

3: Effective Teaching

One of the most important goals of The Ohio State University is to offer effective instruction to the students who study here. The university strives to recruit the best faculty and teaching associates possible and to support them in their teaching, research, and service endeavors. As part of the support for teaching, this handbook provides an overview of some basic information on instructional strategies. To situate this information within the general context of effective teaching, this chapter discusses what is meant by effective teaching, how teachers can continue to develop their instructional strengths through seeking and using feedback, and how, given the pressures on instructors to perform well in several roles, they can “balance it all.”

Traits of Effective Teachers

Although many people believe that good teaching is impossible to define in any general way, a large body of research suggests that certain characteristics are consistently associated with good college teaching as viewed by students, other teachers, and administrators. In a study of winners of the Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award at Ohio State (Ebro, 1977), observation of classes identified the following characteristics of effective teaching, which strongly parallel those found in other studies:

- ❖ The teachers got right down to business. They began class promptly and were well organized.
- ❖ They taught at an appropriately fast pace, but stopped regularly to check student comprehension and engagement.
- ❖ They used a variety of instructional strategies rather than lecture alone.
- ❖ They focused on the topic and their instructional objectives and did not get sidetracked. Their explanations were clear.
- ❖ They used humor that was in keeping with their individual styles.
- ❖ They practiced good classroom management techniques, holding the attention and respect of the group.
- ❖ They interacted with students by providing immediate answers to questions or comments and corrective feedback when needed. They praised student answers and used probing questions to extend the answers.

- ❖ They provided a warm classroom climate by allowing students to speak freely and by including personal humor or other attempts to relate to students as people.
- ❖ They used nonverbal behavior, such as gestures, walking around, and eye contact, to reinforce their comments.

Joseph Lowman (1996) describes two main dimensions of effective college teaching that emerge in his studies: intellectual excitement (enthusiasm, knowledge, inspiration, humor, interesting viewpoint, clarity, organization) and interpersonal concern/effective motivation (concern, caring, availability, friendliness, accessibility, helpfulness, encouragement, challenge). Other studies (see, for example, Chickering and Gamson, 1991) consistently identify knowledge of subject matter, organizational skills, enthusiasm, clarity, and interpersonal skills as marks of the effective teacher. The amount of agreement across studies suggests that the characteristics of good teaching are not mysterious or extremely discipline-specific. They can, and have been, identified by researchers, students, and professionals alike.

Inspection of these characteristics fails to support another commonly held belief about teaching: “Good teachers are born, not made.” While certain characteristics, such as humor and interpersonal skills, seem to come easily to some people and not others, people are not born with knowledge of a given discipline or competency in the use of instructional strategies. Furthermore, those who exhibit these qualities most consistently state that they work hard at attaining them and are very conscious of their actions and their effects.

These highly conscious teachers are examples of what Donald Schön (1983) has termed the

“reflective practitioner,” the professional who acquires expertise by learning in the action environment. In a study of Ohio State faculty (Chism, 1988), a model of faculty growth in teaching emerged that suggested that effective teachers develop by maximizing what they learn through experience. They engage in cycles of learning during which they try a practice, observe its effects, and decide how and when they will use a similar practice. The process is often carried on without a great deal of conscious attention and rather unsystematically by most teachers. What distinguishes those who learn best, however, is the very level of conscious reflection and the quality of information they bring to bear in determining the effects of a practice in a particular context. The best teachers know not only what they are doing, but why it is working and why it is likely to work in one kind of environment and not in another. Although they may have some natural personality characteristics that support their success, they also work very hard at their teaching and continually try to improve.

Teaching Styles

A number of writers have observed differences in style among teachers. They classify them according to a number of dimensions that represent how the teachers approach their students, the ways in which they think learning takes place, and personal strengths and preferences. Lowman (1996), for example, observes that exemplary college teachers “appear to be those who are highly proficient in either one of two fundamental sets of skills: the ability to offer presentations in clearly organized and interesting ways [intellectual excitement] or to relate to students in ways that communicate positive regard and motivate them to work hard to meet academic challenges [interpersonal rapport]. All are probably at least completely competent in both sets of skills but outstanding in one or, occasionally, even both of them” (p. 38).

Grasha (1996) delineates five teaching styles:

Expert—is concerned with transmitting information from an expert status; challenges students to enhance their competence

Formal Authority—is concerned with the acceptable ways to do things and providing students with the structure they need to learn

Personal Model—believes in teaching by personal example; oversees and guides students to emulate

Facilitator—emphasizes the personal nature of teacher-student interactions; guides students toward developing their capacity for independent action

Delegator—is concerned with developing students’ capacity to function autonomously; encourages independent projects

Grasha advocates an “integrated model” of teaching and learning styles, recognizing that individual teachers will naturally exhibit different styles, but stressing that teachers must cultivate certain styles so that they can use approaches that are appropriate to the instructional situations and kind of learners they encounter. For example, he observes that a blend of the Expert-Formal Authority styles works best with learners who are dependent and less capable with the content. Grasha advocates that teachers reflect on their stylistic approaches and make conscious decisions about these. His book, *Teaching with Style*, provides many exercises for faculty to use in thinking about styles of teaching.

Starting Well and Developing Teaching Skills

After studying new faculty at different institutions over several years, Robert Boice (1991, 1992) identified several characteristics of new faculty members he calls “quick starters,” those who adjust easily and make steady progress in their work. According to Boice, quick starters:

- ❖ are concerned about students’ active involvement in the learning process
- ❖ avoid feelings of isolation by developing social and professional networks with colleagues and others
- ❖ seek advice on teaching from colleagues and consultants
- ❖ avoid being critical and negative about undergraduate students
- ❖ learn to balance time across teaching, research, and service
- ❖ are highly energetic, curious, and humorous

Eison (1990) stresses the importance of confidence for new teachers. Confidence is built upon good planning, clear goals, and a cultivation of relaxation and self-esteem. Eison advises new teachers

to avoid perfectionism, to recognize their limitations, and to view admitting that they do not have all the answers as scholarly, rather than a sign of failure.

Sustaining growth in teaching involves continuing to learn. Chism (1993), using a model of teaching development rooted in experiential learning, suggests that experienced teachers can avoid burnout and continue to improve through:

- ❖ stimulating their own thinking by taking advantage of opportunities to learn new approaches to teaching through reading, attending workshops and conferences, observing colleagues, and joining book groups or seminars on teaching topics
- ❖ relying on colleagues and teaching consultants to try new things and to provide them with support as they experiment with teaching
- ❖ obtaining regular, systematic feedback on their teaching
- ❖ reflecting on their teaching continually and making changes based on those reflections

Stephen Brookfield, in *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995), offers a variety of practical and insightful methods for promoting reflection on one's teaching. He stresses understanding how students learn as a way to approach teaching improvement.

Chapter 9 will highlight additional opportunities for growth and development. Strategies for documenting teaching performance will also be discussed.

The Role and Types of Feedback

A key element in the process of teacher development is feedback. As with all learning, getting information on one's actions is essential to continuing improvement. Most teachers get feedback on their teaching by scanning faces in class for signs of interest or confusion. While these are important strategies, they are highly inferential. The most effective teachers employ more systematic ways of obtaining feedback. Several ways are described below.

Written Evaluations from Students

There are a variety of ways in which instructors can obtain written information on their teaching from students. They may use one of several standard teaching evaluation forms with rating items that have been tested for their validity and reliability. Since the items on these forms are often very global and students frequently are asked to provide a rating without an explanation, standard forms serve mainly as gross performance indicators. They can alert instructors to areas that differ from average ratings.

The Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI)

One student rating form that is available at Ohio State is the Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI). A 10-item form, the SEI is designed primarily to monitor teaching performance for personnel decision-making processes. The items tap into global ratings of instruction, such as "The subject matter of this course was well organized," "The course was intellectually stimulating," and "The instructor was generally interested in teaching." Forms are sent automatically to all instructors, who may use them and return them to the University Registrar for tabulation, using a process designed to preserve confidentiality and validity. Instructors then receive reports that display their scores, their college's or school's mean scores, and university mean scores for all items, along with interpretive graphs.

Feedback on Your Instruction (FYI)

A second optional method for collecting student feedback is the FYI. This is a web-based tool that instructors can use anytime to generate customized questionnaires containing items that solicit student opinion about particular things that the instructor wishes to check. It can be used for early or final feedback, depending on the instructor's preferences. It should not be used for documenting teaching effectiveness since it is intended specifically for teaching and course improvement.

To access FYI, the instructor visits the FYI web page (<http://www.ureg.ohio-state.edu/fyi>), logs in, and then selects questions to be included in the survey. Over 200 questions are arranged within 16 categories. Both standard and custom items are available. The instructor can choose as many or as few as desired. When selection is complete, the

questions are printed on a form according to the format the instructor has chosen. The instructor then photocopies the instrument, administers it, and scores it. There is no need for a third party to tally the results since they are intended for the instructor's own use. For large classes, instructors can use scan sheets and submit these to the Office of Testing for more efficient tabulation of scaled items.

Consultants from Faculty and TA Development (292-3644; see Appendix) are available to help instructors customize their questionnaire, interpret the results of student feedback on teaching, and think of strategies for changing teaching in response to suggestions.

Other Instruments

More specific feedback from students can be obtained on comment and "tailored" forms developed by the instructor or by a Faculty and TA Development consultant for use at any time during the course. Many instructors use such forms at midquarter, judging that students are able to assess the teaching by then and that there is still time to make changes if the information points to problems. Written comments can be obtained frequently during the quarter through an informal activity called the "minute paper," in which students are asked during the last minutes of class to comment on a blank sheet of paper about that class period or the course in general, suggesting whatever changes they feel would improve the course. Instructors who are using a new teaching technique or experimenting with the content or structure of a course might ask students to comment on the particular change that is occurring as it happens. Written comments gathered in these ways provide specific kinds of information that instructors can use as they assess the effects of their practices in an effort to improve and to increase their instructional repertoire.

Class Committees

Some instructors at the beginning of the term appoint a committee composed of students from the class charged with gathering and providing feedback on the course and teaching performance from the student perspective. The committee may devise its own survey form, collect information informally through conversations with members of the class, or hold periodic "meetings" to discuss class issues. The committee meets at intervals with

the instructor to discuss the information it has obtained.

Discussion Mapping

Instructors often wonder why some class discussions are more productive than others or how they can better keep discussions on track. The discussion mapping technique can help answer these and other questions regarding class discussions. This technique leaves the instructor free to continue his or her role as facilitator while a colleague or teaching consultant observes various aspects of the discussion, including (a) how participation is distributed (Are there patterns associated with age, gender, or cultural differences?); (b) the nature of teacher comments (Are they supportive, argumentative, topical, or discursive?); (c) the listening skills of students; (d) how content is addressed (e.g., Do students concentrate on theoretical or practical implications? When appropriate do they engage in synthesis, analysis, and evaluation techniques?); and (e) the role of the facilitator (e.g., Does the facilitator mainly guide the discussion, monitor participation, or handle problems that arise?). Discussion mapping services are available through the Office of Faculty and TA Development.

In-Class Observation

Inviting a colleague or teaching consultant from Faculty and TA Development to observe class is yet another way in which instructors can receive helpful feedback on teaching. It is useful to try to identify in advance of the observation some specific things that the observer should be noting. For example, an instructor concerned about whether he or she creates enough opportunities for participation might ask the observer to pay close attention to this question as the class is observed. Depending on the particular focus of the observation, observers may use a pre-established rating or frequency count form for recording information or they may use a narrative format. The more skilled the observer, the better the feedback the instructor is likely to receive. Observation is also improved if multiple observations are used to establish a representative information base and if multiple observers are used to corroborate findings. Following an observation, it is important for the instructor and observer to meet to exchange information and to discuss specific ways for improving the instruction that was observed. Specific ideas for classroom observation are in *Peer Review of Teaching: A Sourcebook* (Chism, 1999).

Videotaping

Videotapes, recorded either in the actual class setting or in a simulated environment, are a very powerful means of feedback for assessing presentational skills. The videotape can be analyzed by the instructor with or without assistance from a consultant or colleague to explore a variety of teaching skills ranging from nonverbal behavior, voice tone, and diction to clarity of presentation, classroom management, and organizational quality. Often, viewing oneself provides an immediate message that creates a strong awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. Videotaping only services are available through Classroom Services (see Appendix). Videotaping and analysis are available through Faculty and TA Development. These services are free of charge.

Class Interviews

Usually conducted by a person other than the instructor, class interviews can serve as another good source of feedback for the improvement of teaching. According to a procedure described as a Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) by Joseph Clark, a former instructional developer at the University of Washington, the interview is conducted by a teaching consultant who works with students in groups to answer three questions: *What do you like best about this course?* *What do you like least?* and *What suggestions do you have for the instructor?* The consultant tries to probe when there are areas of uncertainty or disagreement and tries to get the class to arrive at a consensus on each topic which is brought up. Following the class, the consultant reports back to the instructor and the two discuss relative teaching strengths identified and implications for change. Other ways of conducting class interviews are also available to instructors who might want to identify some specific areas of concern or might want a student or colleague to conduct the interview. Instructors may also want to interview specific students themselves to get feedback. Consultants at Faculty and TA Development are available to conduct class interviews at the request of the instructor.

Syllabus and Materials Review

When instructors would like information and opinions about the goals of the course, the way in which it is structured, the appropriateness of the activities and examinations, and the accuracy and quality of the printed materials that are distributed,

they can ask colleagues who have knowledge of the discipline to review course documents. While students or a teaching consultant may offer some feedback on examination items or the clarity of explanations in printed notes, often the best judge of content accuracy will be the colleague who has disciplinary expertise. A review of materials is followed by a conversation during which the reviewer provides feedback to the instructor. Specific ideas for reviewing syllabi or course materials are in Chism (1999).

Students' Exams, Written Work, and Other Products

Although instructors generally keep a careful record of grades, very few devote a lot of attention to looking at teaching factors associated with the results. In order to learn more about the effects of specific teaching practices, instructors can do such things as examine a set of graded papers for common error patterns (see the section "Procedures for Computing Difficulty and Discrimination Indexes" in Chapter 7), talk with students about how prepared they felt for a given examination (individually or in the form of a "minute paper," see Chapter 2 under "Ways to Determine What Approach is Appropriate"), or look to see if certain key concepts or skills they tried to convey are reflected in the students' tests, papers, or other work. Chapter 7 is devoted entirely to the process of assessment.

Classroom Research

Instructors with particular questions related to student learning or teaching strategies can use the classroom as a natural laboratory for descriptive or experimental studies. Often, these may be very informal, such as to assign one paper with a given format and to assign another with a different format to see which format is associated with better achievement of objectives. Studies may involve such things as having students take learning style inventories so that the instructor knows more about the range of learning preferences in the class. The studies must be conducted in a way which does not jeopardize student learning, but which can provide solid information for making good teaching choices. Classroom research is a more systematic way of conducting the ongoing inquiry into teaching practice that is so essential to teacher growth. For a more in-depth look at the subject, see *Classroom Research: Implementing the Scholarship of Teaching* by Cross and Steadman (1996).

Angelo and Cross (1993) have compiled a variety of strategies called *classroom assessment techniques* (CATs) for obtaining information on student learning and teacher performance. Their collection of 50 strategies is a useful resource for instructors who wish to conduct brief, informative classroom inquiries. Example techniques include the “Muddiest Point,” whereby the instructor asks students to take a minute at the end of class to identify one thing that they are still puzzled about, and “Reading Rating Sheets,” which ask students how well they understood an assigned reading, how helpful it was, and what specific questions they have about the reading.

Balancing It All

The challenging task of being the kind of teacher who continually strives to improve instructional technique is faced by instructors who are simultaneously conducting their own studies or research program as well as engaging in service activities and maintaining a personal life. Often, instructors feel caught among all these roles and have the sense that they are not performing up to their personal standards. Severe stress can result. Experts in the field suggest several ways in which stress can be controlled. Psychology professor Anthony Grasha (1987) lists the following solutions:

1. *Be more assertive about refusing requests.* He suggests that instructors avoid feeling that they must please others at personal expense to themselves. He notes that it is not necessary to provide a reason for refusing requests.
2. *Set priorities.* Grasha advises that instructors look at their calendars before each week begins with the following questions in mind: (a) Does the task have to be completed as scheduled?, (b) Is the task something that can be delegated to others?, (c) Can completion of the task be delayed for a period of time?, and (d) Is it really necessary to do this task at all? After using the questions to eliminate some tasks, the instructor should schedule social and recreational time as well as uninterrupted “work” time for writing or extended projects and take these “appointments” as seriously as scheduled meetings.
3. *Use quick relaxation techniques.* Grasha suggests that tensing the body for a count of 10 and then breathing deeply in and out to a count of four for a period of three to five minutes is

especially effective after a tension-producing event. He also suggests that writing, such as keeping a personal journal or writing angry letters that are not mailed, can help during extremely stressful periods.

4. *Think Positively.* Citing William James, Grasha points out that stress often occurs when people feel that they cannot perform to self-expectations. He advises that people reevaluate their expectations, seek small victories, focus on achievements rather than deficiencies, and seek social support.

Summary

Teaching is, as a recent report (Higher Education Research Program, 1989) terms it, “the business of the business,” the main purpose for institutions of higher education. Instructors who take this responsibility seriously strive continually to be more reflective about their practice and to improve as their careers progress. Good teaching involves more than the simple transmission of information and includes motivating students and creating a positive classroom environment as well. When coupled with the many other responsibilities a university instructor has, however, efforts to teach well can lead to stress and burnout. Maintaining realistic expectations and exercising time management are ways in which instructors can help avoid unproductive stress.

Recommended Readings on Effective Teaching

Items preceded with an asterisk (*) can be found in the FTAD resource suite.

*Angelo, T., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Eble, K. (1988). *The craft of teaching* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Grasha, A. (1996). *Teaching with style: A practical guide to enhancing learning by understanding teaching and learning styles*. Pittsburgh: Alliance.