

# "Open Door" Teaching

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College teaching is done behind "closed doors". The door closes when the bell rings and the lecture begins, but it is also closed in other respects. It is closed because lecture rooms are somewhat formal. Auditing or visiting permits are required for those not taking the course. Our peers, our administrators, and other students do not feel free to enter, to observe, or to criticize our teaching or its content. It is closed also in the sense that the wisdom embodied in the course is exposed only briefly during the one hour increments of presentation and otherwise is enclosed in the notes and mind of the professor. He opens his door for only one hour per semester or, in the case of low enrollment courses, for only one hour per year.

This door must be opened for two reasons. Firstly, we need the buffeting of observations and criticisms from our colleagues and students to keep our courses relevant, current and of high quality. Secondly, since education is our job, we cannot justify hiding or hoarding knowledge.

## OPENING THE DOOR IN UNDERGRADUATE COURSES

The "learning center" or "study center" approach to teaching undergraduate courses in agriculture is particularly effective in opening the door to the classroom. Each major increment of the course is on public display for at least a week. The study center is open all week and the professors lecture materials and his directive commentary are on tapes and available to anyone who wishes to listen. His experiments, his demonstrational material and his assigned reprints or literature reading, are all on display. With the door open all week, many people stop by regularly to observe, to criticize or comment on the material. The professor is there as the tutor, or one of his colleagues is serving in this capacity, so that new ideas and improvements are continuously entering the teaching cycle. This open door approach has made it very easy for the occasional graduate student who is coming from an unsatisfactory undergraduate background to remedy his past training by visiting this open classroom during his free time.

## OPEN DOOR GRADUATE LEVEL TEACHING

The open door classroom is particularly needed at the graduate level. Much of the knowledge and wisdom being dispensed in graduate courses is not readily available in text books. Therefore, there is no alternative to getting it from the individual professor. Yet he only exposes it once per year and often only once per biennium. His colleagues need access to his wisdom as they prepare for their discussions in related courses and as they prepare for research projects. The graduate students need access to segments of this information as they prepare themselves for research studies and for their advanced degree examinations. A "Graduate Learning Center", as proposed below, would open the door to graduate classrooms, as well as considerably improve the common lecture style of teaching.

The Graduate Learning Center would be a small, discussion-oriented room which would serve as a meeting place for the professor and the students, as a central location for distribution of the weeks study materials, and as a library of study materials. The main introductory portion of the information transfer from professor to student would be via recordings and prepared study-guide materials.

Two tools enable easy shifting to a Graduate Learning Center approach. One is the electronic stencil process which is now commonly available at universities. This electronically transfers material from a sheet of paper onto a stencil. Diagrams, figures, and intricate equations with numerous

symbols can be transferred to a stencil in high quality form and then be reproduced by mimeograph. These study guide materials eliminate much of the necessity for use of the blackboard.

The second tool is the small, compact, inexpensive, solid-state tape recorder. The graduate lecturer now can prepare his lecture carefully in the privacy of his office and talk his lecture onto tapes, carefully leading and working the students through the materials reproduced by the stencils. These, given to the students at weekly intervals, are their week's lectures and normal blackboard and similar illustrative material. The small tape cassettes are available in several lengths up to 2 hours so the professor can choose tapes to fit the length of his discussions.

A desirable aspect of the Graduate Learning Center approach would be for the student to have his own tape recorder which can be purchased for slightly more than the cost of an expensive text book or two. He could then listen to the lecture and work through the lecture material at his convenience and as often as he wished.

After the students have listened to the tapes and worked through the material, they would meet in the study center for a tutoring session with the professor. They could stay in discussion with the professor as long as necessary for them and then leave. Each course would be scheduled to have their weekly discussion during a different ½ day in the Graduate Learning Center. During this time the professor would also hand out the tapes and lecture materials for the new week's work.

The Graduate Study Center would become an open-door library to all of the courses using this approach to teaching. At the close of the week several copies of the tape would be labelled and filed in an open-stack library in the Graduate Study Center. They would be available for checking in and out, or for study within the Center itself. A librarian or secretary would be available in the Graduate Study Center to check tapes and lecture materials in and out. She would also reproduce electronic stencils and multiple copies of the master tape as an aid to the professors in preparing materials for subsequent weeks.

In this approach the professor's time with students would not change, but it would shift to time spent in tutoring and discussion rather than in formal lectures. The professor would spend more time teaching rather than in writing on the blackboard. The tape would handle the formal lecturing which would precede the discussion session. Taping the lecture comments and preparing the lecture materials in the manner discussed would insure that high quality materials reached the student's notes.

Some of the disadvantages of standard lectures would be overcome. These are the problems of having no chance for replay of things that are not understood, of being too busy copying notes from the blackboard and from slides to comprehend the professor's comments, and of having to be in the lecture at a specific hour whether sick or tired or concerned about other matters.

## CONCLUSIONS

Classroom doors must be open. The buffeting comments of colleagues, administrators and students will help keep the courses relevant, current and honest. The classroom door must be open because knowledge is too important to be hoarded or hidden. The Learning Center approach to teaching may take a different format in graduate teaching than in undergraduate teaching, but the end result can be the same. Let's open the classroom door.