

GOOD TEACHING: THE TOP TEN REQUIREMENTS

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One. Good teaching is as much about passion as it is about reason. It's about not only motivating students to learn, but teaching them how to learn, and doing so in a manner that is relevant, meaningful, and memorable. It's about caring for your craft, having a passion for it, and conveying that passion to everyone, most importantly to your students.

Two. Good teaching is about substance and treating students as consumers of knowledge. It's about doing your best to keep on top of your field, reading sources, inside and outside of your areas of expertise, and being at the leading edge as often as possible. But knowledge is not confined to scholarly journals. Good teaching is also about bridging the gap between theory and practice. It's about leaving the ivory tower and immersing oneself in the field, talking to, consulting with, and assisting practitioners, and liaising with their communities.

Three. Good teaching is about listening, questioning, being responsive, and remembering that each student and class is different. It's about eliciting responses and developing the oral communication skills of the quiet students. It's about pushing students to excel; at the same time, it's about being human, respecting others, and being professional at all times.

Four. Good teaching is about not always having a fixed agenda and being rigid, but being flexible, fluid, experimenting, and having the confidence to react and adjust to changing circumstances. It's about getting only 10 percent of what you wanted to do in a class done and still feeling good. It's about deviating from the course syllabus or lecture schedule easily when there is more and better learning elsewhere. Good teaching is about the creative balance between being an authoritarian dictator on the one hand and a pushover on the other.

Five. Good teaching is also about style. Should good teaching be entertaining? You bet! Does this mean that it lacks in substance? Not a chance! Effective teaching is not about being locked with both hands glued to a podium or having your eyes fixated on a slide projector while you drone on. Good teachers work the room and every student in it. They realize that they are the conductors and the class is the orchestra. All students play different instruments and at varying proficiencies.

Six. This is very important -- good teaching is about humor. It's about being self-deprecating and not taking yourself too seriously. It's often about making innocuous jokes, mostly at your own expense, so that the ice breaks and students learn in a more relaxed atmosphere where you, like them, are human with your own share of faults and shortcomings.

Seven. Good teaching is about caring, nurturing, and developing minds and talents. It's about devoting time, often invisible, to every student. It's also about the thankless hours of grading, designing or redesigning courses, and preparing materials to still further enhance instruction.

Eight. Good teaching is supported by strong and visionary leadership, and very tangible institutional support -- resources, personnel, and funds. Good teaching is continually reinforced by an overarching vision that transcends the entire organization -- from full professors to part-time instructors -- and is reflected in what is said, but more importantly by what is done.

Nine. Good teaching is about mentoring between senior and junior faculty, teamwork, and being recognized and promoted by one's peers. Effective teaching should also be rewarded, and poor teaching needs to be remediated through training and development programs.

Ten. At the end of the day, good teaching is about having fun, experiencing pleasure and intrinsic rewards ... like locking eyes with a student in the back row and seeing the synapses and neurons connecting, thoughts being formed, the person becoming better, and a smile cracking across a face as learning all of a sudden happens. Good teachers practice their craft not for the money or because they have to, but because they truly enjoy it and because they want to. Good teachers couldn't imagine doing anything else.

GOOD TEACHING

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I'd like to talk briefly about good teaching. I fear doing this, knowing well how fine teachers differ as their characters and styles differ. Idiosyncrasy is a virtue to the extent that successful teaching rests on character - and I believe it heavily rests there. By describing a generalized view of good teaching, I may unintentionally signal to you an intolerance of idiosyncrasy. I do not wish to do so.

I am also concerned that I may give the impression that I think teaching *per se* is important. Of course, it isn't; what is only important is what the students learn. By speaking of teaching, I hope I won't muddy the truism that our actions as instructors are a means to an end -- a pupil's knowledge -- rather than an end in themselves.

However, with these reservations expressed, let me proceed. Brilliant teaching, in my view, at its heart reflects scholarship, personal integrity and the ability to communicate with the young.

Scholarship is both the grasp of a realm of knowledge and a habit of mind. An effective teacher provokes both from his students. But particularly the latter, as it is a habit of mind, rather than facts, which endure in a person over a lifetime. Scholarship is not only an affair of the classroom, but, at its best, is a way of life, one which is marked by respect for evidence and for logic, by inquisitiveness and the genius to find new meaning in familiar data, and by the ability to see things in context, to relate specificities to generalities, facts to theories, and theories to facts.

The second characteristic of great teaching is **integrity**, in at least two of its separate meanings. First there is probity: characteristics of honesty, principle and decent candor. These qualities are fundamental, of course, to the good life for anyone, but they play a special role in the behavior of those of us who inevitably, as we live together with them, influence younger people by our example.

Another, but equally important, kind of integrity is **completeness** or unity of character, the sense of self-confidence and personal identity a fine teacher exhibits. There is much pop jargon around to describe this, some of it useful: "knowing who you are," "getting it together," "not losing one's cool." Because they are teenagers, most of our students' most painful trials are in finding their own selves, in gaining proper self-confidence, and they look to us as people who have learned to control the ambiguities, pressures and restrictions of life rather than having them control us. A fine teacher is not particularly one who exudes self-confidence from every pore -- a superperson (more likely, a hypocrite!). Far from it. A fine teacher does have confidence, but the honest confidence that flows from a fair recognition of one's own frailties as well as talents and which accommodates both joyfully. The lack of assurance that typically marks adolescence and that takes observable form in pettiness, distortion, scapegoating, over-reacting, or withdrawal ideally is balanced in a school by the presence of adults who have grown to channel and control these sturdily persistent human traits. A teenager leans little from older folk, of whatever scholarly brilliance, who as people are themselves yet teenagers.

The ability to **communicate** with the young is the third basic characteristic of good teaching. It means, obviously, liking young people, enjoying their noisy exuberance and intense questioning, which is their process of growing up. It means the ability to empathize, to see a situation as the student sees it. A good teacher must be, obviously, a compulsive listener. It means the skill of provoking more out of a student than he believed possible, of knowing the tests to which to put a young scholar in order that he be convinced of his own learning and to lure him into further learning. It means a belief in the dignity of young people and in the stage of life at which they now find themselves. Great teachers neither mock nor underestimate the young.

I am intensely aware that the foregoing description sounds pretentious and begs specificity. I won't apologize for the pretension. I believe these goals are both achievable and proper for each of us as professional teachers to hold. Lesser goals, or more pragmatic goals demean us, I believe, and would suggest that the teacher's craft is less human and

more mechanical than it properly should be. But I do recognize that lack of specificity, and respond to it by recounting some little incidents and practices I've observed among members of this assembled company. Acts which may appear trivial in themselves, but which, when added to the hundreds of similar acts, create a standard and a style from which young people can learn.

For example, here are some apparent minutiae:

- knowing student's names, and calling them by name
- greeting students and colleagues pleasantly
- going to see student friends on varied occasions (i.e., the House Counselor or teacher, attending a game or play because of a youngster who's playing)
- remembering something that had earlier worried a student, and asking about it ("Is your mother recovering from her operation?")
- resisting the sarcastic, if funny, *bon mot* that could be an amusing but hurtful rejoinder to a foolish comment a student has just made in class
- never tolerating *ad hominem* remarks among students and colleagues, such as apparently benign but really insulting jokes arising from one's sex or ethnic origin
- scrupulously following the dictum which all our parents taught us: "If you can't say anything good about someone, don't say anything at all."
- telling a student the unvarnished truth, privately (i.e., "Susan, I honestly suspect you...", "George, you're not working hard enough.", "Sam, you are an insult to the olfactory nerves; go take a shower.", "Joan, you're a bully.")

I could go on, but I trust the point is clear; such actions signal the importance a teacher feels for an individual, for his dignity and for his growth.

Some others; minutiae, of a different sort:

- always insisting on the reasons for things -- in class and out -- and always taking time, one's self, to give reasons. This takes patience, indeed stretches it often to Biblical extremes
- knowing the difference between asking students to listen to you and to hear you - and acting upon it
- "hearing" students, and questioning them thoroughly enough to know just how they see or are confused by an issue
- showing that you can change your mind, when evidence and logic suggest it
- being on the edge of your subject and interests; exhibiting the same questing in your field that you would have your students feel

The point here is obvious, the need to help students develop rational habits of mind and a sense of the joy of inquiry.

Some others, apparent trivia:

- never being late to class or cutting it for some personal convenience
- returning papers to students within twenty-four hours
- insisting on neat written work, delivered on schedule
- insisting on a formality of conduct in a classroom comparable to the formality of thought implicit in the subject being studied
- clearly signalling the imperative of scrupulous intellectual honesty
- insisting on clear thinking and fair-mindedness in the dormitory, on the playing field and elsewhere, as expected in the classroom
- perceiving the results of a class as "My students know XYZ," rather than "I covered XYZ in class" - and knowing the difference between the two

The message here unequivocally is the deep seriousness we have for intellectual values and for learning.

Some other minutiae; ones that help students to grow:

- always expect a bit more of a student than he expects of himself

- accentuate the positive; be careful always to praise good work. No one learns anything faster than when he feels he is successful
- exhibit the greatest possible friendliness that one can honestly exhibit to a student one doesn't like, and try to repress personal annoyances
- be friends with students, but not buddies; the obligations of the latter relationship limit one's freedom to teach well
- never give up on a student, or categorize or 'brand' him permanently

One can go on, and we should go on among ourselves all year. I admit that this definition of teaching -- a mix of scholarship, integrity and the gift of communicating with the young -- is in its generality often as difficult to categorize as it is to describe. It turns on a person's style, character. We mustn't be afraid to confront this fact, and deal with it.

I take heart in this situation by recalling the consternation of some university colleagues of mine when they discovered a persistently inconsistent hiccup in their masses of research data on students' school performance, a hiccup of excellence that could be explained by the fact that the teachers in a particular school gave a damn. The students in my colleagues' study shouldn't have performed well in this -- but they did. It's so much easier for social scientists to explain realities in terms of income level, or ethnic origin, or average ages. But "giving a damn"? Caring about kids? It made a difference, they -- but they were embarrassed to admit it. We shouldn't be embarrassed!

Know the material:

The purpose of teaching is for students to learn. To help a student who is having trouble understanding the material, you need to know (a) where the student is having a problem, and (b) how to explain it differently the second time. Both require that you know deeply the material you are teaching. It is not good enough to be "one page ahead" of the class, or to have memorized the material well enough to write it on the blackboard without making any mistakes.

Want to teach:

When you walk into a classroom, you should want to be there. Very little is as infectious to the student as an instructor who is genuinely happy to be there. The students can tell the difference. If the instructor is excited about the course, the student is likely to be also.

Genuinely respect your students and show it:

You are in the classroom for the benefit of the students, not vice-versa. Your ability to help them understand concepts that they currently do not understand is enhanced enormously if you connect with them. No one wants to be treated like a dummy or talked down to. Connecting means giving them credit for having a brain, willing to use it and caring enough to do what it takes to get it. AND, conveying that -- not verbally, but through your body language. That means respecting them.

Set the bar high; students will measure up:

Good students are there to learn and they know it won't happen automatically. My experience is that if you set the bar high, and do NOT waste the students' time with tedious work that serves no learning purpose, they will work as hard as they can to measure up to it. The myth that students want an easy course is just that, a myth. Some of them may complain and moan at the moment over some very tough homework. But at the end of the course, I generally am thanked profusely for setting the bar high. "Thank you, I never thought I could learn so much in one semester" is a comment I often get at the end of the course.

Emphasize understanding; de-emphasize memorization:

Memorizing is not understanding. Unfortunately, many students have gotten by for a very long time on the basis of a sharp memory, and have never had to really think. Memorization may work for the moment, but after graduation when they are faced with new challenges, it is their ability to think and to understand that will carry the day, not their ability to memorize. I have seen too many examples of students who can memorize almost anything, yet cannot think through a simple extension of what they have memorized. I suggest they will not be prepared for what lies ahead after graduation, in work or in life.

My Ten Commandments for Good Teaching

- [Know the material](#)
- [Want to teach](#)
- [Genuinely respect](#) your students and show it
- [Set the bar high](#); students will measure up
- [Emphasize understanding](#); de-emphasize memorization
- [Take responsibility](#) for what is covered
- [Don't even try](#) to cover the material
- [Encourage interruptions](#); don't be afraid to digress
- [Don't forget those three little words](#)
- [Reserved for future use](#)

Don't forget those three little words:

The three little words are "I don't know." The biggest thing about a classroom that makes learning work or not work is the connection between the instructor and the students. Many of the items above relate to establishing that connection. Nothing will destroy that connection as quickly as the instructor speaking nonsense. It only takes one student in the class to know that the instructor is bs-ing, and credibility has been lost for good. And, if the instructor loses credibility, he/she has nothing. Students will tune out. AND, it is okay to not know. The instructor can not be expected to know everything. That is the nature of humans. Never pretend to know. Just say, "I don't know," move on, and if possible try to find out before the next class and answer the question then.

Take responsibility for what is covered:

Too many instructors have been lulled into this new pedagogical notion that the students should decide what gets taught in the classroom. Not in my classroom. I have been around longer, have seen techniques come and go, and because of that, I believe I know better than they what is important for them to know to be successful after they leave my course. Ergo, I decide what gets covered. I am very concerned about this fashionable notion of letting the students decide. Many students want instant gratification -- a technique they can use today, whether or not it will be useful downstream. It is up to instructors to take charge of what goes on in their classrooms.

Don't even try to cover the material:

When one sits in the office in August and plans the syllabus for the Fall semester, optimism runs very high. The instructor often lays out the course outline, assuming that every student gets every point the first time, that every explanation is brilliant, and that no student needs to ask a question. Not too many classes into the semester reality sets in. The fact is that some days the explanations are bad. And, some days the students don't get it the first time. Ergo, if one insists on covering the material, the only one left standing at the end of the course is the instructor (maybe). I believe the following. First, there is always far more material than can be covered adequately in a semester. BUT, only a core body of material needs to be covered. So, in August when everything is coming out roses, sure -- assume the best. But, as the semester moves along, and reality sets in, do not be afraid to stop and cover again the same point a second or third time, bringing in different perspectives and examples to get it across. Answer questions, even if it means totally blowing the schedule. That is, do not even try to cover the material. Certainly, one has to cover the core body necessary to move on to the next semester. But that usually represents half the material, or so. Anything beyond that is a bonus, and has no place in the course if the student failed to learn the core material.

Encourage interruptions; don't be afraid to digress:

This is a consequence of the one just above. The point is that the reason for the course is for the student to learn. If the student is not learning, it is irrelevant how much material is being covered. Therefore encourage interruptions. It means the student is thinking. And, if the student is thinking, he/she has a chance of getting it. Digress when it seems useful. Digressions can add meaning to the understanding of a concept. Anecdotes from the instructor's experience can make the material more alive. It can provide just the twist that allows the student to get it.

Reserved for future use:

Many have observed that this last one is not a commandment at all, and that therefore there are really only nine. Wrong! This tenth one is my way of saying you should make allowances for contingencies. Things will often not go as planned. Be prepared to adapt to dynamic situations, as they unfold.

A dozen years ago, Mort Brown, Pat Shure, Beverly Black and I were having a conversation about helping TAs to become better teachers, and the question came up "What do we mean by 'a good teacher', anyway?" So I took notes during the conversation, and wrote a draft, which each of them, in turn, edited, and then I edited, and then we came to a consensus, and that consensus involved taking the Pink Floyd references out, and then I grew up and got a web-page and gave it a final edit without their consent, which did involve putting the Pink Floyd references back in.

I think that when developing a program to help instructors, it is a Good Thing to have a goal in mind. I believe that this list is a good place to start.

Elements of Good Teaching

I. Management

A. Organizing the information-flow

1. Policies and expectations about class procedures such as tests, homework, and student behavior should be clearly stated.
2. Homework should be announced far enough in advance, collected regularly, graded efficiently, and returned promptly.
3. Grading policies should be fair and conveyed unambiguously.

B. Planning the time

1. Staying with the syllabus.
2. Scheduling well in advance for quizzes, reviews, student presentations, etc.
3. Organizing the class period including outlining at the beginning of class and closing with a smooth summary.
4. Adjusting plans when suddenly faced with too much time or too little time.

C. Managing the students

1. Keeping order and focus.
2. Handling interruptions.
3. Fostering attendance and promptness.

II. Communication

A. Content

1. Knows the subject and is well-prepared.
2. Gives clear explanations.
3. Stresses the basics.
4. Uses the "rule of four."
5. Sets an appropriate level/tempo.
6. Anticipates student difficulty.

B. Presentations

1. Presents with enthusiasm!
2. Interests and stimulates students.
3. Exhibits good board work.
4. Encourages questions.
5. Appears self-confident and poised.
6. Speaks loudly enough and clearly; uses eye-contact.

III. Respect

A. "No dark sarcasm in the classroom"

1. Avoids gratuitous harshness. ("We've been over and over this. When are you planning on learning it?" "This is about as easy as it gets." "Didn't you learn anything last term?")
2. Avoids callous feedback.
3. Listens to students, never talks down to them.

B. "Teacher leave them kids alone"

1. Promotes gender and racial equity.
2. Avoids personal criticism; student-instructor, instructor-student, student-student.
3. Assigns grades fairly.

C. "All in all, you're all just bricks in the wall"

1. Learns and uses student names.
2. Shows concern for individual students and attempts to see things from their points of view.
3. Makes exceptions when appropriate.
4. Tries to be available.
5. Individualizes instruction if possible, especially during office hours.

IV. Commitment

A. Devotes the "right" amount of time to teaching

The particulars here were specific to University of Michigan TAs. I am leaving it in because I think it is important to find out what your specific department's expectations are for teaching.

1. 20 hours a week (TA union contract)
2. 3 office hours a week.
3. 3 long grading sessions.

B. Utilizes opportunities to develop professionally

1. Participates in staff meetings
2. Cooperates with co-workers
3. Experiments and improves

V. Outcome

- A. Students are successful in the course
- B. Students agree that "this is an excellent course"
- C. Students agree that "this is an excellent teacher"
- D. Happy students make generous alumni