Dom Purpura’s Contributions to Education

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Fascinated by the neuropharmacological studies conducted by a young man named Dom Purpura at Columbia’s College of Physicians and Surgeons, I invited him to give a seminar in Cornell’s pharmacology department when I was in charge of its seminar program. Listening to Dom while conversing and during the seminar itself, I was impressed by his confident manner, sharp intelligence, breadth and depth of knowledge about his subject, contagious exuberance and sense of humor, and ability to present complex concepts in clear and interesting ways. That was about a half-century ago, but I can still list these qualities about Dom today. In fact, I can kick them up a notch or two. Add to this mix an enormous capacity to stay abreast of his discipline, a remarkable ability to see the big scientific picture while detecting leading indicators of scientific change and progress, vast experience in teaching and planning courses and curricula, and an extraordinary openness to new ideas and strategies in medical education—and you have an educator’s dream of a dean. I am privileged to have lived that dream during the 22 year period we have been colleagues in Einstein’s deanship and for many years before when Dom was the Neuroscience Chair, leader of the Neurobiology course, and co-chair of the college’s curriculum committee.

While chairing Einstein’s Department of Anatomy in 1968, Dom developed one of the nation’s first courses in neurobiology, thus separating this rapidly growing discipline from physiology while also incorporating neuroanatomy. This action may seem benign by today’s standards, but 38 years ago it was a bold and courageous initiative. It was also the right thing to do. During the 14 year period that Dom headed the Neurobiology Course Teaching Committee, even while fully engaged in research, chairing the newly formed Department of Neuroscience, directing the Rose F. Kennedy Center for Research in Mental Retardation and Human Development, and rising to the top tier of the world’s research neuroscientists, Dom found the time to develop his course into a masterful blend of neurophysiology, neuroanatomy, and neurology. Dom’s success in this endeavor encouraged others on Einstein's faculty to undertake similar projects, leading to the many interdisciplinary courses in today's biomedical science curriculum.

Dom gave most of the neurobiology course lectures himself. These lectures gave full expression to Dom’s mastery of the subject and, for many in the audience, were inspiring. One of those in the audience, in 1978, was a young fellow named Steve Walkley, now head of the sequel to Dom’s course—Nervous System and Human Behavior. When Dom left for to become dean at the Stanford University School of Medicine in 1982, he shared with Steve the secrets of successful lecturing, knowing he would be taking over much of the teaching. These secrets had nothing to do with preparing great PowerPoint slides or reading every bulleted line on the slides to the audience. Indeed, by today’s high-tech standards, Dom’s secrets seem simple enough: Dom viewed lecturing as story telling. “Have a good story to tell”, he said, “and know it well. And understand that when you lecture, you must also listen. For if the students are not listening to you and absorbing what you say, your words will bounce around the lecture hall and come back to you, and you will hear them.” Now in his 25th year of “filling in” for Dom, Steve Walkley still follows Dom’s advice despite the fact, Steve says, “it finds no validation in either the physics of sound or the physiology of audition.”

Dom’s neurobiology course demanded more than great lectures. Being ahead of its time, no textbook could match the course’s content or topic sequence. So with assistance from other faculty teaching the course, Dom created the first major course syllabus at Einstein, an enormous work that grew to more than 500 pages of text and illustrations and was the forerunner of today’s neuroscience textbooks.

Around the time that Dom first began planning the neurobiology course, he was appointed Chairman of a new Einstein committee, the Committee on Curriculum Revision. Thus, Dom joined others on the faculty who had, and still have, what Dom calls a “magnificent obsession” with curriculum change. The change sparked by the actions of this particular committee was a substantial reduction in didactic teaching hours in years one and two. This allowed departments to schedule a number of relatively short elective courses covering a wide spectrum of cutting-edge biomedical science. Although these electives were eventually displaced by new courses, the action of Dom’s committee set the standard for Einstein’s pre-clerkship curriculum right up until today. That standard is to limit course hour bulge, prevent curriculum compression, and allow sufficient time for students to devote to studying, worthwhile extracurricular activities, and relaxation.

From the above, it is evident that Dom has excelled as a teacher, course planner and curriculum developer. But perhaps his greatest contribution to Einstein’s education program is the Division of Education (DOE). Conceived...
by Dom about 10 years ago, the DOE has served from its outset to stimulate and facilitate development of new courses and clerkships and new strategies in instruction and knowledge/skill assessment. It also serves as a forum for discussion and learning by approximately one hundred faculty members, students, and deans appointed to the DOE’s parent and standing committees and working groups. The DOE seems to bring out the best in group behavior, energizing faculty to act rationally and creatively with respect to educational change. I do not think even Dom could have predicted how successful the DOE would be; or did he? Not the least important factor for the DOE’s high-level functioning and enthusiasm is Dom’s excellent record of attendance at meetings of the DOE executive and parent committees despite his busy and challenging schedule.

Finally, Dom’s support for new programs in education is not just of the cheerleading kind, but is accompanied by wise counsel and, if necessary, funding. Dom’s blessing of a new program is not granted without his careful review of the programmatic and financial aspects of the proposal, thus encouraging program creators to express their ideas with precision, clarity and conviction. Having made or endorsed many a bold move in education prior to his deanship, Dom is not adverse to supporting educational concepts and methods that depart, sometimes radically, from the traditional. In fact, he is usually an advocate for change. Ending on a more personal note, I have never taken Dom’s capacity for change lightly. I have treated it with respect and admiration. It is this quality of Dom’s that has enabled me to be joyful and effective in my position here at Einstein; it forms a significant basis for our long and productive relationship.