

**FACULTY FOCUS**

**SPECIAL REPORT**

# Effective Strategies for Improving College Teaching and Learning



MAGNA



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# EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING COLLEGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

When teachers think the best, most important way to improve their teaching is by developing their content knowledge, they end up with sophisticated levels of knowledge, but they have only simplistic instructional methods to convey that material. To imagine that content matters more than process is to imagine that the car is more important than the road. Both are essential. *What* we teach and *how* we teach it are inextricably linked and very much dependent on one another.

This special report features 11 articles pulled from the pages of *The Teaching Professor* to help you discover new ways to build connections between what you teach and how you teach it. The report offers tips on how to engage students, give feedback, create a climate for learning, and more. It also provides fresh perspectives on how faculty should approach their development as teachers.

It's been said that few things can enhance student learning more than an instructor's commitment to ongoing professional development. Here's a sample of the articles you will find in **Effective Strategies for Improving College Teaching and Learning**:

- Faculty Self-Disclosures in the College Classroom
- A Tree Falling in the Forest: Helping Students 'Hear' and Use Your Comments
- Understanding What You See Happening in Class
- Can Training Make You a Better Teacher?
- Striving for Academic Excellence

Although there is no single best teaching method, approach, or style, this special report will give you a variety of strategies to try. Those that work effectively with your students you should make your own.

Maryellen Weimer  
Editor  
*The Teaching Professor*

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# Faculty Self-Disclosures in the College Classroom

By Sarah M. Ginsberg, Ed.D.

While interviewing university faculty for a study about classroom communication, Jim,\* a professor of history, made this comment about a colleague he had observed teaching: “I was really amazed, when I saw him teach, how little of his personality you see.” This starkly contrasted with his perception of his own teaching style, about which he said, “I try to use humor a lot. My dad says I just think funny, you know, and I do; it’s hard for me not to joke around.” This comment started me

If our goal as faculty is to have students seek us out when they are in need of assistance, it is worth considering the value of these small personal disclosures toward increasing our accessibility.

wondering about how much of ourselves we let our students see.

Early in my own teaching career, I was acutely conscious of trying to find that perfect balance between the desire to let my students know that I was a whole person, with life experiences that influence my understandings of our world and the course content, and the desire to limit how much of my personal life I exposed in my classroom. Although watching my own children develop language is potentially pertinent to the views of language development discussed in class, I don’t want students to know intimate details of my family life, nor do I want to bore them with endless cute-child stories.

My research has suggested to me that there is great value in college faculty exposing a few aspects of their personal lives to their students. In my study, conducted at a public, comprehensive university, I found that when teachers were willing to share small characteristics of themselves, their students found them to be approachable and motivating. Among the 64 percent of the faculty study participants who were perceived by their students to be effective com-

municators, 100 percent of them were observed disclosing small facets of their personal lives in the classroom.

The details these faculty shared related to course content. For example, Joan, an English professor teaching about writing brochures for educational purposes, said to her students, “I picked up a brochure for our project when I took my son to his swimming lesson.” In this statement, she shared a bit about her life beyond the classroom and demonstrated how course content connected with her real life. When another faculty member, Maura, shared that she has a daughter beginning college at another university, she showed that she understands from multiple perspectives what it is like to be a college student.

Jim and Maura reflected on and discussed further their struggle between the personal and the professional natures of the relationships. They wanted their students to feel that they are accessible and friendly, but not inappropriately so. Jim signs his first name to his emails to be “informal” but actually wants to be called “Professor.” He was aware of the potential for the informal, personal conversations with his students to be misconstrued and was cautious “because I don’t want students to feel too close.” Maura realized that her early career naïveté put her professional credibility in jeopardy. Since then, she has worked “hard to find the right place” between the formal and the informal, and has “found that niche.”

In sharing my research with faculty, I have been intrigued by their responses to the idea of self-disclosing in the classroom. One memorable professor stood up and exclaimed, “That is fine for faculty who lead traditional, mainstream lives! Faculty who are gay or lesbian cannot share that kind of information without fear of reprisal.” I agree that there are many aspects of our lives that we cannot or should not share with our students. On the other hand, I do think that each of us probably has some small characteristic, be it our love of chocolate or our preference for cats over dogs, that humanizes us to our students. The students in this study repeatedly described the faculty who disclosed small personal details as “approachable” and “comfortable” to talk with. Although faculty members’ approachability cannot be completely accounted for by these self-disclosures, they were noted specifically by the students as contributing to it. If our goal as faculty is to have students seek us out when they are in need of assistance, it is worth considering the value of these small personal disclosures toward increasing our accessibility.

*\*All names are pseudonyms to protect participant identities.*

*Dr. Sarah M. Ginsberg is an associate professor at Eastern Michigan University. 🍓*



# Content Knowledge: A Barrier to Teacher Development

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD.

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**N**ow, there's a story headline you might read in the educational equivalent of the *National Enquirer*. Aware that your material prevents instructional growth? How can that be?

A love of the material and a willingness to convey that to students only enhances learning. The problem is when the content becomes the be-all and end-all of the teaching process, when the content matters more than anything else. When content is that important, faculty are prevented from using methods that enhance how much students learn. In this case the content orientation of faculty hurts students, but the argument here is that it also hurts teachers.

When teachers think the only, the best, the most important way to improve their teaching is by developing their content knowledge, they end up with sophisticated levels of knowledge, but they have only simplistic instructional methods to convey that material. To imagine that content matters more than process is to imagine that the car is more important than the road. Both are essential. **What** we teach and **how** we teach it are inextricably linked and very much dependent on one another.

Even though both are tightly linked, they are still separate. Development of one doesn't automatically improve how the other functions. So you can work to grow content knowledge, but if the methods used to convey that knowledge are not sophisticated and up to the task, teaching may still be quite ineffective. It may not inspire and motivate students. It may not result in more and better student learning. Because teachers so love the content, they almost never blame it. No, it's the students' fault. They aren't bright enough. They don't study enough. They don't deserve to be professionals in this field.

But teachers who teach courses in which large numbers of students struggle and routinely fail are not generally positive about teaching. They are more often cynical, rigid, and defensive. The truth about how much isn't being learned in these courses is hard to ignore, no matter how routinely students are blamed.

The typical college teacher has spent years in courses developing the knowledge skill set and virtually no time on the teaching set. This way of preparing professors assumes

that the content is much more complex than the process, when in fact both are equally formidable. Marrying the content and the process requires an intimate and sophisticated knowledge of both. Some kinds of content are best taught by example, some by experience. Other kinds are best understood when discussed and worked on collaboratively. Other kinds need individual reflection and analysis. Besides these inherent demands of the content itself, there are the learning needs of individual students, which vary across many dimensions.

The best teachers are not always, not even usually, those teachers with the most sophisticated content knowledge. The best teachers do know their material, but they also know a lot about the process. They have at their disposal a repertoire of instructional methods, strategies, and approaches—a repertoire that continually grows, just as their content knowledge develops. They never underestimate the power of the process to determine the outcome. With this understanding, content is not a barrier to teacher development.

*Dr. Maryellen Weimer is the editor The Teaching Professor, and a professor emerita, teaching and learning, Penn State-Berks.* 🍀

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## A Tree Falling in the Forest: Helping Students 'Hear' and Use Your Comments

By E. Shelley Reid, PhD.

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**W**hen it comes to commenting on student writing, good advice abounds. The literature suggests that we offer praise and critique, be specific in our comments, and balance suggestive comments with directive ones. To improve our effectiveness and efficiency, we may adopt a grading rubric, choose "minimal marking" for errors, or comment only on a few crucial focus areas.

Even so, a perfect set of comments on an essay can still fail to "make a sound"—if students do not hear us and use our feedback to improve their writing. All of us have seen

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it happen: students glance at the grade and toss the paper as they leave class. Responding to student writing is perhaps our most labor-intensive act and a terribly frustrating effort if it has no effect.

Meanwhile, learning to write better is one of the most difficult tasks facing students, and our comments can support their efforts. Recently, I find myself being more deliberate in the ways I try to help students use my feedback

## Responding to student writing is perhaps our most labor-intensive act and a terribly frustrating effort if it has no effect.

to improve their writing. Let me illustrate with some examples.

**Adjust the timing:** While we know it makes sense to give more feedback early in the writing process, doing so efficiently is difficult. We may have to comment a lot on an early draft and then very little on the final essay, even though the final essay has a grade that needs defending. We may comment more early in a term, even though later assignments may involve more complex skills or carry a higher grade-weight. To help us all adjust, I tell students what I am doing and why, I combine this approach with some of the strategies I list below, and I use a rubric-checklist of key features that helps me quickly defend my final grade even without commenting on all those features. These steps help me to shift rather than simply increase the time I spend commenting.

**Ask students for responses:** If I record my essay grades separately from my responses, I can then hand back essays in class and ask students to respond in writing to my comments before I hand back (or email) the grades. Usually I ask students to write about one comment they understood, one that surprised them and one that they have a question about. In some classes, I collect and respond to their responses; in others, I treat students' responses as a write-to-learn exercise and don't collect them, though I may offer students a moment to compare notes with a partner. This exercise effectively engages students with comments even if I only devote five or 10 minutes to it.

**Help students become revisers:** Simply reading my comments does not always sufficiently inspire or direct students. To motivate more learning, in my draft-and-revise


assignments I now set aside a small percentage of the final essay grade specifically for "significant revision," an activity I take time to define for my students. I can check this quickly by eyeballing early and later paper drafts in a folder, or by asking students to use "Track Changes" in an online document. When time is short, I ask for a revision memo instead: in a paragraph or two, students identify key changes they could make in an already graded essay, and include specific examples. Other times I set aside class time for students to practice a revision strategy such as elaboration. "Take out your previous draft, find one place where I asked for more detail and write three sentences that would help. Share those with your partner." I preface this exercise by discussing examples of good writing that I hope students will emulate, and follow it by answering student questions.

**Ask students to articulate their learning:** Students, of course, need to take responsibility for improving their comment reading and revising. In reflective post-writing assignments, students articulate how a current essay or draft uses comments provided on the previous one to improve the quality of writing. More recently, I have used an approach borrowed from a colleague: students find a comment I've made on a previous essay. They write it on the top of their current essay and then use two sentences to explain how the new essay implements that suggestion.

**Teach students to comment:** Finally, I have begun asking students to make the first comments on their own essays. Even on final essay copies, I ask them to write three to five margin comments: a few in which they identify something specific they fixed or did right ("I included my own argument here"), and a few in which they ask questions ("Do I summarize too much here?"). I can respond quickly to these as I grade essays, and students pay attention to the comment-conversations that they started. More important, students start internalizing elements of good writing and learn to identify these moments in their own essays.

Most of these approaches do take time that I am often reluctant to give. However, I have decided to take this time in order for my investment—the hours and hours I spend responding to student writing—to pay off. When the tree falls in the forest, I want my students to hear the sound and use the event to their benefit.

For a thorough, recent bibliography of research related to commenting on student writing, see Rich Haswell, "The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing," *Across the Disciplines* 4 (2007): <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/haswell2006.cfm>.

*Dr. E. Shelley Reid, is an assistant professor at George Mason University* 

# What Are They Doing Over There in the English Department?

By Amy Getty, PhD.

At the recent Teaching Professor Conference in Atlanta, I was privileged to have many great conversations on teaching. In one, my group of six contained only one English professor—me. While discussing what our students know (or more frequently don't know) about the citation of sources in research essays, many of my group members expressed their exasperation over what the English department was failing to teach our students.

“Our students just don't know how to write, let alone use documentation.” “I'm not an English teacher, so I don't know how to teach writing.” “I'm just not sure what they're doing over there in the English department.”

As valuable a course as first-year composition is, it cannot and should not be the last time students receive detailed instruction in writing.

That was not the first time I'd heard such complaints over the course of my career, nor, I fear, will it be the last. I do, however, have some responses to these frustrations.

**1. Realize that first-year composition cannot create perfect academic writers.** The first year of college is a trying time for many students and, as rigorous as it may be, a writing course during the first 15 weeks of college students' careers will not make those students experts in argument, research, and writing for their majors. An analogy may suffice: expecting first-year students to be expert academic writers after their first-year composition class is equivalent to expecting them

to set up a medical practice after taking biology 101. Both courses are essential in laying the foundations, but should never be considered the courses where students learn all they need to know about the subject.

- 2. Know that we are all writing teachers.** You may not have a Ph.D. in English, but that does not mean that you can't teach students to write. Personally, I am not an expert in how to write like a nurse or how to write like a sociologist. To tell the truth, I don't think the nursing or sociology departments at my school would want me to teach students how to write like nurses or sociologists. As valuable a course as first-year composition is, it cannot and should not be the last time students receive detailed instruction in writing.
- 3. Collaborate with the English department.** The best way to teach students to write in your field is to lay out clear expectations along with the assignment sheet for each essay. A simple rubric or even explicit essay goals on the assignment sheet can save a lot of student frustration. These tools may also make your grading experience less exasperating and more enjoyable. If you're not sure what you want from your essay assignments or don't know how to articulate what you know you do want, take an English colleague to lunch. Ask her or him to help you delineate a rubric. I would hazard a guess that most of us would be happy to help—especially if free food is involved.
- 4. Assign more writing.** Complaining that students don't know how to write and then not assigning writing is akin to complaining about your love handles while eating double chocolate cake. Students need to exercise their writing muscles or those muscles will atrophy. If your school fosters a situation in which your majors come to you as juniors with little to no writing experience since the first semester of their first year, it will be no wonder if the papers they produce for you are a tad flabby. Regardless of whether or not your campus has a Writing Across the Curriculum program, the trick to making better writers is to assign writing—informal, formal, graded, nongraded—as frequently as you can at all levels.

Ultimately, our students will need to write—not only as professionals, but as functioning members of society. If we all assume responsibility for developing this essential skill, then we can all take credit for the results.

*Dr. Amy Getty is a professor at Grand View College in Iowa.* 🍀

# Understanding What You See Happening in Class

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD.

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**W**hile conducting a class, even though teachers may be doing all or most of the talking, students communicate important nonverbal messages. They communicate these messages through facial expressions, body postures, and how they say what they say, as well as what actions they do or the skills they attempt to perform. Both novice and expert teachers see the same student responses, but expert teachers see in those responses something very different than novices see. Research summarized and referenced in the article below identifies four features that distinguish how expert teachers see what transpires in class. As the authors note, the good news is that teachers are not born experts. Rather, the ability to see and respond to this kind of feedback can be learned. The four features and suggestions for developing expertise in each are highlighted below.

**Focus on the relevant** — When an expert teacher looks at what students are doing, he or she focuses on events and information relevant to the decisions that must be made as a teacher. So if the students are learning to play tennis, that teacher attends to how the student swings at the ball. Novice teachers notice extraneous details such as how students are dressed, whether they look like they are enjoying the activity, and if they are talking to other students. To help them focus on relevant details, the authors suggest that teachers might refer to a checklist that identifies those student responses relevant to how well they are learning.

**Draw inference from observations** — Based on what they see, expert teachers make good judgments about which subsequent activities will interest students and improve their performance, if what's being taught is a skill or if the students' understanding of what's being taught requires a cognitive response. One excellent way to develop this ability to see what's happening and use that knowledge to plan next events is to partner with a teacher who does it well. "The technique requires the person to verbalize his or her thought processes. It may be awkward at first, because verbalizing a thought takes considerably longer than only mentally processing a thought." (p. 31) The reverse of this technique may be equally instructive. If the novice teacher explains what she or he sees and what

conclusions she or he'd draw about next steps, then the expert can point out differences.

**Tuning into the atypical** — Experienced teachers know how students typically respond when learning a particular technique or grappling with a particular part of the content. If an individual student or a group of students responds differently, expert teachers automatically tune in to what's happening with those students. This is true whether the student is struggling or excelling. If a student learns something with great ease, perhaps that approach would be of benefit to others. Part of what helps novices develop expertise here is their explicit attempt to understand how and why something works for students. If a particular set of exercises moves students to a new skill level, teachers need to know why. "Teachers will need patience as they are learning to see—which means they will not immediately understand what they see. With deliberate practice, teachers will make better sense of instructional situations and become adept at finding potential in the unusual."

**Developing a critical eye** — The objective here is to use what is seen to implement improvement and to always consider ways to do it better. It is almost as if experts don't know they are expert. Their efforts to improve are even more relentless than those of novices. Key to success here is the ability to analyze what's happening, to thoughtfully consider what one sees. The dynamic milieu of the classroom does not afford time for scholarly reflection, but events can be noted and then more carefully thought about later.

"To improve in teaching, teachers must deliberately practice their teaching skills." (p. 32) Teachers are not born understanding what is happening as students attempt to learn. Moreover, they can see something happening time and again, but that does not mean they will come automatically to understand it. The effort must be deliberate. The effort is work making because, "Unless you understand what you see, your class might as well be invisible." (p. 29)

Reference: Schempp, P. G. and Johnson, S. W. 2006. Learning to See: Developing the Perception of an Expert Teacher. *JOPERD* 77 (6): 29–33.

*Dr. Maryellen Weimer is the editor The Teaching Professor, and a professor emerita, teaching and learning, Penn State-Berks.* 🍀



# ‘Warming’ the Climate for Learning

By Sandra Allen, Columbia College Chicago

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When educators talk about climate, they don’t mean global warming. In academic circles, climate refers to the atmosphere of warmth existing between the teacher and the students. Much research suggests that few other factors produce a more lasting impact on learning than the professor’s approval or disapproval of the student’s work, and their in-class interactions.

So, how to go about climate change? With trial and error, and a dollop of research, I’ve identified three aspects that seem key to creating a “warm” climate for learning: (1) the teacher’s praise or approval; (2) enthusiasm for and use of students’ own ideas; and (3) teacher-student interaction. To be effective in facilitating student learning, I recommend that we use all three. In fact, praise alone does not definitively correlate with improved student learning.

## Praise

Offering praise and approval doesn’t mean avoiding messages that let students know when their work doesn’t meet acceptable standards. In fact, recent studies show that students want specifics about their performance—not bland, ambiguous feedback, which can actually disrupt student learning. One survey of 100 students found that 70 percent saw their professors as the best source of written or face-to-face feedback on relevant tasks and assignments.

## Enthusiasm

In my classroom, I’ve found that enthusiasm for and use of students’ own ideas is contagious. When the teacher gives concrete evidence of valuing a student’s diverse approaches—to say, problem solving—that creates an energy that makes all students more attentive and cooperative. Here are four techniques I use to generate enthusiasm for student ideas. First, acknowledge what students contribute to the discussion. When appropriate, I point out that their solution to a problem, or insight into an issue represents a new twist, maybe even one I have not thought of previously. Second, I modify or rephrase the ideas into concepts that serve as springboards to new material. Next, I compare student ideas by connecting the dots between their thoughts. And finally, I summarize what was said by an individual or group of students, stating how it applies to the

course content.

Another way to more proactively use students’ ideas is to solicit their opinions on course content and teaching style. Rare is the student who hesitates to give his opinion anonymously as those end-of-course comments on rating forms clearly indicate. However, those assessments come after the fact, and don’t necessarily help the teacher change if the approach in the current course is off. Among the many ways to gather student feedback, the one I prefer is simple, cheap, and easy. I distribute a three-by-five-inch index card to each student in class a few weeks before midterm. I ask them to write two or three things they have learned so far on one side of the card and to indicate what gets in their way of learning on the other side. After collecting and reviewing this anonymous feedback, I tell students “what I learned” and “what I’m doing (or will do) about it.” My response to their feedback lets them know that I value their opinions. I recommend repeating the process again three or so weeks before the final. It’s always an enlightening experience to compare the two sets of student responses.

## Interaction

Characteristics of successful student-teacher interactions include both verbal techniques that hold student interest and the teacher’s physical gestures or movement in the classroom. Being savvy about what’s going on verbally and nonverbally with students goes beyond positively responding to student ideas. It gives the teacher the ability to interpret and respond to the classroom dynamic in real time. Long story short: get out from behind that desk, and move around the room as you talk. Remember: body language is part of a professor’s message. Moving among students has the added benefit of identifying those who are busy text messaging and/or using their laptop to refine their lists of friends on My Space.

It’s not a stretch to conclude that a vibrant classroom climate is important to enhancing student attitudes toward the teacher, and by extension, to acquiring the skills and knowledge of the course. Praise by itself might be counterproductive, but it becomes a potent motivational force in the classroom when combined with enthusiasm for and interaction with the students. Those three together improve teaching and enhance learning outcomes.

*Sandra Allen, director of Public Relations Studies in the Marketing Communications department at Columbia College Chicago, combines experience as an assistant professor with professional experience and expertise. 🍀*

# Unique Perspectives on a Shared Classroom Experience

By Dena McMartin and Yvonne Petry

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In fall 2007 I took my first undergraduate course in about 12 years and in a subject I hadn't studied since high school. I'm an engineer and I enrolled in one of Dr. Petry's history courses. We decided to write about this classroom experience from our perspectives—McMartin as a faculty-student and Petry as an instructor with a colleague student in her course.

## Open dialogue

*McMartin:* When I registered for an undergraduate course on campus, my first thought was to confirm that Dr. Petry was comfortable having me in her classroom. I wanted the dialogue between us to be open.

*Petry:* I will admit that when I heard that a university colleague was interested in taking a class from me, I initially reacted with some apprehension. I realized that the situation was potentially challenging. The fact that her field of expertise was so far from my own lessened this anxiety, though, and I decided to view the situation as a potentially interesting opportunity.

## Saving face

*McMartin:* Assured that my colleague was accepting of my presence, I next worried a bit about saving face, both personally and professionally. My behavior and performance in the course became a source of constant personal scrutiny. I probably put more pressure on myself to perform well than students typically do.

*Petry:* It's interesting to hear Dr. McMartin express concerns about her performance as a student. I didn't think about that at all. What I was acutely aware of, though, was my performance as an instructor. Having a colleague in the class meant having someone there who could scrutinize my competence and performance in the classroom in a way that most students cannot. Throughout the semester I felt somewhat self-conscious in front of the class, even though I reminded myself that Dr. McMartin was there as a student, not as an observer.

## Peer evaluation

*McMartin:* Having my coursework evaluated by an academic peer was nerve-racking. I cared what my colleague thought about my performance. I tried to write

succinct and witty responses to questions. The experience also made clear to me how much work is involved in grading 25 essay-style midterm exams. Here I was aware of the student and instructor perspectives.

*Petry:* I was conscious that my evaluation of written work would be interpreted by Dr. McMartin on two levels, that is, as an assessment of her work, but also as an expression of my own ability to evaluate others' work. I also wondered how the differences in marking history exams and essays would appear to someone coming from a scientific background.

## Pedagogy

*McMartin:* I never found myself evaluating Dr. Petry's teaching style per se, but I did pay close attention to the lecture format and activities she used in the classroom. History lectures differ greatly from those in engineering, but I did see some methods that might be transferable. In my courses, I do spend more time writing on the whiteboard, using PowerPoint slides, and demonstrating on overhead transparencies, but I saw other methods that we both use although in slightly different ways. For instance, the class discussions in history were more frequent, open-ended, and focused on the readings. Discussion in my class involves in-class calculations and the interpretation of technological applications. Those differences mean that the two of us prepare for and facilitate discussions differently.

*Petry:* I assumed that my pedagogical techniques would be under some additional scrutiny with a peer in the classroom. That awareness made me try harder to deliver good lectures and facilitate interesting discussions. And if, on a given day, something did not go as well as I had hoped, I was acutely aware that a colleague was watching!

## Just another student

*McMartin:* Finally, I very much appreciate the anonymity I felt I had in the class. In my more recent student experience I was "outed" by the second lecture. There are benefits to being "just another student" in class for both the peer-learner and the course professor. The pressure to perform on both sides is a bit less if students aren't watching to see how academic peers interact. I liked not having to guard my comments, and being able to participate in the discourse as just another student.

*Petry:* I did consciously try to treat Dr. McMartin as a student rather than as a colleague. I didn't want other students to think that she would receive special privileges or attention. I didn't actually know whether she had told other students in the class that she was a professor. Since this was an upper-level history course with a number of good students in it, I hoped that she would find the experi-

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ence intellectually stimulating. I know that the students certainly benefited from having her in the classroom. I particularly enjoyed watching group discussions unfold with students and a faculty member tackling the assigned readings and questions together.

*McMartin and Petry:* For both of us, this was a very rewarding experience.

*Dena McMartin, Ph.D., P.Eng., is an associate professor at the University of Regina. Yvonne Petry, Ph.D., is an associate professor at Luther College at the University of Regina.* 🍀

## Finding the Best Method

By *Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.*

“All too often in education, pundits, and some researchers for that matter, seem to believe that they have found the method which all teachers should use.” So writes Noel Entwistle, a noted scholar with a career of research on teaching and learning in higher education to his credit. He (and others) are concerned about the pressure that educational researchers feel to discover “what works.” He notes that 50 years of educational research has failed to find that definitive set of best practices.

Searching for the best way to teach assumes a kind of simplicity about teaching and learning that just plain does not exist. Start with the fact that teaching is used to accomplish a variety of different educational aims. It is used to help learners acquire knowledge of a vast panoply of subject matters and is aimed at students from all sorts of backgrounds, with varying degrees of cognitive ability and at different levels intellectual maturity. Those who do the teaching share a wide diversity of backgrounds and have experiences that cross the continuum from novice to expert. The host of factors that influence teaching makes clear the preposterousness of imagining that there could be one or even several best methods, approaches, styles, or practices.

However, a tentative approach to pedagogical methods feels counterintuitive. Once a teacher finds something that works with her content, her students, and her style of teaching, it is natural for her to want to recommend that

way to others. And making those recommendations is not inappropriate so long as they are presented as something a colleague may want to try—not as the answer that will fill the colleague’s instructional needs. Becoming an advocate for a particular method is difficult to resist when research offers evidence of that method’s positive impact.

Research may verify that a method works under a certain set of conditions; if it’s good research, its findings may apply to other teachers—but never to all others. So, one can advocate for certain methods just as long as that advocacy does not definitively exclude other methods. A particular method may gain “best practice” status as more and more faculty jump on the bandwagon after having used the approach and found it successful. As more and more faculty adopt a method, it can become faddish. Across the years, the popularity of various instructional methods has waxed and waned.

But does this mean that all educational practices are equal, that there are no general principles that might guide individual faculty or those working together on a curriculum who want to pursue what promotes more and better learning for their students? Entwistle’s answer is intriguing: “In the end, ‘best practice’ is whatever helps students to engage more deeply with the subject and to become more actively responsible for their own learning.”

So, all educational methods are not equal. No method is ruled out so long as it engages students and makes them responsible for learning. But some methods accomplish those goals less frequently than others. Take lectures, for example. They can be highly successful at involving and engaging students. Most faculty can attest to that power firsthand. However, in practice, most lectures do not engage students or motivate them to take responsibility for what and how they learn. Lectures tend to encourage passivity and make students dependent on the teacher. As a result, faculty are rightly encouraged to rely less on lectures and to explore other methods. But that advice results from the way lectures are used, not from their inherent inability to promote significant learning.

It would be lovely if a box of best practices could be handed out to new faculty members as their careers commence. Even mid-career faculty might queue up for the box. If only teaching and learning were that straightforward; but they are not. On the other hand, their complexity and variability provide enough intellectual challenge to keep even the brightest faculty member engage. It can take a career just to figure how the learning of a particular kind of content is promoted, given a particular blend of students.

Note: The Entwistle quotes come from a paper prepared

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for an international symposium called “Teaching and Learning Research in Higher Education,” held April 25-26, 2008, in Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

*Dr. Maryellen Weimer is the editor The Teaching Professor, and a professor emerita, teaching and learning, Penn State-Berks.* 🍀

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## Striving for Academic Excellence

By Keith Starcher, PhD.

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**L**ike all academics, I worry about standards and whether mine have slipped. Actually, I worry more about my students and the number of them who no longer see academic excellence as a goal worth pursuing. Many more seem to feel, as one student told me recently, “If I work hard, I deserve an A.”

Would they agree that, since I had seen the results of hundreds of students’ labor (e.g., written business plans), I should be capable of recognizing excellent work when I see it?

I wondered if there was a way I could use the first class session to help my students and myself recalibrate our “excellence meters.” Could I motivate them in a fun and engaging way to rethink what excellence means?

Last semester I decided to try, and I used an activity pretty much outside the box for me. After the normal introductions in each of my courses, but before I even mentioned the syllabus, I asked for five volunteers to help in a group activity. Five students (the competitors) came forward. They were joined by 12 others: two cheerleaders per competitor, plus a line judge and a measurement judge.

I explained that we were going to participate in a standing broad-jump competition. After marking the starting position with a strip of masking tape, I told the

competitors to prepare by consulting their cheerleaders for encouragement and discussing strategy. Some students took off their shoes, while others stretched. Then the competition began. Each student jumped with gusto and waited nervously as the distance jumped was marked and measured. Sports competition does amazing things to people. These students, strangers only 15 minutes before, now behaved like starstruck sports fans.

I looked at the patches of tape that marked each jump. But instead of announcing the obvious winner, I said, “Although some competitors jumped farther than others, I believe that each one really did try to jump the farthest. No competitor demonstrated a lack of great effort. Thus, we will award a gold medal to each of them. What do you say?”

Students did not like this idea. In each class there had been one competitor who clearly outperformed the others by at least a foot. This led to a fruitful discussion about how excellence is defined in sports and whether excellence in the sports arena should carry over to the classroom. We talked about the importance of striving to produce excellent work rather than just excellent effort.

In each class, I let the students convince me that we had but one standing broad-jump gold medalist in our midst. After a rousing round of congratulations, we began discussing the upcoming assignments and assessments laid out in the syllabus. For each assignment, I referred students to the blackboard, on which I had placed examples of “good work.” I then encouraged them to consider what it would take to go beyond “good” results and produce “excellent” results.

We closed the class with a discussion about their willingness to trust me to fairly and objectively evaluate their work. Would they agree that, since I had seen the results of hundreds of students’ labor (e.g., written business plans), I should be capable of recognizing excellent work when I see it? Would they trust my feedback, even when that feedback was constructively critical?

I believe that this first-day broad-jump competition set the tone for subsequent discussions of academic excellence. A few students even encouraged me to uphold high standards and push them to higher levels of performance. One comment from a student on a final exam illustrates what I hope all my students will come to understand: “I learned that I should settle for no less than excellence. Although there are times my work might not be excellent, I should always try to produce excellence.”

*Keith Starcher is an associate professor of business at Indiana Wesleyan University.* 🍀



# Can Training Make You a Better Teacher?

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD.

Countless workshops, seminars, retreats, and other training opportunities are offered under the assumption that they can positively affect how faculty teach, which in turn will help students learn more. It seems pretty obvious, but solid empirical evidence supporting these positive benefits is not widespread. In fact, there's more evidence that short-term interventions, such as an afternoon workshop, don't have much of an effect when it comes to sustained behavior change.

With the growing number of new faculty has come a rise in the amount and extensiveness of training for first-time college teachers. According to authors of the article referenced below, in some countries this more comprehensive

**If teachers are more learner-centered, their students are more likely to take deep approaches to learning—those associated with students understanding, retaining, and being able to apply what they have learned.**

training is now required by the institution. But here again, we have little in the way of evidence to support the assumption that these programs positively impact either teaching or learning. That is why the study being highlighted here is so important.

It looked at the effects of training programs at 20 universities in eight countries. Each training program involved at least 60 hours (300 for the longest) and spread those activities across four to 18 months. Three different surveys were used: two administered to students and one to the faculty participant in the training program. Students completed a widely used instructional rating instrument (Marsh's SEEQ) and the Module Experience Questionnaire, which solicits data as to whether students are using deep or surface approaches to learning. Faculty filled out the Approaches to Teaching Inventory, which measures the extent to which faculty are teacher-centered or learner-centered. Data were

collected at the beginning of the training and approximately one year later. Results on all three of these instruments were compared with data collected from a control group. Faculty in the control group did not receive any training.

Results provide confirmation that this kind of training does make a significant and lasting impact on teaching. According to the student rating data, "the training group's scores improved significantly on all five scales. In contrast, the control group's scores did not change significantly except for the scores for 'group interaction,' which worsened significantly." (p. 95) The extent to which students used surface approaches to learning also decreased after their teachers had been trained. The amount of this decrease was not statistically significant.

Faculty who participated in the training programs did become more student- and learning-focused, and that change was statistically significant. Teachers in the control group actually became more teacher-centered than when they started. However, the sample size of the control group was too small to attribute a lot of significance to this change.

Part of what adds power to these findings is that the instruments used in the research all have been tied to important learning gains. For example, if teachers are more learner-centered, their students are more likely to take deep approaches to learning—those associated with students understanding, retaining, and being able to apply what they have learned. And higher scores on reliable and valid rating instruments correlate with higher scores on exams.

So the training for new faculty received in these programs did make a difference. That doesn't establish that all training programs have that effect, and it leaves untested the difference training might make for faculty with experience or faculty with serious teaching deficiencies, but this research takes an important first step. These data verify that well-designed, substantive training programs for new faculty are worth the time and effort.

Reference: Gibbs, G., and Coffey, M. (2004). The impact of training of university teachers on their teaching skills, their approach to teaching and the approach to learning of their students. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 5 (1), 87-100.

*Dr. Maryellen Weimer is the editor The Teaching Professor, and a professor emerita, teaching and learning, Penn State-Berks.* 🍀

# The Benefits of Music and Stretching in Maintaining Student Attention

By Christopher H. Kodani and Michael Wood

Given how students fidget during lectures and the popularity of personal music devices, it sometimes seems that students would much rather hear music and move around than listen to a professor. Our solution is simple and direct—we encourage them to do both!

To help students fight off lecture fatigue in the science classes that Christopher teaches, we have implemented a “seventh inning stretch” during which students get up out of their seats and perform some basic stretches while music is playing. In fact, the idea is not so crazy, as the importance of a break during lectures has been noted by other

**Our approach is a bit different. We believe that there may be benefits to having a break that is simply that—a break from the material, a break from lecture, a break from sitting.**

college professors in various pedagogical publications, including this newsletter. Both we and these colleagues have found that giving students a break from taking notes increases the chances that students will stay mentally productive throughout the class.

Some faculty who give students breaks use this time to show videos or engage students in discussions or other content-related activities. Our approach is a bit different. We believe that there may be benefits to having a break that is simply that—a break from the material, a break from lecture, a break from sitting. Here’s how the seventh inning stretch works in Christopher’s biology course. Halfway through every lecture, students get the chance to stand up and do a series of easy, yoga-style stretches while popular music plays over the classroom’s audio system.

Stretch breaks typically last two to three minutes. All the music is chosen by the professor and is popular music, most of it relatively current, the 1970s to the 2000s, and includes a wide variety of artists and formats, so as to appeal to our diverse student body.

Near the end of the semester, we administered a survey through WebCT Vista, a Web-based teaching platform, that allowed us to easily record and tabulate student responses. Most of the students responded favorably to the seventh inning stretch. The majority agreed or strongly agreed that it enhanced their learning. Furthermore, 38 out of the 49 stated that they would like other instructors to adopt the seventh inning stretch, and none strongly agreed with discontinuing breaks altogether. The class was almost evenly divided upon whether or not stretch breaks affected student retention within the class. Most did not want to do other activities during the break and recommended that its format not be changed.

We also invited students to provide written feedback describing how they felt about the stretch. Their answers helped to explain responses on the survey. One student wrote, “I really enjoyed the seventh inning stretch. I feel that it breaks up the class a little. By breaking up the class you can clear your head for just a second. By being able to clear your head you can make more room for more information.” Similarly, a classmate wrote “The stretch helps you refocus and continue to learn for the entire class.”

A few students did want the break activity to be content focused. One wrote, “I enjoyed the stretch, but I believe it would be more beneficial if it was mixed up by having a discussion, a short video, a demonstration, or a little review of what was just taught.” Taken in the context of the overwhelming popularity of the stretch, this student’s comment and these data tell us that although a break is necessary for most students, it cannot take the place of good teaching methods, active learning, and variety. We are not arguing against the use of multiple teaching strategies—in fact, a change in teaching technique during lecture is universally accepted as important for maintaining student attention as well as for addressing all students’ learning styles. Even when a variety of active learning strategies is used, we believe there is still a need to take a short rest from learning. The seventh inning stretch is a unique, quick, and fun way to increase student attention during the second half of class.

*Dr. Christopher H. Kodani and Michael Wood are with Clayton State University in Georgia* 🍓



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