TEACHING CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE PROFESSORS

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During the past several years, the authors have devoted a great deal of time and energy in the pursuit of becoming effective college professors. After observing a number of excellent professors (and a number of less-than-excellent ones), the authors would like to share some of their observations and ideas.

Although this article focuses specifically on effective classroom performance in a traditional lecture-based setting, many of the principles discussed can be applied to alternative styles of teaching such as seminar settings, individualized instruction, etc.

Below are listed ten characteristics which the authors feel comprise good teaching. The remainder of this article focuses on ideas of how professors should incorporate these areas into their teaching to maximize teaching effectiveness.

1. Attitude
2. Organization
3. Sensitivity
4. Involvement
5. Professor Expectations
6. Fairness
7. Non-threatening Atmosphere
8. Effective Examinations
9. High Energy Level
10. Admitting "I Don't Know"

1. ATTITUDE -- Caring whether or not the students learn is the single most important success characteristic in teaching. When students believe that a professor cares, they are willing to overlook a number of weaknesses in technique.

In addition projecting a positive attitude about oneself and the students is essential. Everyone needs to feel good about themselves and to feel their ideas have value.

2. ORGANIZATION -- As with any occupation, good organization is vital in college teaching. Teaching should be fun. Being well-organized allows you to feel relaxed and to enjoy the time in the classroom. Being well prepared does not mean being rigid, but it does mean knowing what is to be accomplished and how to accomplish it. This will allow freedom to focus on the interaction present in the classroom.

3. SENSITIVITY -- A good professor must be sensitive to the students' frame of mind, level of attention, and level of understanding. Sensitivity is enhanced by focusing on what is happening to the students during the classroom session rather than on what is happening to oneself. This requires confidence and adequate preparation.

Sometimes a beginning professor will ramble in front of the class with few students paying attention. This professor is out of "contact" with the students. Being well-prepared can provide the confidence necessary to focus on what is happening in the minds of the students.

When a professor senses that the students are losing attention, it is important to change what is happening in the classroom. If only one or two students are daydreaming, the problem usually can be handled by involving those students in the classroom discussion. This can be accomplished by calling on them for responses to questions, for homework problems assigned, or simply for their opinions on the subject material being covered.

On the other hand, if several students are not paying attention, it is important to initiate a change. The content of the change is not nearly as important as making the change.

A number of techniques may prove helpful, such as, changing from lecture to reviewing assigned homework or vice versa; involving the students in an active process such as group projects, solving a short problem from the book, etc.; or simply increasing the level of stimulation by using more gestures or increasing your expressions.

4. INVOLVEMENT -- Students are most attentive when they feel involved. Calling people by name can create a sense of importance and of accountability in the student. Maintaining eye contact during lectures also helps them feel involved. Everyone has had a professor who talked to the back wall or to the ceiling, showing little or no interest in the audience. Unfortunately, students often reciprocate by showing little or no interest in what the professor is saying.

Structuring lectures to assure that each student is called on at least once during the classroom session directly increases involvement. However, be sure everyone hears the response or question. Otherwise, the class becomes frustrated and disinterested in what is being said. One helpful technique is to repeat the student's response or question.

5. PROFESSOR EXPECTATIONS -- Although students often complain about being overworked, it seems that most people want to be pushed somewhat beyond the limit which they would normally set for themselves. In this sense, teaching is similar to coaching. Good athletes aspire to be trained by coaches who demand a great deal. Even though the athletes may resent the pressure at times, afterwards they feel a sense of accomplishment which makes them feel good about themselves. Students want this same sense of accomplishment which they can obtain by working hard and by pushing themselves. Of course, professors must be realistic in their demands. The optimum level is reached when students are pushed a little beyond the level at which they feel comfortable.

6. FAIRNESS -- In order to feel they are being graded fairly, students must understand how grades are determined and be confident that grades are assigned impartially. The ease or difficulty of a professor's grading scale is not a major factor in the students' consideration of fairness in grading. Rather, clear expression of how grades will be assigned and strict impartiality are vital factors in assuring a sense of fairness.

7. NON-THREATENING ATMOSPHERE -- In order to feel comfortable expressing ideas and to be open to accepting new material, students should not feel threatened. They often fear appearing "dumb" to the professor and to the rest of the class. This fear can cause a reluctance to ask questions and to express ideas in class, thus lowering interest level.

Creating a non-threatening atmosphere is an on-going process. Assuring students that questions and comments are encouraged is essential for effective communication between the students and the professor. Questions not only give students a valuable sense of involvement in the classroom, but they also can provide the professor with insight into probable trouble areas which the students are encountering.

Sometimes a question may be inappropriate for a particular classroom session. If so, comment that the topic is beyond the scope of the lecture but offer to pursue it after class on an individual basis.

Attempt to react to questions or ideas in a manner that will not make the students feel their remarks are inane. Try to find any positive or correct points that have been expressed and reinforce those ideas before pointing out the incorrect concepts that were raised. In areas in which there is no right or wrong answer, but simply a difference of opinion, attempt to point this out.

Other students should never be allowed to ridicule someone asking a question. Often when someone asks a question, there are a number of others who may have the same question but are reluctant to speak up.

When asking students for answers to assigned homework problems, there are certain responses that are more conducive to continued participation. For instance, responding to an incorrect answer by saying "that's close" or "I have a different answer than that" is preferable to "no, that's wrong."

Having a non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom contributes to greater enjoyment both for the students and the professor. When students feel comfortable expressing ideas and asking questions, a positive atmosphere prevails and the learning process is facilitated.

8. EFFECTIVE EXAMINATIONS -- Of course learning the subject material and understanding how to apply it is more important than earning a "good" grade. However, it is a simple fact of life that grades are extremely important to most students. Since examinations generally constitute the single greatest variable in determining grades, it is essential that they be fair and effective. Class lectures and assigned homework should be structured to clearly indicate which concepts the professor considers most important. Students should be expected to have a high degree of competency over those particular concepts.

Making students aware of which concepts are most important and reinforcing those principles throughout the classroom sessions is essential. If students believe that they will be tested upon the material covered in the lectures and the homework, they are much more likely to be attentive and cooperative.

9. HIGH ENERGY LEVEL -- Some classrooms have a sense of excitement in the air. Both the professor and the students are operating at a high energy level. While teaching and acting are certainly two distinct disciplines, there is an element of performing when conducting a lecture-based class. Thus, many professors--even experienced ones--may become nervous when conducting a class, especially at the beginning of a term.

Since anxiety causes an increase in adrenalin, professors may feel "keyed-up". This increased adrenalin can be beneficial if it is allowed to flow out in the form of energy and enthusiasm. For instance, moving around the classroom, using somewhat exaggerated gestures, and speaking intensely can create an exciting, dynamic atmosphere. These feelings are then often transferred to the students, and attention and interaction increases.

10. ADMITTING "I DON'T KNOW" -- Many professors are reluctant to respond to a classroom question by saying "I don't know." Instead of admitting ignorance, they may try to put up a smokescreen by throwing out a complex answer hoping that no one will push the subject further. This usually results in one of two negative situations. Either students believe that this intelligent-sounding response is correct, and feel badly because they are not able to make any sense out of it. Or, they may be perceptive enough to realize that the response is nonsense, thus creating a loss of respect for the professor. Either way, both parties lose, and effective communication is impeded.

Don't overlook the possible benefits which can be derived by saying "I don't know, but I'll have an answer the next time we meet". It is humanizing and provides students with a more realistic picture that indeed no one knows all the answers in any particular field and that research is a life-long process. Also it can increase credibility. For instance, if students perceive that the professor will acknowledge not knowing an answer, they will have greater confidence in the answers that are given.

CONCLUSION -- While the authors have discussed several techniques which they have found helpful in teaching, this list is not all-inclusive. In addition, it is clear that what may work well for one may, in fact, be inappropriate for another. Despite the differences that exist among professors, the authors strongly believe that there are some common elements requisite to good teaching and that the techniques presented in this article are some of these elements.