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Confidence in the Classroom:

Ten Maxims for New Teachers

James Eison

Henry Adams proclaimed, "A teacher affects eternity: he can never tell where his influence stops." The truthfulness of this observation is known to experienced teachers; its implications can be profoundly intimidating, however, to new or inexperienced faculty. The possibility that eternity might be influenced by one's first days in the classroom is likely to reduce a new instructor's initial feeling of eager anticipation to a vague sense of desperation and despair. Though much has been written about teaching effectiveness (see Eison 1987, Gleason 1984, 1985, Weimer 1988 for annotated listings of some of the best articles and books of this type), and some excellent advice for new teachers has appeared in this journal (Browne and Keely 1985), surprisingly little has been written to help new instructors face, and conquer, their natural insecurities. The following ten recommendations can assist new teachers in their quest to become both professionally effective and personally self-confident; suggested readings to further empower new faculty members have also been provided.

1: To Feel Confident, Act Confident

One well-established finding in psychology is that actions give rise to feel-

ings. For example, William James (1892, 1958) noted in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, that there is "no impression without expression." Thus, to feel confident in the classroom the neophyte instructor must begin acting confidently. "Easier said than done" or "How does one begin?" the doubtful reader might rightfully reply. Increased confidence about one's teaching will result when the following general recommendations are implemented and practiced regularly.

2: Examine Why You Want to Teach

The greatest prestige often goes to those professions that provide the most substantial financial rewards; by this criterion, teaching leaves much to be desired. Furthermore, teaching is intellectually, emotionally, and physically demanding; teaching excellence also requires an inordinate investment of time. For these reasons, every new instructor should ask himself or herself, "Why do I want to teach?" and reflect thoughtfully upon the answer.

Teaching without a personally compelling answer to this question can readily lead to tedium and burnout; creating a clear and meaningful answer to the question, "Why teach?" will give rise to increased feelings of self-confidence and possibly to a lasting commitment to the profession. Young faculty members interested in reading the reflections of two experienced and

articulate professors who have faced this question should consult the provocative essays written by Peter Beidler (1984) and Maryellen Gleason (1982).

3: Learn the Characteristics Associated with Effective Teaching

Despite several recent reports and books criticizing the quality of American education at all levels, most faculty members can recall the positive impact that at least one teacher had upon their lives. Many who choose careers in higher education have been blessed by their relationships with outstanding faculty during their college years. Memories of these relationships can provide valuable insights into effective teaching; new instructors should use these memories as personal guides.

A large and growing body of research literature offers the inexperienced instructor further insight into the characteristics of effective college teaching. This literature should be read and its findings incorporated into teaching practice. For example, in an excellent recent text entitled *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*, Joseph Lowman (1984) describes a two-dimensional model of effective classroom instruction. Dimension I is "intellectual excitement," which refers to the clarity of the instructor's communication, and the positive emotional impact the teacher can have on students, and Dimension II refers to "interpersonal rapport," which occurs when the

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teacher promotes positive emotions and avoids arousing negative ones. This model is based upon both an analysis of published studies and Lowman's direct observations (and videotaping) of award-winning professors. A second outstanding treatment of this topic has recently been offered by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson (1987) in "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education."

In addition, hundreds of studies have examined student ratings of courses and instructors to identify the key elements of teaching effectiveness. These studies (e.g., Burdsal and Bardo, 1986) consistently reveal the following important dimensions: (1) organization, structure, or clarity, (2) teacher-student interaction or rapport, (3) teaching skill, communication, or lecturing ability, (4) workload or course difficulty, and (5) grading examinations. Other representative studies in this area have been discussed by Eison and Stephens (1988), McKeachie (1986). Murray (1985), in a carefully controlled observational study, reported that as few as ten behaviors predict the most of the variance in student ratings of instructors. These behaviors included: speaks expressively or emphatically, uses humor, varies facial expressions, stresses important points, shows concern for student progress, encourages questions and comments, moves about while lecturing, praises students for good ideas, asks questions of class, is friendly and easy to talk to. Three suggestions for new teachers (Eison 1988), based upon Murray's findings, are:

1. *Spack actively.* Become an expressive, enthusiastic speaker who captures students' attention both verbally (e.g., humor) and nonverbally (e.g., facial expressions, movement). Fear not the dramatic!
2. *Teach actively.* Make certain actively to engage students in the learning process by asking questions, encouraging participation and comments, and providing a clear emphasis to your main points.
3. *Care actively.* Demonstrate a visible concern for your students, recognize publicly their academic achievements and growth, work hard to insure that students recognize that you are an approachable human being.

Eison's and Murray's studies provide both a conceptual framework and a list of specific teaching skills that can be used to improve classroom performance. New faculty members should reflect upon these findings and apply them to class planning and preparation. Systematically emulating a research-based model of effective teaching will support the recommendation: To feel confident, act confident.

4: Enter Each Class with Specific Educational Goals and Objectives

One key to confident teaching is effective planning; planning begins with setting clear goals and objectives. Faculty should not enter class with vague goals such as "finishing as much of Chapter One as possible in a fifty-minute period" or "covering six chapters before the next exam." A more useful approach is to formulate specific instructional objectives for each class session. Gronlund (1978) provides a concise treatment of how to state course objectives effectively. They need not be restricted solely to material contained in the required textbook.

Consider ways to address objectives such as (1) providing opportunities for experiential learning (e.g., demonstrations, activities, self-assessment exercises), (2) teaching specific critical thinking, writing, or speaking skills, (3) examining one's attitudes and values, and (4) identifying the significant personal implications that can be found in the course content. The greater the diversity and variety found in one's instructional objectives, the easier it will be for the instructor to maintain students' interest. Furthermore, by structuring instructional objectives in terms of specific knowledge, attitudes, skills, and experiences, faculty members can clearly observe students' progress. Few things will enhance a teacher's self-confidence more than visible signs of students' satisfaction and growth.

5: Teach Less, Better

New faculty often demonstrate love of their discipline, and enthusiasm for teaching, by sharing everything they know about a given topic with their

students. As a result, freshmen in introductory classes may receive detailed remembrances of graduate seminars. But, such presentations are frustrating to students and faculty alike. Introductory classes should introduce rather than overwhelm!

Albert Einstein once said, "Education is what remains when one has forgotten everything he learned in school." A few brave researchers have empirically examined the amount of knowledge retained by students after completion of a typical undergraduate course; the data suggest that shockingly little long-term retention occurs. For example, H. Rickard et al. (1988), in a study of introductory psychology students at the University of Alabama, found that four months after completing their first psychology course, student had little more factual knowledge of psychology (i.e., 8%) than did a control group of students who had never taken a psychology course. Your efforts to insure that what is taught is taught well will be rewarded by increased long-term retention; hence the recommendation "Teach less, better."

6: Use Active Learning Strategies Regularly

About 25 years ago, Wilbert McKeachie wrote in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Gage 1963), "College teaching and lecturing have been so long associated that when one pictures a college professor in the classroom, he almost inevitably pictures him as lecturing." Unfortunately, the findings of numerous researchers and the recommendations of several recent national reports (e.g., AAC Task Group on General Education 1988, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators 1987, Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education 1984) add darkness to this picture. They all support Patricia Cross's (1987) conclusion that "When students are actively involved in the learning task, they learn more than when they are passive recipients of instruction," as in most lectures. The implications of this finding for faculty were perhaps best described by Carl Schorske who suggested that

the test of a good teacher is, “Do you regard ‘learning’ as a noun or a verb? If as a noun, as a thing to be processed and passed along, then you present your truths, neatly packaged, to your students. But if you see ‘learning’ as a verb!—the process is different” (cited in McCleery 1986).

Active learning “involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (Eison and Bonwell 1988); active learning strategies provide students with the opportunity to do such things as completing short, in-class writing activities, engaging in extended class discussions, taking field trips, completing laboratory exercises or self-assessment activities, conducting debates or role-playing exercises, participating in games and simulation activities, using computer-assisted instruction activities, making individual or small group presentations, taking tests of either the graded or ungraded variety. Several practical ways faculty members can learn to incorporate active learning strategies into their classes—whether large or small—have been described by Peter Frederick (1981, 1986). These two articles should be mandatory reading for all who are interested in improving their instructional effectiveness.

7: Don't Be a Perfectionist

A touch of perfectionism can lead to carefully prepared class sessions; carried to excess, however, perfectionism is certain to destroy a teacher's self-confidence. Surprisingly little has been written about perfectionism (Burns 1980, Pacht 1984). Meier and Sheffler (1984) have identified four traits commonly observed among perfectionists: overattention to details, overplanning, indecisiveness, and inflexibility in relating to people. These behaviors are neither associated with teaching excellence nor the enhancement of self-esteem. Furthermore, because the classroom is an ever-changing environment, effective teaching involves a dynamic interchange between the teacher and his or her students, as well as the interchange that occurs among the students themselves. As a result, the classroom is often highly unpredictable, and this

type of environment can ruin the perfectionist's best-laid plans for organization and control.

It is also helpful for new teachers to remember that one secret to good teaching, passed on through the ages, is “to appear to have known all your life what you learned earlier in the day.” That is to say, necessity often forces the new instructor to stay only a few days ahead of his or her best students. In such instances, the new faculty

most experienced instructors can attest, a few seconds of silent contemplation can greatly enhance one's ability to answer students' questions.

New instructors should not be afraid to admit to themselves and to their students that there is something that they do not know. But in the words of my colleague Charles Brewer, Furman University psychologist, “Endeavor always to reduce the frequency with which you must say so.”

Build some flexibility into your class preparations. Good teaching involves a dynamic, often unpredictable, interchange between you and the students.

member need not despair—rather, he or she should simply keep working. Instructors need only remember that “when” something was learned is less important to good teaching than that the instructor was able to explain the material clearly during the class period.

New teachers often ask, “How long will it take before I feel that I am doing a really great job?” In response to this question, it is tempting to remember the observation of Eddie Cantor, the great showman, who noted that as a performer it took him “20 years to become an overnight success.” The experiences of many faculty suggest that, when taught well, students can be an especially appreciative audience.

8: Be Relaxed about Admitting It When You Don't Know Something

One measure of instructional effectiveness is the number of questions that students ask. Anticipate that student curiosity and creativity will often be greater than most instructors' knowledge and experience; there will be times when student questions will stymie even the most senior instructor. In such situations, the wise instructor does not panic; rather, she or he remembers the ancient Greek proverb, “When at a loss as to how to go on, cough.” Or, as

9: Ask for Response from Students and Colleagues

One of the best ways to improve both teaching skills and level of self-confidence is to seek feedback from both students and colleagues. Ask students how well they understood yesterday's class or last night's homework assignment. Periodically ask for a written response, which may be by anonymous answers to short standard rating forms or by asking students to describe in writing the three things they have liked best about the class and the three they have liked least. Additional strategies that can be successfully used to gather student feedback have been described by Eison and Hoover (1989).

Regrettably, relatively little has been written about the use of peer observations to improve instruction (Eison 1988). Helling (1988) has developed a useful series of observational checklists in three different types of classes: (1) teaching through speaking (i.e., presentation, lecture), (2) teaching through involvement (i.e., discussion), and (3) teaching through questioning. Each inventory contains statements that describe good teaching; observers can use these inventories to check off readily those behaviors seen during the class

session. The inventories can be completed by students, trained observers, or faculty colleagues and used by the faculty member either alone or in consultation with the classroom observer.

And last, the self-confident teacher will always remember Mark Twain's sage advice, "When you can't get a compliment any other way, pay yourself one." A few minutes of silent reflection—or private feedback—after each class session can help the new instructor identify his or her instructional successes, upon which new skills may later be built.

10: Remember that Enthusiasm and Energy Can Carry the Day

It has been said that teachers can be divided into three groups: (1) those who make things happen, (2) those who watch things happen, and (3) those who ask, "What happened?" The hope is that new faculty will commit themselves to becoming leaders of the first group and insure that the possible negativism of a few senior colleagues does not deter their commitment to teaching excellence.

Emerson once noted, "Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm." In the classroom, an instructor's enthusiasm is often contagious; so too, is the lack of enthusiasm. McKeachie (1974) has noted that, "probably no one thing is more important in education than the teacher's enthusiasm and energy."

Conclusions

Classic and current texts on college teaching (Fuhrmann and Grasha 1983, McKeachie 1986) do provide the neophyte instructor with practical and valuable advice. They will help new instructors recognize that teaching excellence requires them to be sensitive and responsive to critical issues that have only recently received serious attention from educational researchers, faculty developers, and classroom practitioners. For example, (1) teaching students to think critically (Beyer 1987, Browne and Keeley 1986, Meyers 1986), (2) using writing to promote learning (Fulwiler 1984, White 1985), (3) recognizing

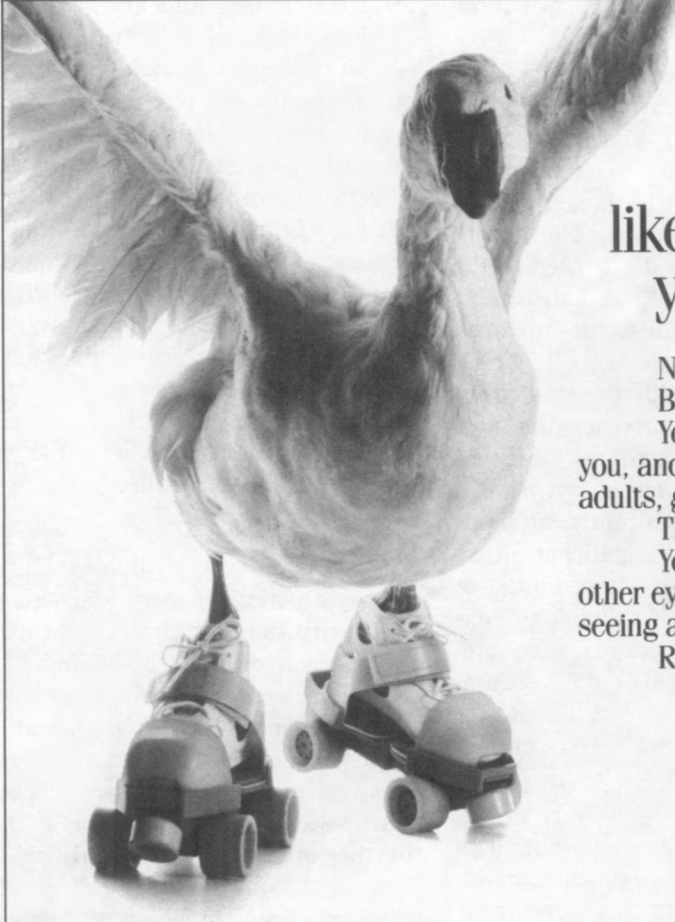
student learning-style differences (Claxton and Murrell 1987, Fuhrmann and Grasha 1983), (4) constructing tests and assigning grades that aid learning (Milton 1982, Milton, Pollio, and Eison 1986), and (5) encouraging undergraduates to conduct research (Palladino 1986)

But as noted by Horace, "Wisdom is not wisdom when it is derived from books alone." That is to say, much can be learned about teaching excellence through one's daily experiences in the classroom. A positive attitude, high level of motivation, and willingness to reflect on one's teaching will join with texts and experience to increase both self-confidence and skill.

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If this looks to you
like a goose on roller skates,
you could be going blind.

No, there's nothing wrong with your vision.
But there could be something wrong with your eyes.
You could have an eye disease serious enough to blind
you, and not even know it. The leading cause of blindness in
adults, glaucoma, has no symptoms in early stages.
There is no cure. But there is hope.
You can stop glaucoma from advancing (and many
other eye diseases from happening in the first place) by
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Remember, no one can save your sight but you.



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