

Thriving in Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ Getting Better as Teachers

How can we get better in our teaching?” It is a question that perpetually challenges us. One powerful option is to learn from the outstanding teachers around us: What do they do that makes them so effective? Can we learn from them to become better teachers?

BY:

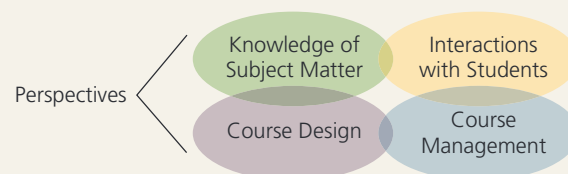
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Improving Our Teaching: Learning from the Best

In 2004, Ken Bain published the influential book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, which offered an in-depth study of more than 60 outstanding teachers from quite varied institutions. His book contains numerous wonderful lessons, but the central theme was that these teachers created “natural critical learning environments.” They challenged students with authentic problems and questions and then supported their efforts to grapple with related ideas, rethink their assumptions, and re-examine their mental models of reality.

In the belief that it is possible to look at exceptionally good teachers and learn more than one valuable lesson, I offer this additional analysis.



The four circled items represent the fundamental tasks of teaching. The way we do those tasks is influenced by our own views of knowledge, learning, teaching, ourselves as teachers, and our students as learners. In my essay, I identify some lessons from Bain’s book on three of these factors: perspectives, course design, and interactions with students.



Meet L. Dee Fink



L. Dee Fink served as founding director of the Instructional Development Program at the University of Oklahoma from 1979

until his retirement in 2005. In 2004-2005, he served as president of the POD Network in Higher Education, the primary professional association for faculty developers in the US. He currently works as a national and international consultant in higher education, helping universities identify ways to improve their educational program. His professional website is: www.finkconsulting.info.

“What the Best College Teachers Do”: An Additional Analysis

Ken Bain’s description of the best college teachers (2004) is a rich resource of information from which we can all learn. As a long-time faculty developer with my own perspective on college teaching, I offer this additional analysis of what accounts for the unusual impact of these teachers on the learning of their students. This analysis focuses on the perspectives they brought to their work, their course design decisions, and the special way they interacted with their students.

THEIR CONVERSATIONS REVEALED A MINDSET THAT TRUSTED STUDENTS TO BE GOOD STUDENTS.

ATTITUDES AND PERSPECTIVES

Apart from their actions in relation to specific courses, these teachers had a special set of attitudes or perspectives about teaching and learning that was foundational to

the way they taught.

Intense Desire to Continue Learning. Not only did these teachers do the usual work of keeping abreast of changes in their discipline, they spent substantial amounts of time continuously learning new ideas about teaching and the nature of human learning.

Positive Attitudes Towards Students. In their own thinking and in their communication with others, they never engaged in the all-too-common practice of blaming

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > LEARNING ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

Like most of us who teach in higher education, Kristin Scott, an assistant professor of Marketing, had no preparation for teaching. At her first university, she was given some old syllabi a week before classes and told: “Just try to stay one week ahead of the students.” Result? “I had

no understanding of what to do or of how students learn. I dreaded going to class. I thought the students hated me.”

Fortunately her second university, Minnesota State—Mankato, had a Teaching Certificate Program to help junior faculty learn about teaching. Result? “It

was a complete paradigm shift for me. I learned some really fundamental concepts, like ‘active learning and metacognition; I learned how to engage students, and the importance of identifying what I want students to learn.’”

An increasing proportion of college teachers are discovering there

are some “break-through” ideas about teaching and learning “out there.” Fink maintains an annotated bibliography of books with major new ideas on college teaching published in the last 20 years; it is available online at: www.finkconsulting.info/majornewideas.doc

As Professor Scott said,

“Participating in this Teaching Certificate Program made my job more enjoyable. I still have a lot to learn, but my courses already have a lot more focus to them; my students are more engaged with each other and with me. That makes my courses much more exciting—both for my students and for me.”

students. They never made comments like “Today’s students just don’t [fill in your favorite problem] like they did in my days as a student,” or “You just have to force students today to work hard.” Rather, their conversations revealed a mindset that trusted students to be good students.

Used Teacher Evaluations to Improve. They did not just glance at their end-of-course evaluations and ask: “How’d I do this time?” They examined the evaluations closely to see what students liked and disliked, then they used this information to get even better in their teaching. When students were not learning well, they examined the course, before automatically blaming the students.

Viewed Their Teaching as Part of a Larger Context. They did not view their teaching as their private domain—and no one else’s business. Rather, they saw their own teaching as an integral part of what their institution or their discipline was trying to do. That is, they saw themselves as part of a collective effort to provide students with a high-quality educational experience. This meant they tried to contribute in some way to the goals of that larger effort.

DECISIONS ABOUT COURSE DESIGN

Before the course even began, these teachers undertook a number of specific actions and decisions, which I would describe as course design decisions.

Identified Big Questions and Stories. Many of them identified big questions or

big stories that gave meaning to the whole course. One calculus teacher drew an irregular shape and then asked students: “How would you calculate the area under that curve?” A sociology professor posed the question: “How does society influence individual human behavior, and is that influence

THESE TEACHERS HAD MOVED WELL BEYOND PRIMARY RELIANCE ON THE TRADITIONAL STAPLES OF LECTURES, HOMEWORK, AND WHOLE-CLASS DISCUSSIONS.

greater than the personal and biological forces within each person?”

Fully Used the First Day of the Course. They did not dismiss class early, and tell students to “go buy your textbooks.” They used the first day to get the course started in a powerful way. Many used this to get to know their students better, both individually and collectively. Others used it to pose their big question and start the process of engaging students.

Formulated Good Learning Goals. These teachers clearly had moved into learning-centered teaching. They recognized the need to build their course around a set of high-quality learning goals, rather than just march their students through a set of topics about the subject. Many of these goals

focused on “thinking” as well as “knowing.” But many also wanted learning that, in terms of Fink’s *Taxonomy of Significant Learning* (2003), went well beyond the categories of cognitive learning. One medical-school professor wanted her students to learn: how to handle their own emotions, how to treat a person in a hospital bed as a human being, and how to care both for healing and for helping people and their families.

Used Good Learning Activities. These teachers had moved well beyond primary reliance on the traditional staples of lectures, homework, and whole-class discussions. They had students engaging in authentic tasks, small group work, finding sources of information, answering those big questions themselves, and reflecting on their own learning.

Responded to Student Characteristics. By paying attention to several characteristics of their students over the years and currently, they were able to make adjustments in their courses to deal appropriately with: students’ prior knowledge of the subject, their dominant learning patterns, their expectations of the course, etc.

Used Good Assessment Activities. Their assessment activities were used to do more than grade students; they were used to enhance learning. They accomplished this by (a) periodically having students assess their own learning, (b) providing frequent feedback on student work, and (c) using well-developed rubrics to evaluate

■ BEST PRACTICES > STRATEGIES FOR GETTING BETTER AS A TEACHER

Here are three pieces of advice to get anyone on a growth curve in terms of their competencies and capabilities for helping other people learn.

First, spend time learning about teaching. This might mean participating in on-campus or national workshops, reading books, gathering feedback from

students, and if your university has a faculty development program, using their consultation services.

How much time should one spend? Most sizeable organizations spend 5% of a person’s time on professional development. For faculty members, that would mean spending 8 hours a month or 8 days a year.

Second, apply what you

learn. It is not enough to learn new ideas; you have to use them and make some kind of change in your teaching.

Third, assess your teaching carefully. When you try something new [which should be every time you teach], ask your students if they learned something valuable. Which activities helped them learn well and

which did not?

If you can regularly learn and apply new ideas to your teaching, and also assess the impact of these changes, you will see yourself getting better and better as a teacher — every year, every year!



complex projects.

Created a High Level of Course Integration. One level of integration was achieved by making sure their learning and assessment activities fit their learning goals. In addition, they frequently found a way to connect out-of-class learning with in-class learning. This way, the course offered a sequence of activities that built on each other, frequently leading to a culminating activity or project.

THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS

Once the course was underway, these teachers communicated and interacted with students in a way that motivated and empowered students to effective learning. How did they do this?

They Showed Students They Cared. They didn't just "say" they cared; they did care—about many things. They were concerned about students as human beings; they deeply wanted students to learn; the whole teaching-learning process excited them; and they truly believed their subject was the most important and exciting in the world. These passions were made visible to students, not hidden or kept secret.

They Knew How to Motivate Students. Bain mentioned three specific actions by teachers that motivated students to work hard on learning: (a) they gave praise in a special way, e.g., using "task" praise rather than "person" praise, (b) they listened carefully to students, and (c) they figured out what motivated different students, and then responded in special ways to each student.

They Had Dynamic Communication Skills. Part of this involved using a sense of drama and rhythm in their dialogue. They also used the language of "promises" ["This is what you will be able to do as a result of this course..."] rather than "demands" ["This is what you must do in this course..."]. In addition, they:

- Invited students into a community of learners about the subject at hand, both past and present.
- Repeatedly expressed their belief that each and every student in the course really could learn this material.
- Celebrated the achievements of students.
- Used the "warm" language of good story telling.

Illustration: Steve McCracken

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

GETTING BETTER AS TEACHERS: SOME A PRIORI QUESTIONS

Before we even make the effort to get better as teachers, there are some questions that we need to ask and answer. Here are three questions that many teachers have.

IF I WORK REALLY HARD, CAN I BECOME ONE OF THE BEST TEACHERS AT MY UNIVERSITY? Maybe yes, maybe no. But that is not the right question to ask. The right question is: "Can I get myself on a growth curve and stay there? That is, can I continue to get better, every year, every year?" That will require spending time both learning new ideas from wherever you can, and then finding a way to use these ideas in your own teaching. We can't all be "the best" but we can all get better — and we owe it to our institution, ourselves and our students

to work hard at achieving that goal.

CAN I REALLY MAKE BIG CHANGES IN MY EFFECTIVENESS AS A TEACHER?

Aren't we all born with our particular level of talent as a teacher? The answer to this question is quite clear. Everyday there are people learning how to make major improvements in their effectiveness as teachers. I worked as a faculty developer for more than 25 years at a university with approximately 1,000 teachers. Over and over, I saw ordinary teachers take an idea from a workshop, from a consulting session or a book, and apply that idea in their courses with amazing results. The teachers felt much better about their teaching and so did their students.

IS THERE A SINGLE, BEST WAY TO TEACH? Is this not "one size fits all" thinking? It is correct, that there is not a single best way to teach. But



there are some universal principles that we can all apply in unique and specific ways. The teachers described in Bain's book were clearly quite varied in their specific practices. But what Bain did in his book and what I am trying to do here, is identify some common principles and patterns we see within that variation. An analogy to this is what happens with airplanes. Some planes are made in Europe, some in the U.S. Some are built to be agile fighter planes; some are designed to carry cargo or passengers. Some are big, some are small. But no matter what the size and purpose, when that plane takes off and lands, there are some universal laws of aerodynamics that must be used in the design and operation of that plane. The same is true of teaching.

They Were Trustworthy. They were sensitive to how they handled the power-trust issue inherent in any hierarchical relationship. They did not use the classroom to demonstrate their power or brilliance, but instead to invest in students, displaying a trust that students were ready to learn. When possible, they gave students power to make decisions about their own learning. And finally, they were fair, i.e., they equally applied the same policies for all.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Here are seven books with ideas that can help anyone make their teaching more effective.

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