

## **The Peter Principle: A Critique about University Faculty Hiring, Tenure, and Promotion**

**K.B. Elazier**

*Hampton University, Hampton, VA, USA*

**Gabriele Strohschen**

*DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA*

**[Abstract]** Within this essay, we view the traditional, time-honored approach to hiring, advancement, tenure, and promotion practices in the academy through the lens of the *Peter Principle*. Current practices have a profoundly debilitating effect on the quality of instruction because values, tenets, and processes are not clarified and not made transparent or even consistently and equitably applied.

In turn, this has a profound impact on the quality of the professoriate. The faculty governance agreements with most major US universities allow faculty to hire and promote peers, at will, irrespective of clear and measurable qualification or even federal and state labor laws that apply to other classified employees within institutions receiving federal funds. These faculty-led evaluation and hiring produces a condition of *homo-social* reproduction among the faculty with a stated rationale of selecting candidates with *best-fit* characteristics. Not only does the lack of clearly defined credos and philosophies hinder faculty to be the mentors they ought to be for students, but by removing objective, competence-based criteria for candidate selection and promotions, faculty become inbred and incompetent, divorced from professional job classifications. The faculty pool, through lack of diversity in experience, background, and demonstrable knowledge and skill sets will ultimately be promoted not only to the level of incompetence, but also out of the area of their competence. This practice diminishes higher levels of professional development and competency within disciplines.

**[Keywords]** professional development for professors, competency-based evaluation, *The Peter Principle*, faculty tenure and promotion short-comings, diversity hiring

### **Introduction**

The fundamental premise of the Peter Principle is once well performing employees are rewarded with a promotion, they will likely be promoted again (Peter & Hull, 1969). This pattern continues until the point an employee is no longer performing at a level deserving of additional promotion, thus placing the employee at a skill and ability level where they are over-matched by the demands of the job - in other words, *incompetent*.

This *promotion to incompetence* phenomenon is commonly observed in the sales profession. A highly competent sales producer is promoted to sales manager and it quickly becomes apparent that the competency that made for success in selling is inadequate for tasks involved in managing sales operations. Considering the number of new businesses that shutter their doors every year due to incompetent management (Forbes, 2019), numerous examples of incompetency in the business literature highlight this phenomenon. Fortunately, the competitive

marketplace of business eventually disciplines or eliminates the incompetent operator, unless protected by a bloated bureaucracy or monopoly legislation. This market discipline, traditionally, did not impact the education industry because of its exclusive franchise awarded by legislative bodies; however, the impact of non-competitive, incompetent instruction affects generations of people that trust education as the transformer of lives. Witness the failing USA K-12 public education system as evidence. This system failure crosses all categories: racial, economic, class, etc., with the common denominator being poor-quality instruction, despite the massive funds directed toward improvement. The universities, across the board, are responsible for churning out these teachers. They must assume a lion's share of the blame, since they have the exclusive franchise for teacher preparation programming.

That tacit acceptance and collusion in preparing and hiring incompetent teachers, and not only maintaining but also promoting individuals without standard, criterion-based performance evaluations, is a breach of the public trust that borders on deliberate negligence and malpractice. Educators have the professional obligation and duty to practice competently within their discipline as much as any other professional, like a physician or airline pilot, for example. They have an obligation to constantly improve their practice and upgrade their knowledge and skills. This obligation to the profession is why research and professional development opportunities are subsidized by the universities, and contributors are rewarded with tenure. Ironically, one often observes that although great opportunities and resources for continuous development are at their disposal, some professors are among the least willing to continue to learn; whether it is an inability to recognize their knowledge or skill deficiencies or it is an issue of egos, those unwilling professors are protected by the education franchise. They travel the road to irrelevance and certain incompetence, within their respective departments at their universities. The longer they remain securely tenured to their highest level of incompetence, the more entrenched their damaging effect upon positive improvement aspirations of more competent members in the department.

Here, we posit that only through a competence-based evaluation of the candidate's abilities to perform the requisite job duties (i.e., knowledge, skills, and attitudes) for the new position can an accurate assessment be made of the candidate's suitability for promotion; one that is free of the inherently biased assumptions that traditional university *best-fit* selection processes promote. Many examples of tenure debacles exist to highlight the pit falls of evaluating faculty on *best-fit*, or other group consensus determinations versus measuring and evaluating performance aligned with competency-based, job performance promotion criteria. Also, through this essay, the authors seek to make the case for providing competency-based faculty development when promoting candidates to functional areas outside of their discipline or specialty areas (e.g., promotion to administration/managing roles, department heads, and leadership roles, such as deans and committees, especially personnel related).

### **The Peter Principle**

In the *Peter Principle*, Peter and Hull (1969) state that persons who are competent at their job will earn a promotion to a position that requires different skills. If the promoted person lacks the skills required for the new role, they will be incompetent at the new level, and will not be promoted again. According to the Peter Principle, every position in a given hierarchy will eventually be filled by employees who are incompetent to fulfill the job duties of their respective positions. The Peter Principle is thus based on the paradoxical idea that competent employees will

continue to be promoted, but at some point will be promoted into positions for which they are incompetent, and they will then remain in those positions because of the fact that they do not demonstrate any further competence that would get them recognized for additional promotion (Lazear, 2004). We argue the university is a prime breeding ground for this phenomenon because of the life-time employment protections of currently prevailing tenure and promotion processes. Through this process, status quo-mediocrity and incompetence are rewarded while efforts at innovation, critical analysis, and improvement are thwarted and punished. Thus, homo-social reproduction is accomplished.

### **The Role of Professor as Instructor**

Professors perform various roles: knowledge production and dissemination and presentation of that knowledge to an audience. Presentation has many purposes: to inform, persuade, entertain, inspire, etc.; however, if knowledge is presented to instruct, then the purpose for instruction must move beyond presenting knowledge for knowledge's sake. Instruction is the transfer of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for a deliberate behavioral change in the learner. Although there may be instruction for the sake of what has been called *edutainment*, at the higher education level adults enroll into programs to gain knowledge and skills they can apply in their respective settings. Their goal is to learn what they need to know and do competently (Strohschen & Elazier, 2007).

Presenting the traditional knowledge-based lecture is not instruction, irrespective of how entertaining, informative, persuasive, and inspiring it may be, it remains solely a presentation. As Joseph (2012) pointed out, "*educere* might suggest the need for a knowledgeable guide who supposedly is qualified to rear or guide others, who might view this guide as an authority figure." Within the institutions of higher learning, such is the institutionalized authoritative stance of professors, and all too often it prevents students' learning. To clarify, traditional lecturing prevents the reciprocity of teacher and student which can provide the space for learning to take place. If we agree that the role of a professor is to *bring forth* the student's learning, then clarity between the goals of the teachers and those of the students is fundamental. And with that we arrive at what instruction is to accomplish, namely, to facilitate learning.

Furthermore, as Joseph pointed out so succinctly in the blog entry (2012), the education institutions' formats, by and large, perpetuate the authoritative and unilaterally designed approach to teaching,

[...]there is some kind of informality that seems to benefit learning while education, on the contrary, seems to call for a set of defined rules that may or may not encourage learning: think of our modern edifice of codes associated with education, such as fixed semesters, standard exams, constant data collection and reports, and letter grades. Could this level of informality imply that learning is independent or could be free from any institution? Or to put it differently: does one need to subscribe to any formal institution to learn anything? Furthermore, does education, seen as a set of rules with intended goals from some authorities, necessarily encourage learning at all?

October 13, 2012, Blog Entry

Turning to key definitions in our field of education, consider the following statements from a not-so-well performing public school system to an international body of education. The California Department of Education (2022), for example, describes instruction as,

the process of teaching and engaging students with content. While curriculum is the organized content and plan for engaging students with specific knowledge and skills, instruction is how a teacher organizes time and activities in implementing that content.  
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/qs/in/>

We understand a *curriculum* as the totality of student experiences that occur in the educational process, wherein a curriculum refers to planned sequences of instruction. Yet, a confusion about terms and their meaning continues with widely accepted descriptions of differences between teaching and instruction. Seen as mutually exclusive activities on one hand, Figure 1 is an example that adds to the Tower of Babel approach in education, particularly the educating of teachers.

**Figure 1**

*Difference between Teaching and Instruction*

| Teaching  | Instruction  |
|---|--|
| Teaching works for overall development.   | Instruction works for skill development.   |
| Teaching arouses critical thinking.   | Instruction arouses functional thinking.   |
| Teaching produces new product.  | Instruction aims for producing carbon copy or photocopy.                                       |
| Teaching is explaining how something is done.   | Instruction is telling how something is done.  |
| When you teach someone, you may transmit almost anything: concepts, ideas, theories or, say, history. | When you instruct someone, you're giving him a set of tools or tasks to do something specific. |
| A teacher strews ideas to be subverted.   | An instructor lays down rules to be obeyed.  |
| Teaching provokes.  | Instructions prescribes.   |
| Teaching is liberation.   | Instruction is regimentation.  |

SOURCE: <https://educarepk.com/difference-between-teaching-and-instruction.html>

Upon reflection, definitions and descriptions, we see at the same time, they also allow one to conclude that *teaching* and *instruction* go together in education as both sets of concepts are clearly applied in *leading forth* the knowledge, skills, and attitudes people wish to apply in their lives. For example, The UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2023) provides definitions which conclude that teaching and instruction are interchangeably used in the field of education.

### ***Education***

The creation and implementation of purposefully developed plans for guiding the process by which learners gain knowledge and understanding, and develop skills, attitudes,

appreciations and values. Instruction is frequently associated with the term ‘curriculum’ and generally refers to the teaching methods and learning activities that a teacher uses to deliver the curriculum in the classroom. The terms ‘teaching’ and ‘instruction’ are often used interchangeably.

### Teaching

There are diverse approaches to teaching which also implicitly reflect the approach to learning. The didactic approach mainly entails lecturing and is typically teacher-centred and content-oriented, i.e., teaching as transmission where the learners are considered to be the passive recipients of information transmitted. Teaching can also be seen as supporting the process of learners’ knowledge construction and understanding, building on what is already known by the learner and involving a learner-centred approach (i.e., teaching as facilitation). Another approach emphasizes the development of learners’ cognitive processes and awareness and control of thinking and learning.

SOURCE: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/glossary-curriculum-terminology/t/teaching>

In short, the definitions and tribal language in our field notwithstanding, instruction requires three phases: presentation, application, and feedback. Regardless of what is being presented, taught, or instructed, the learners must be able to do something as a result of the facilitations of learning. To know about it, or that there is such and such knowledge<sup>1</sup> is not enough. This is particularly essential in the preparation and professional development of the professoriate. Given the confusion and lack of clarity of our very understanding of roles, combined with the ideological arrogance and bestowed authority to universities to educate, we are clearly facing a dilemma in the quality and “development of the mental life in the democratic U.S.A.,” as Saul Bellow (1987) stated in the foreword to Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*.

While much of Bloom’s conclusions have been and remain controversial, he pointed to a lack of critical thinking and radical analysis in the academy, and this is still relevant years after the penning of his treatise. The social and political crises described in 1987 prevail in 2023, “Higher education fails to arouse or to nurture the self-knowledge that has always been the basis for serious, humane learning” (Bloom, 1987, p. 25). That said, if we lack self-knowledge and awareness, what happens to critical reflection and analysis of our paradigmatic assumptions (Brookfield, 2011). Are we, the academicians, so enamored with content-lacking rhetoric and so infatuated with self-aggrandizement that we are failing our students and ourselves by not judiciously examining the definitions and descriptions of the latest theories and practices *du jour*? Which are, truth be told, often praxes that have been cliff-noted or otherwise diluted regurgitations of classic scholarship in the first place? Clearly, to our thinking here, the role of the professors is foremost to profess to teaching of critical and honest thinking that leads not only to gaining

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed discussion on this topic, review: *Developing a Competency-Based Instructor Training Model of Professional Development: A Key Component for Competency-Based Instructional Programs*. (Elazier, 2019); *Considering a Competency-Based, HyFlex, e-Learning Strategy?* (Black & Elazier, 2022, July).

propositional knowledge (skills) but also to making decisions and taking the power to be more informed about one's self and the world (Strohschen, 2022; 2019).

### **But We've Always Done it like this...**

Then how do we ensure that the profession of the professoriate includes the professing and facilitating of such liberatory and emancipatory knowing? Are we clear on what knowledge, skills, and attitudes the professors ought to have and how to promote the very lifelong learning we claim to value in our profession? The tenure and promotion processes are conducted throughout multi-year evaluation stages. Most in academia would attest that the promotion of a candidate after this evaluative period is evidence that promotion standards have been met (Benson & Shue, 2019). Yet, it can be observed that some individuals perform better and some worse after being promoted. This can be explained, in part, by the phenomenon of a human performance *regression to the mean*. This statistical occurrence can distort the faculty evaluation measurements. That is why it has to be accounted for in the design of faculty evaluation and in the analysis of the results. But if the baseline group is composed of homo-socialized, best-fit individuals, then regression to the mean implies that future performance will be lower, on average (Kahneman, 2011). The Peter Principle, which states that people are promoted to their level of incompetence, suggests that something is fundamentally misaligned in the hiring as well as in the tenure and promotion process. Faculty incompetence and mediocracy are built into the design of the tenure and promotion process, *de jure*. So, despite the claims of adherence to the *standard*, the reality is that the expectation and performance to adhere to the standard are lowered. This is the essence of a mediocracy, not of a meritocracy. The mediocracy is thus manifest more visibly in instructional practices, and less so in areas of scholarship published in obscure journals.

### **Toward Solutions**

A possible solution to the problem of promoting professors to levels of eventual incompetency, as posed by the Peter Principle, is for universities to provide adequate skill training and design development plans in preparation for professors prior to receiving a promotion. Such plans then need to be implemented to ensure the training is aligned to competency sets for the position to which they will be and/or have been promoted. It is critical for education professionals seeking and qualifying for tenure and promotional opportunities to work with faculty mentors who utilize competence-based instruction and evaluation approaches to determine job readiness for the new position. In developmental planning for such opportunities and enhancement of skill sets, whether through additional education and training or job coaching, options that offer the direct, task-relevant, competency-based approaches should be selected.

Adopting a competence-based approach along with specific competency sets and performance-based criteria for promotion and hiring decisions would provide junior faculty and new hires clearly-defined targets toward which to aim (Acosta, 2010). Decisions related to research agendas, committee assignments, service to the university, and other areas to demonstrate a clear path of progressive development can then be rationally considered and justified during the tenure review process. Seeking and promoting diverse candidates based on objective criteria applied equitably to all candidates through competence-based selection, interviewing, and criterion-referenced assessing reduces the perception of bias. Furthermore, it incentivizes prospective candidates to prepare for promotion prior to application to improve selection results. Performance

evaluations based on objective, criterion-referenced assessments serve to increase the candidate's effort to improve their current job performance after an evaluation series, because they expect this to increase their chances of promotion, even though the new job tasks require higher-level abilities (Chan, 2018).

Isn't it ironic that, in large part, people engage in university learning as a partial strategy for personal and professional development (Peters, 2007); yet, the university professors are not competently qualified for their own tenure and promotion pathways, based on their current performance levels. Obviously, they need their own remedy for next-level success. The proposed competence-based training concept and development solution for tenure and promotion certainly contrasts the traditional subjective, discriminatory methods that permeate current practices, which are primarily based upon seniority and rank, nepotism, so-termed best-fit, and other arbitrary approaches so common in the hiring and promotion processes.

### In Conclusion

The Peter Principle, when observed in academe, is readily apparent in the people engaged in the faculty hiring, promotion, and tenure processes. Homo-social reproduction reinforces the outcome of incompetence within the power structures and faculty hierarchy. Hiring, promotion, and tenure outside of one's discipline without proper training for the position locks one into the highest level of incompetence and the resultant stagnation and decay of the individual and organization (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993).

This is the current state of many faculties across the academy that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed to the public. The condition is exacerbated by the increasing influence of educational technology commodity sellers and artificial intelligence peddlers over the instructional functions within the classrooms and lecture halls. The administrations' response is increased standardization, utilizing outside expertise as the only solution to counter the internal low-quality outputs from the faculty. Incompetence will eventually lead to replacement of function by artificial means (Peters, 2007). As was predicted more than three decades ago about higher education and its professoriate, "The gravity of our given task is great, and it is very much in doubt how the future will judge our stewardship" (Bloom, 1987, p. 382).

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