An Open Letter to My Students

On December 25, 2009, Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab attempted to detonate a bomb aboard Northwest flight 253 while the plane was approaching Detroit Metro Airport. Only chance and the quick actions of a few passengers averted this terrorist attack. In the days following this near tragedy, we learned of the abundant, pertinent information that U.S. intelligence officials had in their possession. Indeed, they seemed steeped in actionable data. Yet, this significant amount of information did not lead them to act urgently. Early in January 2010, President Obama explained the situation to the American public, thereby elucidating a defining trait of our time:

> *The U.S. government had sufficient information to have uncovered this plot and potentially disrupt the Christmas Day attack, but our intelligence community failed to connect those dots, which would have placed the suspect on the no-fly list. In other words, this was not a failure to collect intelligence; it was a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence that we already had*. (CNN Staff 2010)

This is but one—albeit highly memorable—reminder of our paradoxical zeitgeist. The sheer torrent of information generation has outpaced our ability to process, assess, and evaluate this data. And we regularly misperceive this information for knowledge. Technological developments such as high-speed internet and palm-held devices instantaneously put a tremendous amount of data at our fingertips. We are awash in information. Yet, we regularly fail to deeply understand what this information means, increasingly to our detriment.

It is imperative that we learn better, by making meaning from information and by transforming this meaningful data into usable knowledge (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). Recent trends in higher education have risen to address this challenge—correcting for a paucity of attention to learning in earlier decades. In the last two decades, cognitive scientists, psychologists, sociologists, neuroscientists, and education scholars have scientifically examined the factors that facilitate or inhibit real learning gains in college students. This is part of a larger trend in higher education: a shift from a teacher-centered paradigm (an emphasis on what teachers do) to a learner-centered paradigm (an emphasis on how and what students learn) (DeZure 2003). In the parlance of the opening example, facilitating student learning helps them gain knowledge by making meaning from information. The learner-centered model typically emphasizes cognitive apprenticeship, establishes less hierarchy between teacher and students, facilitates peer collaboration, utilizes inquiry-based learning and authentic assessment, and demands that highly motivated students invest in their own learning (Svinicki 1999).

I am a strong proponent of this shift toward learner-centered education; the abundant scientific evidence that it increases student learning gains is quite impressive. I am sharing this with you for two reasons. First, I want you to understand the reasoning behind my teaching decisions in and out of the classroom. So, I am making transparent my teaching philosophy and teaching goals that guide my teaching decisions. I hope this gives you a sense of what to expect this semester. Second, this will help you understand your role and responsibilities in our learner-centered classroom. Think of our course as a limited resource. We meet together only 30 times this semester. I want us to utilize this limited meeting time as efficiently as we can to maximize your learning gains this semester. Ultimately, to return back to the opening vignette, I want each of you to deepen your understanding of the world around you to transform factual information into usable knowledge.

My **Teaching Philosophy** derives directly from my middle-class, rural Iowa upbringing. As the son of a high school teacher and a registered nurse, I have developed a pragmatic, Midwestern view of education. To me, education is important for citizenship and work. Education is crucial for cultivating citizenship and promoting enlightened involvement in public decision-making. I want to help create lifelong learners who can protect and promote their interests throughout their lives. Education is also crucial for successful participation in our increasingly global labor force. I want to help create lifelong learners who can learn effectively each day at work. This teaching philosophy has directly informed my primary teaching goals.

My **Primary Teaching Goals** are threefold. First, I want to teach young adults to become lifelong learners. Second, I want to help them improve their understanding of core HPS concepts, theories, and methods. Third, I want to help them sharpen their critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem solving skills. I teach all of my LBC courses in service to these goals.

All of my LBC courses have the following **Signature Characteristics**. I have intentionally chosen these because they most effectively help me accomplish my primary teaching goals. Briefly, my courses . . .

- are learner-centered; they focus on improving student learning gains and promoting a reflexivity among students about their learning;
- utilize active learning; students DO something every day, such as inquiry-based learning;
- demand that students work through ill-structured problems, ones that are controversial, ambiguous, and opaque in their definitions, causes, and solutions;
- involve collaborative learning, whereby students work together to help each other learn;
- employ authentic assessment, whereby students perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills; and
- use performance-based assessment standards, which are non-zero-sum (i.e., if everyone significantly exceeds the evaluation criteria, then everyone will receive high grades).

As in any class, you should always be organized, prepare well, work hard, and try your best. These keys to success will serve you well in most settings. Let me offer you a few additional suggestions that specifically will help you achieve success in our learner-centered classroom.

1. Know that *you should be highly motivated to invest much in your own learning*. You will be more inclined to gain ownership and appreciate your learning when you reflect regularly on what you are learning, how you are learning, the value of what you are learning, and what else you need to know.
2. To participate effectively in our classroom, be sure to *rigorously prepare for each class meeting*. Slacking on this may not only inhibit your own learning gains, but it may also inhibit the learning gains of those with whom you collaborate. MSU officials offer the following guideline (from the Academic Programs Catalog): "The earning of a *credit* requires, as a minimum, one instructor-student contact hour per week per semester plus two hours of study per contact hour" (www.reg.msu.edu/AcademicPrograms/Text.asp?Section=112). This requirement is based on several decades of scientific research on academic performance. Notice the phrase "as a minimum." If you wish to earn more than a 2.0, then you will likely need to spend more than two hours per credit outside of class. Keep in mind that learner-centered courses regularly demand more work and preparation outside of the classroom.
3. Keep in mind that learner-centered classrooms reduce the hierarchy and power differences between teachers and students. Teachers retain authority, but give up some of the control and direction of the learning environment to the students—with the expectation that this empowers students to invest more and engage deeper in their own learning. Central to this is that teachers facilitate peer collaboration among students. *By working well with others, you can significantly increase your own learning gains* and take advantage of the non-zero sum performance standards that allow win-win situations.

References

Bransford, John D., Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking. 2000. "Learning: From Speculation to Science." Pp. 3-27 in *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, edited by John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

CNN Staff. 2010. "Obama on Intel System: 'This Was a Screw-Up'." January 6. Retrieved January 8, 2010 (http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/01/05/obama.terror.meeting/index.html).

DeZure, Deborah. 2003. "Innovations in the Undergraduate Curriculum." Pp. 509-514 in *Encyclopedia of Education*, edited by James W. Guthrie. Second Edition. New York: Macmillan Reference USA.

Svinicki, Marilla D. 1999. "New Directions in Learning and Motivation." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 80:5-27.

