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What the Best Teachers Do

“Learning doesn’t just affect what you know; it can transform how you understand the nature of knowing.”

Ken Bain, in “What the Best College Teachers Do”
Harvard University Press, 2004¹

By: Bob Harrison

The natural critical learning environment

Ken Bain studied dozens of the best college teachers in America. These teachers were from a variety of disciplines, but all were identified as having a sustained impact on their students. Although the teachers studied varied widely in their approaches (some relied heavily on lecture, some were very active, some used blended learning approaches, etc.) there were clear, consistent similarities amongst the best. Most notable were:

- They create a “natural critical learning environment”² in which they embed the skills and information in assignments the students will find fascinating – authentic tasks to arouse curiosity, challenge assumptions and examine their mental models of reality
- They think of teaching as anything they might do to encourage students to learn
- They consider the classroom as an environment engineered for learning and meant to engage students

¹ Ken Bain, *what the best college teachers do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004)

² Ibid, p. 47

- They focus on four fundamental inquiries³:
 1. What should my students be able to do intellectually, physically or emotionally as a result of the learning?
 2. How can I best help and encourage them to develop those abilities and habits?
 3. How can my students and I best understand the nature, quality and progress of their learning?
 4. How can I evaluate my efforts to foster that learning?

Bain notes these teachers treat their lectures, discussions and other class activities as “serious intellectual endeavors as intellectually demanding and important as their research and scholarship.”⁴ The outstanding teacher, he continues, know their subjects extremely well. They use a much richer process of inquiry and reflection in their class design, and often expect more from their students. They also treat their students with what Bain terms “simple decency” in the class.⁵

Obstacles to Effective Teaching

Perhaps some of the greatest obstacles to optimal effectiveness in teaching may lie within us. Bain asserts many academics would define teaching as “transmitting” knowledge, which is comforting because it leaves the teacher in charge of learning.⁶ Citing Don Finkel’s title, he encourages teachers to learn about “teaching with your mouth shut.”⁷ Bain encourages a fundamental shift in thinking to break free of the old paradigms. Amongst these are:

- Teaching is not just lectures or class activities. It is anything you might do to help students to learn and internalize the skills and concepts under study
- Teaching, in this conception, is “creating those conditions in which most – if not all – of our students will realize their potential to learn”⁸
- To remember that you, as the teacher, still always have something to learn
- And, finally, that teaching is more than just style, technique and delivery. It is both an “intellectual creation and a performing art”⁹

³ Ibid, p. 49

⁴ Ibid, p. 17

⁵ Ibid, p. 18

⁶ Ibid, p. 173

⁷ Donald L. Finkel, *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut* (Portsmouth, N.H.:Heinemann, 2000)

⁸ Bain, p.173

⁹ Ibid, p. 175

Learner Motivation

An important aspect of effective teaching is who is “in the room.” Bain also noted there are generally three factors that motivate people to learn in the classroom:

- Some respond primarily to the challenge of mastering something; getting inside a subject and trying to understand it in all its complexity
- Others react well to the competition, doing better than anyone else (or at least those present in the same environment)
- Finally, some are “performance-avoiders” who primarily learn to avoid failure¹⁰

Considering the students in your classes, think of your experiences with motivating others to learn. As an assessment, think of which description(s) might fit best each of the three motivations as you may see them in your experience:

1. These people are often seen as “deep” learners
2. These people might be seen as bulimic learners, studying for the test and then quickly expunging the material after the test
3. These people are surface learners, unwilling to dive deeply into a subject
4. These people tend to stick with trying to cope with the challenge in front of them, resorting to memorization and reproducing what they see and hear
5. These people respond to the beauty, utility or intrigue of the content
6. These people become strategic learners, interested in making high grades

Think of the four fundamental inquiries, and then reflect on the variety of motivations learners may bring to class. They may be there to satisfy academic requirements. They could be there because of a passion for the subject matter or the teacher leading the class. They could be there with a “wait and see” attitude, wanting to know their time will be worth the effort. In any case, how might you plan and present a learning environment that moves them to deeper levels of thinking and cognition.

Bain sought to study those teachers who “profoundly helped and encouraged students to learn deeply and remarkably.”¹¹ Look back at who you might consider the best teacher you ever had. What did he or she do, say or make you feel to earn that place in memory? What lasting impressions did they make to encourage you to learn more deeply? What processes or structures created that enduring response in you? The stories and accounts of students give a glimpse into a teacher’s effectiveness. What memories do they take from your teaching?

¹⁰ Ibid, p.40

¹¹ Ibid, p. 5

Your learning environment – An Assessment Tool

Think of the findings from Ken Bain’s study about the best instructors. As an officer and instructor dedicated to training the next generation of peace officers, what might the “best” police academy trainer or instructor do, both in planning and during their training?

What would their planning look and feel like?

What steps might they take to ensure they move beyond potential obstacles, and what resources might they tap to prepare for their classes?