Helping New Faculty Thrive

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Introduction

Academics dedicate years of hard work to earn the credentials and develop a deep understanding of their disciplines. They are experts in their fields, but they may not feel as secure in their ability to teach.

We hope this report can help—it covers some of the basics that will help new faculty thrive in the classroom. It is composed of articles written by experienced faculty members covering best practices, lessons learned, what works—and perhaps more importantly—what doesn't work when teaching college courses.

By no means exhaustive, this report serves as a resource and starting point for helping new faculty members thrive in the classroom. If you are looking for more direction on the resources available for new faculty, contact support@magnapubs.com.

Ten Things We Wish We Knew about Leadership before Stepping into the Classroom

By Laurie Bjerklie and Laura Mastel, Rasmussen College, MN

We did it! We survived the application process, the grueling interviews, and the countless introductions. Finally, it was time to step into the classroom and share our passion and knowledge of medical laboratory science. We were ready to prepare students for associates' degrees to become medical laboratory technicians, and we thought it would be easy. We had carefully prepared. Our textbooks were ready, our syllabi were done, and our labs were set up. What we found, however, were two teachers skilled in the area of laboratory medicine but lacking in teacher leadership experience. Here's what we learned from our first teaching experience and what we wish we'd known before we stepped into the classroom.

1. **Find a mentor**
   Find a colleague who can be a mentor early on, and learn from that person. Observe your mentor in and out of the classroom, with students, and with colleagues, and then practice what you have observed, making it your own. Ask your mentor for advice, and use it to improve your teaching.

2. **You set the tone**
   We've all heard the phrase "attitudes are contagious." Get your students excited about coming to class and motivated to learn by maintaining an enthusiastic and positive attitude from the beginning of the course to the end. There will be times when you will feel frustrated—times when students are difficult. But showing these feelings in the classroom will not earn you the respect of students.

3. **Have a vision for your class**
   Just as leaders have visions for their organizations, you need to have a vision for your class, and you need to regularly communicate it to students. Let students know what you hope to achieve and how. Sharing your road map for the course helps them understand and keeps you on track.

4. **Communicate, communicate, communicate**
   Communication is the key to being a successful leader. According to Thomas Hoerr, author of *The Art of School Leadership*, a good leader communicates openly and honestly to build, maintain, and enhance relationships with students. Do everything you can to encourage open and honest communication in your classroom. Be responsive when students reach out to you. Be aware of your tone, whether you're speaking or writing to students. Even if your answers may not be the ones they want to hear, the manner in which you state them can make all the difference.

5. **Be firm and fair even if it doesn't make everyone happy**
   Before making a decision, try to understand both sides of the issue, especially how it looks from the students' perspective. Explore the alternatives, considering both the benefits and drawbacks. Make sure your decision benefits the majority of those it will affect.

Once you've decided, be firm and let your decision stand, even if it doesn't make everyone happy.

6. **Take time to self-reflect**

Take some time after each class to think about what happened. What worked? What didn't work? What would you change the next time? Don't be afraid of the mistakes you will make, but learn from them, capitalize on them, and turn them into successes. That's what effective leaders do.

7. **Develop your own leadership habits . . . then realize that they might not work for every class**

Effective leaders find habits that are successful for them, and they practice those habits. But even good habits aren't effective all the time. Sometimes what's worked well with one group of students won't work with another group. Be flexible and learn to modify these habits as the situation and your students change.

8. **Not everyone will like you as a teacher**

Even if you come prepared for class, maintain a positive attitude, develop good leadership habits, and are fair to your students, not everyone will like you as a teacher. Great leaders learn to look past the naysayers and focus on the fact that they are truly making a difference in some students' lives.

9. **Learn to take the personal out of poor feedback**

Evaluations filled out by your students are a great way to learn about your strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. They will contain positive and negative feedback. Try not to take the negative feedback personally, and realize that these evaluations can be influenced by many factors. Maybe the student was having a bad day. However, if there are repeated suggestions for improvement in one area, make adjustments. Find your strengths, and turn these into good leadership habits.

10. **How to balance your life now that you are a teacher**

A teacher's work seems never to be done. There's homework to correct, emails to answer, the next day's class to prepare, and grades to assign. Linda Lambert, author of *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement* (2003), writes, "It is essential to reserve time for ourselves. Without personal time, we lose focus and can overlook what's important in our rush to take care of what's urgent." Every great teacher leader needs to find a balance between work and home life.

Stepping into the classroom is an exciting and thrilling experience, but it can also be scary. We knew that we had the knowledge to teach our students, but we didn't realize that there was so much more to leading a class than just sharing our skills and knowledge. We needed to be leaders of learning, and that entailed lots of details we didn't anticipate.

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The Things I Did Badly: Looking Back on My First Five Years of Teaching

By Graham Broad, King's University College, University of Western Ontario

Like birthdays, anniversaries are occasions for reflection, and as I approach the fifth anniversary of my teaching career, I find that my thoughts are drawn to the things that I did badly. Here's a list of five teaching mistakes I have made. I share them in the hope that they will cause others to reflect, and perhaps help new professors will avoid making these same mistakes.

1. Not taking advantage of research on pedagogy.

It's curious: as a graduate student in history, I was trained to maintain the highest evidentiary standards in my scholarship, to situate my research in a body of existing literature, and to scrutinize every claim I made for any possible error. And yet, when it came to teaching, I went entirely on instinct, teaching the way I was taught, assuming that was good enough. It wasn't. Nearly a year passed before it occurred to me that there might be scholars in the field of pedagogy, too, and that maybe they'd written useful material about how to teach! Was I in for a surprise. Keeping up with that field is a major scholarly undertaking. So I limit myself to two journals specific to teaching in my field, and over the years, I've attended workshops and compiled a modest collection of books on teaching. I'm glad to say that my instincts weren't entirely off, but I also know that I'm a much better professor now for having learned from the pedagogical literature.

2. Chastising the whole class.

We all get exasperated at times, and the temptation to let a whole class have it is sometimes hard to resist. In my third year as a professor, though, I had a "eureka" moment in the midst of bawling out a class for its poor attendance. It suddenly occurred to me, "I'm talking to the people who are here." I was making them resentful—and doing nothing to reach the people who were the source of the problem. Ever since then, I've dealt with problems on a one-on-one basis, except in cases where nearly everyone is doing something wrong.

3. Being defensive about student complaints.

Yes, there is something presumptuous about undergraduates, who often are still teenagers, griping about their professors. Have they taught? Studied pedagogy? Don't they realize how good they have it? More and more, however, I remind myself that, since I'm training them to critically assess every reading and, indeed, every truth claim placed before them, I can hardly object when students turn those very faculties of critical inquiry on me. Instead, I've moved toward greater transparency in my teaching methods. I also took the advice in Gerald Graff's book *Clueless in Academe* and made my own pedagogy part of the discussion.

4. Answering student e-mail at all hours.

I'm considered a student-friendly professor, one who is always willing to lend a hand. Last year, however, I inserted a passage in my course outlines stating that I would answer student e-mail during regular business hours only: Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. I think one of the damaging ideas conveyed by various inspirational books and movies about teachers who make a difference is that teachers are not entitled to private lives, that they must be on call for their students at all times. If the purpose of education is, as the ancients believed, to help us lead "the good life," what kind of example am I setting if I live entirely to serve my students? A corollary: I no longer answer e-mails that ask me questions that students can answer for themselves using the course outline and other resources (e.g., "What is the final exam worth?"). Some students complain that I'm slow to respond to e-mail, but I remind them in a good-natured way that students somehow muddled by for thousands of years without e-mail at all.

5. Egotism.

At some point in the past year, I decided that my initial beliefs that I could reach all students and that all teaching problems could be resolved through correct pedagogy weren't optimism, but rather egotism. Some students, I have come to understand, just aren't that into me. I give all students the same benefit of my time and experience, and I tell those who are slipping that they can stand upright. But I realize that some of them choose not to, so I have decided to respect that choice, even if I believe that it's the wrong one.

Above all, I have come to realize that the division between teacher and scholar is an artificial one. Over the past five years, my teaching has improved by leaps and bounds whenever I have applied the same standards of critical scrutiny to my pedagogy that I have always applied to my research. I can only assume that, in another five years, I'll be shaking my head at some of the methods I'm employing now.

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Qualities of Successful Teaching

By Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Teaching and Learning, Penn State Berks

The quest to identify the ingredients, components, and qualities of effective instruction has been a long one. Starting in the 1930s, researchers sought to identify the common characteristics of good teachers. Since then, virtually everybody who might have an opinion has been asked, surveyed, or interviewed. Students have been asked at the beginning, middle, and end of their college careers. Alumni have been asked years after graduating. Colleagues within departments and across them have been asked, as have administrators, from local department heads to college presidents. So many studies have been done that there are studies of the studies.

Despite this large database, researchers continue to explore this issue and, surprisingly, find new groups to ask and new ways to analyze the results. Even more amazing is how much overlap and consistency there is across these many studies, and the study we're about to highlight here is no exception. It is unique. The researchers studied a group of 35 faculty members who had received a Presidential Teaching Award at a public university in the Midwest. To be considered for the award, teachers had to write a 1,500-word essay describing their teaching philosophies and teaching goals. Using a qualitative methodology (hermeneutics), researchers analyzed these statements with the goal of identifying the factors that made these teachers successful. The researchers found four categories of comments characteristic of all these award-winning teachers.

Presence

"The term *presence* for this study is defined as a deeper level of awareness that allows thoughts, feelings, and actions to be known, developed, and harmonized within. Presence is also the essence of a relationship and of interpersonal communication." (p. 13) Illustrating this particular category were comments in the essays indicating how important it is for teachers to get to know their students. "The classroom should not be a sea of faceless forms," writes one teacher. (p. 13) Another observes, "In helping students achieve their highest potential, I realize I must cherish their individuality—their special needs, interests, and rich life experiences." (p. 13) Another frequent theme in this category related to the importance of caring for students. "By caring for my students, I mean that I am genuinely interested in my students' learning and understanding the course material, and in making a significant contribution to the success of their careers." (p. 14)

Promotion of learning

These teachers also wrote of the importance of student learning and their roles in promoting it. They held their students and themselves to high standards, seeing students' work in their courses and programs as preparation for lifelong learning. They also wrote of the need for students to do more than just memorize material. "Mere possession of scientific knowledge without the ability to apply it is of limited value in nursing practice," wrote one nurse educator. (p. 14) Equally important was their shared view that promoting learning goes beyond content acquisition.

Education is also about personal development, and teachers have a role in promoting that kind of learning as well.

Teachers as learners

These exemplary teachers described themselves as learners, each making it a priority to keep their teaching current. "As teachers, we must continue to re-engineer our curriculum, experiment with new and different methods of delivering course content, and bring emerging technologies into our classrooms." (p. 15) These teachers valued opportunities to revise course content, to teach new courses, and to work on degree-program curricula.

Enthusiasm

"Effective teaching presupposes a command of the material and facility in communicating it with clarity, grace, fairness, and humor. But most of all it supposes enthusiasm." (p. 15) This enthusiasm starts with a love of the content, but it goes beyond that and includes a genuine love of teaching and a passion for students and their learning. "I am also concerned that my students develop a passion for learning that goes on well after the course has ended." (p. 15)
In their conclusion, these researchers note that "there is no formula for successful teaching. Each professor is unique and has an individual educational philosophy and teaching goals." (p. 16) Even so, good teachers share common commitments and characteristics—they do in this study and have done so in many others as well.

Reference: Rossett, J. and Fox, P. G. (2009). Factors related to successful teaching by outstanding professors: An interpretive study. *Journal of Nursing Education, 48* (1), 11-16.

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This article originally appeared in the newsletter ***The Teaching Professor*** http://bit.ly/1IJcBwZ 21.1 (2010): 6, 5.

Lessons Learned from My Students

By Candice Dowd Barnes, Ph.D., University of Central Arkansas

My students have taught me some invaluable lessons during my first two years as a college professor. I'd like to share three of the most important ones here. They aren't new lessons and I didn't use any unique methods to learn them. I collected data midsemester from students, I talked with them, and I looked closely at what was happening in my classroom. The lessons were there for me to learn, and taken together they have helped me think more clearly about what I want my students to know and do, and who I want them to become. They are lessons that have made me a better teacher.

Assumptions about students can be dangerous

I have learned from students that new learning can be overwhelming. Many students have great difficulty when challenged by rigorous coursework. This is especially true when the course includes activities and assignments that require students to demonstrate their knowledge. For most of their school years, success in and out of the classroom has been relatively easy for many students. When challenged by rigorous coursework, they experience fears that can be paralyzing. For some students these become insurmountable obstacles.

I complicated the problem with my assumptions about their skills, knowledge, and dispositions. There was a gap between students' actual knowledge, skills, and attitudes and what I expected of and from them. That ended up frustrating everyone. I learned I couldn't make assumptions about their knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and instead had to investigate what they knew and were able to do. Not doing so compromises the learning process, but with support most of my students find a measure of sustainable success.

Deepen the learning to maximize the learning

It has always been my goal to impart as much knowledge as possible to prepare students for careers in their respective disciplines. That desire to impart knowledge pushed me to rush through content, leaving students with a lot of superficial knowledge and little in-depth understanding. From my students I have learned three things about deep learning. One, I needed to focus on fewer topics, but with greater depth. This allowed for more integration of topics and content. Two, I needed to design more opportunities to engage students in their own learning processes. When I did this we had richer class discussions. My students engaged in more inquiry and research, and their confidence that they could critically reflect on their work increased. Finally, I learned how essential it is that I consistently make modifications to sharpen the content, activities, and strategies used for each new group of learners. This lesson reminded me to regularly assess students to determine the best methods and strategies to deliver instruction suited to their diverse learning needs and strengths.

Champion the content

Students are exceedingly concerned with their final grades and miss the value of learning the content. This is the most frustrating lesson I have learned. Students of this generation are often pressured to achieve. Failure is not an option. Many of my students became upset at the idea of earning a B. For them B's are tantamount to failure. This relentless pursuit of A's leads too many students to academic misconduct, dishonesty, and plagiarism.

To combat this challenge, it was important for me to find a way to champion what is truly valuable and important. I deliver this message relentlessly: "I am far more interested in you learning the content than I am interested in your final grade!" It has become a strategy to move students' thinking from focusing on their final grades to embracing the importance of learning the content, skills, and dispositions they will need to become proficient and productive professionals.

Final thoughts

These lessons learned from my students challenge me to acknowledge the diversity in learning styles, knowledge, skills, and dispositions; consistently evaluate my teaching to meet the needs of each new group of learners; teach fewer topics in greater depth; and continually articulate with fervor the value of learning content over getting grades. Although I'm sure there are many more lessons to learn, these lessons continue to transform my thinking about students and the methods I use to teach effectively and to help them learn deeply.

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'What Works' in the Messy Landscape of Teaching and Learning

By Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Teaching and Learning, Penn State Berks

The title is borrowed from text in an excellent article that challenges our use of the "what works" phrase in relationship to teaching and learning. Biology professor Kimberly Tanner writes, "... trying to determine 'what works' is problematic in many ways and belies the fundamental complexities of the teaching and learning process that have been acknowledged by scholars for thousands of years, from Socrates, to Piaget, to more recent authors and researchers." (p. 329) She proceeds to identify six reasons why the phrase hinders rather than fosters an evidence-based approach to teaching reform (in biology, her field, but these reasons relate to all disciplines). "Language is powerful," she notes. (p. 329) We use it to frame issues, and when we do, it guides our thinking.

"What works" is incongruent with the nature of science.

Her point applies more broadly. The phrase implies that "what works" is readily applicable to all contexts. It also conveys the sense that once you know "what works," there is no need for further investigation. You've got the answer. There is no equivalent phrase or sentiment used in scientific investigations of the natural world. "Why should our evidence-based investigations and view about the issues in teaching and learning of biology be any different?" (p. 330)

"What works" ignores individual students and their brains as key variables.

If the solution works, then it works for all students, or at least most of them. Lots of research now documents that "what works" for students depends on a host of demographic variables, including gender, language background, levels of family education, and ethnic identity. And then there is the individuality of student brains, which Tanner describes as "individual both in terms of architecture and information previously stored within." (p. 330) "What if the right way to teach is *not any singular way,* but rather the use of a variety of teaching techniques intertwined to benefit a range of learners and their experiences in a heterogeneous classroom? What if the closest we get to 'what works' is to teach using all of the available techniques and not just one?" (p. 330)

"What works" assumes uniformity in instructor experience and skill.

Also lurking within the "what works" assumption is the premise that it "works" for all instructors. Interestingly, when a technique is tried and it doesn't work, blame is usually affixed to the technique, not the instructor. For example, "group work" is labeled a bad technique rather than being recognized as a technique that was used ineffectively. The success of instructional strategies, especially complex ones, depends on the experience and skill of the instructor. Any given

technique may work, but not all instructors may be able to make it work, given their teaching skill and experience.

"What works" requires defining what is meant by "works."

This problem with the phrase has two parts. The first is that the definition for "what works" is largely left to the user. Typically "what works" means the strategy or technique promotes learning as measured by test scores and course grades. Tanner points out that grades may improve, but the technique may have had no effect on student motivation or interest in the discipline.

The second definitional problem with the "what works" phrase and accompanying thinking is evidence that supports the effectiveness of a particular solution is based on short-term measures, again mostly grades. "'What works' for short-term performance in a course … may or may not be the same as 'what works' for deep conceptual change and long-term retention, yet we have little to no evidence beyond a single semester time frame." (p. 332)

Building a common language about the substance of the "what" in "what works" is not trivial.

There is no common lexicon for instructional strategies. We toss strategy names about, assuming we all define them similarly, but in execution, even simple strategies such as think-pair-share look very different. If that's true for comparatively straightforward techniques, imagine the variation involved in complex strategies such as problem-based learning or in whole approaches such as learner-centered teaching.

In sum, Tanner explains that "at some level 'what works' arises from a desire to give scientists [and the rest of us] a shortcut to effective teaching, but there may not be any shortcuts." And what should we be saying and thinking in lieu of this phrase? "We can perhaps refocus on what has been shown again and again to be the path to effective teaching and learning: the development of reflective instructors who are analytical about their practice and who make iterative instructional decisions based on evidence from students sitting right in front of them." (p. 329)

Reference: Tanner, K. D. (2011). Reconsidering "what works." *Cell Biology Education, 10* (Winter), 329-333.

Student Engagement: What Is It?

By Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Teaching and Learning, Penn State Berks

Student engagement is one of the most widely used terms in higher education these days. What it describes is positive, something that benefits students, courses, departments, and institutions. It's also something we think we can measure, which many institutions have via the well-known and widely used National Survey of Student Engagement, or NSSE, as it's most often called. But like so many popular descriptors, the more it's used, the wider and looser its definition becomes and the more confident we are that everybody is talking about the same thing. We no longer bother with definitions. Perhaps it's time to pause and reconsider what student engagement actually means.

When the term first emerged, it was "seen as an evolving construct that capture[d] a range of institutional practices and student behaviors related to student satisfaction and achievement, including time on task, social and academic integration, and teaching practices." (p. 759) Some of the definitions offered then were simple and straightforward: student engagement is "the time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities." (p. 759)

But student engagement is actually a good bit more complicated than these definitions would seem to indicate. Kahu, in the article referenced below, identifies and explores four "distinct approaches to understanding [student] engagement." Each is highlighted briefly here and explored in much greater detail in Kahu's article.

The Behavioral Perspective, which Kahu says is the most widely accepted view of engagement, emphasizes student behavior and teaching practices and is exemplified by the NSSE instrument. Kahu identifies a number of empirical questions that have been raised about the instrument, including some related to the validity of student responses to certain items. Other research has shown that students struggle to define terms such as "thinking critically and analytically" and so how would they accurately know if they are? Also the NSSE instrument is used across disciplines, and teaching and learning do vary across fields. Finally, although the behavioral perspective does measure students' thinking processes as well as their behaviors, it does not address the emotional aspects of learning. Based on her analysis, which does include a delineation of the perspective's strengths, Kahu concludes, "[D]ue to its development as a tool for institutional improvement and comparison, the definition of student engagement within the behavioral perspective is limited and unclear." (p. 760)

The Psychological Perspective sees student engagement "as an internal psycho-social process that evolves over time and varies in intensity." (p. 761) Said another way, from this perspective, engagement is positioned within the individual. It is seen as having four dimensions: behavior, cognition, emotion, and conation or the will to succeed, which makes this a more integrated perspective. However, the problem, which Kahu calls a key limitation, is that researchers have not clearly differentiated between these dimensions. When engagement has been measured from

the psychological perspective, the results have been inconsistent. Kahu lauds the inclusion of the affective dimension—there is an emotional intensity associated with learning—but she sees the strong individual focus as "downplaying the critical importance of the situation. Engagement is fundamentally situational; it arises from the interplay of context and individual." (p. 763)

The Socio-Cultural Perspective focuses on "the impact of the broader social context on student experience." (p. 763) Some theorists working out of this perspective look at the opposite of engagement, which they say is alienation. Students often experience something akin to "culture shock" when they first start college. This is particularly true of nontraditional students, first-generation students, and students whose ethnicity is not that of the majority group. They are described as "not having the necessary social, cultural, and academic capital to easily fit into the university culture." (p. 763) This perspective offers ideas as to why students become engaged or alienated.

The Holistic Perspective tries to integrate the various other perspectives. Some theorists here see engagement as a "dynamic continuum with different locations (task, classroom, course, institution), and thus not measurable by surveys but best understood through in-depth qualitative work." (p. 764) In the holistic perspective, engagement is both a process and an outcome. Institutions should be "engaging students," the process, and the outcome should be "students engaging."

Kahu writes that all these perspectives offer useful and relevant insights that deepen our understanding of student engagement. She concludes the article by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates these various perspectives. This work is theoretical, devoted more to directing future research than practice, but for those of us who hear the term at every turn, and who aspire to engage our students, it is a useful reminder that often what seems simple and easily understood is vexingly complex.

Reference: Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38* (5), 758-773.

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Ways to Achieve Student Engagement

By Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Teaching and Learning, Penn State Berks

Student engagement is another of those buzz phrases popular in higher education. As with many regularly used terms, everyone assumes we are talking about the same thing; but when asked for definitions, either we are hard pressed to come up one or what's offered is a decidedly different collection of definitions. Here's an article that includes clear definitions and, based on a creative synthesis of research, offers 10 ways to promote student engagement.

The authors propose definitions broad enough to include more specific descriptions. For example: engagement is "students' cognitive investment in, active participation in, and emotional commitment to their learning." (p. 168) Or, engagement is "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning." (p. 168)

Based on this synthesis of research, student engagement can be promoted by teachers and institutions in the following ways:

Enhance students' self-belief

There is no agreement in the research literature as to what motivates learners to engage, but the dominant view is that students engage when they act as their own learning agents working to achieve goals meaningful to them. This means that what students believe about themselves as learners is very important. They must believe they can learn, including that they can overcome and learn from failure experiences. Giving students some control over learning processes helps develop this confidence and commitment to learning.

Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others, and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives

"When institutions provide opportunities for students to learn both autonomously and with others, and to develop their sense of competence, students are more likely to be motivated, to engage and succeed." (p. 170) Not unrelated to the first recommendation, the focus here is on cultivating intrinsic motivation, which fosters the self-determination that leads to engagement.

Recognize that teaching and teachers are central to engagement

Much research places teachers at the heart of engagement. For example, one study found that "if the teacher is perceived to be approachable, well prepared, and sensitive to student needs, students are committed to work harder, get more out of the session, and are more willing to express their opinion." (p. 170)

Create learning that is active, collaborative, and fosters learning relationships

"Findings acknowledge that active learning in groups, peer relationships, and social skills are important in engaging learners." (p. 171)

Create educational experiences for students that are challenging and enriching and that extend their academic abilities

Easy learning activities and assignments are not as effective at engaging students as activities and assignments that challenge them. When students are reflecting, questioning, conjecturing, evaluating, and making connections between ideas, they are engaged. "Teachers need to create rich educational experiences that challenge students' ideas and stretch them as far as they can go." (p. 171)

Ensure that institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds

To become engaged, students must feel they are accepted and affirmed. They must feel they belong at an institution.

Invest in a variety of support services

Sometimes it seems as though students don't take advantage of support services like learning and advising centers, but a wide variety of research findings confirms the importance of these support services. They are perceived as part of the institutional culture, and students engage when that culture values and supports their efforts to learn.

Adapt to changing student expectations

An institution should never be satisfied with how it is promoting student engagement. As students change and new research evidence emerges, institutional practices should be adjusted. Engagement cannot just be promoted, it must also be maintained.

Enable students to become active citizens

"What is needed is a democratic-critical conception of engagement that goes beyond strategies, techniques, behaviours, a conception in which engagement is participatory, dialogic and leads not only to academic achievement but to success as an active citizen." (p. 173)

Enable students to develop their social and cultural capital

This kind of capital derives from a sense of belonging, from active relationships with others, and from knowing how things work around the institution. It is especially essential for minority students who need to be successful not only in the classroom but beyond it as well.

Reference: Zepke, N., and Leach, L. (2010). Improving student engagement: Ten proposals for action. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 11* (3), 167-177.

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Critical Thinking: Definitions and Assessments

By Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Teaching and Learning, Penn State Berks

Despite almost universal agreement that critical thinking needs to be taught in college, now perhaps more than ever before, there is much less agreement on definitions and dimensions. "Critical thinking can include the thinker's dispositions and orientations; a range of specific analytical, evaluative, and problem-solving skills; contextual influences; use of multiple perspectives; awareness of one's own assumptions; capacities for metacognition; or a specific set of thinking processes or tasks." (p. 127)

Critical thinking is assessed in a variety of ways by individual teachers, but unlike many other college-level learning skills, it is also regularly assessed via a battery of standardized tests such as ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), ETS' Proficiency Profile (PP), and a set of scoring rubrics known as the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE).

Stassen, Herrington, and Henderson report on an interesting activity undertaken to answer several questions regarding critical thinking definitions. They wondered what dimensions of critical thinking were emphasized by these standardized tests and measures and whether those dimensions reflected how faculty at their institution defined critical thinking. "This exploratory analysis was intended to help us understand the relevance (or fit) of each of these tools to our faculty's priorities for students' critical thinking development." (p. 135)

They began by having a group of general education instructors generate an operational definition of critical thinking. The definition grew out of faculty responses to the following question and prompt: "What learning behaviors (skills, values, attitudes) do students exhibit that reflect critical thinking? Students demonstrate critical thinking when they ..." (p. 128) Analysis of the instructors' responses resulted in 12 dimensions of critical thinking: judgment/argument, synthesizing, problem solving, evidence-based thinking, drawing inferences, perspective taking, suspend judgment, application, metacognition, questioning/skepticism, knowledge/understanding, and discipline-based thinking.

Next they looked at how the four standardized tests defined critical thinking. "To understand the commonalities between the four external sources and our campus's own critical thinking definition, we used our internal definition as the anchor definition and coded the external sources in relation to the categories present in that internal definition." (p. 130) A table in the article presents this comparison.

Their analysis shows that "judgment/argument is the predominant component of critical thinking reflected in all of the external assessment options (accounting for between one-half to over three-quarters of all the descriptors associated with critical thinking)." (p. 133) They found "substantial emphasis" on drawing inferences and evidence-based thinking and lesser emphasis

on synthesizing, problem solving, and perspective taking. But some aspects of their definition of critical thinking, such as application, suspending judgment, metacognition, and questioning/ skepticism, received no emphasis in the standardized assessments. "The results suggest that all three standardized tests address a narrow set of constructs present in the campus definition, with the primary focus on judgment/argument, evidence-based thinking, and drawing inferences." (p. 135)

This analysis was not a study of the validity of the items on the standardized assessments, but rather an exploration of how the basic construct of critical thinking was defined by the assessment tool. Furthermore, their campus definition was not assumed to be the "correct" definition. The authors note that it wasn't systematically vetted or compared with the responses of other groups of faculty on their campus or elsewhere, although the list of dimensions identified by these general education instructors is not notably unusual. Despite these limitations, other benefits derive from this kind analysis. Most notably it generates rich conversations about critical thinking. It helps individual faculty, collections of faculty teaching related courses (in this case general education), and institutions clarify what they mean when they say they are teaching critical-thinking skills.

Reference: Stassen, M. L., Herrington, A., and Henderson, L. Defining Thinking in Higher Education. In Miller, J. E. and Groccia, J. E., eds. *To Improve the Academy, 30*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

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A Less-Structured, More Learning-Centered Environment

Traditional teaching: "doing something to students."

Learner-centered teaching: "doing something with students."

Learning-centered: "being with students."

Do these differences seem semantic? To Jean Ramsey and Dale Fitzgibbons (reference below) they typify three modes of teaching, each located at a different place on a continuum. In the traditional mode, teachers pass on knowledge. Ramsey and Fitzgibbons note that most teachers have moved beyond this conception to a point on the continuum where they find themselves doing activities, exercises, leading discussions, and otherwise working to engage and involve students. But they observe that most learner-centered teaching still rests on teacher-initiated techniques. They see a place on the continuum beyond this, a place that simply puts the teacher among the students. "We're here to learn together and you (the students) are as much a source of our learning as I (the teacher)." (p. 337) This "being" with students creates a kind of ultimate learning community.

"Being classes," as the authors refer to them, rest on the belief that students themselves control what they are learning. Teachers cannot learn content for students. But neither can teachers force students to learn. From any given learning experience, students will take vastly different things. They learn in different ways and filter all learning experiences through the unique set of past experiences. If you doubt these premises, the authors challenge you to take a learning experience that has occurred in your class, maybe a good student presentation, an exercise or an especially animated discussion, and immediately after its conclusion, ask students to write a paragraph about what they learned. "You may find yourself amazed at what some of them learn. What was intended as the major learning may pass them by completely, whereas some of their learnings may be unexpected, and unintended." (p. 339)

Applying these assumptions in a classroom changes the role of both teachers and students. For teachers, it introduces ambiguity and uncertainty in classroom. "Content emerges spontaneously, and often serendipitously, from the process. There is no way to anticipate the learning opportunities that may emerge." (p. 341) This means teachers must be grounded well enough in a topic area that they can go with the flow — respond with the content when, where, and on what topic it is needed.

As for students, in these kinds of learning environments, compliance is not enough. Cooperation won't carry the day, and students need to bring commitment — an enthusiastic involvement in their own learning and the learning of others. Students and teachers engage in an exploration of

ideas. In these classrooms, questions are valued more than answers.

"Being in the classroom" is at the far end of the learning continuum — well beyond where even the learner-centered among us have ventured with our teaching. But this article offers lots of encouragement to push toward this place of diminished structure. The authors repeatedly point out that "being is not just nondoing. Being classes have purpose and a clearly visible process to them." (p. 354) In fact, the syllabus excerpt included in the article looks and sounds quite conventional. Students are doing written work, taking exams, and preparing projects. These two authors see course design as the creation of a "container," the setting of boundaries within which students are given the freedom to self-organize their learning.

They also see viability for all three modes of teaching and see the possibility of all three being used in the same course. "What we advocate here is active and overt choice about where to operate on the doing-being continuum." (p. 354) Those choices may depend on the nature of the content, the objectives of the course as well as where students are in their own development. They use different amounts of each depending on the time trajectory of the course -- less of the being mode at the beginning; more at the end.

Reference: Ramsey, V. J. and Fitzgibbons, D. E. (2005). Being in the classroom. *Journal of Management Education, 29* (2), 333-356.

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This article originally appeared in the newsletter **The Teaching Professor** http://bit.ly/1IJcBwZ 19.6 (2005): 6, 7.

Avoiding Information Overload: Remembering Course Goals

By John A. Dern, Temple University, PA

In more than 20 years of teaching, I have learned that too much information frustrates rather than inspires students. Today, however, with a few clicks of the computer mouse, any teacher can retrieve an overabundance of information. What is more, courseware makes distributing this information to students amazingly easy. As a result, teachers risk (unintentionally) giving students much more information than they can reasonably digest, including electronic texts, supplementary texts, and background information. The key to avoiding information overload is remembering course goals.

A few years ago, the program in which I teach revamped its two courses. Consequently, I ended up having to teach a number of texts I had never taught before. As I prepared to teach these new texts, I confronted this question: how much background information do I need to provide for students so that they will have sufficient context to analyze and discuss these works effectively?

My program is interdisciplinary: the courses do not focus on a single author, era, or theme. Rather, the focus is on critical reading skills, and the texts themselves—from disciplines as varied as biology, literature, urban planning, and more—pose disparate critical challenges for readers. Thus, each text essentially requires its own background information—an overview of its author, its historical setting, its relationship to other works, etc. Those of us who teach in this program have nine texts of varying length to cover in each of the two courses, so one can see how a teacher *could* spend a considerable amount of time supplying background information to the detriment of skills development. Indeed, this is the essential point: the program's focus is not biology or literature or urban planning but *skills development.* Having taught the new courses numerous times now, I have come to realize that if a teacher keeps this course goal in mind, he or she can use experience in the classroom to discern how much background information a given text requires in order for students to achieve the intended outcome.

I recently found myself thinking again about background information when my program adopted a new text, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality,* and I was asked to pilot the book in a summer session. (I had not taught anything by Rousseau in a dozen or more years.) Once again, the question arose: how much background information would my students need in order to help them analyze and discuss this work effectively? I started by reminding myself of the desired outcome: the goal was not for students to become proficient in Rousseau or *Discourse on Inequality*—or even to use Rousseau as part of a survey of 18th-century literature. Rather, the objective was for my students to become proficient readers, using parts of Rousseau's text for close reading exercises in pursuit of that goal. I realized that given the course goal, my students would not require the amount of background information on Rousseau that other courses might require.

If my class were focused on Rousseau and his works or even on 18th-century literature, I would need to assign comprehensive supplementary readings, such as the entry on Rousseau found in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and another companion piece or two. In my critical reading course, however, I only needed to prepare a 20-minute lecture on Rousseau, his works, his relationship to the Enlightenment, and his influence on Romantic thought. Indeed, given my program's desired outcome, it behooves me to spend as much time as possible on passages from actual course texts such as *Discourse on Inequality*. The key to doing this is to supply just enough background information to help students contextualize the reading.

As accessing information becomes easier and easier, teachers need to practice greater discrimination in terms of the quantity of the supplementary texts and background information supplied to students. Too much information may overwhelm students and detract from the intended outcome.

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Some Lessons Learned about Learner-Centered Teaching

Because so much of what college teachers learn about teaching they learn from experience, there is a bit of a tradition of senior faculty sharing instructional wisdom with beginners. It's not a strong tradition or one that has any consistent format, but, with some regularity, articles and sometimes even books appear in which the "senior" attempts to distill lessons that can be passed on to those more "junior." If the "senior" is insightful and the lessons are articulated ably, then those lessons benefit not just beginners but all faculty. And that is certainly the case with a wonderful piece authored by management professor David A. Whetten, who now directs a faculty development center.

Whetten admits with honesty that for some years he didn't think there was much he could learn from people who "studied" education. After all, he was in the classroom doing education and had learned much from that experience. He explains how a conversation with his golf instructor resulted in an important insight about the nature of experiential learning. "One day on the driving range, I was demonstrating my swing while remarking, 'Practice makes perfect.' His disarming response was, 'Only if you begin with a good swing. My advice to you is to either stop practicing or change your swing.' In teaching, as in golf, repeating poor teaching mechanics can actually move us away from, not closer to, our performance objective of effective student learning." (p. 340) Faculty do learn from experience; that's true. However, the more salient question is what have they learned.

"So what changes in my swing as a teacher am I trying to make that I wish someone had corrected early in my career?" Whetten asks. (p. 340) He explains that early in his career a new faculty member asked advice about teaching at a top-tier private business school where MBA students would not tolerate poor teaching. "My recommendation at the time was to find the highest-rated MBA teacher and attend every class for a semester, taking copious notes." (p. 341) But that's not the recommendation he'd give today. Now he'd find the MBA course where students report learning the most, and then he'd carefully examine the design of that course. "It's not that we can't learn anything of value about learning by observing great teachers; it's that emphasizing classroom observation perpetuates the myth that the key to learning is a talented instructor." (p. 341)

And this leads Whetten to the most important lesson he's learned: course design. He explains with another example. As a teacher he prizes discussion and he reports working diligently to learn how to lead those discussions effectively. ". . .as I crafted provocative discussion questions, I did so with the expectation that my answers needed to be significantly more profound than those offered by the students—otherwise, I reasoned, I wasn't adding value as a teacher. In contrast, I have come to understand that the most important things I can do to influence student learning involve carefully planning what my students—not their teacher—will do before, during and after each class." (p. 341)

The remainder of this excellent article then articulates some of the most important principles of learning-centered course design. They include beginning with explicit, high-level learning objectives, using valid developmental assessments of student learning, selecting course activities that foster active and engaged learning, and aligning course design elements. The alignment issue is not one easily understood by most faculty. It relates to whether what is taught is consistent with stated objectives for the course and whether students are tested on what they have been told is important to learn.

Whetten concludes with this observation: "I went into this experience [referring to his work in faculty development] expecting to pick up some useful teaching tips for polishing my performance as a teacher; I will leave this experience with a very different view of teaching—focused on student learning outcomes and framed as teacher-as-course-designer." (p. 356)

Reference: Whetten, D. A. (2007). Principles of effective course design: What I wish I had known about learning-centered teaching 30 years ago. *Journal of Management Education, 31,* 339-357.

Ed.'s note: *This entire issue of the Journal of Management Education is devoted to articles from senior and well-respected faculty in the field. Guest editor Janet Gillespie describes the issue this way: "Wisdom from Our Sages: Advice and Reflections for Early-Career Faculty (and for the Rest of Us)." What a wonderful idea and how appropriate for all discipline-based pedagogical periodicals to give some permanence to the lessons of those who have learned much and well.*

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Learning from Our Mistakes

By Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Teaching and Learning, Penn State Berks

We regularly tell our students "Don't be afraid to make mistakes. You can learn from your mistakes." Most of us work hard to create classroom climates where it's okay to make mistakes. We do that because if we're there when the mistake is made, we can expedite the learning, and because we know that everyone else in class can learn from those mistakes.

We know all this because most of us have long histories of learning from our own mistakes. It started in school, continued in college and graduate school, and happens all the time in our scholarly work. Most of us also realize that more can be learned from a mistake than from a triumph. Mistakes have a way of opening us up to learning.

But you know, most of us don't handle teaching mistakes the same way. I suspect this partly derives from the long history of teaching being a private activity—something we do in our classrooms, alone, often with the doors closed. It's also tied up with how teaching is an expression of who we are as people, which makes mistakes a matter of personal integrity. Aren't we a bit like our student writers and performers who are so vested in what they write and perform that they cannot separate the person from the performance?

Sometimes the decision not to talk about teaching failures, troubles, or less-than-successful approaches is a political one. We don't need to have the department chair or our senior colleagues thinking we aren't doing all that well in the classroom. And that does make sense, but even very senior faculty (like me) find ourselves reluctant to talk about things that don't work well. When we meet with colleagues to talk teaching—in my workshops, for example—invariably what's shared is a success story. They're good and they add to the exchange, but not everything we do in the classroom is a success. We don't talk about what didn't work, sometimes even to ourselves.

I hold in particularly high esteem those faculty members not only willing to talk about teaching failures but also to publish articles about them. At the end of this article I've listed a collection of my personal favorites. You can't read them without admiring the courage of the authors. But you also can't read them and be unimpressed by how much they learned through the analysis. Each one is an exemplar of the kind of critical reflection that fosters growth. This is reflection that makes us wise and wonderful teachers. And finally you also can't read these articles and not realize how much there is for us to learn from one another's mistakes. I'm definitely in favor of more articles like these, but there is one caveat. It might be better if they were published after you have tenure or a continuing contract.

I'm advocating more confrontation with what doesn't work, more analysis of why, and more discussion of the instructional complexities that render great teaching ideas, strategies, and approaches dead in the water with some students and in some classes. We need to heed the

advice we give students. Mistakes are there to be learned from, but only if there's a willingness to confront what happened and why. Let the articles below inspire you to analyze something that didn't work but offers lessons that can be learned. And don't be shy about asking for a little help from your friends. After all, we've all had those days and those classes where we didn't get it right.

Albers, C. "Teaching: From Disappointment to Ecstasy." *Teaching Sociology*, 2009, 37 (July), 269–282.
To this teacher's surprise, honors students resisted approaches that required them to be more self-directed.

Cohan, M. "Bad Apple: The Social Production and Subsequent Reeducation of a Bad Teacher." *Change,* 2009, (November/December), 32 ¬ –36.
This is an honest exploration of early failures as a teacher and of how new approaches to teaching were developed.

Damico, A. M. "Stories of Boy Scouts, Barbie Dolls, and Prom Dresses: Challenging College Students to Explore the Popular Culture of Their Childhood." *Teachers College Record*, 2006, 108 (4), 604-620.
An account of students resisting content shows how two teachers tried to respond.

Gallagher, T. J. "Embracing Student Evaluations of Teaching: A Case Study." *Teaching Sociology*, April 2000, 28, 140-146.
This recounts how a new teacher responded to a case of not very good student ratings.

Noel, T. W. "Lessons from the Learning Classroom." *Journal of Management Education*, 2004, 28(2), 188-206.
The author recounts first attempts to implement learner-centered approaches and explores why they failed.

Sandstorm, K. L. "Embracing Modest Hopes: Lessons from the Beginning of a Teaching Journey." In B.A. Pescosolido and R. Aminzade, eds., *The Social Worlds of Higher Education.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1999.
Teachers begin as idealistic and optimistic; this teacher describes how he became more realistic without becoming pessimistic.

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Talk about Teaching That Benefits Beginners and Those Who Mentor Them

Beginning college teachers benefit when they have an instructional mentor. That fact is well established; as is the fact that mentoring benefits those who mentor. The influx of new faculty over the past few years has caused mentoring programs to flourish. All kinds of activities have been proposed so that mentors and mentees can spend their time together profitably. Addressed less often are those instructional topics particularly beneficial for the experienced and less-experienced teachers to address. Here's a list of possibilities.

Talk about teaching that gets past the pleasantries and basic techniques.

Most new teachers do need help with the mechanics. But details about how many points for extra credit, what prevents late papers, and whether students should eat in class should be part of a first conversation. They should not dominate subsequent exchanges. Early on, new teachers need to realize that real instructional issues are much more complex and much more intellectually intriguing. Mentors can help new faculty talk about teaching on a different level—the level of questions without easy answers and the level that reveals how much more there is to learn about teaching and learning.

How to put student ratings in perspective.

Most college teachers don't get their best student ratings in the first courses they teach. But most new college teachers do take early ratings more seriously than those received subsequently. Much like beginning (and sometimes not-so-beginning) writers, new teachers have trouble separating themselves from the performance. So it's beneficial to have a colleague who's been around for a while, who can look objectively at a set of ratings and say something like, "Well, if these were my ratings, here are the three things I'd conclude."

Help seeing syllabus construction as the design of learning environments and the construction of learning experiences.

For beginning teachers, there's the mechanical question of what goes on a syllabus—it's a pragmatic question and often needs to be answered in a hurry. But syllabus construction is not just about what happens in the course and when. It's really about course design. The policies placed on a syllabus convey what the teacher believes contributes to learning. Assignments dictate the terms and conditions under which students will have their most in-depth encounter with the content. A mentor can help a new college teacher see beyond the details and look for the assumptions on which a policy or practice rests.

Reminders that exams not only assess learning, they promote it.

Too often faculty (not just new teachers, although new teachers are particular susceptible) see exams as the means that allows them to gauge and then grade student mastery of material. Faculty forget that exams promote learning. They "force" an up-close and personal encounter with the content of the course. Students review their notes, they read the text, they ask each other questions, they decide what's important, and they make guesses about what they need to know for the exam. All these activities promote the learning of course material. Together, the teacher with experience and the new teacher can talk about how exam events can be designed so as to maximize their inherent learning potential.

Warnings about the folly of predicting who will and won't make it in the course/major.

Making judgments about who is and who isn't going to succeed in the course is natural, and with experience, the accuracy of those calls improves but doesn't mean it's always reliable. Honest teachers have lots of stories about how badly they missed. What any teacher must avoid is letting students think that the teacher doesn't believe they have what it takes. Yes, teachers do need to give students accurate feedback about their performance in a course and what that level of performance will lead to if it continues. But that's very different than saying or subtly conveying that a student doesn't have the intellectual muscle required to master the material. Students need teachers who believe in them and who recognize that ultimately, the decision about success or failure is one that students make.

Wise advice on classroom management.

Not being seasoned, confident pedagogues, new teachers can be suckers for rules, especially those that make clear the teacher's authority over life in the classroom. New teachers need to learn that the attraction to rules grows out of an interesting conundrum. Despite having lots of power over students, teachers are not in control of the classroom. It takes time and encouragement from a mentor to learn that students can be trusted—not believed in blindly, but trusted enough for teachers to show them respect and believe that it will be returned.

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Confessions of a Bad Teacher

By Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Teaching and Learning, Penn State Berks

It's not often an article starts with an admission like this: "I was a bad teacher." (p. 32) Can you see yourself submitting an article that begins this way? Definitely not before tenure and probably not even after that—is that what most of you are saying?

And what was it that made Mark Cohan a bad teacher? "I was not mean or abusive to students, and I didn't make capricious demands, ignore my syllabus, grade while under the influence, or test students on material I had not taught." (p. 32) But his course evaluations were not stellar despite a great deal of time devoted to preparation. However, what signaled his ineffectiveness was how disconnected he felt from his students. "They were enigmas to me, and I didn't know how to deal with the varying levels of interest, commitment, and ability they brought to class. All I knew how to do was to expect of them what I had always expected of myself—not perfection, exactly, but something close to it." (p. 32)

Like many of us in academe, Cohan was raised in a middle-class family where school was a priority. It was expected that after high school he would go to college. His parents paid for his education so he didn't need to work while in school. He could give school his full, undivided attention. "I had been taught my whole life to see myself in terms of grades and commitment to school and to judge myself harshly if either of those faltered; why wouldn't I see my students through the same lens?" (p. 34)

Cohan arrived at his first job with high expectations for students, which they mostly failed to reach. And he critiqued their performances, offering way more judgment than praise. He says that he lacked "the compassion, patience and power necessary to help students meet those expectations." (p. 33)

But the problem really wasn't Cohan's students. "Truthfully, it was I who was not measuring up; I was not practicing the craft of teaching at a high level and, more importantly, I was not taking full measure of myself. I was not reflecting on who I was and how that could, would or should inform who I was as a teacher." (p. 33) Once he started making that reflection an integral and ongoing part of his teaching practice, he was able to reorient his teaching. "My own transformation has meant that I am much less a critic and much more a mentor to my students." (p. 33)

His transformation did not happen overnight, nor is it fully finished, nor has progress always been straightforward. He has arrived at a place where he is moving forward by stops and starts. Early on, a tutoring experience with one student gave him "a glimpse of a new conception of the teacher. … What that experience produced was a shift in consciousness. The recognition (albeit intermittent and partial) that one fundamental flaw in my teaching—a source of the angst that infused my effort and daily wore me down—was inside me meant that I could actively work to change it." (pp. 34–35)

Cohan's insights about himself were affected by teaching experiences in a community college and at a small Jesuit university where teaching was taken very seriously. It was there that his pedagogical knowledge began to grow. Attendance at workshops and conversations with teaching colleagues encouraged more thinking and reflection about his teaching—some of it decidedly painful. "Sometimes, all of this conferring and contemplation left me overwhelmed. I would become convinced that all of my course designs were broken beyond repair and that I would need a year … to scrap and rebuild them. In darker moments, I was convinced that I was broken beyond repair—a well-meaning but hopeless instructor who didn't have *the gift*."

But Cohan has made much progress. "I believe I've come quite a ways from my days of treating students like problem children and writing outlines on the board to avoid really interacting with them. The challenge for me … has been to stop projecting who I was as a student onto my students." (p. 36)

This is one of those truly amazing articles! Many teachers begin where Cohan started, but few are willing to own up to the problems that come to those who teach from a place of superiority and impossibly high standards. Not only is this a journey from which others can learn, it's an optimistic piece. Teachers can change how they orient to teaching—not around the edges with a few new techniques, but how they teach and what they believe about students.

Reference: Cohan, M. (2009). Bad apple: The social production and subsequent reeducation of a bad teacher. *Change* (November/December), 32–36.

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Six Things That Make College Teachers Successful

By Mary C. Clement, Berry College, GA

1. Study the knowledge base of teaching and learning.

You have chosen to teach in higher education because you are a subject-matter specialist with a tremendous knowledge of your discipline. As you enter or continue your career, there is another field of knowledge you need to know: teaching and learning. What we know about teaching and learning continues to grow dramatically. It includes developing effective instructional strategies, reaching today's students, and teaching with technology. Where is this knowledge base? Books, articles in pedagogical periodicals, newsletters, conferences, and online resources provide ample help. Take advantage of your institution's center for teaching and learning or other professional development resources.

2. Accept all who enter the classroom door.

Much has been written about underprepared students who enter college. Since more students attend college now than ever before, it is only rational that some are not as prepared as we might expect. Institutions are dealing with this issue, but instructors must do some rethinking about how they teach, in order to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms. Ungraded pretests and interest inventories can be used to see what your students already know about the content you will be teaching next. Students in all classes need help learning how to learn the material. You may not have imagined that you would be teaching how to learn vocabulary in your college courses, but that may be just what your students' need. Above all, students should not be berated if they don't know things that weren't taught in high school. Accept students where they are and help them to go forward. They need a college education!

3. Plan for instructional management.

For decades, college instructors never thought of classroom management as something they had to plan, but times have changed and today's college students need to know what's happening. Posting a visual outline of what will be done during the class helps students follow the lesson and stay on task. Various aspects of teaching, such as distributing papers, taking attendance, and making time for students to ask questions, need to be part of course planning. Put policies in the syllabus about attendance, disturbances, cell phones, etc., and then review those policies with students. You set the tone of the class, and management procedures are needed.

4. Teach with a variety of strategies.

Study the literature and learn about approaches such as learner-centered teaching, guided inqui-

ry, active learning, lecture, group work, and online discussion. Use what works best given your content and your students' learning needs. The best advice is to be visual, followed by keeping students actively thinking, writing, comparing, and applying new knowledge. Students learn more easily when they've been given the rationale for what they are learning, and when they understand why the teacher has chosen certain instructional methods and learning activities.

5. Use assessment to inform students of their achievement.

Today's students are used to checking their grades online so they know where they stand at any given time in the semester. Grading policies need to be clear and grading scales easy to use. Share your grading policy in writing on the syllabus and then show exactly how it works after the first big exam, paper, or assignment. Remind students that assessment is more than the assigning of a grade. Assessment helps them to understand their achievement and helps teachers meet their needs.

6. Keep the passion.

It is very easy to become disheartened by student complaints, lack of administrative support, budget cuts, and job insecurity. However, what is it that drew you to your discipline originally? For most of us, it was a true passion for the subject, a desire to learn all about it, and a further desire to then share that knowledge. In higher education, we have opportunities to learn, research, teach, and shape the future of our disciplines and influence the larger world through our disciplines. Successful college teachers recognize that many of today's college students have learning needs. Taking actions like these helps them to meet those challenges successfully.

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This article originally appeared in the newsletter **The Teaching Professor** http://bit.ly/1IJcBwZ 27.7 (2013): 5.

Additional Resources

Here is a collection of additional tools to help new faculty on your campus thrive.

20 Minute Programs

What Are Five Tips for Writing Effective Learning Outcomes?

Developing a clear understanding of where you want your course to go and what your students will learn is essential for faculty. By articulating your pedagogical goals, you will clarify your practices and take both your teaching and your students to the next level. **$49 on-demand | $99 on CD**

White Papers

Ten Ways to Engage Your Students on the First Day of Class

This white paper gives you the simple tools and strategies that create and maintain an optimal classroom environment. Equip new instructors with the classroom management tools they probably did not learn in graduate school but that have a measurable impact on instructional success. **$99 PDF**

Courses

Principles of Effective College Teaching

This online course will give new faculty the information and confidence they need to be an effective college instructor. Learn how to effectively design a course, create exams, manage content, increase student engagement, deal with common classroom challenges, evaluate learning, and more. **$299 with discounts for multiple seats**

20 Minute Programs

What Kinds of Questions Encourage Student Interaction?

Changing how you use questions requires a few tweaks to your approach and not a major overhaul of your teaching methods. Learn the subtle things you can do to make your questions more powerful and your classroom interactions with students more fruitful. **$49 on-demand | $99 on CD**