

WELCOME

Welcome to *Tips and Thoughts On Improving The Teaching Process In College--A Personal Diary* by Joe Ben Hoyle, David Meade White Distinguished Teaching Fellow at the University of Richmond at <http://oncampus.richmond.edu/~jhoyle/>

Herein, you will find more than 30 essays on teaching in college and methods by which the educational process might be made more efficient and effective. Tips, ideas, thoughts, and suggestions are presented with the genuine hope that a few will prove to be beneficial to you and your classes. That is the only goal.

I am delighted to share this work with every person who is interested in college teaching. There is absolutely no cost or obligation; please feel free to pass the manuscript (or the URL) along to others. Any comments, improvements, or suggestions can be sent directly to Professor Hoyle at Jhoyle@richmond.edu.

If you prefer not to download this work from the website, you can mail a check for \$5.00 (made out to the University of Richmond) to Joe Hoyle, Robins School of Business, University of Richmond, VA 23173 and a hard copy will be mailed to you. The \$5.00 is solely intended to cover the cost of printing and mailing.

**This book
Is dedicated
To the thousands of wonderful folks
Across the world
Who walk into countless college classrooms
Each day
And make learning happen for their students!**

Tips and Thoughts
On Improving
The Teaching Process
In College--
A Personal Diary

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Additional Free Copies Of This Work Are Available At:
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“Teaching is serious business. We have wonderfully bright and talented students. ... They have almost unlimited potential. For most, this is their one shot at college; they deserve nothing less than an excellent education, an academic experience that challenges them to excel from their first day to their last. Faculty members have a responsibility to the world to coax the very best from their students because they will certainly become the next generation of leaders. Where they go from here, what they accomplish, how they impact the world, depends in large part on how much we are able to push and nurture their development.”

Joe Hoyle (essay, 2005)

Introduction, Kind Of

My name is Joe Hoyle. I am on the faculty of the University of Richmond. I led my first college class (scared to death) in graduate school in the fall of 1971 and became a faculty member in the fall of 1972. Over the decades, I have taught at Gardner-Webb College, The College of William & Mary, and--since 1979--the University of Richmond.

At various times in my career, I have been lucky enough to receive teaching awards. The most cherished are those that came from the students. Over the years, they have named me “the most feared professor,” “the professor least likely to ever retire,” “the professor most likely to ruin your grade point average,” and “the most caring professor.” That probably tells you everything you need to know about me.

There have been days in my classes when the educational process appeared to flourish exactly as I had envisioned, almost like magic. Learning bubbled up from every face in the room. On other days, though, I was surprised that the students did not revolt and demand the return of their tuition money as a result of my incompetence. Teachers try every day, some days they succeed.

This book was created as a discussion of teaching, about the day-to-day challenges and rewards of walking into a college classroom to help increase student thinking, learning, and understanding. That is the sold purpose of this work; it is about teaching. My thoughts are set down in what I call a “reverse diary”; they were not transcribed on a daily basis but they should be read in that way. Go through one essay each day; take your time and ponder the idea or suggestion being put forth. Make notes on the back. I hope that a few of these pages will provide you with at least a modicum of benefit.

When you finish reading this book, if the results have been worth your time and energy, please pass along the manuscript (or the URL address) to others who might also try a few of the ideas. Because this work is being given away for free, the marketing budget is rather low. Any and all help in spreading the message would be greatly appreciated.

“Education’s purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one.”

Malcolm Forbes

Preliminary Exercise

Before officially starting, here is one of my favorite exercises. It is designed to stimulate reflection--not a bad activity for a teacher. Simply consider four questions:

(1) – Think back on your entire educational experience, from kindergarten through graduate school. *Who was your best teacher?* Select that one person who should be placed at the absolute pinnacle. In my experience, almost everyone arrives at a single name rather quickly without much guidance. People seem to know automatically the identity of that one individual they believe qualifies as their all-time best teacher.

(2) – Spend a few moments thinking about this educator. Recall the reasons that he or she meant so much to you. Do not get sidetracked by trivial memories. Why was this teacher outstanding? What did this person do that so many others did not? Now, come up with three terms to describe your best teacher. *What are three terms that best exemplify the characteristics that made this individual so special?*

(3) – One at a time, apply the three descriptive terms generated in (2) to your own teaching. Score yourself on each. As an example, if one of the descriptive terms was “highly organized” or “enthusiastic” or “genuinely caring,” what grade is appropriate for your teaching? *For each of these, as a teacher, are you outstanding, good, average, poor, or failing?* Most people have a general understanding as to how well they teach. That is not the purpose of this exercise. I want a separate and personal evaluation for the three descriptive terms that you identified as being significant.

(4) – Do not consider the grades in (3) as permanent. They are not tattoos. For each of these three terms, come up with one action that you can attempt to raise the score. *How can your grades be improved?* Think about the kinds of activities that your own best teacher utilized. Let your imagination run wild; people talk a lot about thinking outside of the box but rarely do so. If this outstanding educator was now standing in your shoes, how would he or she go about achieving improvement?

These four questions are not designed to guide readers toward some universal descriptor of good teachers because there probably is none. I simply want you to consider the traits that you associate with high-quality education. Many individuals have taught for decades without thinking seriously about the fundamental question of what specific attributes cause a teacher to be judged outstanding--not just good but truly exceptional.

Improvement is always difficult if a person does not understand the essence of the quest. In the simplest terms: *As an educator, what does it take to be good and what can you possibly do to get better?*

This exercise has one other purpose: The reader is placed in the student position. It is difficult to comprehend fully the essential importance of education and the key role played by effective teachers without vividly recalling the timorous days of being a student. Remembering how significant such individuals have been to our development is a good way to start contemplating actions that might spark a personal teaching evolution.

Day Zero - It Is Your Journey

According to one of my college courses some 40 years ago, there is a Zen philosophy that proclaims, "The journey is everything." This reflects my view of a teaching career: a marvelous journey, a kind of crusade against laziness and ignorance. I continue to be a pilgrim in precisely the same way as any of my readers; I am always seeking new and better ways to stimulate the thinking of my students.

This book is a consideration of that crusade. Each page is constructed entirely from my own personal opinions. To my knowledge, there are no facts stated here. Virtually every word is merely a verbalization of my beliefs, based on observations from a journey spanning well over three decades. At times, assertions may be proclaimed in forceful and confident ways but that does not make them facts. A philosophy of mine is at the core of these writings: To arrive at even one good idea in life, a very large quantity of ideas must be generated. I am not conveying facts. I will toss out as many suggestions, techniques, and the like as possible, indicating how they were used by me and why. Results will be described based purely on my perceptions. Nothing in this book has been formally studied or analyzed as part of any scholarly research. Each idea appeared to benefit the students--with varying degrees of success--during my journey as a teacher.

Some of these suggestions might help your class; many may not. That is to be expected. What has succeeded for me could prove useless for anyone else, even in identical situations. Improvement starts with the willingness to consider innovation.

As the teacher, judgment as to what works and what does not ultimately falls on you. At the end of the day, you are the one person who must look around the classroom and decide whether all goals have been achieved. Do not abdicate that responsibility. Ricky Nelson put it ever so well in 1972 when he sang: "You can't please everyone so you've got to please yourself." If you are happy with what is seen and heard in class, there is no reason to change anything (except, perhaps, to keep from getting bored). This is your journey. Therefore, when listening to suggestions, from me or anyone else, it is good to remember the old adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

In teaching, there are no absolutes. No two journeys are alike. I fully concur with the sentiments of Kathleen McKinney of California State University, Sacramento: "Any teaching style can work if the teacher is truly involved and sincerely interested in his or her students" (see note below). But that does not mean we should hesitate to share our thoughts and experiences. The goal here is to explore and consider many possible ways to improve student learning. If you have a pen or pencil, underline that sentence.

Note: The Stanford University Center for Teaching Excellence sends out periodic e-mail essays on teaching. I find many of these insightful and energizing. You can review information about this service and read through the archives at the following website: <http://ctl.stanford.edu/Tomprof/index.shtml>. The quotation here from Professor McKinney is taken from essay number 98.

Day One - How Did You Manage To Do That?

How can a teacher communicate positive reinforcement to the best students?
How can a teacher elicit helpful feedback about a class?
How can a teacher guide each new group of students at the start of the semester?

Here is a simple and genuinely nice gesture that provides a legitimate response for each of these needs, a single action that should provide three specific benefits.

Typically, between 10 and 20 percent of my students earn the grade of A. Sometimes it is a few more and sometimes a few less but that is a fairly normal range. Throughout the semester, I stress that attaining an A requires a serious amount of time and effort. Occasionally, I like to throw out a challenge to the students, "If you can make an A in this course, you will have achieved something worthy of telling your mom."

After the semester, when grades have been calculated but before they are officially released to the students, I e-mail a congratulatory note to each one who earned an A. "Congratulations! You Did It!" It describes what they accomplished during the semester and how proud they should be of such an outstanding effort. My goal is for them to feel extremely pleased with their educational achievement. Former students sometimes tell me, years later, that they held onto that e-mail as a treasured memory of college.

At the end of these e-mails, I ask each A student to do me a favor and write a paragraph or two describing how he or she managed to earn the grade of A when so many other, equally bright, students did not. They are told (as they should already know) that these messages will be passed along verbatim to the next group of students in this same class. The A students are directed to think about how they accomplished so much during the semester and then write a serious and honest description of what they did. This essay can be submitted anonymously, if they wish, but most prefer the recognition.

The responses are absolutely fascinating. I peruse each one carefully. What insight are these students providing about my class? Is this the way that I want a student to earn an A grade? If a student writes that the A came from excessive cramming and memorization on the night before each test, is that a sign that serious changes are needed immediately? More can be learned about a class from this short assignment than from most formal student evaluations. These essays are honest words from the best students.

All of the paragraphs are then cut and pasted into a single document which is distributed to the next class of students on the first day of the following semester. It is one handout that they read with interest and care; they are always inclined to believe the words of their fellow students. These short essays help remove any rumors or mystery associated with my class. From the beginning, I want every student to understand exactly what it takes to earn an excellent grade. In most team sports, the players who are seniors are expected to teach the freshmen what it means to be part of the team. That is what I am seeking: One group of students instructs the next on how to achieve excellence.

Day Two – Do You Really Experiment?

In college, one of my political science professors read his notes to us each day for an entire semester--notes that must have been written 20 years earlier. They ended with Harry Truman as president although Lyndon Johnson was in office at the time. No matter how often I have relayed this story over the years, my listeners always come back with similar tales from their own student days. Yes, teachers do get into ruts; the easiest way to structure any class is exactly as was done in the preceding semesters.

My students know I like to experiment because I talk with them about what I am doing and why. One recently sent me a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson: “All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better.” Trying new things helps us grow. The public television program, *Sesame Street*, which has been around for over 30 years, claims that each new year is an experimental one. Likewise, every day that a teacher walks into class and faces those students provides an opportunity for innovation.

However, experiments can fail. There are risks involved. You can waste valuable time and look stupid. At the end of too many classes, I have stood muttering, “That sure didn’t work as I had expected.” Peter Beidler (who was named the 1983 U.S. Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching) believes the gamble is worth taking: “Good teachers take risks. They set themselves impossible goals, and then scramble to achieve them. If what they want to do is not quite the way it is usually done, they will risk doing it anyhow. Students like it when we take risks.”(1) When did you last attempt something truly new in class? Are you innovative or are you risk adverse (and maybe in a rut)? Do you even know where you fall? Self-awareness is critical for improvement.

In this book, I suggest practical ideas that might improve teaching. People often anticipate the related risks and look for reasons to avoid making a change. Having talked with many educators over the years, I sometimes observe one potential pitfall that can stifle all experimentation. It is easy for a teacher to respond automatically to any suggestion: “This is great but it simply won’t work in my classes.” That assertion may well be true but do not let it become the eternal justification for the status quo. Avoid knee-jerk reactions, either positive or negative. Search for potential improvements rather than for reasons a new approach will not succeed. Play the offense, not the defense.

Gauge your own creativity. Set up a computer file titled “Teaching Experiments.” Whenever you attempt something new or different in class, go into that file and type the date, what was done, and how it worked. The entry should take no more than two minutes. At the end of every month, read the file. How experimental are you? Have you settled into a routine or are you still trying new techniques on a regular basis? Many teachers claim they experiment frequently, but is that a vision of reality or just their own delusional self-image? It is easy to find out by maintaining this computer file. Once gathered, the information provides an accurate snapshot of your level of innovation. Plus, merely monitoring this type of list will encourage a teacher to be more experimental because it keeps the possibility of change ever present in the person’s mind.

Day Three - What Is Teaching?

Okay, Stop!! Before reading any further, define the term “teaching.” You are a teacher; I am a teacher. This book is about teaching. Prior to proceeding, we should, I think, determine what the term “teaching” means to each of us. Our definitions may be quite dissimilar but that is acceptable. It is more important for each person to arrive at his or her own understanding of “teaching” than it could ever be to achieve some type of milquetoast compromise definition. Pretend, for a moment, that you are Noah Webster and have the pleasing task of defining “teaching.” What will you say?

Ken Bain, formerly the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at New York University, is the author of a delightful book: *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Harvard University Press, 2004). To create this work, he talked with a number of great teachers and then analyzed their thoughts and advice. In reading these words, I frequently find myself underlining one or more sentences on virtually every page.

On page 49, Bain has a statement that epitomizes my view of teaching:

“Teaching is engaging students, engineering an environment in which they learn.”

Only 11 words but they say so much about what teachers try to do on a daily basis. Notice that there is nothing here about “conveying knowledge” or “passing tests.” Instead, the entire definition wraps around (a) engaging students and (b) creating (or engineering) a learning environment. On any day that a teacher manages to achieve both of these, the rest should be easy. In truth, probably everything that will be written in this book is about (a) engaging students and (b) creating a learning environment. To me, at its core, all teaching comes back to these two goals.

There are probably a million techniques to engage students and a million more to create a learning environment. Some work for some teachers; different ones work for other teachers. Some work for some students; different ones work for other students. Some work for some topics; different ones work for other topics. Some work on some days; different ones work on other days.

This book is not concerned with finding a single way to teach. It is about engaging students and creating a learning environment. In other words, this book discusses the development of an educational process that will work best for you today with your current students and subject matter. Tomorrow will be a different day, one that may well require a totally different approach. That is the special and wonderful challenge of teaching; each day is a new day. That is what keeps teachers on their toes.

Okay, that is my definition of “teaching.” What is yours and how does it impact the role that the instructor plays in the educational process? Do not just pretend to think about teaching; that is a waste of your time. If you are going to read this book, be active; do not be passive. Come up with a definition that you like and write it down. Then, think about the implications that can be drawn from this definition. Truthfully, what does it say about how you, as a teacher, should approach each class and each student?

Day Four – Throw Out Some Puzzles

I made an assertion on the previous page that possibly irritated some readers. In fact, it is a statement that occasionally upsets me. Bain's description of teaching indicates that one of the keys for success is "engaging students." Plenty of teachers have taken me to task over the decades for making a declaration like that one. Their frustrated responses usually start out with a retort somewhat akin to one of the following:

--"It is not my responsibility to entertain students."

--"No matter what I do, the students simply will not get actively involved."

--"The class is for the benefit of the students; they should provide their own enthusiasm."

--"A teacher cannot engage students when they just sit there like bumps on a log."

This can be the death spiral of education: Students claim the teacher is boring; the teacher believes the students are not willing to participate actively in their own education.

I teach financial accounting, a topic that a great majority of humans believe is as boring as watching mushrooms grow. It is not beautiful like poetry, art, or music; it is not as relevant to every day life as political science or modern psychology; it is not as capable of changing our world as biology or chemistry; it is not as intriguing as the study of history. Almost every student walks into my introductory accounting class on the first day with a visibly pained look that virtually shouts, "This is going to be soooo boring!"

I am not an entertainer; there are never any jokes or funny stories. Fortunately, the intricacies of financial accounting fascinate me; that is what initially drew me to the discipline. The issues are real and extremely complex; they require careful analysis and serious contemplation to arrive at legitimate resolutions. I enjoy sharing that enthusiasm with my students. Nothing pleases me more than having one of them comment at the end of class "that was an interesting discussion; none of it had ever occurred to me. I need to think about all of this for a while." Such epiphanies are the building blocks of education.

Bain, in his book on best teachers, states "One professor explained it this way: 'It's sort of Socratic. ... You begin with a puzzle--you get somebody puzzled and tied in knots, and mixed up.' Those puzzles and knots generate questions for students, he went on to say, and then you begin to help them untie the knots." To me, that is the essence of engagement: Get the students puzzled and then help them untie those knots.

How would the Civil War have concluded if Stonewall Jackson had not been killed? Why is one line of poetry beautiful while a similar line is banal? In the New Testament, why are there four gospels and not just one? What are the puzzles in your discipline? What fascinates you about each separate concept? Why should it matter to a student?

Education begins by introducing students to the excitement and wonder that a teacher has discovered. Slowly crack open a door to your discipline and turn to them and say, "Let me give you a peak at something that is just going to blow you away." If you puzzle them as you open that door, most students (I have found) will meet any teacher halfway.

Day Five - Who Are You?

As a teacher, I think it is important to have a clear self-concept of your own “teaching personality.” Who are you? Maybe more to the point, who do you really want to be at key moments? Do you have what I occasionally refer to as a “personality role model?” That term does not allude to a teacher whom you have known, as in the preliminary exercise at the start of this book, but an actual role model for your teaching style.

For example, when making presentations to fellow educators, I often distribute a list of names such as the following and ask the participants to select the one individual with whom they most closely identify when it comes to their teaching personality. Or, better still, if none of these names suits them, they can come up with a personal choice. This can provide excellent insight as they tread the steps of their teaching journey.

So, with whom do you identify as an educator?

- Attila the Hun – a cruel but victorious warrior
- Billy Graham – a fiery orator who shows Heaven and Hell to his listeners
- Dr. Dolittle – a learned man who talks to the animals every day
- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde – a person with multiple personalities, some good and some evil
- Florence Nightingale – a person dedicated to healing the afflicted
- General Patton – a dynamic, charismatic soldier and leader
- Gil Favor – on the 1960s television series “Rawhide,” he was the trail boss who was in charge of moving the cattle to market
- Jay Leno – a comedian who keeps his audience constantly entertained
- Leonard Bernstein – a conductor who brings the entire orchestra together to make beautiful music
- Martin Luther King – a leader who truly made a difference in society as we know it
- Meryl Streep – a talented actress, always playing different roles
- Moses – the man who led the children of Israel out of the wilderness
- Mother Teresa – a saintly person who cared deeply about every individual, especially the afflicted
- Mr. Wizard – in early television, a character who seemed to have the answer to every possible question
- Santa Claus – a kindly fellow who gives out gifts to good boys and girls
- Socrates – a wise person who guides students to understanding by means of questions
- The Marquis de Sade – a sadist who enjoyed the pain of others
- Vince Lombardi – a championship football coach known for motivating his players to do their best

Most people who have been students in college can probably recollect certain of these characters as being among their own teachers. I know, for certain, that my education included a Mr. Wizard and a Jay Leno, not to mention a couple versions of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I only wish that I had experienced a Santa Claus or, perhaps, a Mother Teresa.

With whom do you identify? I feel that being a teacher becomes a bit more directed when a person has a personality role model. For me, that one individual has always been Vince Lombardi. During his years as the football coach of the Green Bay Packers, his teams seemed to win the championship game virtually every year. He was probably best known for taking average players and turning them into winners.

This concept greatly appeals to me: working with average people to achieve outstanding results. One of Lombardi's quotes has often guided me both personally and in the manner in which I interact with my students: "A man can be as great as he wants to be. If you believe in yourself and have the courage, the determination, the dedication, the competitive drive and if you are willing to sacrifice the little things in life and pay the price for the things that are worthwhile, it can be done." That seems to be excellent advice for both teacher and student.

Over the years of my teaching career, there have been a seemingly infinite number of times when I have been thoroughly stuck as to what action to take when faced with a troubling situation. After running out of easy options, I inevitably scratch my head and ask myself: "Wonder what Vince Lombardi would do in this case?" In all honesty, I do not always follow the path to resolution that he probably would have taken. However, simply framing the question in this manner helps me organize and direct my often scattered thinking. The real question, of course, is: What action is really appropriate for me here? Even as I near age 60, I think it is great to have role model to provide guidance.

The Vince Lombardi personality model has guided my teaching in other ways. For example, he never seemed to over-emphasize individual games during the season but, rather, focused on winning championships at the end of the year. Likewise, I attempt to keep my eye directed toward the desired end-results. As much as possible, my concentration is solely on the potential positive changes that can be engendered in my students by the conclusion of the term. How will a particular action today impact their overall long-term development? I have never been much interested in short-term results but, rather, my priority is in maximizing the amount of progress achieved by each student from the beginning of the semester to the end.

But the goal here is not to follow me. Consider your own personality and teaching style. Everyone is unique. Are you more like General Patton or Florence Nightingale when you slip into your "teacher mode?" Had they been educators, those two would have probably approached their classes with widely different tactics and strategies. Yet, my guess is that each would have achieved significant success.

I often tell my students that "nothing in this class ever happens by accident." Good teaching is not a random series of unfortunate events; it is a logically thought-out process based on the teacher's vision of education. Having a personality role model can help guide the design and creation of the structure that anchors your classes. The essential question comes back to: Who do you really want to be when it comes to orchestrating the education of your students?

Day Six - What Is Your “Fly-On-The-Wall” Philosophy?

Do you have a formal teaching philosophy? Articles written about effective education often claim that teachers need one. For years, I failed to see any benefit and simply ignored the suggestion. How were a few words jotted down on paper supposed to impact my role or the structure of my classes? Then, one day, I realized that I already held to a teaching philosophy and it had long served as a guiding principle for my work each day.

Consequently, during teaching presentations, I encourage participants to uncover their personal philosophies by introducing them to my “fly-on-the-wall” concept. It is simple and effective. Assume that you have just finished teaching one of your college classes for an entire semester. On the final day, the students file from the room for the last time. Now, pretend that you are a fly on the wall listening to their parting remarks. What do you want to hear them say as they exit? I am not asking what you believe they will talk about but rather what mumbled comments would absolutely thrill your soul. What student words do you hope to hear at the end of a course?

This is a legitimate question for any teacher to ponder. Students are the beneficiaries of class; it is their education. After the interaction of a full semester, what are the remarks you want from them? Uncovering that desired response provides a real standard to guide the educational process for each class. My own personal “fly-on-the-wall philosophy” has evolved over the years and still varies a bit by course. Currently, as they leave the room on the final day, my general hope is that every student will say:

I never knew that I could work so hard.

I never knew that I could think so deeply.

I never knew that I could learn so much and I actually enjoyed the process.

This philosophy reflects my wish for each student: to work, think, learn, and enjoy it all. In fact, I explain this as clearly as possible at the beginning of each semester. My goal for them is not a secret to be hidden. I refer to these four priorities as my “education diamond.” For me, every action and activity during the semester ought to be designed to help students maximize one or more of the points of this diamond. (1)--I want them to work hard; I do not believe any person achieves much of importance in life without effort. (2)--I want them to think; I expect my students to eventually be able to “figure things out” on their own. (3)--I want them to learn; I am not in the memorization business. (4)--I want them to have fun; much of the vitality of education and the accumulation of knowledge is lost if the process is tedious.

Furthermore, I want the responsibility for such outcomes to focus on the student. “I could work so hard,” “I could think so deeply,” “I could learn so much.” A good teacher should be like a good waiter: The best ones are extremely efficient and barely noticed.

Stop for a few minutes and consider what you hope that fly on the wall hears as students exit on their last day. After you uncover the results you want for the class by the end of the semester, getting to that point becomes a much more realistic possibility.

Day Seven - First Contact

What is your first contact with each new group of students? I am a firm believer in the adage: A person only gets one chance to make the proper first impression. My advice is to establish the desired tone for the entire semester right from the very beginning.

At my school, as with probably most colleges and universities, faculty members are furnished with the e-mail addresses of all students in upcoming classes a few days before the start of the semester. I immediately sit down and compose a note to these students. Receiving an e-mail from a teacher whom they have not yet met normally catches their attention. This is my chance to make the appropriate first impression.

In constructing this introduction, I have several objectives:

- Their assignment for the first day is provided; I see no reason to waste an entire class period simply because it is the beginning of the semester.
- My few class rules are laid out along with the rationale for each. Students seem willing to follow rules if they know them and understand their purpose.
- I spell out my teaching philosophy. The students are told that they are expected to work, think, learn, and have fun; in other words, they are introduced to my education diamond. No one should ever enter my class with false expectations.
- The subject matter is described very briefly. Hopefully, this initial picture of financial accounting reflects why it is relevant to their lives and can be so fascinating, even to a college student. If I cannot explain those adequately, students should drop my course and seek one that will be more beneficial.
- The students are told that this class will be their most interesting and important of the semester. I dare them to hold me accountable for that bold assertion. High expectations are good; both the teacher and the student are likely to work harder.

There are several reasons for this preliminary contact. It is primarily designed to start each student off with a realization that “this course is serious business and will require work.” They should believe from Day One that this is not merely another college class. I once took a coaching class with Hubie Brown who later became a successful professional basketball coach with the New York Knicks, Atlanta Hawks, and Memphis Grizzlies. One piece of his advice has lingered with me for nearly four decades: “It is easy to get easier on your players as the season goes along; it is very difficult to get harder on them.” I always ponder that admonition as I move toward the first day of each new semester. However, it is never my intention to come across as an ogre; there is a discernible difference in creating a serious tone for the work that is to be done and being a tyrant.

In addition, I use this initial e-mail to pique the interest of my students. I am beginning to open the door to those puzzles. “Bill Gates is the richest person in the world. What possible use does he have for financial accounting?” “If financial accounting had never existed, how would the world today be any different?” “If the Coca-Cola Company uses one type of financial accounting and Pepsico uses a different one, what is the impact?”

Think about making that first impression. Be sure to create the one that you want.

Day Eight - Creating a Team Mentality

Try an experiment: Sit down with several college students and ask about the standard educational process. Sadly, many of them will likely spell out a basic formula that they have experienced too often: (a) teacher conveys a mountain of information, (b) student madly tries to transcribe the relevant information in legible scribbles, and (c) student attempts to memorize as much of those notes as possible the night prior to the test.

There is a lot not to like about this litany. Probably most appalling is that many seem to perceive the students' role in their own education as relatively negligible--taking notes and memorizing information. They become stenographers. That view might seem overly cynical but, truthfully, what college teacher has not worked with a significant number of students who did little more than just that? No wonder they fall asleep in class.

On the first day of classes, I talk to my students about learning to dance. For dancers to come together and create a beautiful, exciting activity, the man must do half of the work and the woman the other half. They are partners. Yes, the man typically leads the dance but that is simply part of his share of the responsibility. If one does too much of the work or the other does too little, the result quickly becomes awkward rather than wonderful.

The students are then informed that class is like a dance. We are partners. I will furnish half of the effort but they must put in the other half if we are to succeed. As the teacher, I lead but that is just a portion of my 50 percent. I pledge to do my share but they are absolutely responsible for their part. They will be held accountable; they need to know, right at the start, that this teacher will not be the only person in class doing any real work.

That sounds great but what happens if there is a lack of effort? I am confrontational, but fussing at students in class is rarely helpful. Unless they are rude, I do not verbally attack students. After many classes, though, I have gone straight to my office and sent the entire group an e-mail explaining exactly what occurred that day, why I did not like it, and what should have been different. Many students are relatively young; what a teacher expects may be obvious but not necessarily to them. This is where the teacher must lead the dance. "Here is precisely what should happen" is never a bad message to students.

A teacher can always force desired responses through the threat of quizzes, additional papers, or the like. However, those actions have a remedial or punishing feel that I try to avoid, if possible. I prefer to lead: "If you do the following very specific tasks before the next class, you will learn how to function better in the real world AND probably earn a higher grade in my class. I am doing my half of the work; you need to do your half."

Individual students can always have personal problems that require a specific teacher reaction based on their nature and seriousness. I am not talking about those kinds of issues. Here, I want to focus on creating an appropriate team mentality. Doing half of the work is expected. Doing half of the work is the norm. "Here is a puzzle, and here is exactly what you need to do to start untying the knots that are created by this puzzle."

Day Nine - What Are The First Words You Write On The Board?

It is opening day of a new semester. Students stream in, anxious to get a sense of what they are up against. Most of them have been in school for at least 12 years. They have experienced an eclectic range of teachers: the good, the bad, and the ugly. They are keen to gauge the upcoming educational experience and the person who will direct it.

The teacher says nothing but picks up a marker and scratches a few words on the board. What should they be? What is the first message that the teacher needs to convey face-to-face to those students who will be working in this class for the next few months?

In my classes, I write:

“A Means Excellent”

It is my opinion that grade inflation has had a seriously detrimental impact on college education. Stories echo throughout the academic community about many well-known institutions where even the median grade point average approaches perfection. In his essay “Grade Inflation: It's Not Just an Issue for the Ivy League” (found at www.carneigefoundation.org), John Merrow, a scholar-in-residence at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, states: “Former Harvard Dean Henry Rosovsky found that in 1950 about 15 percent of Harvard students got a B+ or better. Today, it's nearly 70 percent. Last year 50 percent of the grades at Harvard were either A or A-, up from 22 percent in 1966, and 91 percent of seniors graduated with honors.”

On the first day of class (and at times during the semester), my students are reminded that “C means average. There is nothing wrong with making a C; I earned a lot of them while in college. B means good and A means excellent. Do not turn in good work to me and expect an A. I can tell the difference between good and excellent and SO CAN YOU.”

If a teacher plays Santa Claus and gives the grade of A for work that is merely good, that teacher should never again expect results that are any better. Never. If Professor Santa Claus cannot distinguish between good and excellent, why should any student ever push beyond the lower standard? In this case, human nature is extremely predictable. If an A is awarded for output that is less than excellent, there are two results: (1) the student who was “given” the A believes he or she has pulled a fast one and does not necessarily appreciate the grade fully and (2) others who did accomplish excellent work feel stupid for having exerted unnecessary time and energy. Those are two very bad lessons.

Start, from the first day, building the concept of excellence into the class and, then, when the time comes to assess the grades, hold fast to that standard. Here is an important truth in education: The student “grapevine” works quite efficiently. If a teacher stresses excellence in class and restricts the grade of A to that level of achievement, the next semester (before a single word is written on the board) the students already know “this guy will give students an A but only if they really do an excellent job.” At that point, the teacher has earned the chance to receive some truly high-quality work.

Day Ten – Learning The Secret For Becoming An Excellent Teacher

At a crucial point during my first semester as a faculty member, I was lucky enough to unlock the ultimate secret for improving as a teacher. This IS the magic bullet. That was more than 30 years ago and, in my mind, the secret has not changed one iota in all these intervening decades. If you have a serious desire to do a better job in the classroom, this is the one absolute fact that needs to be accepted--sooner rather than later.

The secret is nothing more than a simple formula:

If it takes a person X number of hours to be an average teacher
then
it will take that same person 2X hours to be a good teacher
and
3X hours to be an excellent teacher.

Here is the moment of truth; it is time to face reality. Anyone who has a genuine wish to become an excellent teacher must be willing to invest a significant number of hours. There are no shortcuts. If you are reading this book in hopes of discovering quick and easy tricks, my advice is simple: Close the book and walk away. Preparing for class, grading tests and papers, working with students, and all the rest of the normal, daily teaching activities require an almost infinite number of hours of thought and labor.

How much time are you willing and able to devote to improve? That is the question that each teacher needs to address in an honest and realistic fashion. We live in a hectic society; almost no one has sufficient hours to complete everything that needs doing. We all scramble to become more efficient just to keep our heads above the proverbial waters.

Teaching takes time; good teaching takes more time; excellent teaching can quickly become a 24/7 pastime. Faculty members face serious pressures to research and write; committee assignments seem to multiply like the heads of the Hydra. Time is like gold.

But there will always be periods when a class is struggling. You are dissatisfied and frustrated with the failure of students to grasp concepts that seem self-evident. In such situations, the number one remedy is to put in additional hours. To tell the truth, that extra time might best be spent sitting alone in the corner of a dark room thinking about the topic, the assignments, the class, and the each student. Such reflection is helpful. Radical (or even subtle) improvements in the educational diamond are difficult when the teacher is flying through life at warp speed. If it is important, invest the time.

Because the hours in life are finite, learn to make use of moments that might otherwise be wasted. I have a 25-minute commute to campus. During that drive, I often listen to National Public Radio; other days, it is a book on tape. On occasion, though, the sound is turned off and I mentally walk through the steps plotted for the coming class, trying to envision exactly what is supposed to happen. When I take this third path, class invariably goes better. Adequate time has been invested and nothing is more essential in teaching.

Day 11 – Is It Your Job To Teach Study Skills?

Professors often lament: “Our students have high SAT scores but seem incapable of learning my material. They are frustrated and so am I. How can these students be so bright and so dumb at the same time?” As teachers, I think we sometimes fail to comprehend that being intelligent is not necessarily synonymous with having a mastery of the techniques needed to be an efficient scholar. If a student has not developed strong study skills, should that be any concern of a college teacher? Is that part of your job?

In high school baseball, occasionally there will be an athlete who is extremely talented and can succeed with no apparent effort. He is so much better than the players around him that he dominates the games. Eventually, if he signs a pro contract, his development continues in the minor leagues. A few of these high school superstars zip rapidly through this “farm system” straight into the big leagues.

An odd thing sometimes happens to these phenomenal players when they first arrive at the New York Yankees or the Boston Red Sox. Despite almost unlimited physical potential, they cannot hit a curve ball thrown by a major league pitcher. One day, the young man seems destined to be the next Babe Ruth and then suddenly he is floundering like a little kid. Even the most talented athlete can look foolish trying to swat a ball that is breaking several inches as it speeds toward the plate.

What went wrong? What happened to all that potential? Young players can be so good that they never have to work with any diligence on basic techniques in the minor leagues. Pure talent carries them to success at that lower level; they have no need to hone their skills. Then, when the curveball does start to curve, their training proves to have been insufficient; they are unable to compete. Such players are often returned to the minor leagues where they get a second chance to develop the skills required in the majors.

College students can experience similar problems. By being bright, they may be capable of sailing easily through high school (and some college) classes. They do not necessarily see a reason to develop into effective learners. At some point, the subject matter grows too complex for intelligence alone and problems ensue because they have failed to master efficient study skills. Sadly, the teacher cannot send them back to the minor leagues.

Ask your C students how they study. The answers can be revealing: “I read some of the chapters and try to understand as much as I can. I recopy my notes so that I can follow them. I pay attention in class.” The problem is not desire or intelligence; they are C students because they literally do not know how to be A students. How much effort should a teacher expend to direct student learning? Do you teach biology or do you guide them in learning biology? At the college level, this is a critical distinction because it impacts the teacher’s approach to class. Some professors leave students entirely to their own devices. Others practically carry their charges through the steps: Do this on Monday, do this on Tuesday, and so on. Response to ideas in this book will be affected by your view. So, before proceeding, what do you think is your role in the education process? If students need help in developing learning skills, is that your responsibility?

Day 12 – Using The Russian Alphabet To Teach Reading

The professor rolls into class and begins to pour out a stream of information on an obscure topic that he or she has studied intensely for years if not decades. Turning to a student, the teacher puts forth a relatively simple question. The student is clueless and spurts out a ridiculous answer. The teacher's exasperation is obvious: How could anyone be so stupid? This is hardly a scenario for inspiring student self-confidence.

As faculty members slip further and further from their own college days, the reality of being a student sometimes begins to fade from memory. Any empathy for the difficulty of learning strange and complex material can leak away. Thus, to become a more effective teacher, get back into the student role as often as possible. Refresh your memory; how does it feel to be on the side of the desk where the topics are not so very clear? Recall the uncertainty of facing mysterious material with a sense of utter confusion. The importance of clarity and organization is more obvious after being lost.

There are groups in this country dedicated to stamping out illiteracy, certainly a worthy endeavor. One tactic for achieving this goal is to enlist volunteers to help others learn to read. I have been told that occasionally, as part of the training process for the new instructors, an innovative strategy is used. They are given lessons in reading Russian because the letters are written in the Cyrillic alphabet and, thus, look like hieroglyphics. Faced with that obstacle, these future teachers are suddenly illiterate; they occupy the same position as their students. Being introduced first hand to the student perspective helps them empathize with the challenges faced by those they will soon be instructing. They truly do approach illiteracy from both the teacher and the student vantage point.

Therefore, one of my recommendations for teachers is to take classes, especially in subjects where they will struggle. Over the years, I have attended courses in furniture-making, Russian culture, development of the right-side of the brain, jewelry making, black and white photography, and ballroom dancing. At times, I was horrible at all of them. I became frustrated when the teacher went too fast and irritated when I did not achieve the correct results. In most of these classes, every step that seemed easy for the instructor proved impossible for me; I prayed for their patience and more explanation.

Recently, I took a class on large-format cameras. Five of us were enrolled. This group took photographs for one entire day. I worked to replicate every step demonstrated by the teacher. The film was developed overnight so that we could discuss the results. On the following day, the teacher started class by saying, "Four of the film packs came out great but, for one, every picture was blank." It was my pictures that had been ruined; I felt so dumb. The following week, I taught my own classes with more patience and care.

Many students face such heavy frustrations almost every day; their confidence is shaken constantly. Understanding the student perspective can help as you organize a class. How long has it been since you took a course, especially one where your knowledge and ability were strictly limited? Occasionally, feeling lost is a good position for a teacher.

Day 13 – Think About The Placement Of Those Stepping Stones

Your students are truly working but they are all struggling. What do you do now?

In Richmond, Virginia, where I live, there is a public park that holds a lovely Japanese garden. It includes a pond stocked with huge koi. By using a series of stepping stones, visitors can walk across the water to the other bank. Over the course of many years, I have observed scores of people successfully ford that pond one stone at a time.

Proper placement of the stepping stones requires a bit of special care. Set them too far apart and some of the shorter children might not be able to jump safely from one to the next. Conversely, if the steps are too close together, then individuals with long legs could find the walk awkward and unnecessarily slow. Of course, if the stones are just randomly thrown into the water, they might not actually lead anywhere. Watching park visitors walk across that pond always makes me think about the educational process that teachers orchestrate for their students.

In my classes, most learning appears to be sequential. People speak and write one word and one sentence at a time. Consequently, students seem to absorb information step by step. Situations do arise where learning is probably nonlinear, such as developing an appreciation for a Picasso painting, but such cases appear to be exceptions. In a textbook, a lecture, or a study session, the normal learning sequence is: Comprehend point 1, then point 2, and so on until the student (it is hoped) arrives at a full understanding.

One of my theories is that education will stumble when either (a) the learning points are not sequenced in a clearly logical order or (b) they are not placed at a proper distance from each other. When troubles arise, look at the placement of those stepping stones.

If the sequencing is wrong, the teacher may be discussing point five before point two. That almost inevitably leads to confusion. Try an experiment in preparing for a class. Start by randomly listing all of the points to be covered. Then, decide which logically comes first, second, and so on to create the order that is easiest to comprehend.

Setting the proper distance between those learning points is a more complex issue. Over the years, some of my best students have been able to leap from virtually any point to the next with ease. Other (equally bright) students needed the stepping stones to be pushed close together, practically touching. Both groups are able to learn the material and that is the goal. The first uses long strides from one point to the next; the other arrives at the same understanding with a great many short steps covering points placed side-by-side.

If a class is working hard but having problems, check the sequencing of the coverage. Do the steps form a pattern that is logical for students? Look to see whether the learning points might be too close or too far apart. If students have trouble learning, it can mean that they are not able to make the leap from one point to the next. If students are bored, these points could be too close together so that they are not being adequately challenged.

Day 14 – Be Careful Of Slipping Into The Nonaggression Pact

“There is a nonaggression pact between the students and faculty members. The deal is that students get high grades and an undemanding workload in return for not expecting much attention from their profs.”(2)

Murray Sperber (Indiana University)

If a faculty member asks students for their best efforts, they are likely to seek guidance in return. If a faculty member challenges students to write exceptional papers, he or she must be willing to assist in the process and then carefully grade the results. If a faculty member plans to demand critical thinking on a test, work is needed to nurture and develop that skill. If a faculty member pushes students to leap tall buildings in a single bound, there should be no surprise when they request additional flying lessons.

It all requires time. And, time is a commodity often in short supply for a teacher. One subtle “solution” slinking through the halls of many colleges today is the nonaggression pact: The less a faculty member asks of students, the less time that teaching requires.

Previously, in the Day Nine essay, I discussed the negative impact of grade inflation. It is not a significant stretch to believe that grade inflation is simply one manifestation of the nonaggression pact. In the twenty-first century, the demands on a college faculty member can be relentless. Serious research requires an incredible amount of time and mental energy. The work is not trivial; tenure and promotion decisions often hinge on the eventual outcome. Beyond research and writing, the number of committee assignments heaped on faculty at many schools can seem staggering. When time gets tight in a teacher’s schedule, the easiest release is a reduction in the demands placed on students.

The nonaggression pact is not created overnight. Instead, professors lower their standards incrementally: A required paper is dropped so the faculty member has time to finish a manuscript, fewer tests are scored below a B so that struggling students will not ask for extra assistance to salvage their grades, students are no longer encouraged to seek help during office hours. Any faculty member can manipulate the amount of time required in his or her role as a teacher simply by placing fewer demands on the students.

There are no simple answers for the nonaggression pact. However, three interrelated thoughts should be kept in mind when deciding how challenging to make a course. First, in most cases, students or their families pay a considerable sum for an education. Second, for most, this opportunity will be their one and only shot at college. Third, the future is not well served when students complete school with less than a sterling education. The teacher has a moral obligation, I believe, both to students and to society.

So, although it may seem naive to say, keep your standards high. Determine what students should be accomplishing and then focus on getting them there. Certainly, every faculty member is busy and will have to work carefully to allocate time and energy. But nothing truly beneficial ever comes from the nonaggression pact. The world is improved when teachers work with students to help them attain a high-quality education.

Day 15 – The Nonaggression Pact – Is It Real?

Every person who has ever attended college has heard this story. It is one of those legendary tales where the boundary between the past and present has become blurred.

The professor walks into class on the first day of the semester and, in a no-nonsense manner, informs the students that they should expect to spend three hours doing outside study and preparation for every hour of actual class time. I first heard that story prior to beginning my college career in 1966 and frequently in the years since then. For a high-quality college education, a 3 to 1 ratio is demanding but not totally unreasonable. It certainly explains the late-night study sessions that I remember so well from 40 years ago. Following this standard, students enrolled in courses meeting 15 hours per week should also study 45 hours for a weekly total of 60 hours spent in academic pursuits. In the “real world,” a 60-hour work week is the norm for many full-time jobs.

Is this an accurate portrayal of the work required today for an education? The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is utilized by many schools to obtain a picture of college life. In this survey, a variety of questions solicits information from students about their academic experience. One asks them to estimate the hours per week they spend “preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, and other activities related to your academic program).” How close are those results to a weekly 45-hour standard?

In the 2004 survey, senior students at master’s category institutions (based on the classification system for colleges and universities developed by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education) indicated an average of slightly under 13 hours per week allocated to such preparation. The average for freshmen at these same schools was even less, approximately 12 hours per week. If these students are attending courses that meet weekly for 15 hours, they are investing a total of less than 30 hours each week in their classes. A college education is coming to resemble a part-time job.

If proof is needed that the nonaggression pact is alive and well on college campuses, that 12-13 hour per week study average should suffice. No one is going to deny that today’s students are extraordinarily busy. Their daily lives are spread thinly across fraternities, sororities, clubs, jobs, sporting events, parties, and the like. Academics can easily fall low on their priority list. Human nature prevails once again: If students can get by with minimum effort then that is what they will give. Without adequate faculty motivation, the nonacademic portion of their lives simply squeezes out the time devoted to education.

When I talk with faculty members about the NSSE results, the invariable (and often indignant) response is: “Well, my students spend a lot more hours than that.” Okay, how many hours do they spend? Many schools allow faculty to insert questions on the formal student evaluations. Add one: “In the average week for this course, how many hours do you spend studying and preparing outside of class?” If the response is not to your liking, address three questions. (1) How many hours per week do you want students to spend? (2) What do you want them to do in those hours? (3) How do you convince/force them to put in those hours? Increase study hours in meaningful ways and learning will improve.

Day 16 – The Three Points For Improving Education: The Learning Triangle

Occasionally, faculty members approach me to talk about possible educational improvements in their classes. My response has become almost a religious litany: “There are three points, and only three, where the learning process can be strengthened. Pick one and focus attention for several weeks on achieving better results at that spot. Even small improvements quickly enhance class learning. This is no hoax; it will work. Beware, though, that most teachers tend to concentrate almost exclusively on Point Two when more benefits are usually available at Points One and Three.”

Okay, what is this all about???

One of the most significant epiphanies in my teaching career was realizing the essential role played by what I have come to call the “Theory of the Learning Triangle.” It sounds esoteric but, like many of the important discoveries in life, it is rather simplistic.

This theory states: Students will learn more and understand it at a deeper level if:
Point One---they are adequately prepared when they walk into class each day.
Point Two---class is well organized and the presentation is sequenced properly.
Point Three---subsequent to the class coverage, they almost immediately spend time organizing, clarifying, and assimilating the knowledge in an effective manner.

Put succinctly, the educational process is most efficient when students are prepared, when class time is well used, and when they review and solidify their understanding shortly after the material is covered. Simple stuff.

To appreciate the central, essential role of the learning triangle, consider what happens when problems arise at any of these points?

- If students arrive at class unprepared, how can they effectively follow the subtleties and complexities of the discussion? How much informed interaction can teacher and student have? At such times, the student is only able to be a passive participant, a note-taker. The teacher’s ability to create an active learning environment is held hostage by student preparation. What can the teacher do then other than lecture? In my teaching, enticing (or forcing) students to prepare prior to every class is one of the highest priorities. Without that, significant in-depth learning is virtually impossible.
- If class time is not well structured, how efficient can the educational process be? Even when students are prepared, more frustration than education will occur if the subject is covered in a random, illogical fashion.
- If students do not organize information shortly after class, how will they keep the clarity of that knowledge from fading? Students often moan, “I understood the material during class but then I couldn’t do it on the test.” That is a clear sign that inadequate work was done subsequently to turn short-term recognition into long-term understanding. Class introduces and explains; true learning comes after that.

Now, which of those three points are you going to focus on first?

Day 17 – Class Preparation - Here Is One Approach Worth Trying

Assume for class on Wednesday that you plan to lead a discussion on Freud--the impact of his work, findings, and theories. The students have been instructed to walk into the room having spent at least 2-3 hours in preparation so that there can be a serious, thoughtful analysis of the topic with active participation by everyone. They have a textbook. Several other good sources of information have been mentioned that can be reviewed before class. If the students do not prepare, then you are almost forced to lecture; they must know about the topic in order to hold up their end of the conversation.

Why will your students put in those hours of preparation? This may be the single most important question this book addresses. Nothing ruins education more quickly than a lack of student preparation. Here are a few possible tactics. How many have you used?

1. Assign students one or more specific textbook chapters to read and assume they will.
2. Assign students specific pages to read to focus their attention and assume they will.
3. Indicate that Wednesday's class will begin with a short quiz on the assigned readings or require that an on-line quiz be completed prior to class.
4. Threaten the possibility of a pop test on the assigned readings.
5. Award a participation grade as part of the student's overall grade for the semester.
6. Require students to do a written assignment on the readings, one that might be graded.
7. Require students to do a written assignment on the readings, one that will be graded.
8. Hand out a list of specific questions in advance that students will be required to discuss in class on Wednesday.

Quite honestly, the teacher's problem is that each of these techniques has substantial flaws. Participation grades are subjective and may be difficult to assess if student preparation varies during the semester. Readings are often skimmed with little thought. Quizzes use fear as a motivator. Written assignments encourage cheating and so on.

Over the years, I have tried all of these but currently rely exclusively on number 8. I never lecture; I randomly call on students to discuss a list of 3 to 10 questions distributed at the previous class. Each answer can illicit a follow-up inquiry or a second student might be directed to evaluate the initial response. It is a system that works well for me. Students know they will be called on so preparation tends to be quite good. Creating the questions allows me to pose academic puzzles to engage my students as well as stimulate critical thinking. The listing provides a logical and organized sequence to the coverage. By its nature, this Socratic approach forces class to be interactive, one of my main goals.

I attempt to call on each student every day; thus, they walk in knowing they will face interrogation. That removes any uncertainty as to the need for preparation. The list of questions serves to direct their advance work so that study time can be efficient. If any students consistently fail to prepare, I call them in and we discuss the advantages of being able to provide and support answers. No system is perfect, but this one helps students know how to make use of study hours and gives them reasons to do the work.

Day 18 – The 50-50 Rule

Talk with virtually anyone, teacher or student, about education and they will almost always assert that the best learning experiences are interactive. Comprehension goes up when students are engaged and participate in class. The subject matter and its intricacies simply become more intriguing--as well as understandable--to the active learner.

Over the decades, I have walked through the halls of numerous college classroom buildings. Whenever possible, I conduct a little experiment. I pause outside of each room just long enough to register whether the teacher or one of the students is speaking. Try it yourself. My experience has been that, nearly 95 percent of the time, the teacher is the person talking. If interactive education is preferred, why are most students so quiet? In truth, developing a consistently interactive class can be a vexing challenge.

Here is a helpful test. Invite a visitor to class. Have that person bring two stopwatches. Ask the visitor to operate one watch while you, as the teacher, are speaking and the other when a student talks. At the end of the session, the closer the two watches are to a 50:50 ratio, the more interactive the class is. Regardless of what a teacher wants to believe, my guess is that there are few classes where students speak more than 25 percent of the time. Try it and find out. As I have said, truly interactive education is not easy to create.

Over the course of a semester, any real movement toward a 50-50 allocation of time will improve class interactivity and the learning process. Therefore, teachers need to focus attention on how to make students more talkative. Here are some typical possibilities:

1. Occasionally, pause and ask if students have any questions.
2. Pose a question to the class and wait for a voluntary response.
3. Award points for participation as part of the student's overall grade.
4. Ask questions and then call on specific students to respond.
5. Require numerous group or individual presentations.

Spend time talking with students about interactive classes that they have had. How did the teachers promote student participation? Ask about techniques such as those listed above to judge which appear to be truly effective. Most college students have been in school for 12-15 years; they can be an excellent resource in discovering what works.

Previously, I indicated my use of the Socratic Method, posing questions shared in advance with the students. My daily goal is to come as close to a 50:50 ratio as possible. At the start of each semester, I describe the class as a "structured conversation." A student is asked a question from the list and everyone listens to the response. A related question or series of questions can then be based on that initial answer. Or, a second student raises a question or is directed to evaluate the first student's answer; a third is asked for an example to illuminate the issue being discussed and so on. It is give and take. We literally converse about the topic based on that list of questions. Students do half the work by being prepared and participating; I carry out the other half by leading the discussion. As the group moves toward a 50:50 ratio, student learning is enhanced.

Day 19 – Spend Time Conversing With Your Students

On the previous page, I suggested talking with students to learn about interactive classes, especially ones they had found to be the most effective. For any teacher seeking to improve the level of education, students can be an almost unlimited source of information and opinions. Plus, they are often fascinating individuals. Unfortunately, many students feel uncomfortable walking into a faculty member's office just to chat. Although they might enjoy the idea of getting to know the teacher, students are rarely too bold. The professor is busy and they do not want to intrude. Furthermore, any teacher sitting on the far side of a big desk with all of those thick books can be an intimidating parental figure.

Create some easy opportunities for student conversations. For example, when preparing the class syllabus, indicate that once a week or so you will have lunch at the campus dining center (or some equally available location) at a specified time. Invite the students to join you if they wish. At first, you may endure a few lonely meals but, if nothing else, that will provide time for peaceful reflection. But if the invitation is viewed as genuine, my guess is that students will eventually take advantage of the chance to chat. Their curiosity will entice them to visit your table at least once.

I am not talking here about becoming friends with students; that is rarely a good idea. Teachers must ultimately evaluate each student and award a grade; friendship can taint that assessment process. There is a significant difference in being a friendly, caring professional and being an actual friend.

Conversation over lunch (even a lunch of college food) provides both parties with an excellent chance to learn about each other as human beings. What can you talk about? Anything!!! College students are adults (albeit many are young adults) so chat with them as you would with any adult. Get them to tell you about themselves. Be a good listener.

- Where did they grow up?
- What do their parents do?
- What are their favorite classes this semester and why?
- What brought them to this particular school?
- How well have they liked the school so far? What has surprised them about the school?
- What are they thinking about majoring in and why?
- In what campus activities are they involved?
- Have they started pondering life after graduation?

Do not view these conversations as a chance to pump students for information. At some point, you may want to ask about study habits or interactive classes but the goal is to get to know each other. They will work harder if they view you as a person. Students are more likely to do what is asked if they can interact with you away from the classroom.

College professors have to eat. Why not use that opportunity occasionally to converse with students and help them come to know what you are really like?

Day 20 – Solidifying Jello Knowledge

There are many pieces to this puzzle referred to as an education. Some fit in nicely whereas others take more manipulation. However, to me, one critical step in the process has always seemed to be almost universally under-appreciated by teacher and student.

Assume, on Wednesday, the class is scheduled to discuss Freud and then, for Friday, it will move on to analyze the work of Jung. The students arrive on Wednesday extremely well prepared. Coverage is excellent, very interactive. The students do half of the talking and the teacher does the other half. During class, numerous details about the work of Freud are described and discussed. Theories are put forth and eventually accepted or dismissed after vigorous debate. This is education at its best. The students leave with the beginning of a true appreciation for the importance of Sigmund Freud.

For how long will this clarity about Freud stay with the students? If there is no follow-up to sort through and organize the material, understanding will seep away, starting almost immediately. I tell my students that class merely provides them with “jello knowledge;” it looks solid but is rather shaky. Only the work that takes place soon after class can convert this jello knowledge into a relatively permanent level of understanding. To me, the importance of that step within the educational process cannot be overvalued.

So, following class on Wednesday, what is likely to be the students’ next action? Every teacher already knows the answer to this question. They will now focus on preparing for Friday’s class on Jung. In fact, most students will ignore Freud completely until time for the test. By that point, the wonderful foundation begun in class will have turned into a fuzzy, disorganized mass that seems more like a pile of trivia than a basic understanding.

I push my students to spend 1/3 of all study time on previous material and 2/3 on future topics. Unfortunately, this is a step in their learning where students are often clueless. Other than recopying notes, most have no idea what to do after coverage in class. From my vantage point, this is truly a weak link in education. This is one point in the process that usually requires leadership from the teacher. Here are some suggestions:

- At the conclusion of each session, have students write for five minutes on the topics covered in class. Organizing their thoughts at this critical juncture is quite helpful.
- Immediately after class send them an e-mail where you literally walk back through the highlights of the class coverage: “Here are 14 key points that I heard today.”
- Immediately after class send them an e-mail posing one or more questions or puzzles about the material. (I often post my answers on my door but only for 48 hours.)
- At the end of class, assign them to write 3 to 6 sentences describing the most important aspects of the class with this short paragraph to be turned in at the following session.
- Require completion of a quiz on the coverage at the beginning of the subsequent class.

Helping students turn jello knowledge into solid understanding is a true challenge for any professor. Following class, how can you guide this part of the learning process?

Day 21 – Learning To Fly A 747 Jet

On the previous page, I described the trouble students have in solidifying their understanding of material after it has been discussed and analyzed in class. I often tell my students that the primary purpose of class is to help them accumulate all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. Then, their responsibility is to take those pieces back home and work with them until they fit together to form a recognizable picture.

Unfortunately, coming to accept the need for this action can be a problem for students. If they followed the class coverage carefully, they may feel no need for further work. Thus, I often have a conversation with my class about the third week of the semester.

- Me: We covered Sigmund Freud on Wednesday.
- Student: Yes sir, we discussed the findings and theories of Dr. Freud.
- Me: I felt that this class went extremely well. Everyone was prepared and the debate was lively. We seemed to get a lot of material covered.
- Student: Yes sir. I was amazed at how much I learned about Dr. Freud. It is such an interesting and complicated area of study.
- Me: How much time have you spent on Sigmund Freud since Wednesday?
- Student: Well, actually none. Haven't really thought about him. I have been preparing myself really well for today's class on Jung.
- Me: Let's say that I brought a flight simulator in here for a 747 jet. Assuming I had the knowledge, could I show you how to fly one of those big jet airplanes?
- Student: You would have to demonstrate every step very slowly but a flight simulator is designed to help people learn how to fly.
- Me: Okay, assume that I spent, let's just say for convenience, seven hours explaining everything to you about how to fly a 747. Assume we went through each instrument and each step very slowly and you took excellent notes. I answered every question and we didn't miss a thing.
- Student: All right, I have spent seven efficient hours in a flight simulator.
- Me: Now, if I drive you over to the local airport, could you hop into a 747 parked on the tarmac and fly me to New York City?
- Student: Of course not. Are you kidding? I might know what the buttons and knobs do but that is different than flying. Anyone would need a huge amount of practical work before being bold enough to even think about flying a 747 jet.
- Me: Well then, why do you think you know enough about Sigmund Freud simply because you were able to follow our class discussion? Many people will tell you that understanding Dr. Freud is more complicated than flying a 747 jet.

On one level, students realize that it takes review, organization, and practice to turn jello knowledge obtained in class into solid understanding. But in practice, this step appears to be a relatively foreign concept in much of the educational process. That is why I put so much focus on it. Students need help. When the last word is spoken in class, how do your students turn the information obtained there into the ability to fly the plane?

Day 22 – What Do Your Students Say About Good Teaching?

At some point each semester, ask your students to write a short paragraph identifying their “very best college teacher,” explaining why that person deserves such recognition. Tell them not to select you. They will enjoy the diversion and you can learn quite a bit about good teaching by reading their responses. What common threads can you discover that run through their descriptions? Typically, I find that three themes tend to dominate: challenge the students, engage the students, and care about the students.

After reading these essays and pondering their messages, I send a note to each teacher who is mentioned to pass along my compliments: “My students were told to write about their best college teacher and one or more of them wrote about you and your class. That is absolutely great. Congratulations!!” I receive some genuinely touching responses.

For this book, I wanted to do something similar. My school is not in session at the moment so I sent an e-mail to the students who were in my class last semester asking them to write a couple of sentences of advice for a faculty member wanting to become an outstanding teacher. Here are a few of their responses.

Challenge The Students

“Do not be afraid to have high expectations for students and to hold them to those expectations. My best experiences have come when I was challenged by a professor. It caused me to raise my goals for myself and the end result was always more satisfying knowing that I had grown intellectually and had actually accomplished something.”

“Make the student really know the material by creating problems that cannot be found straight out of the book although the concepts learned in the book should serve as a guide in arriving at a reasonable solution.”

“One thing that I have found that great teachers do is set the standards high from the first day. They then help the students reach these standards rather than starting out slowly and expecting the students to pick up their intensity as the semester goes along. The more responsibility and respect a teacher gives the students, the higher quality work I believe the student will produce.”

“At the university level, I believe it is important for professors to challenge their students. It is too easy for students to slip into a routine of just doing enough to get grade ‘x’. ‘Think outside the box’ is something of a cliché, but I think it is important for professors to make students look beyond simply the material being presented.”

“Don't settle for being mediocre. Students can tell when a teacher is complacent. Teachers would not accept their students being mediocre, so why shouldn't teachers be held to their own standards?”

“What I like most from professors is for them to encourage students to give their best and believe that they are set for greatness and not expect less than that.”

Engage The Students

“A professor's job is to do more than show a kid how to learn; learning is nothing more than thinking and remembering. Teaching is engaging a willing mind, preparing him to conjure ideas, stretching those ideas and then wadding them up like chewing gum to put back in the brain.”

“Make the class interactive and not just lecture or else the class will seem dreadful in the mind of the student.”

“A great teacher actively engages with students, challenges them, and all the while wants to see them succeed and overcome those obstacles put before them.”

“A good teacher makes you question and wonder about even the little things that are happening around you. A good teacher also helps students to realize how lucky they are to be there, being given such an opportunity to learn. Then, students will find themselves looking forward to his/her class and even wish it would last a little longer.”

Care About The Students

“Invest in the lives of the students--know their names and a little bit about their lives. Students are more inclined to work hard for a teacher they feel is working hard for them. Don't be afraid of being stereotyped as hard--my favorite professors have always been the 'hard' ones.”

“A good college professor must be able to interact with his or her students on an individual basis regardless of how many students there are in the class. Understanding what drives each student academically can lead to more productive classes and bring out areas in need of motivation.”

“Care about the students. The professor must realize that the students in his or her classes are actually there to learn and better themselves. Students rely on the professor to do his or her part of the bargain, and they should be more than willing to fulfill their part by putting forth as much time, energy, and effort as the professor does.”

“My advice for up-and-coming professors would be to make themselves available to students outside of the classroom so that students can seek help in an environment where they can feel free to ask anything.”

“Do your best to get to know each of your students (perhaps a meeting in the beginning and end of the semester). Also, have a very detailed syllabus so that the students know what is expected of them throughout the semester and can plan accordingly.”

“Learn to admit when you're wrong. Students understand that their professors make mistakes or do not know the answers to every question. By admitting their faults, it makes them more human and students respect and love a professor to whom they can relate on a more personal level.”

Day 23 - What Type Of Tests Do You Give?

“Memorization is what we resort to when what we are learning makes no sense.”

Anonymous

Ask professors whether they are attempting to teach memorization or understanding and they will be insulted. No faculty member is going to admit stressing pure memorization. Learning the state capitals in the fourth grade requires rote memory but, in college, the education process should have evolved beyond that type of knowledge. Nevertheless, my experience has been that, even in college, students seem well schooled in the art of memorization. In class, if I happen to make a statement like, “Here are four things ...,” the pencils start flying as students begin to make a list. Sometimes mnemonic devices appear to be the highest form of learning. Is that what is meant by an education?

I am convinced that student effort is overly influenced by testing and grading procedures. For example, if students believe that their examinations will only require them to identify trees based on leaf shapes, then they see no purpose in learning about the bark or the root system. That would be wasted effort. Testing and grading expectations influence every aspect of the students’ approach to a class. Denying that is, I believe, naïve.

To limit possible emphasis on memorization, simply give only open book (or open notes) tests and inform the students well in advance that this is the type of exams they will face. Do that and you send a clear message: “I am not asking questions just to check whether you have memorized the contents of the textbook; the tests will measure your ability to understand and work with the material.” As soon as this declaration is made, student attitudes will change; they must focus on comprehension. If books or notes are available, any perceived benefit from cramming the night before the test soon disappears.

Just as important, open-book/notes tests provide an excellent challenge for teachers. Faculty members are forced to think seriously about what is important in the course and how that knowledge can be evaluated. Closed-book tests are easy to write, “Tell me everything you know about Rule 48.” How is that different from asking what the capital of Maine is? Many students do not like open-book/notes tests for that reason. They recognize that the depth and complexity of the questions will be significantly greater.

If students are allowed to use their book/notes, the teacher must ask questions that go beyond memorization: “Rule 48 is in the book. Give an example to illustrate how Rule 48 combines the logic of all previous rules while making slight changes in theory.” The student is required to understand the new rule as well as the evolution that led to the rule.

I admit that this advice is tough to accept. It took me more than 30 years before I tried it. Writing questions is scary; grading can be a real challenge. But after students have been yanked from the security of memorization, they are faced with having to understand the meaning, purpose, and nature of the material. Merely as a result of using open-book/notes tests, the quality of daily class preparation and discussion can rise significantly.

Day 24 – What Type of Questions Do You Ask?

Each semester, about a week before the first test, the students are informed that I am going to explain how my questions are created. Everyone in the room immediately snaps to attention; this information will be helpful. To begin, I draw a large circle on the board and then place an X somewhere inside of it.

“Assume that this circle encompasses absolutely everything covered so far this semester. I possess a good memory and keep detailed notes. Consequently, I have an outline of all the various ideas, rules, and concepts that have been examined. The X inside of the circle represents approximately 1/3 of the test questions, the ones that will be created based on the material we have gone over. These questions will require you to explain various aspects of exactly what we analyzed in class. *‘Discuss the immediate implications of the law passed by Congress in 2006.’* I will want explanation and not memorization. Correct answers indicate that you followed the discussion, took good notes, and learned the meaning of those notes. To me, that is average work and earns the grade of C.”

I then draw a second X, this time about two inches outside of the circle.

“This second X represents another 1/3 of the test. This batch of questions will be designed to use knowledge learned in class but you must extend it somewhat to resolve new situations. *‘Based on the law passed by Congress in 2006, speculate on new laws that might be passed in 2007.’* That is a stretch of our coverage but only a slight one. If you understood the class conversation well enough, then you should be able to address such issues. To me, that is impressive; it requires a higher degree of learning. I want you to apply your knowledge to problems that were not specifically discussed in the class or the book. That is good work and earns the grade of B.”

I then draw a third X about two feet from the circle.

“Okay, the last 1/3 of our questions will be created to determine if you can truly stretch your understanding. I want you to take the knowledge from class and extend it to arrive at reasonable resolutions for complex situations. These are written to force you to think deeply about the material and the implications of our coverage. *‘Because of the law passed in 2006, explain and justify how you believe the country will be different by the year 2016?’* I will not ask questions that are unfair. However, I am going to write ones where the understanding of the topics needs to be incredibly sharp, both in clarity and depth. Answer those and that will be excellent work and will earn you the grade of A.”

Each student receives all tests and answers from the previous semester. I challenge them to discern which questions were drawn from inside the circle and which from outside. Similarly, during class conversations, I often pose a question and then ask whether it came from inside the circle or not. If the answer is “outside,” then I want to know how far outside. To me, this is all part of the thinking process. Students need to realize that there is an essential difference between explaining knowledge and being able to extend it so that entirely new issues can be addressed in a logical and considered fashion.

**Day 25 –
Impart Information Imaginatively**

I read a lot about education, teaching, learning, and the like. Occasionally, I come upon a passage that seems to have been stolen directly from my own brain; the words reflect my thoughts and opinions precisely. In such cases, there is simply nothing left for me to add. Here is a piece written in 1929 that meets that criterion especially well.

“The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning. The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes. Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts.”(3)

Alfred Whitehead

Day 26 – Start A Best Practices Club

“Bertolt Brecht, who plucked plots from Shakespeare, Moliere and Farquhar, reportedly said the best writers never borrow; they always steal.” *Time*, November 27, 1989, page 119.

Best practices methodology first appeared over a decade ago and is now used throughout business, government, and other types of organizations. In simple terms, Company A identifies a comparable organization (Company B) as being particularly effective in specific areas such as product delivery or customer service. Company A ascertains and evaluates the individual actions Company B uses within this operation or system. Then, Company A benchmarks itself against each of the best practices to pinpoint where and how improvements can be made. In other words, a basketball player works to get better by comparing his passing, defense, and shooting to that of Michael Jordan.

At your college or university, start a faculty “best practices” club. Every month, pick a different teaching topic for discussion, such as testing, motivating preparation, or encouraging class interaction. Begin by asking a couple of the school’s best teachers to describe what they do and then open the meeting to general conversation. Effect an exchange of ideas; there is no reason every teacher must reinvent the education wheel. Virtually every step that I take in class today I learned from some other professor. In describing my teaching, I often claim that “I carefully stole from the very best.”

For example, my wife came home from a science test in 1972 and described what her teacher had done in class. Ever since then, I have used the same technique. What did I steal that day? All teachers want their students to learn. Not surprisingly, students are keenly interested in the subject matter immediately after each test as they assess the probability of a good or bad grade. At that point, the meaning of Freud’s words or the method by which interest is computed on a capitalized lease becomes genuinely significant. Thus, for more than three decades, I have handed out a detailed answer sheet. I spend considerable time writing it up to explain precisely what I wanted and how students should have derived that information. Creating the answer sheet before the exam also helps me locate questions that contain flaws and need to be fixed or replaced.

In the past, I set copies of the answer sheet outside my door after the last test had been finished. Now, I simply e-mail it to the students. I challenge them: “I am not perfect. If you find mistakes, let me know immediately.” I rely on students to uncover my errors. The next semester, all tests and answer sheets are distributed to every new student as a guide for the type of learning I seek. That prevents me from reusing questions for a while but I am surely creative and competent enough to write new tests each semester.

At your school, there are undoubtedly professors using excellent teaching techniques. Do not hesitate to steal from them. Set up a “best practices” club and encourage the flow of information and ideas. Many professors teach in the way they were taught because they are not aware of alternatives. Create a system to spread innovation across your campus.

Day 27 – Help A Colleague; You Can Do It

If I am ever unlucky enough to become president of a college or university, I have already planned my first official action. I will hire an expert to routinely conduct student focus groups for any professor who feels that the resulting information might be helpful. Students are partners with the faculty in the educational process and their input can be invaluable. Unfortunately, course evaluations are often used, almost exclusively, to measure student perceptions. Properly directed focus groups can be an infinitely more effective tool for accumulating and assessing their opinions and suggestions.

In our society, use of focus groups has proven quite effective. They have become an accepted method for “picking the brain” of a target audience. Individuals creating campaigns for political elections rely on them. Advertising agencies learn about the potential effectiveness of million-dollar television ads in the same manner. Motion picture studios incorporate a similar strategy to determine how a movie will end.

I am not a big fan of student evaluations. They can probably provide a general sense of the effectiveness of a faculty member in defined areas: fairness, rigor, preparation, and the like. Their usefulness, though, seems quite limited if the underlying goal is to help a teacher improve in a practical sense. One student thinks for two seconds and suggests “talk faster” while a second urges the teacher to “talk slower.” What is the benefit? I quit reading evaluations years ago when a student indicated that I should wear better ties.

In contrast, holding a student focus group (possibly every year or two) can provide genuinely helpful feedback about a class. Luckily, an expert is not required. This is one technique where teachers can assist each other, especially if the results are gathered solely for self-improvement (rather than for advancement decisions). Without formal training, I have managed to run a few small focus groups for colleagues, ones who were struggling. The sessions were not perfect but the information generated for the faculty member seemed extremely beneficial. You can do this; volunteer to help a friend.

There are undoubtedly better ways to set up a focus group but here is one simple approach. At the beginning of a semester, meet with a random group of students (5 to 7) from a class held the prior semester. For large classes, several groups might be necessary to obtain fair representation. Assure the students of absolute confidentiality. I prefer not to know their names. Inform them that the only goal is serious and honest feedback. Ask questions and listen carefully to the resulting conversation; pay special attention to points of agreement by the group. Tape record the sessions so that you can listen several times.

What questions should be asked? My favorite is: “One of your best friends is thinking about taking this class as an elective and asks what you thought. How do you respond?” Student discussion on that question alone can open up a world of insight about a course. “The professor has decided to change 10 percent of the class. Which aspects should be selected and why?” “You have been asked to write a paper describing this class. What is your opening paragraph?” The discussion is the key. Which of the responses become the consensus? Write up the results and you will have helped a colleague improve a course.

Day 28 – Do Not Let Students Get Comfortable

“I have learned that when I am comfortable, complacent, and sure of myself I am not learning anything. The only time I learn something is when my comfort, my complacency, and my self-assurance are threatened.”(4)

Peter G. Biedler

For the first few days or weeks of a new semester, students are inclined to be a bit tense. Each class is a new experience and they are uncertain as to what will transpire. To avoid problems, they are likely to do the advance preparation and remain alert throughout the discussion. Class goes well. But almost invariably, students start to get comfortable. Over time, they get to know their teacher and the people sitting around them; they walk in each day more relaxed. After about a month, preparation often begins to slide and involvement in class is not as sharp. Students are human; they lose their edge.

I refer to this as the “comfort slump.” The quality of the educational process falls off as students settle into a recognized routine. For decades, I struggled with this periodic waning of intensity and usually wound up fussing at my students--a tactic that rarely did any good. Then, about 10 years ago, I discovered a technique that did help.

Students tend to sit in the same spot each day. They surround themselves with their acquaintances and take possession of the space. Like an animal in the wild, this seat becomes their lair where they feel secure. It is their home territory. So, on the first day, I assign each student a seat and use a chart for identification. If a teacher is rapidly calling on “Mr. Jones” and then “Ms. Smith,” it is helpful to be able to locate them.

Subsequently, when I sense the class is becoming too comfortable, I simply pass out a new seating chart where everyone has been moved. They are yanked from the safety of their homes. Individuals on the back row are now directly in front of me, surrounded by a new group of peers. Students who chat with their friends are moved away from the temptation. Their comfort zone is destroyed. A little bit of the freshness and tension of the first weeks of class returns and students again become better prepared and more alert.

I have a good friend with whom I teach who argues that she prefers her students to be comfortable so that they will feel at ease and be more creative. She might be generally correct or, perhaps, this approach is right for her classes. However, from my perception, comfort leads to lethargy and complacency. I want to keep students a little off-balance and rearranging the seating chart about every four weeks seems to help.

There is a second benefit that can accrue from this tactic. Former students tell me that the most valuable aspect of college was getting to know so many interesting people. But in class, students usually cluster next to their friends. I do not like that; nothing is gained. I want my class to be a melting pot; students should learn something about and from every member of the group. By being moved around throughout the semester, they gain a wider range of acquaintances which is (to me) a very desirable outcome.

Day 29 – Remove The Boundaries

For the first 25-30 years of my career, I viewed my classes as big boxes. I met with students for 50 minutes at regular intervals three times per week. Plus, on occasion, some would stop by during my announced office hours. Those blocks of time established fairly clear boundaries for my direct involvement in the educational process.

Then, one day, some brilliant person said, “Let there be e-mail!” and those boundaries dropped away. Almost over night, my classes opened up and the flow of information--back and forth--moved closer to 24/7. Now, it is not unusual for me to receive an e-mail at 10 p.m. that pleads: “Susan and I have been working on problem 4 for the past two hours and cannot figure out how to derive the proper approach. We are stuck. Can you help?” My students quickly become aware that I rarely provide answers in this way; I much prefer to play the role of Agatha Christie and pass out clues to the puzzle. “Think about the question discussed in class dealing with the Ajax Company. How does problem 4 parallel the Ajax situation and how is it different? Ponder those distinctions and you should be able to create a logical resolution for problem 4. YOU CAN DO IT.”

Before e-mail became omnipresent, if these same students had been stymied by problem 4, they likely would have put their books away to await clarification in class. I do not want them to quit; the learning process should be on-going rather than chopped up into boxes. During class, if a student responds to a query with the age-old excuse, “I read the question but did not understand what to do,” then my rather stern response is, “You could not have seriously wanted to know or you would have asked for guidance by e-mail.”

Perhaps more important, I use e-mail to talk with my students. I do not think enough faculty-student conversation takes place in college. On the first day of class, students are informed that they will receive e-mails from me several times each week and should consider those communications part of the course. Here are some typical examples:

- “In class today, no one gave a particularly insightful answer to question 2. However, in the assigned readings, on page 97, the third paragraph relates directly to this issue. I expect you to read and use the material.” (I want to hold them accountable for the assignments and help them see a connection between that work and actual learning.)
- “A student sent me an e-mail today asking for a second example of the theoretical issue we reviewed in problem 5. Here it is . . .” (When a student asks a thoughtful question, the response is shared with everyone. That spreads the knowledge but I also like for students to understand that being curious and asking questions is good.)
- “Class went well today. Great job!” (A pat on the back, when deserved, is important.)
- “I was reading *Forbes* magazine this evening and came upon the following weird quote... What do you think?” (I love to puzzle students in this way and elicit their opinions. It also shows them that continuous learning can be a fun part of daily life.)
- “I saw the movie *Capote* last week and really liked it. If you have not read *In Cold Blood*, you are missing a classic.” (All students need a well-rounded education and I never miss an opportunity to talk with them about politics, books, movies, current events, the theatre, and the like. The intellectual curiosity possessed by most professors is one of the greatest gifts that can be shared with students.)

Day 30 – Confidence And Bad Grades – Be Proactive

“Confidence is everything. From there, it’s a small step to winning.”(5)
Craig Stadler, professional golfer

A golfer stands poised over a ten-foot putt that he must sink to win the championship. Tension hangs thick in the air as television cameras zoom in for a closer look. If the golfer has confidence in his ability to hit that shot, chances of success rise dramatically. For the golfer who harbors seeds of self-doubt, odds on making the putt slide precipitously. Every baseball player, bowler, ice skater, public speaker, and car mechanic will agree with that assessment; believing is the first step and doing is the second. Human beings tend to live up (or down) to their own self-image.

College professors quickly learn that students follow this same mantra. Those who are convinced they are C students typically make C’s whereas those who believe they are A students frequently come through with the higher grade. Believing is the first step. No one can read long about education without finding an exhortation to build up student confidence. Over the years, I have dealt with any number of “whipped puppies,” students who walk into class on the first day already believing they cannot compete academically and – surprise, surprise – they usually earn poor grades. I frequently say that confidence helps a little but lack of confidence is a real killer. Without hope, why do the work?

No teacher wants any student to leave class feeling stupid or inferior. Nothing is ever gained by damaging a person’s self-respect. Nevertheless, teachers must award grades. Papers and tests are corrected; student work is evaluated. A big red D or F may be the proper grade but it rarely helps to engender personal confidence. I cannot begin to estimate the number of times that I have returned tests in class and then watched students weep silently for the remainder of the period. Poor scores rarely raise self-esteem.

How does a professor reconcile assessing bad grades with the goal of nurturing student confidence? A first poor mark often leads to a second starting a downward spiral; but, if the work deserves a 57, a higher grade is not justified just to be kind. How does a teacher bolster students who earn low grades so they do not get down on themselves and give up?

After correcting my first test each semester, I compile a list of students who made a grade less than C or that was lower than I had expected. On their papers, I ask them to stop by my office within a day or so. Then, I start trying to rebuild their confidence. “I was not pleased with your grade and hope you were not either. I believe you can do a lot better but we need to start now. This test was only 22 percent of your total grade; there is time to improve but corrective action is clearly needed. You made lower than many other students. You seem just as smart but they did better. What did they do that you did not? How did they know answers you missed? I will be glad to work with you between now and the next test. Start by writing two short essays; bring them to me tomorrow. Describe why you did poorly and what your plan is for improvement. Think carefully; be honest. If the needed adjustments are made, you have the ability to do well. The course of action is up to you; I will help but you are the one who must take steps to improve.”

Day 31 – Make A List; Check It Twice

“When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school, it’s a wonder I can think at all.” Paul Simon in his song *Kodachrome*

Want to start a heated debate? Ask your colleagues to name the biggest problem today in college education? I wager that a survey of 50 professors will elicit nearly 50 different responses. A list of the usual suspects will probably include the following. “Students today are lazy and do not want to think for themselves.” “Research requirements make it difficult for anyone to have time to teach.” “Students only want a job; they do not want an education.” “High schools do not prepare students to learn.” “Students are too busy to study.” Every teacher can add a number of other contenders. Faculty members seem dissatisfied with the current state of education but blame often gets spread around.

Obviously, I want to put forth my personal opinion: The biggest problem in college education today is that faculty members attempt to teach too much stuff. The quantity of knowledge in the world has multiplied many times during the past 50-100 years. Professors appear to have succumbed to the temptation to try to keep pace by teaching increasingly more material. To us, nothing in our subject should ever be missed. This trend has led to what has been referred to as “bulimic learning,” students cram in all the information they can and then regurgitate it on a test before walking away totally empty.

If I could inscribe one motto over every classroom door, it would be the words of Plutarch, the first century Greek essayist: "The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled." I believe that colleges today are too often in the vessel-filling business.

Every teacher has read statistics on the paltry amount of class information that students retain. We all know that a few years after graduating from college many of them will be in fields totally unrelated to our courses. Why, then, is the quantity of specific data to be covered such an obsession? Should we fill the vessel or kindle the fire?

I am as guilty of this sin as anyone. My students must slog through mounds of concepts, rules, calculations, and the like. If I cannot teach them, I can always overwhelm them. Thus, a few years back I allocated time one summer to listing every distinct topic examined in my classes. What am I actually trying to teach? I divided all of my coverage into 2 to 6 relatively discrete subjects per hour. The boundaries were extremely fluid but, with some creativity, I developed a comprehensive inventory for every course.

I pondered each topic on that list and asked: “Why am I covering this? Why does this warrant class time? What is the chance this material will benefit the students’ overall knowledge? Is there a theoretical justification or a practical rationale?” I am ashamed to admit that a lot of material was covered solely because it was in the textbook. There was neither theoretical nor practical value being added. As might be expected, this exercise led to some serious pruning. I decided to spend more time on areas where a better conceptual understanding was needed and could be developed. Less can be better. Make a list and ensure that you are covering those topics in class that will kindle the fire.

Day 32 – A Student’s Education Needs To Be Well-Rounded

The job of a history professor is to teach history. In the same way, the responsibility of a faculty member in English is to instruct students in English. This certainly seems to be the natural order of things. Or does it?

I have taught Intermediate Accounting for more than 30 years. When I took this class as a student, the professor spent 100 percent of our time on accounting. No alternative probably ever crossed his mind; the goal was our complete understanding of financial accounting. This was an example of “silo education” where each course stands alone.

I maintain a more holistic view of education. Last fall, I escorted my entire Intermediate Accounting class to the play *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. The previous spring, we took in *The Furies* by Aeschylus. Later, the students were offered a few points of extra credit for attending a French movie at an ancient cinema near campus. During summer vacations, they are urged to visit museums, theatres, art galleries, and the like. Each year since 1993, I have required my students to identify “the best book you ever read.” They select one work and then write a short paragraph to explain why that book meant so much to them. I want students to consider what impact reading has had on their lives. After perusing their thoughts, I update my accumulated list of titles and distribute it to the group (the top choices during that span of time have been *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and *The Lord of the Rings*). I encourage them to choose at least one selection on the list to read each year. They need to enjoy good books throughout their lives to be truly educated individuals.

My own Intermediate Accounting professor would think my approach was insane. What is this all about? I once read that Goethe said: “Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be.” I try not to treat my students solely as future accountants but rather as thinking and intellectually curious members of society because that is what I want them to become.

Similar to many others in college, my students often discount the importance of any knowledge outside of their chosen discipline. One of my goals is for them to be more intellectually alive than that. I do believe that my subject matter is vitally important but everyone benefits from a well-rounded educational foundation. These students might be accountants for a long time or only for a few days but their college experience has to form the basis for an entire life. They will be happier (and, I think, more thoughtful and successful) if they learn to enjoy reading, the theatre, museums, and the like. To me, every class needs to go beyond its own silo; it is simply part of my position as a teacher.

It is easy to claim that “broadening a student’s thinking is someone else’s job,” but I disagree completely. One of the most important roles that every college professor can play is as a guide to the joys of intellectual pursuits. Allocate time each semester to opening up a piece of the world to your students that is outside of your course. Find some area of life beyond your field that excites you and share it with them. Kindle a fire.

Day 33 – It Is All New To Them

I have covered some of the same material in my courses each year since the early 1970s. Occasionally, when walking back to my office after class, I complain in jest to my neighbor: “I have taught this particular topic now for more than 30 years. Don’t you think it is time these students managed to learn it?” He laughs because teachers know the feeling. All coverage will evolve over time but a lot of core information remains quite stable. No matter how often the subject is discussed, the Civil War raged from 1861 until 1865 and the Battle of Gettysburg was fought on July 1-3, 1863. However, there are always different students each semester. For them, it is all new and potentially amazing.

Repetition can lead to teacher burnout. A professor’s spark of enthusiasm can begin to die, after those initial years when the material seemed fresher, and a few of the essentials start to get bypassed in class. I had a teacher in college who signaled such moments with a dreary moan “I know this is very boring material but we just have to struggle through it.” To me, such words were the ultimate kiss of death for possible student engagement. That was the moment to turn off the brain and start making notes to memorize.

Broadway plays are usually performed 6 to 8 times per week and, if successful, can stay open for months or even years. Works such as *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* appear to run practically forever. Actors in those plays take precisely the same steps and utter identical words night after night, weeks on end. The speeches are not even their own; they mechanically repeat what someone else has written for them. After a few weeks, how do these actors avoid becoming lethargic and careless during their performances? What keeps the people in those cat suits from falling asleep on stage?

I remember an article about a Broadway star who was asked about the difficulty of giving a virtuoso performance, night after night. His response has stuck in my memory for decades and continues to impact my teaching. He admitted that boredom was a problem but that each member of the cast understood an important fact: For virtually every person in the audience, this was their first night seeing the play. The actors may have walked through the steps 1,000 times but, for the audience, it was all entirely new and they deserved the best the actors could give. “We look at each performance as the first night and put in that kind of energy because, for most people present, it is their first night.”

I once read a somewhat similar story about Mother Teresa. The writer said that no matter how busy Mother Teresa was, when talking with you, she made you feel like you were the only person in the world. Despite all the distractions, she focused entirely on you.

Approach each class with the same freshness and excitement as the first time you covered the material and you will never burn out. Focus on your students as the only people in the world for that moment you work with them and you will be a great teacher. My students today deserve the same enthusiasm as my students received in 1971. It is not their fault that I have covered the material so often. Even the dullest topic can seem unique and alive when a person is first exposed to it and everyone deserves that thrill.

Day 34 – Most Epiphanies Come In Small Packages

In a freshman English class in 1966 sitting among approximately 300 students, I was introduced to the word “epiphany.” As I remember, we were told that it meant something like “revelation” or “sudden enlightenment.” The professor used the experience of Saul on the road to Damascus as an illustration.

You read this book, I imagine, because you want to become a better teacher. I hope you have picked up a couple of helpful suggestions worth trying with your students. As teachers, we all wish for an epiphany to show us the way to genuine improvement. Saul was lucky; it was hard for him to miss the advice being given. For most of us traveling on this journey to maximize student learning, the epiphanies are a lot less obvious. After so many years in the classroom, my final words of advice are: Keep your eyes open because most of the truly important bits of inspiration can be easily overlooked.

In 1990, a former student of mine finished his first year at Harvard Law School. I dropped him a short note and asked him what the experience was like. As his answer, he mailed me a little book titled *One L* written by Scott Turow (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977). Turow went on to become a famous writer of mystery novels including *Presumed Innocent* and *The Burden of Proof*. But before that, he was a Harvard-trained attorney who introduced readers to the rigors of the first year in law school in *One L*.

I read the book with mild interest because it related to education. At the time, I had become dissatisfied with my own teaching style. The student work that I seemed to be inspiring was inconsistent--good one day and horrible the next. Too much of the learning depended solely on my ability to convey information. My students were never as excited about their own educational progress as I wanted. I was 43 and thinking about alternative careers.

On pages 56-57, I read the following passage about one of Turow’s law professors, a person who was actually a relatively minor character in the book:

“How could it be, Zechman asked us, that in some situations you could run a pedestrian down and not pay a penny, and yet be forced to bear all the losses when a toaster which you’d merely sold exploded in a freak accident? The responses from the class were puzzled, tentative. Zechman would digest each, then frame another question. Usually they centered on elaborate hypothetical situations Zechman had devised (“hypo” for short, a term which for weeks reminded me, a doctor’s son, of syringes); and the hypos themselves sometimes seemed wildly peculiar, only adding to our confusion. Was it assault if a midget took a harmless swing at Muhammed Ali? Was it negligent to refuse to spend \$200,000 for safeguards on a dam which could wash away \$100,000 worth of property? When bewilderment on a subject seemed to have peaked, often with the class baffled into silence, Zechman would move on to another topic. But he never made a positive statement, never gave anything which resembled an answer, not even a hint.”

At first, the students disliked Zechman; they wanted definitive answers like those they received from the other professors. But by the end of the students' first year in law school, he was greatly admired; he had gradually guided them as they developed a true understanding and appreciation for the nuances of the law.

Before I had finished reading *One L*, probably before I completed the previous passage, I realized that I wanted to teach like Zechman. If he could help students understand complex law topics in this way, surely I could teach accounting in much the same fashion. I truly had an epiphany. I immediately changed my teaching style and have never looked back. It was the turning point in my career. Reading those few sentences tucked away in a relatively obscure book forever changed me as a teacher. I did not adapt Zechman's approach completely (he was teaching law students and I was working with undergraduates) but, for me, he provided the road map.

This is your journey; your goal should not be to follow me. Look for your own inspiration. Keep your eyes open and search for ways to improve the educational process in your classes. Most of the ideas that you will encounter are small. If tried, some will work, many will not. However, one time, if you experiment enough, you will encounter your own wonderful epiphany.

In 1983, I was putting the finishing touches on the first edition of my *Advanced Accounting* textbook. I had been looking for weeks, in vain, for a relevant quote to put on the opening page. One day, I went to the salon that was located on our campus to get a haircut. The young woman who trimmed my hair had a little "quote of the day" calendar sitting on her table. As I paid her, I casually picked up the calendar and read the quote for that particular day:

"The real purpose of books is to trap the mind into doing its own thinking."
Christopher Morley

The *Advanced Accounting* textbook is now going into its ninth edition and that quote is still on the opening page. I never read these words, though, that I do not think that the author should have removed the word "books" and replaced it with "an education."

Notes

- (1) Beidler, Peter G. "What Makes a Good Teacher?" *Inspiring Teaching*. Ed. John K. Roth. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing, 1997. 4.
- (2) Leef, George. "Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk." The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy. 25 January 2006
<http://www.popecenter.org/recommended_reading/article.html?id=1665>.
- (3) Whitehead, A. N. "Universities and Their Function." *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929. 139.
- (4) Beidler. 8.
- (5) McGovern, Mike, and Susan Shelley. *The Quotable Athlete*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000. 33.

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After reading this work, if you have ideas or suggestions, I would love to hear from you. I continue on the journey myself. My e-mail address is Jhoyle@richmond.edu. As I readily admit on Day 26, I try to learn from every teacher that I encounter. I firmly believe there should be more teaching conversations between faculty members. We have much to learn from each other.

I want to give special thanks to three folks who helped me greatly with this book: Kristy Witkowski (a former student of mine who now works in New York with the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers), Mike Spear (a journalism professor at University of Richmond), and my beautiful wife, Sarah. Kristy and Mike spent countless hours reading each word so that she could explain to me why specific words, sentences, or punctuation were incorrect. Without them, these pages would have been a much rougher read. In fact, I probably should have followed more of their advice. Sarah, on the other hand, would read the pages and talk with me at length about which of my ideas was not necessarily clear. In writing, having someone who can say, "this page is just not working," is ever so much help. Thanks to both of you!!!!