



Murphy: The Grass is Always Greener

By James Murphy, Guest Columnist

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A Dartmouth professor recently told a colleague: "Everything I teach my undergrads will be obsolete in 10 years." He attempted to introduce his undergraduate students to the frontiers of research in his own special field and those frontiers are constantly moving. No doubt we are all tempted to teach our own research fields and try to introduce our students to the issues and questions that we find so exciting. And there is no doubt that our students often enjoy feeling like participants in creating new knowledge.

But research in the psychology of expertise reveals that we professors possess an immense reservoir of factual knowledge and tacit intuition that is almost totally absent in even our best undergraduates. Hence, our students may enjoy the feeling of working at the cutting edge of research, but that feeling is largely illusory. If undergraduates could create new knowledge, then there would be no intellectual justification for graduate education. What our undergraduates need is to develop that broad and deep reservoir of relatively permanent knowledge that will underwrite whatever expertise they choose to later acquire.

Of course, some of our senior majors and honors students can benefit from exposure to scholarly research. But we Dartmouth professors are increasingly teaching our narrow fields of expertise even to our first-year students, as I discovered by participating in a study of our first-year writing program. Studies show that students tend unconsciously to emulate the prose style of what they read, meaning that the last thing we want our writing students to read are scholarly and scientific articles!

Unfortunately, the most up-to-date education is always the fastest out of date. Most of our students want their expensive college educations to have a shelf life of more than 10 years. The old proverb turns out to be true to the psychology of expertise: "Teach the oldest things to the youngest people." Undergraduate students should focus their learning on foundational theories and texts so that they can acquire the deep reservoir of knowledge that we professors possess. But because our own foundational knowledge is invisible to us, it becomes invisible to our students as well.

My friends who teach at large research universities often say to me, "It must be nice to teach in a department with no graduate students. Your undergrads must get a great education." But lately I have been saying to them, "It must be great to be able to teach your own field of expertise to graduate students, so that you can give your undergraduates the foundational knowledge they need." For example, several of the universities best known for their world-class graduate schools — Yale University, Columbia University and the University of Chicago — are also the schools that have most carefully protected the integrity of undergraduate education through Directed Studies at Yale and the core curricula at Columbia and Chicago. When I point to these examples, my friends at those schools say, "Yes, those are great programs, but we are having trouble staffing them because undergraduate teaching is such a low priority here."

A great college should have some highly specialized, transient or boutique courses that reflect the ever-changing interests of our faculty. But only some. As things stand, the ideals and aims of graduate training are increasingly colonizing our undergraduate curriculum. Cutting-edge research can be exciting, but the path to "new" knowledge runs through "old" knowledge. The job of a great college is to give students the enduring foundation of basic theory and classic texts, so that they can develop the judgment, understanding and intuition that they will later use for discovery and innovation.

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