Xavier – present students with a model of work that contrasts sharply with the prevailing one of “getting a job and making a whole lot of money.”

Students respond to teachers’ genuine interest in the subject they are teaching, and to teachers’ interest in the students themselves. Most students quickly catch on if a teacher is bored by what he is saying, or if he has little respect for the class. As one teacher notes, “They will

put up with all sorts of stuff if they believe that you have their best interests at heart – [and] they are very good at detecting whether you do.”

At the same time, teachers need to introduce students to the broader institutional framework that may nurture a lifetime passion for learning. To succeed, learning must be embedded in a network of stable and significant relationships. Teachers bring students into the learning community through various routes, establishing communities in their own classrooms and taking the most engaged students to professional meetings. More broadly, they may help create a sense of intellectual community in the institution as a whole by establishing common curricula, setting aside time for the exchange of ideas outside of class, designing spaces that encourage interaction, and supporting the negotiation of differences through dialogue. At many universities, of course, the great majority of students display with pride the bumper stickers and other paraphernalia of the school’s football team, but are effectively strangers to the world of knowledge the school is supposed to represent. One of the main tasks confronting higher education is to engage young people not just with ideas, but also with a fellowship of knowledge seekers.

Teachers heighten student engagement when they can show their students that what they are learning might make a difference outside the domain of knowledge and the field of scholarship. Good schools set ambitious goals for their students: to become community leaders, champions of the oppressed, protectors of the environment. When teachers care deeply about such goals and can provide credible solutions, the aim of serving social ends through knowledge becomes compelling to students. For example, one professor told

us her work is “not a job at all; it’s a call to contribute to the world.” She framed the challenge for her students in the same terms: “We want [the students] to go out there and participate and be leaders in the community, to excite them, to engage them! We want to engage them so that they become engaged with the community . . . professional life is to be viewed as a life of service . . . I think all of us try to share that, and instill it in our students.”

Undergraduate teaching in the United States today may be extreme if not unique among the professions in the divergent visions of service it encompasses. However, it is not unique in the varied forms of engagement it affords, nor in privileging one set of challenges – the form of service to others that defines the profession – over the other challenges that members of the profession may find engaging. Good work can be threatened if secondary tasks actively compete or conflict with the profession’s *raison d’être* – for teachers, the education of students. However, good work may be more likely if engaging the challenges of domain, institution, or broader society serves or complements that central purpose.

In addition to being typical of professions in this general sense, undergraduate teaching has a special, underappreciated relationship to all the professions: if work is enhanced or compromised there, it will cause ripples throughout the professions for which an undergraduate education is a prerequisite, and affect all the knowledge workers on whom the future of society depends. If good work is threatened in the colleges, we suggest, it is at risk everywhere.

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