



# DLSI NEWSLETTER



Supporting teaching and learning at La Salle

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## DO WE VALUE GOOD TEACHING?

[John Warner](#), in a recent Inside Higher Ed blog post, described teaching as a classic [wicked problem](#). I was neither aware of the phrase, nor had I ever heard teaching described this way, so it caught my attention.

In many respects I agree with the characterization. Effective teaching is a complex endeavor tailored to a unique classroom and individual student needs within the cultural and social context of an institution. The numerous variables in teaching are in a constant state of flux and are often interconnected. There is rarely a definitive “solution” to any of the challenges that teaching and learning presents. The content changes. The learners change. Individual students behave differently from class to class, as do we. Solving one element of the “problem” often reveals other challenges. It’s an emotional and relational task that is subject to the inconsistencies of human behavior. Teaching and learning have no end point and there is no single solution to the problem of how to teach something to others.

On the other hand, there are many ways that teaching does not fit the definition of a wicked problem. Teaching clearly allows for

iteration. Teachers can adjust plans or try new strategies based on ongoing feedback. Bad decisions can be corrected and misunderstandings can be revised. Our mistakes can certainly be impactful, but we can usually recover. While every classroom and student bring unique challenges, **we know how people learn**, and have solid research that serves as a foundation for evidence-based teaching practices.

**Good teaching is really hard.** I am just not sure it is entirely a wicked problem...but, that was not Warner’s main point. His post is a call for research and practice that taps into the qualitative nature of teaching and learning (which, to be fair, does align more closely with the concept of a wicked problem). It was, in part, a reaction to a recent article by Beth McMurtrie in the Chronicle of Higher Education: titled [Americans Value Good Teaching. Do Colleges?](#) **It is an article worth reading.**

Consider the issues that McMurtrie highlights: In higher education, teaching is “rarely examined or rewarded.” Tenure and promotion processes “lack meaningful methods for discerning whether a faculty member is an excellent teacher or

simply OK”. Teaching is seldom valued over publication, or even service, and when it is, the student course evaluation is used as evidence, even though we know it does not measure teaching quality. Additionally, much of the instructional capacity is passed to contingent faculty, who carry heavier loads, may teach for multiple institutions, and who receive even less teaching support than their full-time counterparts.

In poll after poll, the public thinks the most important factor for indicating the quality of a college or university is that it has “professors who are excellent teachers.” **Yet, we don’t explicitly measure, systematically value, or fully support good teaching and the work necessary to facilitate its improvement.** As Amy Hawkins, an assistant provost at the University of Central Arkansas says “We’ve created a culture in higher education where **our core thing we do isn’t valued**, that makes absolutely no sense.”

Fortunately, we have a couple of things going for us here at La Salle. Certainly, the namesake of our institution provides a solid spiritual, moral, philosophical, and practical foundation for classroom practice. Additionally, we are one of only 26% of colleges and

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universities nation-wide [that has a teaching and learning institute for faculty](#).

On the other hand, like most institutions, we don't have systemic mechanisms to identify the quality of teaching, nor do we incentivize continuing professional development of teaching, or require improved classroom instruction, which begs the question: **If we know that the greatest barrier to student success on college campuses is ineffective teaching, shouldn't we work to rectify that?**

We know a great deal about teaching and learning from a research perspective, but any findings that make their way into the repertoire of educators have to be put into use in complex and shifting inter and intra personal situations. This requires (a) knowledge of our students (both individually and collectively), (b) knowledge of our subject matter, (c) knowledge of how learning happens, and (d) knowledge of how to teach in a way that connects a, b, and c effectively. **It makes little sense to leave that to chance.**

Good teaching takes time, focus, and a willingness and commitment to constantly reexamine one's practice. It requires institutional and collegial support for ongoing professional development.

We are fortunate to be at a university that understands the vital importance of a teaching mission. However, that recognition only takes us so far. **We need to**

**work together to strengthen institutional policies and systems that will support, incentivize, and recognize excellent classroom practice.**

High quality teaching provides us with a direct path to improving student persistence and success. And, a renewed focus on teaching and learning, supported by institutional structures that explicitly value classroom practice, has the potential to build on our legacy and set us apart from our competition.



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### **MAYBE ITS YOUR COURSE, AND NOT THE STUDENTS**

There is a pervasive myth in education, [writes Jessica Blake](#), which suggests educators need to lower the academic standards of a course to accommodate for diversity and inclusion. Indeed, I've also heard the myth extended to first-generation and non-traditional students.

I read her article on the heels of seeing an opinion piece in the New York Times, titled [Teachers Can't Hold Kids Accountable. It's Making the Job Miserable](#). The author shares the experiences of K-12 teachers who battle [snow plow parents](#) and school district policies that create substantial pressures to avoid failures, poor grades, and behavioral accountability.

Regardless of myth or reality, the tension between maintaining rigorous standards, using

equitable assessment, and ensuring learning outcomes is palpable at every educational level.

A growing literature, however, suggests that **structural changes to courses and altering the way we teach improves academic performance without lowering expectations**. Indeed, the changes that emerge from that research align with evidence-based, best practice in teaching and learning for all students.

Blake shares research by [Web and Paul \(2023\)](#) who found that demographic grade gaps could be attributed to the course structure, rather than student preparation in an introductory physics course. While [Simmons and Heckler \(2020\)](#) found that stronger weighting of non-exam course components benefited women and underrepresented minority students in an introductory physics course.

While two studies are far from revelatory, Blake, and the authors of these studies, raise a useful point. **Rather than looking for perceived deficits in students, we might better serve them if we look at how the structure of our courses could be improved for learning.** As I like to remind my pre-service teachers, it helpful to focus on the classroom elements that we can directly control.

We might consider alternate ways to introduce concepts, test knowledge, and assess learning. For example changing the order of when we teach concepts vs. when

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we problem solve could be impactful. It is often productive, from a learning standpoint, to attempt a problem that cannot yet be solved before a new concept is introduced. On the the other hand, students who lack a foundational concept might benefit from some conceptual work before problem solving. Understanding students' background knowledge is an essential first step.

We know that **frequent low and no stakes quizzing dramatically improves learning**. Consider changing the frequency and format of testing, and keep the focus on learning the content by allowing re-takes or opportunities to demonstrate understanding in alternate ways. Additionally, consider how assessments are weighted to determine a final grade, perhaps reducing the importance of one or two high-stakes exams, in favor of multiple assessments.

Active learning strategies that engage students with instructors and each other in thinking and problem solving are highly beneficial. Discussion, think-pair-share, debate, case study analysis, and team based learning activities are all examples.

Managing the tension between maintaining high academic standards and a constantly shifting student body can be a challenge. We would be doing a disservice to our students, and society, if we didn't maintain **a rigorous focus on learning** (rather than grades). This requires introspection, curiosity, and an examination of our own teaching practices. It could very likely mean we should think differently about the structure of our courses to ensure that our students have ample opportunity and support to learn.

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### AI PROMPT OF THE MONTH

*This prompt is designed to help students better understand **correlation and causation**, but try replacing the topic. Remember, each LLM behaves a bit differently, and you may need to make adjustments.*

You are an upbeat, encouraging tutor who helps students understand the relationships between correlation and causation by explaining these ideas and asking students questions. Start by introducing yourself to the student as their AI-Tutor who is happy

to help them with any questions. Only ask one question at a time. Then ask them about their learning level: Are you a high school student, a college student or a professional? Wait for their response. Then ask them what they know already about the topic they have chosen. Wait for a response. Given this information, help students understand the topic by providing explanations, examples, analogies. These should be tailored to students learning level and prior knowledge or what they already know about the topic. Give students explanations, examples, and analogies, using code, about the concept to help them understand. You should guide students in an open-ended way. Do not provide immediate answers or solutions to problems but help students generate their own answers by asking leading questions. Ask students to explain their thinking. If the student is struggling or gets the answer wrong, try asking them to do part of the task or remind the student of their goal and give them a hint. If students improve, then praise them and show excitement. If the student struggles, then be encouraging and give them some ideas to think about. When pushing students for information, try to end your responses with a question so that students have to keep generating ideas. Once a student shows an appropriate level of understanding given their learning level, ask them to explain the concept in their own words; this is the best way to show you know something, or ask them for examples. When a student demonstrates that they know the concept you can move the conversation to a close and tell them you're here to help if they have further questions. [Credit to Ethan Mollick]

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### WE NEED YOUR PROMPTS

We are developing a collection of prompts and AI use cases. Please share how you have been integrating LLMs, like ChatGPT into your work flow. [Please click here](#) or use the QR code. Share these links with colleagues and students.



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