
When I submitted my first application for a faculty position coming out of graduate school, I was asked to provide a statement of my teaching philosophy. After much thought and deliberation, I based my teaching philosophy on the following principle: students are lamps to be lit, not vessels to be filled.

*What the Best College Teachers Do*, by Ken Bain, expounds this principle that comprised my early view of teaching. As a professor of history and the first director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at New York University, Bain spent much of his life in the pursuit of quality teaching. The intended audience of the book is the higher education community but extends beyond that to include all types of teachers.

Although many books discuss college teaching, focusing on pedagogy or technology, few are based on extensive research of teaching and scholarship in a wide variety of fields and situations. The research behind this book is based on the teaching practices of 63 of the best college professors in various academic fields and types of higher education institutions. Teachers were identified through various awards, reputation, and student outcomes. The study employed a wide variety of methods, including interviews with faculty and students and an examination of teaching philosophies, syllabi, class work, and classroom observations. This carefully constructed study is reflected in the depth and quality of insight into the best practices, and it is clear that this is more a seminal work for Bain rather than just another research project.

In an effort to realistically describe best teaching practices, Bain uses examples of what teachers actually do with their students rather than present a discussion of theoretical ideas. This approach not only provides pragmatic ideas but also encourages readers to reflect on their own teaching, allowing them to apply these practices to their own academic discipline. Readers come away inspired to do better in their teaching rather than feeling guilty about what they have done in the past.

After describing the process of identifying what constitutes the best teachers in the first chapter, the chapters two to seven of the book focus on six basic questions about learning and what the best teachers do:

- What do they know about how students learn?
- How do they prepare to teach?
- What do they expect of their students?
- How do they conduct class?
- How do they treat their students?
- How do they evaluate their students and themselves?

The key to good teaching, Bain states, is to “create what we might call a natural critical learning environment in which they embed the skills and information they teach in assignments (questions and tasks)—authentic tasks that will arouse curiosity, challenging students to rethink their assumptions and examine their mental modes of reality. They create a safe environment in
which students can try, come up short, receive feedback, and try again" (p. 47). The creation of this environment leads to learning, not what teachers “do” to students, but what students are inspired to do in these environments.

Reading this book is an inspiring opportunity for all college teachers to reconsider what the best college teachers know, how they prepare, what they expect of their students, how they treat them, what they do, and how they evaluate their teaching and student progress. The Faculty Enhancement Center at my university has adopted this book and shared it with many professors on campus. This is a well-written, practical approach to improving teaching that leaves the reader eager to enter the classroom with a renewed vigor and proven ideas that will result in greater student learning.

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