
Ken Bain (2004) spent a number of years studying the qualities and practices of the best college teachers. His book serves to validate what we have learned about teaching and learning as summarized in the “Seven Principles of Good Practice” in Chapter 1, the “Nine Principles for Assessment” in Chapter 2, and in the work of numerous scholars over the past twenty years. Among his findings are that best teachers work hard to create what he calls a *natural critical learning environment* where the skills, habits, attitudes, and information they want students to learn are embedded in authentic tasks that engage student curiosity, and where students are led to develop their cognitive and metacognitive abilities at the same time they develop expertise in the field. The critical learning environment is created not only by *what* these teachers do but also by *how* they do it.

**What the best teachers do**

- Relate course learning objectives to authentic and intriguing questions and problems that the course (or individual class or assignment) will help students to understand and resolve, and which are relevant to students’ lives;
- Create assignments that train students to reason, evaluate, and apply evidence to make decisions and defend their conclusions;
- Structure assignments to build the scaffolding of stepwise challenges that lead students to develop increasingly advanced abilities;
- Structure their courses to provide very frequent, useful feedback on student work that helps them focus their effort where it is most needed, in an environment where they can safely repeat a cycle of trying, failing, receiving feedback, and trying again;
- Create the challenge with encouragement that makes high demands on their students while at the same time providing continuing opportunities for feedback, revision, and improvement;
- Define the obligations associated with choosing to be in the class in ways that engage students to be feel a commitment to be attentive, thoughtful, and responsive;
- Provide opportunities for students to work collaboratively;
- Design assignments to deepen both discipline-specific and generalized abilities like critical reading and writing, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, and social, cultural, and environmental interdependence;
- Evaluate student work based on clearly articulated standards, while also training students to develop the ability to assess their own work accurately to specific standards.
Bain also found that the best teachers have common attitudes toward teaching and toward their students, which translate into how they organize their courses and assignments, the ways they relate to their students, and the effectiveness of the learning environments they create.

**How they do what they do**

- Start with what students think they know and systematically take them beyond the familiar in manageable steps, carefully grafting new concepts onto existing ones rather than focusing on planting brand new ones;
- Treat anything they say to their students, in any setting, as a conversation rather than a performance;
- Give students a sense of control and responsibility for their own learning;
- Model with their own actions the specific reasoning processes germane to their disciplines;
- Combine the systematic with the kind of curiosity that lays the foundation for the sudden integrative insights that can come after deep involvement with a set of problems;
- Treat students fairly and hold them in positive regard;

Maintain a stimulating and safe forum for students to challenge and update their beliefs and assumptions. The deepest learning happens when students are driven by their own curiosity to make their own meaning from their experiences; and
- Devise grading systems that reward the deepest learning, discourage superficial learning-for-tests, and encourage students who lack confidence. Grades are less effective motivators than internal satisfaction for evoking challenge and curiosity.

**Relating**

Whatever class format or pedagogical style an instructor uses, the same principles of learning apply. It’s not just what you do that is important, it’s also very much how you do it. The instructor’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are the key ingredients that define the classroom learning environment. Experiments have shown that even after only a few minutes of observation, students give an instructor evaluation ratings which are surprisingly similar to those of students who spend an entire semester with the instructor. Thus students are very adept at recognizing the qualities of instructor behavior that will stimulate their learning; the characteristics of good teaching have as much to do with how teachers relate and what kind of environment they create as to what they specifically do.

Though personality plays little role in good teaching, nevertheless the best teachers do have in common several ways of being and relating that oil the wheels of student learning.
As a group, they invariably:
- are supportive and noncombative;
- invest in and share power with students;
- sincerely want to help students learn and to know how well they are learning;
- encourage all students to believe they can meet the same high standards;
- foster a relationship of trust and mentoring, not a competition with winners and losers;
- reliably and predictably show non-judgmental respect, concern, and positive regard;
- maintain a stimulating and safe forum for students to share ideas, through use of space, authentic topics, compelling questions, humor, or calling on non-volunteers;
- act as if every student is unique and brings contributions no one else can make;
- convey high expectations along with assurance that each student can meet them.

Here are some points to remember about good teaching:
- it’s a conversation, not a performance;
- it’s about making contact with, not talking at;
- "warm language" makes you more human and the material more real
- “teaching is above acting, but acting is not beneath teaching”;  
- the ongoing intention is for learning to happen;
- good explanations give students the tools they need to construct their own knowledge.