

# Reflections on Superior Teaching

## Cook Prize Acceptance

G. Peter Wilson, August 8, 2016

### Introduction

- Thanks Billy [Soo] for those thoughtful remarks, which are especially appreciated coming from the recipient of multiple teaching awards. And thanks to my other Boston College colleagues and former students for coming today. I deeply cherish you being here.
- Thanks to the Selection Committee for bestowing this honor.
- And, a heartfelt thanks to the Cooks for their generous support for the Cook Prize.
- Congratulations to Marcus [Ahrens] and Billie [Cunningham]. I've long admired your commitment to your students and your willingness to share teaching tips.
- Today, I'm going to start by briefly discussing key outcomes of superior teaching. That is, valuable things students learn from superior teachers. Then I will discuss two teaching principles I share with my wife Carolyn who co-teaches all my courses. One of these focuses on what we teach and the other on how we teach.

### Key Outcomes of Superior Teaching

- So, what are key outcomes of superior teaching?
- I believe superior teachers change lives. This was certainly true for my mentors.
- Of course, students' lives have already been changed significantly by superior teachers long before they arrive in college. So, what incremental changes can we make?
- We can impact their career success and fulfillment:
- Thought leaders tell us that superior accounting professors help students attain:
  - Ability to think critically about accounting & business issues.
  - Skills to work effectively with others.
  - Skills to thrive in a knowledge economy.
  - Desire to become accountants or work effectively with them.

## Teach Robust Concepts and Rich Applications to Prepare Students for Big Challenges

- Our first principle is robust concepts and rich real-world applications prepare students for big challenges.
- Let's start with the challenges. These present both threats and opportunities. Arguably, the biggest threat students confront is having their jobs outsourced to developing countries or increasingly to automation.
- The good news is this threat is fueled by globalization and technology innovations. These forces also provide rewarding opportunities for students who have the critical thinking skills and confidence needed to adapt to change.
- The pace of change associated with these forces has grown exponentially during my career. One way to view this is the size of the waves we've had to surf have increasingly gotten bigger as we've moved from little data in the 80s, to big data today, and to beyond big data in the future:
- During the 80's and until quite recently, data analyses were mostly based on relatively small quantitative samples. The waves of change resulting from technological innovation were relatively easy for accountants to master. And, foreign competition for accounting jobs was practically nonexistent.
- Fast forward to today when we have big data. This involves petabytes of qualitative and quantitative data, requiring sophisticated tools to analyze. And accounting tasks requiring lower-level thinking skills are increasingly being outsourced to automation or developing countries. This means the waves our students will need to surf, have gotten much more challenging, but also more thrilling, providing they don't wipe out.
- But today's waves pale in comparison to those on the horizon, as we move beyond big data. Perhaps the biggest challenge will be staying ahead of automation as breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and robotics increasingly lead to situations where machines can process big data faster, cheaper, and more effectively than humans.
- Again there's good news. Actually, there are two reasons to be optimistic:
  - First, for the foreseeable future, there will still be plenty of tasks that can't be automated. But, mastering them will mean staying ahead of increasingly sophisticated automation. This will take enhanced critical thinking skills to resolve highly complex issues; a mindset that embraces change; and the confidence to tackle monstrous waves.
  - Second, Susan Crosson, Julie Smith David, Bruce Behn and others have assembled an impressive group of surfing instructors from academia and practice who demonstrate how to tackle these waves in a series of must-see videos posted to AAA Commons.

- Our challenge as educators is to give students a sturdy foundation they can build on as they progressively scaffold from small waves to bigger ones, while in college and thereafter. This will ensure they have highly successful and fulfilling careers, and avoid wiping out.
- Now let's turn to how we build this foundation using robust concepts anchored in the Pathways Vision Model and rich real-world applications.
- By robust, I mean concepts that explain a broad array of phenomena and, importantly, are largely invariant to change.
- The role concepts play in learning is illustrated in the accounting tree of knowledge.
- The facts, processes, and techniques students need to master to succeed, especially early in their careers, are the leaves on the tree of knowledge. As such they have relatively short lives. By contrast, conceptual frameworks like the Pathway Vision Model are the tree trunk; related big concepts are major limbs; and so on.
- Students need to learn the concepts that persist as the leaves change so they can readily adapt. But concepts do more than help students identify similarities in phenomena over time. They also explain similarities across phenomena at a point in time. Here the analogy is one limb can support many leaves.
- Learning how to identify the concept behind phenomena, that is to apply the concept, can be quite challenging. To apply a familiar concept to a complex situation, students need to see through the complexity and recognize that the concept explains the situation. Once again, scaffolding is important. We teach this in two steps.
- First, we introduce a concept using a very simple fictitious company, and then we illustrate how the same concept applies to a complex setting using a real company's financials. But, this is not enough for students to identify the concept in a new setting.
- In the second step, students practice applying the concept repeatedly in diverse real-world contexts. This is the only way they will become proficient at discerning the subtle nuances that characterize applications in different contexts.
- This approach helps students learn that concepts are pathways they can follow throughout their careers to find simplicity on the far side of complexity.
- This gives them the agility to quickly adapt to change.
- I want to emphasize one more point. This approach blends research, the source of concepts, with practice, the source of applications. In doing so, it emphasizes synergies between teaching and research.

## **“We” Make Great Learning Experiences**

- Our second principle is “we,” meaning everyone involved, make great learning experiences.
- To explain what I mean, I’m going to share something I tell students during the first class:
  - I start by saying, “you may have heard we’re great teachers, well that simply isn’t true. We’re very good teachers. Actually, we’re very, very good. But, we’re not great.”
  - I then follow up by saying “I’m also just a very good husband and father, but I have a great family. Similarly, while we are not great teachers, we have great courses. But, this only happens when everyone involved is committed to this end and comes to class well prepared and eager to participate.”
- When the entire class shares this commitment, we create something extra special together. In this regard, we view ourselves as composers and conductors and our students as the orchestra.
- We write the scores, that is, the course materials, and conduct the classes, and our students play the instruments. Working together we make great music, that is, create the right tempo, rhythm, harmony, and tone for a great learning experience.
- This also gives us an opportunity to demonstrate to students that their success will depend greatly on others’ success. We call this principle, taking the journey from “me” to “we.”
- I end the first class by saying “if the course fails to turn out great, Carolyn and I will be disappointed, but we won’t take all of the blame. Neither will we take all of the credit if it succeeds." Shared responsibility means shared credit.
- In this spirit, I’d like to share this award with thousands of former students, including four in the audience, for having played a big role in taking our courses from just very good to great. I’d also like to share the award with my former teaching assistants, also represented by the four former students in the audience. They played an essential role in our courses, by providing a safety net for students, which allowed us to raise the course bar significantly. Finally, I’d like to share the award with Carolyn, who, as most everyone in this room knows, contributes equally to our success.

### **Summary**

- To summarize, superior teachers change lives by, among other things, making great music with their students and getting them ready to surf big waves. Now, that’s fun and fulfilling.
- Thanks again for this splendid award.