

GOOD TEACHING:
PURSUING THE ELUSIVE

John J. Ivers—Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

Editor's note: We asked John to resubmit this article from the Faculty Now bulletin in 1992.

To instruct teachers about good teaching presupposes that one knows exactly what good teaching is. No one possesses *the great secret*. The debate about teaching goes on and on. Some people consider good teaching to be a science. Others feel that it is a very special art form. Since truth often lies between two extremes, I am convinced that we can improve teaching by listening to what both the artists and the scientists have to say. I will take a brief look at both in this article. I will not say much that is not already known to our veteran teachers; however, I hope that this brief exposure will stimulate some interest in reviewing and renewing our commitment to our sacred profession.

In the last few decades, scientific research has produced thousands of articles concerning effective teaching, some of them very useful. For example, research has shown that the average student's attention span increases during the first ten minutes of a lecture where it maximizes at about a 70 percent retention rate. At that point it begins to decrease rapidly, resulting in a retention rate of about 20 percent during the final ten minutes (McKeachie 1986). Such findings assume that the lecture is fairly consistent throughout the entire fifty-minute period. Retention rates can be continually boosted by adding variety of one sort or another to the lesson. If your lecture will not allow for diversity, you better give them your best stuff sooner rather than later.

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Do you like your students to be continually taking notes? Generally I do; however, once in a while I tell them to put their writing utensils down, afraid they will miss the gist of what I am talking about. Whether or not that works, I don't know. I do know, however, of a study where half of a large group of students were told to take notes, the other half were told not to. At the end of class, the notes had to be turned in and immediately a test was given. The note takers had a significantly higher retention rate than those who only listened (McKeachie 1986).

When is the best time to encourage the students to study? Research shows that a student who reviews his or her notes immediately after a lecture has better retention than those who postpone reviewing for a considerable time (Ragsdale 1993).

Research has also been done concerning what *not* to do. A study was done concerning the top ten teacher behaviors that irritate students.

It should be noted, however, that these constitute mostly subjective judgments, viewed through the student's prejudiced lense, often filtered through stress, bad habits, negative attitudes, and insecurities. Though very instructive, I would take the following with at least a grain of salt. According to Ludewig (1993, 1) the top ten teacher behaviors that irritate students are:

1. Assign work as though their class is the only one, or at least the most important one.
2. Lecture too fast and fail to slow down when requested.
3. Make students feel inferior when they ask a question.
4. Not be specific on what the test will cover.
5. Create "trick" questions.
6. Deliver their lecture in a monotone.
7. Give tests that don't correspond to lectures.
8. Get behind and then cram their lecture into the remaining time.
9. Assume students already have base knowledge for the course.
10. Require a textbook and then fail to use it.

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As a professor, it would be nice to see a list of the top ten student behaviors that irritate professors. One student behavior that would make the list might be the propensity to exhibit flawed and low-level thinking. Myriads of articles and books have been written on how to correct this; recently I read something that intrigued me more than usual. According to the research, if you want to help inculcate higher-level cognitive skills in your students, you should dwell more on uncertainty. Everyone loves a mystery, and the more you talk about the unknowns, the controversies, the diverse interpretations, the paradigm shifts, the more your students should develop their cognitive abilities (Nilson 1998).

While the research folks have provided us with some marvelous data to work with, those of a more artistic bent contribute as well. Art Costa (1984), an expert on the more subjective side of teaching, made the following statement:

Indeed, some of the world's more inspired teachers—Jesus, who spoke in parables; Socrates, the insatiable questioner; or Buddha, the master of 'wait time'—probably never performed a task analysis! (196)

Edmund Burke, a British statesman of the eighteenth century, is considered one of the greatest speech writers of all time. University students throughout the world peruse his oratorical masterpieces attempting to get a feel for the genius of his reasoning, organization, and persuasive skills. His speeches earned him a nickname in the House of Commons, however not the type of nickname one would expect. Instead of "The

Great Communicator,” “The Tongue of Fire,” or “The Defender of Justice,” it was simply “The Dinner Bell.” What? The Dinner Bell! What kind of nickname is that for one of the world’s greatest orators? Apparently it was an appropriate one. Burke was boring. Yes, boring. His wisdom and wit were overshadowed by his poor delivery skills. According to Dale Carnegie, whenever Burke arose to speak, members of the House of Commons “either went to sleep or went out in droves” (Carnegie 1962).

Teaching and public speaking are cousins. The essence of both is communication. Martin Luther King felt that good preaching was a mixture of both intellect and emotion (Oates 1982). Good teaching may be the same way. We may fail to realize that no matter how well prepared our lessons, no matter how well researched our material, no matter how well organized our notes, no matter how well supported our conclusions, the students will learn little if they are bored.

What is the catalyst that converts a lesson from dull to dynamic, from sleepy to superb? I don’t really know, but such questions should never be far from our thinking and personal reflections. As teachers, maybe we should attend a little more to delivery. How we package our product makes a lot of difference in significant and diverse ways. Our individual deliveries need to be filtered through our preciously distinct personality and talents, although much of the time they never even reach that stage. How many times have we witnessed a very interesting, funny, and witty individual give a boring talk or dull lesson? I fear there are too many of us hiding our lights under bushels. We need to be more courageous, more genuine, and we need to take reasonable risks.

Both the artists and the scientists would agree that effective teaching is enhanced by love and respect flowing from teacher to student. Consider the following: Educational psychologists claim that there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and school achievement (Purkey 1978). William W. Purkey, a nationally renowned expert on educational psychology, claims that one in every three Americans possesses a self-concept dominated by the negative (Purkey 1988). He adds that negative input can be so devastating that it can take as many as fourteen positive experiences to compensate for the setback of one similar negative experience (Purkey 1988). Threats to self-esteem bring on classroom anxiety, which compounds the problem. Up to 30 percent of students experience school related anxiety severe enough to negatively affect academic performance (Forman 1984).

What exactly can be done about that? Should we give everyone a grade higher than what they earn just to preserve their fragile self-esteem? Of course not. Judgment day must come. However, just as the Church teaches that God cares for all of us, regardless of our performance in life, we must do the same with students right up to their day of reckoning. If we do

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this, their day of reckoning will be less harsh. Studies have shown that a positive, caring teacher-student relationship may be the most important factor in student learning. A student who feels threatened by the teacher may not learn efficiently. There is a positive relationship between accepting, supportive teachers and the performance and positive attitudes of learners (Disick 1974). Other studies conclude that “teaching effectiveness can be generalized when a nurturing environment has been established” (Hanna 1990). By improving a classroom’s affective environment we can enhance the students’ learning and overall college experience.

A teacher by the name of Peter Frederick (“Student of Process” 1993, 11) stated the following concerning the thoughts that may be going through the minds of students on the first day of class:

I think students are asking these three questions 1) Does he or she like me? 2) Am I any good? 3) Will I make it? So that the first emotions in the class are not about whether this faculty member knows his or her stuff and is this going to be a good course, but “In what ways does this teacher understand me, and in what ways can this teacher connect this stuff to me, my issues? And my issues are self-esteem, need for validation, need for affirmation (both as individual and as member of the group) and so on.”

All that is very true. I think our students are often trembling behind their cool facades. However it needs to be mentioned that students expect of us a certain degree of competence in our subject along with clarity of explanations and a degree of enthusiasm in our delivery (Weimer 1990). Clarity, from my experience as a student, is something that was often conspicuously absent in the teaching I received. There were many times I craved examples and never got them. It is our duty as teachers to make connections between the new paradigms and paradigms the students already hold. It is difficult to interpret anything unless we can somehow link it to previously acquired knowledge and therefore come to at least a partial and initiatory understanding. This linking is significantly enhanced by the teacher’s use of examples. I think we should consider erring on the side of giving too many examples rather than err on the side of providing too few of them.

Professional happiness and satisfaction will never be totally ours until we sincerely feel our teaching potential is being maximized. The path to teaching excellence is blocked by a myriad of obstacles. Life’s capacity for throwing curves that inhibit our potential struck me one day on an autumn hike in the crisp Idaho wilderness. The scene was beautiful, and the unnerving, powerful silence wooed me into a philosophical mood. As I paused to rest, I noticed an unusual tree among the nearby foliage. It was covered by long, choking vines. It occurred to me that many of us live our lives like that tree—surrounded by powerful, constricting habits

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and attitudes that inhibit our happiness and potential. As teachers, our vines might be impatience, disrespect toward students, lack of confidence, poor self-esteem, pride, inhibitions, ignorance, apathy, complacency, insensitivity, or a whole host of others. We all suffer from some of these; however, by placing our professional emphasis on continual improvement, we can slowly liberate ourselves from these debilitating and draining forces that so impede and restrict us. ∞

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