PYGMALION IN THE CLASSROOM

Folks:

In 1968 Harvard professor, Robert Rosenthal published, Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development (1968; expanded edition 1992). The book caused quite a stir with its basic conclusion, "when teachers expect students to do well and show intellectual growth, they do; when teachers do not have such expectations, performance and growth are not so encouraged and may in fact be discouraged in a variety of ways."

How does this "Pygmalion phenomenon" impact college teaching? Quite significantly, it turns out. Below is an excerpt from the article, Pygmalion In The Classroom, by James Rhem, executive editor of The National Teaching & Learning Forum, February 1999, Vol. 8 No. 2. The full article can be found at: [http://www.ntlf.com/html/pi/9902/pygm_1.htm].

Regards,
Rick Reis
Reis@stanford.edu
UP NEXT: Distribute Work

---------- 789 words ----------

PYGMALION IN THE CLASSROOM

Excerpt of article by James Rhem, executive editor, of The National Teaching & Learning Forum, February 1999, Vol. 8 No. 2, [http://www.ntlf.com/html/pi/9902/pygm_1.htm].

In Higher Ed?

Rosenthal's book (coauthored with Lenore Jacobson) describes dozens of persuasive studies suggesting that our expectations strongly influence the performance of those around us from the members of our bowling team to the students in our classes. How may the Pygmalion phenomenon show up in higher education? "In what you teach," answers Rosenthal. "If you think your

students can't achieve very much, are perhaps not too bright, you may be inclined to teach simple stuff, do a lot of drills, read from your lecture notes, give simple assignments calling for simplistic factual answers; that's one important way it can show up."

And what about the bell curve? How does the nearly universal presumption that classes will show such a distribution affect outcomes? "At Harvard the problem is the reverse," says Rosenthal. "I have colleagues who give all A's. That should not be. I am a bell curve believer. Not everybody is going to be a star, a Ph.D. or what have you, that's reality. But almost everybody can learn more than they are learning."

Rosenthal offers the example of the juniors he teaches: "I ask them to define a research problem, search the literature, design an experiment and come in with results all in one semester. Now nobody can do all that in one semester. I can't do that in one semester, but these are juniors: they don't know it can't be done; so they all do it. They do amazing things."

"I don't prejudge the people in the class," he continues, "but I have never met a class that didn't have distribution in it in over forty years of teaching."

Rosenthal acknowledges how frustrating it is to know how powerfully teacher expectation affects student performance and not to know how to immediately use that information to improve teaching across the board. What about a very clear syllabus that outlines expectations in a very positive way, I ask. "Here again," says Rosenthal, "it's possible that such a syllabus does not cause anything to happen, but the kind of person who does this kind of planning is likely to teach well, care about teaching, have high expectations."

Rosenthal has worked closely with the Bok Center for Teaching and Learning in some of his research, using their video tapes of teachers to probe the intangible reality of interpersonal communications between teachers and students. "You can tell in about ten seconds of silent video how a teacher will be evaluated at the end of the semester," he says. Rosenthal and colleagues had undergraduates rate teachers they'd never seen and correlated their scores with the ratings the teachers actually got from their students at the end of the year. "We couldn't believe the results; so we replicated them," Rosenthal reports. In a parallel experiment, he took students and played "content-filtered speech"--recordings of teachers speaking, altered so that only the rhythm and tone of voice come

through--for them and got the same high correlations. But what does this mean? "Our research can't speak to causes," says Rosenthal. "Tone of voice is correlated with high teacher ratings, but there's no evidence that it causes them."

Interactional Style

If Rosenthal's clear findings offer no clear answers, they do point toward some hopeful lines of speculation, many of them focusing on "interactional style." Could the most effective interactional style be taught, aped, internalized? It doesn't seem likely that anyone can learn to fake good teaching. And, of course, good teaching takes so many different forms. "There is a whole body of work in the psychotherapy literature," says Rosenthal, "about something called 'patient matching,' and it is possible we might learn how to do something like that with students and teachers." For some, Jungian analysis works well; for others, Freud's the ticket. The trick lies in finding a therapist whose therapy you believe in, that fits your mode of listening, your way of receiving signals. If the interactional styles of a variety of different types of good teachers were matched up with students especially receptive to those interactional styles, more academic success might well be the result. But all that lies down the road of more research.

A Moral Conclusion

For the moment Rosenthal will venture only one conclusion of a prescriptive nature from his decades of research: "Superb teachers can teach the "unteachable"; we know that. So, what I think this research shows is that there's a moral obligation for a teacher: if the teacher knows that certain students can't learn, that teacher should get out of that classroom."

References:

* Eden, Dov. Pygmalion in Management. D.C. Heath: Lexington, MA, 1990.

* Rosenthal, Robert and Jacobson, Lenore. Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development. Irvington Publishers: New York, 1992.