

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief: What Makes an Excellent Professor?

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The best professors treat students like people, not numbers; they go beyond their call of duty in terms of helping students and holding office hours; they not only know their material, but they also know how to teach it well. They understand the student and concerns the class may have. ... a great professor must also be defined in terms of quality of research done, involvement in the campus community, quality of teaching, and other important criteria.²

Readers of *The Journal of Effective Teaching* are most likely those who are continually looking for what they can use to improve their teaching. Our authors are those who have explored a variety of methods in some depth. The papers in these volumes typically address specific methods, like cooperative learning, team teaching, and experiential learning, or student behaviors and learning styles. However, papers in *The Journal of Effective Teaching* do not generally explore the qualities and behavior of an excellent teacher. So, I now ask, “What makes an effective professor in the classroom?”

We all constantly struggle to improve our teaching. Many of us are introverts and feared our first teaching experiences as graduate teaching assistants or beginning professors. Good teachers struggle with this question throughout their career. How do I excite the students about the subject matter? How do I reach a diverse group of students? How do I convey my excitement and get them to want to learn (my specialty)? How do I maintain high expectations but show flexibility so I do not blame students for what they do not know coming into my class? What will they take to the next class in our program? What will they remember for a lifetime? And then there is a more controversial question – How do I pay attention to but not worry about student evaluations?

Answers to these and other questions might be found by discussing teaching practices with other faculty both within and outside the discipline, such as going to university teaching centers. Talking with faculty across disciplines can lead to surprising commonalities or new insights and techniques. Reading journals like *The Journal of Effective Teaching* can introduce new techniques or convey their successes. You can seek and read essays on teaching excellence by award winning professors at your campus. Examples of

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² D. Walcerz. (1996). Newsspeak, Worcester Polytechnic Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.wpi.edu/News/TechNews/960326/Editorial.html>

such essays are in a UNCW publication, *Best Practices in University Teaching*³. Other essays are posted online, highlighting some of the values that an excellent teacher should possess. Probably the best source of answers as to what makes an excellent professor would be to ask both faculty and students, say via a Facebook posting.

Reading many of these essays and talking to students, it is easy to see that several common themes emerge. In some ways, these attributes are covered by Dr. Walcerz's quote at the beginning of this letter. The key phrases in his quote are: *go beyond their call of duty; know the material; know how to teach it well; and, understand the student*. Below is a grouping of the many characteristics that I have found and grouped within these categories, though some bullets can easily be placed in more than one category.

Go Beyond the Call of Duty

- Accessible, holding both real and virtual office hours, meet with groups.
- Fair and open/predictable, expressing and applying expectations the same to all.
- Prompt to class and in returning graded materials.
- Resourceful, providing or finding learning opportunities.

Know the Material

- Passionate for the subject, teaching, and learning.
- Prepared, knowing the material and how to communicate it.
- Informed, being able to convey both new and old materials and methods.
- Confident, not afraid to make mistakes and willing to admit to ignorances.

Teach the Material Well

- Enthusiastic and engaging
- Interactive
- Clear - Excellent Communicator
- Encourage questions
- Organized
- Challenging and Motivating, having high expectations towards attainable goals
- Innovative
- Technology literate, able to use technology effectively

Understand the Student

- Caring - genuinely care about students at all levels
 - learn names, attend club meetings, meet outside of class,

³ Best Practices in University Teaching, Essays by Award-Winning Faculty at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. (2006). Ed. Carolina Clements, The Publishing Laboratory of UNC Wilmington
<http://www.blairpub.com/alltitles/bestpractices.htm>

- Take an interest in the students. Understand the changing generations.
- Listen to students, Respect students
- Advise and Mentor – making a personal connection with students, rapport
- Approachable, Humorous, Hygenic, Patient
- Encourage students to own lifelong learning.

So, how does one embrace these characteristics in practice? Let's explore a few practices in some detail. You might know all of this already, but when was the last time you thought about the components of teaching?

First of all, you should aim to make a good first impression the first day. Express your expectations early in your syllabus. Provide contact information, a list of required materials, a discussion of course coverage and philosophy, policies on attendance (even if there are none) and testing information. Also, in these days of assessment, it is common practice to provide a small set of learning objectives. You can post more specific guidelines for papers, course supplements, etc., online. These may include other useful links to policies on your honor code and university services.

Establish attainable goals. Be challenging, but within the students' grasp, helping them along at points that turn out to be slightly more challenging than usual. At the same time you need to realize that students bring the experiences of their generation. As we progress in our profession, we often forget what it was like to be an undergraduate and that the current generation is different from ours. Keep this in mind and allow your goals and teaching style to adapt to the ever changing demographics of the student population.

We typically see students in class the equivalent of one work week, or about 35 hours, in a given semester for a three semester hour class. (That is 50 minutes, forty-two times per semester. You can add a dozen hours for each additional credit.) If one teaches a TR class, that is about 30 meetings vs. the over 40 meetings for a MWF class. The more students see you, the more you become part of their lives. But, you should also aim to reach out and touch them outside the classroom. Keep in touch with the students by holding office hours (and sticking to those hours), posting and answering emails, and providing other opportunities for interaction outside of class such as study sessions and campus events. In an online environment we might even have more opportunity to connect with individual students than in a large lecture class.

Show passion for both teaching and your discipline. This is the most common mentioned quality of an excellent teacher. Students need to see that you care about their learning and they appreciate it when you can demonstrate your love of what you are teaching. Do you get tired of teaching the same courses over and over? Students pick up on this, as your passion may seem to wane and it appears that you do not want to teach but prefer to be doing research or something else. By teaching new courses, using slightly different teaching methods, or bringing your research into the classroom, you can reinvigorate or maintain the passion you had when you first started teaching.

You should establish common ground early in the semester and reinforce it with periodic review. Begin each class with short summary of what was previously discussed and paint a picture of where the discussion may be going either in the present lecture or within the scope of the section, chapter, or course. Solicit student responses as a way to see where the students are and use these responses to guide the students. Understand where their knowledge and behavior needs work, or how you need to tweak your class in order to bring your students along in the discussion. You might even need to be purposely repetitive in order to make the connection. This approach can make the course more dynamic, evolving, and interesting. Finding common ground can also help in opening the doors to education in the form of both attaining knowledge and developing critical thought.

Know the material. This should be the easiest quality. You have gotten the appropriate degrees. Your credentials have been evaluated by your department and institution. So, what more is there? Knowing the subject and conveying what you know clearly, logically, in fifty minutes is not easy at first. Taking courses in graduate school is not the same as teaching them. You gain new depths of understanding every time you teach. Also, you need to keep up with fields that are changing, new literature, etc. You should be familiar with the your texts and other materials.

Part of knowing the material is being prepared. No matter how much you think you know about the subject, there is still preparation that should take place. Not only should you know the intricacies of your facts, but also the arguments, the operation of the classroom equipment and technology, and have backup plans in case of the inevitable. Most importantly, have you thought about the best way to get students to learn or what your goals are for that class? Of course, part of being prepared is to plan to be on time. Students do not look favorably on professors who are continually late. Being on time, returning graded material in a timely manner, are behaviors that earn their respect and are just further evidence that you are concerned about them.

Be a role model. Show by example that you are also a learner. Bring in new and interesting material to the class. Though, you should stay on topic and not digress too far from your goals for each class. Students often do not appreciate going off topic, especially on things that are not on the exam. However, they should understand that some things do not always show up on an exam and are interesting in their own right. Furthermore, such topics may help students develop basic skills. At the very least, you are demonstrating the importance of intellectual curiosity, which helps to develop a passion for learning and developing a keen mind

Know yourself. What is your teaching style? What works best for you? What teaching styles work best for your current class? There are many techniques, such as found in JET. Try a few different ones, though not all at once. Mesh these techniques with your teaching style and those that you are comfortable bringing to the classroom. Learn from your students by probing and listening to them. We are continually learning and it can't hurt to have them see that you are learning from them as well.

Use technology, but be careful to spare the PowerPoint presentations. Students know when professors use canned slides, clicking away, and giving the impression that they had put little preparation into their class. Use email, structured social networking, student response systems, and other technologies for which you and your students are comfortable. Recognize how mobile this generation is and turn it into a tool, knowing when it is and is not appropriate.

Interaction not only engages students, it helps professors to know their students, their backgrounds and their learning styles. It also allows for students to get to understand their professors and gain respect for them. They get to see when the professor is working in an unbiased fashion, not playing to favorites, carrying out fair policies, and showing their concern for the students' success in the university.

At the same time, we should get our students to stop and smell the roses in our disciplines. Have them slow down and dig deep into some aspect of the subjects we try to convey. It is then that they begin to develop the same passions or to understand ours. It is then that they begin on the path to a deeper understanding. One way to do this is by providing additional learning experiences outside the classroom.

Learning experiences outside the classroom can come from independent research, experiential and applied learning. An excellent professor not only educates in the framework of a course, or a classroom, but also mentors students individually and seeks out opportunities to work with students on individual projects, lab work, internships, or theses. Such experiences are not only important avenues to preparing students for post-graduate experiences, but also keeps the professor active and up to date, learning new things which often find their way into other classes. Such experiences often persist in the memories of graduates.

What will my students remember from my classes? Do students leave each class changed to some degree? Do you provide the environment and opportunities that allow for learning to take place? Keeping some of these ideas in mind may help students to carry away what we want them to know well past the courses they take with you.

We must not forget the student – they also have a role in their education. They ultimately are responsible for what they take away from classes, courses, programs, and ultimately their university experience. It is our responsibility to maximize the rewards and to make them feel part of the community long before graduation.

In the end, we should provide opportunities for students to see the world through our disciplines, to share their work with others, to feel that we have high, but realistic, expectations for their success. They need to learn that they own their education, need to practice what they have learned, learn from their mistakes such as generating multiple drafts of papers, learn to give and receive feedback. As a role model, they will see some of the same qualities in you and the importance of developing a lasting intellectual curiosity. The excellent professor accomplishes this and more by showing students that we care about their learning.