What Might Help a Pretty Good Teacher Become a Great Teacher?

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Professional faculty developers frequently remark that, although it is often fairly easy to help a poor teacher become a pretty good teacher, it is typically very difficult to help a pretty good teacher become a great teacher. Except in extreme cases, the first task largely involves eliminating gross inconsistencies (such as arbitrary grading and haphazard changes of exam schedules) and then the mastering of basic teaching skills. Many good books summarize these basic skills and, often, much of the underlying research. Four of my favorites are: B. Gross Davis’ *Tools for Teaching* (1995, Jossey-Bass); J. Lowman’s *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching* (2nd edition, 1995, Jossey-Bass); W. McKeachie’s (now supplemented with contributions from others) *Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher* (10th edition, 1998, Houghton Mifflin), and finally, R. Menges, M. Weimer and associates’ *Teaching on Solid Ground: Using Scholarship to Improve Practice* (1996, Jossey-Bass). All prospective and new faculty should become familiar with a couple of such books—or with one of these general books and with one tailored specifically for their discipline, such as C. Uno’s *Handbook on Teaching Undergraduate Science Courses* (1999, Saunders) or P. Sanders and W. Walstead (eds.) *The Principles of Economics Course: A Handbook for Instructors* (1990, McGraw Hill). Indeed, I find it useful still to re-peruse a couple of them every year or two. I suspect that in many institutions, combining a mastery of these fundamentals with some moderately interesting content will often allow one to win a teaching award or two.

Beyond Good

Whether I’ve attained them or not, I had larger aspirations. The difficulty for me arose as I realized that, although I had won a couple of awards, it seemed as though my teaching was actually making very little difference.

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offers a deeper approach, an approach that asks one to learn to manage teaching and, importantly, other career tasks efficiently. Boice helps us learn to manage incivilities, work effectively in regular sessions, moderate over-attachment to content and overreaction to criticism. This provides a fundamental approach that should make work with the basic teaching techniques more effective and better coordinate that work with the rest of one’s career. [Editor’s note: Cf. “The Teaching Tribe” NTLF V6 N4, 1997, pp. 1 - 4.]

I also like two recent books that focus on teaching as a larger process. G. Wiggins and J. McTighe’s Understanding by Design (1998, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design) suggests that we start by carefully delineating the insights and skills we want the students to acquire and then work backwards to strategies for fostering and assessing learning. S. Brookfield, in his Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher (1995, Jossey Bass), sees us as “teaching innocently” when we think we always understand what we are doing in the classroom and why, or that our students usually see the same meanings as we do. He asks that we attempt to understand how power considerations frame and distort many educational interactions and how “common sense” (received wisdom) that seems to make teaching easier actually acts against our own best interests as teachers.

**Good for Whom?**

However, with the partial exception of Brookfield, all of the books mentioned so far largely ignore the question of how one decides on the goals towards which the efficiencies and design are to be directed. I see this as leaving us open to two problems. First, it is all too easy to adopt the instructional goals and approaches that were effective in helping us to stay in the field and become faculty. But such adoptions ignore the extent to which our talents, personalities and, often, backgrounds were rather different from those of our students. Second, the goals towards which we might want the students to move may be—indeed, ought to be—rather different from the goals that lead to disciplinary success. Put differently, I am inclined to view the level of public discourse in Washington, D.C., as the collective final exam for higher education (since the participants almost all have at least one degree). I now see the core task of higher education as explicitly fostering the students’ abilities to take evidence-based, values-grounded stands on important issues and to commit themselves to acting in ways that make a difference. I also suspect that the ability to help students do this is the core of a key kind of great teaching, of teaching that students experience as transformative. This is not a stance I foresaw when I started teaching college biology, but one I was led to gradually. I learned, for example, that teaching environmental science as knowledge did not change how students viewed their responsibilities in the world. William Perry’s workshops convinced me that learning to take stands was the path that took many

And I gradually came to understand that the ways I taught made a massive difference in which social groups thrived in my classes. I realized that I needed a much more explicit vision of my teaching values and goals.

**Good How?**

What resources might help us, as faculty, in developing such a vision? I think that such a search underlies the deep positive response of many faculty to P. Palmer’s work, especially his The Courage to Teach (1998, Jossey-Bass) with its emphasis on combining analysis and spirituality and addressing them both in ourselves and in our students. Alternatively, Piaget and Perry both emphasize the importance of building bridges from areas where students can already understand in complex ways to areas where we want complex understanding. In this vein, I mention that—following a recent heart attack—I am currently finding A. Weil’s emphasis on the interrelatedness of body, mind and spirituality in healing and in health to provide an interesting framework for contemplating my teaching goals and practices (see, e.g., his Eight Weeks to Optimum Health, 1997, Fawcett). R. Kegan’s In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life (1994, Harvard) provides a challenging but deeply insightful and helpful consideration of the parallels in the frameworks and values that should prevail in teaching and learning in higher education in relation to those that affect careers, management and interpersonal relationships.

Let me close with a concrete question that may help us focus on our teaching visions. Consider the most important course you teach. Suppose that one of the students in it now is going to be governor of your state in 25 years. What are the five most important outcomes that she should have mastered and how will you make