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PRACTICE PAPER

On Being a Good Teacher

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Abstract

University teaching has often been a poor cousin to research. Few universities require any teacher training for their academic staff, the only level of learning where this happens. Yet teaching is an art that, at least to some degree, can be taught if the organisation supports it as an important element. This short paper provides a personal view based on experience and research into what makes a good teacher. Empathy, accessibility, and good presentation are the traits of greatest importance. Teaching awards, innovations in teaching research grants, training courses, and organisational commitment are also required for effective teaching and teachers.

Keywords: teacher effectiveness, university teaching, teaching awards

Introduction

The question of what makes a good teacher has resulted in an endless stream of ideas, opinions, and theories (Avent, 1931; Kennard, 1939; Barr et al., 1955; Long, 1957; Feldman, 1976; Gage, 1978; Soar et al., 1984; Barry, 1985; Borich, 1986; Adams, 1987; Roy, 1987; Lombard, 1989; Reid, 1999). Many authors that discuss what makes a good teacher have produced lists of what they consider to be important variables. Three representative lists comparing over 100 studies are presented in Table 1.

Different definitions of teaching, the different ideas and traits that make up character, different environments and different students can all affect teaching proficiency. Variables like those discussed here are largely self evident to those who make teaching a career. One need not possess and practice all of the traits outlined here to be good at teaching, of course, but being able to master a good mix in a specific learning environment is likely to make one a good teacher. Above all, a good teacher is one through whom the student actually learns what is outlined in the structural goals and objectives and does so without superhuman effort on the teacher's or student's part. All good teaching starts with specific, clear and measurable goals and objectives. Goals are those general statements of outcome and objectives are how the goals are to be reached. It is also a truism that good teaching is not subject specific; the most important traits transcend subjects.

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The early work of Joseph Avent exemplifies the problem of what makes an excellent teacher. Avent sponsored a contest amongst US high school teachers for the largest and best list of excellence and errors in teaching. He received 1002 replies. The total number of items submitted was 1,486,250 with the longest list containing 8770 items (Avent, 1931).

Avent	Adams	Roy
Approachability	Organised	Organised
Dignity	Essential Material	Active Learning
Enthusiasm	Love of subject	Enthusiasm
Fairness	Sensitive to class	Accepting
Optimistic	Never boring	Optimistic
Appearance	Tells stories	Holistic approach
Knowledgeable	Practical information	Knowledgeable
Sympathetic	Humanises	Fits organisation
Vitality	Easy confidence	Mentally healthy
Congeniality	Humour	Cheerful
Adaptable	Supportive	Flexible
Open minded	Care for students	Open minded
Suspend judgement	Critical	Non defensive
Friendliness	Relaxes students	
Kindliness	Experience	
Courtesy	Respects students	
Conversationalist	Confident	
Improvement oriented	Responsible	
Generosity	Discovery method	
General knowledge		
Good manners		
Politeness		
Wise tolerance		
Knowledge of local affairs		
Knowledge of agency		

Table 1: Characteristics of a good teacher, according to Avent, Adams and Roy (Avent 1931; Adams 1987; Roy 1987)

White et al. (1987:90-91) suggest, based on a review of 300 studies, that no single teaching behaviour strongly relates to student learning but there are clusters of behaviours that distinguish effective from less effective teaching in classroom environments. Their clusters are:

- Management of Instructional Time
- Management of Student Behaviour
- Instructional Presentation

- Instructional Monitoring
- Instructional Feedback

Feldman reviewed over 70 studies of effective teaching at the college level. He found the following characteristics consistently associated with superior college teachers or teaching:

- Stimulation of interest
- Clarity and understandableness
- Knowledge of subject matter
- Preparation for, and organization of the course
- Enthusiasm for subject and teaching
- Friendliness (concern and respect for students)
- Helpfulness (availability)
- Openness to others' opinions

(Feldman, 1976:243).

Tate (1993) points out that even with the differences between different levels of teaching, elementary, secondary, and tertiary, there are still basic variables that make up good teaching and good teachers.

Empathy and accessibility

The above introduction summarises over 400 studies on what makes an effective teacher. The one conclusion that is easily reached is that there is no pat answer. Feldman's summary perhaps best encapsulates the core competencies that a good college teacher should have. Empathy and accessibility are the most consistently mentioned as major elements of good teaching. Accessibility is an easily solved organisational problem; being empathetic is another matter.

It is important to remember that whatever is taught must somehow relate to the experiences of the student or it will be sterile. This makes the work of tourism and hospitality teachers easy since most students have travelled and it is safe to say all have eaten in a restaurant. Drawing on their good and bad experiences draws them into discussion and makes them part of the lesson. To relate in this way you must understand your students. Spending time with students in the coffee shop or pub, listening to television programmes that deal with young people and their concerns, talking to counselling services, all help provide some background on who your students are and what makes them that way. This view is reflected in the work of McAlpine and Weston (2000) who suggest that getting to know the student is key to good being a good teacher.

In the particular situation at Massey University where the author teaches, there is a very high proportion of English as a second language students, particularly from China. This makes the teaching process particularly challenging. It also gives the lecturer a chance to engage students from different cultures in discussions on travelling and studying in different societies. Nor should we imagine all students are young. Mature students are an ever-growing part of the university environment. Family, jobs, and related issues can affect the way they work and the treatment they expect. Some students also have considerable 'life experience' others do not, adding to the complexity faced by the teacher. How to deal with these differences and be able to empathise with the learner requires creativity, time and experience. It is one of the reasons why variety in teaching methods is important.

The majority of students see accessibility as a major aspect of good teaching. An open door and being in for as many hours as possible provides more opportunity to communicate directly with students, to answer their questions and find out more about their concerns and problems. 'Being around' gives you more information and feedback about your students and your teaching. As already discussed, making the rounds of the on-campus coffee shops, computer labs, or other places where students might be found and giving them an opportunity to contact you informally also makes you more accessible. Email is another form of communication much used by students. Timely answers to these emails are important. This writer aims to answer all student emails within 24 hours.

Another part of accessibility is providing good, timely information related to lectures and assignments. Lectures, course outlines and other material, presented electronically through one of the newer electronic teaching tools, such as WebCT or Blackboard and making such material available on reserve in the library can be of considerable assistance to the students. The new electronic tools add challenges but the basic principles of good teaching still apply according to Ritter and Lemke (2000). The writer's lectures, PowerPoint presentations and other materials are put on CD and made available in the library as well as on a web-based teaching system. It is also made clear to students that they should check these sources before they ask questions. Making such a wide variety of material available through different communication channels cuts down on repeat questions from individual students. Access also means being flexible enough to interrupt the lecture sequence to discuss breaking issues that relate to recreation or tourism. Access then, is two-fold, access to the lecturer and also access to the material the student is expected to learn.

Access and empathy are important and so is classroom presentation. Mentioned specifically only by White et al. (1987) above, it is implied in such traits as organised, preparation, tells stories, sensitive to class and so on. Presentation is a difficult art to master. How to balance various teaching techniques to provide a rich learning environment for a class with a wide range of cultural backgrounds and ages is the greatest challenge of a tertiary teacher. Certainly variety helps: lectures, group assignments and problem solving, discussion groups, self-tests, videos, guest speakers, and applied research projects are all examples. It is always important to keep in mind that the student should do the work not the teacher. Let them apply what you are teaching either directly or through information you provide. Have them visit and critique a restaurant or tourism attraction. The author's students are also asked to critique various tourism websites. These methods must occur both in and outside the classroom setting. Send students off on a scavenger hunt to find answers to questions posed. Such exercises are used to familiarise students with tourism based library and research systems. Questions that relate from how to use an atlas to questions such as, "What woman wrote the first ever book on sports fishing?" can provide students with some interesting challenges. Having them design a fact sheet on some aspect of tourism, from Butler's Resort Cycle to complaint handling in a motel is very useful. Rules for fact sheets may include a maximum two sides of a standard page, at least one visual and one table and text no smaller than 10 point. Students are then forced to struggle to make sense of considerable amounts of data and reduce it to something easily understandable and readable.

Communication

The general rules of good presentation also apply, voice and volume, gesture, humour, timing and of course, sufficient knowledge of subject are all essential communication elements. Although some readers may think this sacrilege, a good teacher is often a good entertainer. Good entertainers appear self-confident on stage, work with their audience, and have what is often called a 'stage presence'. This is an ability to connect with the audience in a way that is not quantifiable. Much of the stage presence depends on self-confidence and empathy and an ability to connect with the people who you wish to reach. This is not something that can be easily taught, it comes with experience and an open personality.

The difficulties involved in learning how to teach are at the core of one of the great debates of education. Are teachers born or are they taught? The author of this paper subscribes to the 'they are born' side of the argument. Not actually born, but their environment in early life along with life experience combine with heredity to make the teacher. However, teaching is an art and therefore is to some degree teachable. So those that are not born teachers need not despair; they can become very good teachers with help and most of all motivation. Certainly in my experience, what I learned at teachers' college, from how to prepare a simple overhead, to how to write multi-choice questions and communicate in the classroom, has been invaluable.

Related to presentation is the ability to tell a good story. Adams' (1987) research mentions story telling as a mark of good teaching. Personal experiences, e.g. from life, research or previous employment, are excellent sources of material for stories, as are TV, movies, and stories of friends and colleagues. Stories that somehow relate to your audience's experience are the ones that bear the

most fruit. Stories that add a touch of humour to the lesson are most effective; but do not try to be funny if you are not. Those that have travelled have many stories to tell and others can come from movies, documentaries and news stories. A movie used extensively in the author's teaching is National Lampoon's *European Vacation* (1985); this slap-stick comedy provides a rich source of stereotypes, and common traveller situations in a form that most can relate to.

Perhaps the last point about communicating in a classroom setting is the ability to read the class. Knowing when they have had enough, when they want to stop and discuss something, when they want to hear more. It is an art that is sadly lacking in lecturers if academic conferences are anything to judge by! You may have a certain amount of work you must cover but there is also much more learned where germane and directed discussion is allowed, or where a lecture is cut short as interest flags and students are sent out to find the solution to a problem. In undergraduate teaching in particular, learning how to learn is as important as the absorption of facts.

Institutional support

How institutions support good teaching and teachers is also an important aspect of learning. The recognition of 'good teaching' within tertiary educational institutions has been an issue for over a century. As universities began to recognise research as a major money-spinner, teaching more and more took second place. As the author's wise professor, who had just won the teaching excellence award at his university pointed out; "so much for any chances of promotion!" His meaning was clear, if you were thought a good teacher there was suspicion that you were not a good researcher, or at least you did not have time to be both a good teacher and a good researcher – good teaching does take time. In much of the academic world teaching has been relegated to a poor cousin of research. The fact that in much of the world university teachers require no formal teacher qualification, while all other levels of teaching do (even nursery school), is a point to ponder.

Yet this imbalance is beginning to be redressed. Universities are beginning to recognise that good teachers lead to good learning and good learning can lead to satisfied students, an increase in scholarships, research grants, and can be a good selling point for a department or college.

Teaching excellence awards are one method of supporting good teaching. These can be initiated by the college or university administration, or by the student body themselves. The latter was more common in the 1960s and 1970s. More recently many universities have worked closely with student organisations to develop programmes. Usually these programmes involve some sort of nomination and evaluation panel. Panels can consist of both lecturers, students and in some cases general staff that deal with students (counselling services for example). At the author's present university, each college has its own system. The College of Business offers a number of awards each year. Besides an overall teaching excellence award there are awards for undergraduate teaching other than first year, first year teaching award, postgraduate teaching, and innovations in teaching. Lucrative prizes are assigned. For example, the teaching excellence award is a \$NZ5000 credit to attend conferences particularly related to education. Each of the other awards consist of a \$NZ1000 cash award. Besides actual teaching awards, research funding is also made available at the university level for those lecturers interested in pursuing innovations in teaching. These grants can be up to \$NZ10,000 and can cover anything from the cost of preparing electronic teaching systems to evaluation of postgraduate views of courses, departments, or colleges.

Some institutions offer and require new lecturers to take a teacher training course, some as long as six or eight weeks. Teachers should also be encouraged and have the opportunity to take specialised courses in teaching methods. Some of the most useful are proper exam and test writing, using electronic teaching tools, classroom presentation, and cross-cultural communication in teaching.

Student Evaluation of Content, Administration and Teaching (SECAT) and similar programs are convenient tools for gathering student feedback and provide a systematic means of obtaining information about teaching performance at individual levels and beyond (<http://quality.massey.ac.nz/SECAT/secat.html>). Used in conjunction with other evaluative tools such

as grade point averages, peer review, and informal feedback they can provide useful feedback for the lecturer. Critical feedback is not always easy to accept, but if these things are part of a supportive learning environment then a teacher should be able to continuously improve. The important point here is that for good teaching to take place it must have the support of the institution. Teaching is as important as research, and although the current buzz of research-based teaching has some validity, research is not essential for good undergraduate teaching.

Conclusion

In summary there is no perfect approach to teaching, nor will everyone win a teaching excellence award. Yet a motivated teacher who is not afraid to learn can become a good teacher, one that provides the environment where learning can be effective and enjoyable for both student and lecturer.

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