

6 Cs of Good Teaching—Personal Reflections

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ABSTRACT. The goal of this paper is to share some personal wisdom and six practices in the continuing process of becoming the best teacher you can be. In addition, two more suggestions are provided for one's personal life.

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I have often been in settings where students, teachers, and other professionals have wrestled with understanding what it takes to be a good teacher. While we have never developed a definitive answer, there is one thing that is certain. Good teaching doesn't occur naturally. For some it is easy, but for many it involves hard work—albeit a labor of love. Here are some of my personal reflections on what I perceive are the 6 Cs of good teaching.

1. Competence in Content and Context

A good teacher must be competent in both “content” and “context.” While being mindful of historical context and developments, one must stay current with the latest information in our field. Good teaching is about substance and realizing that your students are interested in gaining new knowledge or ways to think about families and life. This knowledge about research, theory, and practice can come from a variety of sources ranging from professional conferences to the local news. Thus, it is important to be open to receiving this input. It is essential to stay up to date on the most recent research by reading professional journals and attending conferences. You have to do your best to stay on top of your field by reading sources inside and outside of your areas of expertise so you can be at the leading edge as often as possible. However, networking is also essential. You have to leave the halls of academia and immerse yourself in the field by talking to, consulting with, and assisting practitioners, as well as being a liaison with the community. We need to know what is happening in the “real world” in which families live. A current example is a colleague who focuses her research on foster families and is now implementing an empirically-supported parenting intervention with a population living at a residential homeless facility. The families have made suggestions about ways to improve interventions, and these suggestions have been integrated back into the intervention. The knowledge gained from these experiences can then be used in the classroom when teaching about parenting issues or stressors of contemporary families.

Unfortunately knowing “content” is not enough. When I was an undergraduate student, I remember having professors who were “brilliant” chemists; however, they were not good chemistry teachers because they were unable to relate the information to their audience. Thus, understanding the “context” of teaching and staying current with the latest teaching strategies are critical. Certainly one of the prominent content areas of family life education is family life

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education methodology. In other words, knowing about families needs to be accompanied by incorporating methodologies to facilitate learning about families.

There are numerous ways to staying abreast the latest teaching strategies including journals such as *Family Science Review* and *Family Relations*; conferences such as the *Teaching Family Science Conference*; conference sessions such as workshops, teaching round tables, and preconference sessions related to teaching methods; media such as online courses or webinars; and networking. We often go to conferences and engage in conversations about our research endeavors, but do not necessarily talk about how we teach our classes. However, I remember some very helpful sessions involving Certified Family Life Educators who met to share their teaching strategies or what worked for them. While at times experienced teachers may perceive that getting assistance might be demeaning to their status, even world-class athletes practice to refine their craft and have coaches.

Good teaching is also about style. Just as students have learning styles that work best for them, educators also develop individual teaching styles. Good teachers will try to incorporate a variety of learning styles into their teaching style and course design. Stylistically, some teachers like to be experts, delegators, facilitators, demonstrators, performers, or stimulators of creative problem solving and may incorporate experiential learning experiences, scintillating discussions, or entertaining lectures. Don't be afraid to incorporate your sense of humor. By not taking yourself too seriously and sharing some amusing remarks or stories, mostly at your expense, you show you are human. Does this mean your teaching should be entertaining? Absolutely! Does this mean your teaching lacks "content"? Definitely not!

Teaching styles may vary according to the context of the setting, environment of the classroom, level of students, size of course, and teaching culture. Good teachers make the most of the environment in which they are assigned to teach and do everything to make it work for them. They learn about the classroom technology available to them in order to provide the best possible learning environment. They make assessments of the room and lighting conditions and are pro-active in improving their environment by requesting broken lights be fixed, adjusting the blinds, and/or rearranging the classroom so that they can teach from the most effective place in the room. Many times teachers think someone else will make a request to get something fixed, but most of the time, this is not the case. It never hurts to ask for improvements. I have found that when you report the awkwardness of the design, location, and access of the technology console, that sometimes it will be changed. In addition, when I was teaching in a large auditorium that held 200 students, I determined that 35 desks were dysfunctional. When I reported this problem, I was told that there might be a few chairs that needed repair, but there certainly could not be that many broken chairs. Upon further investigation, the university noted the high number of broken chairs and decided that the problem needed to be fixed over break, after which we came back to all new chairs in this auditorium. Good teachers will try to create the best learning environment possible for their students. Engagement of students is critical whether one maximizes the environment for their benefit or your own comfort to provide the elements you need to make you as effective as possible.

Unfortunately, settings can vary due to budget cuts, so we may be more likely to teach online courses and large classes. What may work for undergraduate students in a small class would be different for large classes and graduate courses. Times have changed as exemplified by the continuing upgrades to classroom technology and the evolving use of blogs, wikis, and texting to communicate with students. Electronic communication is particularly helpful with large classes; however, there is also an ongoing controversy about student use of computers, cell phones,

texting, and Facebook in the classroom. Whereas some teachers ban the use of some electronics and personal communication during class, others allow it or tell students that texting is inappropriate unless there is a personal or public-safety “emergency.” If communication is absolutely necessary, students are asked to excuse themselves from the classroom with minimal distraction to others. When teachers are trying to engage their students in the learning process, disruptive use of electronics can be a problem for everyone. While many of the digitally-experienced millennials believe they can multi-task, this may not be the case for all students.

International settings can also influence teaching. When teaching abroad, I once received a manual indicating that the standard mode of teaching was predominantly lecture with no videos, stories, humor, or learning experiences. However, when I asked colleagues about teaching styles in their country, I was told to teach as I normally would because they expected foreigners to be more “exotic.” I don’t consider myself exotic, but I got the point. I could use a variety of teaching strategies to best facilitate the learning of my students and the students were very appreciative.

2. Connection--Linking Research and Teaching

Research is directly related to teaching and provides credibility and confidence when teaching about various topics. Understanding the latest pedagogical research is important, as well as the research in your field. For example, my areas of research expertise have included family life education, family stress, parenting, and sexuality. When you incorporate your own research, you bring excitement to the classroom. For example, when teaching in the area of human sexuality, students perceive that they are quite knowledgeable about this topic, but they often get their information through unreliable sources, such as friends, media, and magazines. I caution students about popular press magazines, as their information on some topics is often questionable. While writers of magazine articles may include some quotes from scientific journals, along with conducting phone interviews with researchers, practitioners, and the general public, there is often a lack of credible knowledge being reported. Once a magazine writer misquotes you, you become very cautious about what you say to whom, so very few researchers respond to requests from writers of popular press articles. However, when one integrates the research process and research findings into teaching, students become really interested not only in the course content, but also research and learning about the research process.

3. Creativity

Creativity can occur in many ways such as responding to teachable moments. Good teaching is not always about having a fixed schedule, but being flexible and having the confidence to react and adjust to changing circumstances. Current events are especially relevant as family issues often emerge in the news. Almost daily I find news clips that can be incorporated in family relations classes, sexuality classes, and my course on family as an ecosystem. In particular, events in the Middle East, natural disasters here in the U.S. or abroad, and economic or social issues are particularly relevant in a class on family as an ecosystem. These contemporary events keep the class current and applicable to their lives.

Creativity is also essential in planning and generating unique learning experiences. I am always exploring novel ideas about teaching and the integration of innovative research to keep the excitement of teaching alive. New ideas are energizing. Thus, when I go to conferences, I try to get a “teaching fix” and a “research fix.” Both provide the necessary energy, creativity, and enthusiasm to return home and try new things. I never teach a course the exact same way and am always updating my teaching and course design.

It is important not to become complacent. A few years ago a young student was doing an independent study course in an elementary school. She overheard two teachers talking about being bored and later asked if I had ever been bored. Yes, that can happen when one teaches the same course multiple times per year for several years. Thus, I need a balance in the number, kind, and subject matter of the courses I teach. If I have too many different preparations, I do not have the time to competently prepare for these classes. On the other hand, I get excitement from planning and preparing new courses that permeates all other courses. Thus, a changing balance of old and new courses keeps teaching exciting.

There are two major elements to being successful in teaching: 1) *preparation*, which is competence in content and context and 2) *enthusiasm*, which is spawned by creativity. If you are prepared, but teach without enthusiasm you will be dull. If you have enthusiasm, but are not prepared, you will be “jazzy,” but to paraphrase one classic commercial, people will think, “Where’s the beef?” Thus, by being prepared and integrating enthusiasm, you can be successful.

4. Caring

Caring involves passion for teaching and compassion for students. Good teaching is about motivating students to learn and helping them to learn how to learn. Good teaching is also about caring enough to devote time, which is often imperceptible to others, to as many students as possible. Teachers devote numerous hours to grading and providing good quality feedback, designing and redesigning courses, and preparing teaching and evaluation materials to further enhance instruction.

Students do not care what you know, if they know that you care. Good teaching is not only about developing the competencies and abilities of students, but also caring and nurturing them as human beings. We all remember the time when we were under stress studying for our comprehensive exams, but some teachers forget this personal challenge and are not particularly understanding to those who are now having this experience. Because you teach in the family field, students will often come to you to discuss their personal concerns, such as an honor student who needed to drop out of school and get a job because of the financial difficulties caused by her parents’ divorce, a student’s mother who was diagnosed as being HIV positive, a student who thought he had herpes and could not have children, or a student who was told she may have cancer. These situations can be troubling, but for students who are away from home you might be their first line of defense in seeking help. Of course, being a family life educator may mean that you do not have the qualifications to deal with situations that require therapeutic intervention. You also don’t want to provide therapy to your students due to the risks of dual relationships. However, you may be the initial person with whom they talk about stressful issues and you can provide assistance by guiding them to a more appropriate professional from whom they can get the type of assistance needed. Unfortunately, a dilemma can arise for caring teachers because you may become vulnerable to being hurt. When you care about teaching and students, who have personal issues or may get upset with you because they didn’t do well on an exam or “need” a higher grade, it can be difficult to objectively deal with situations without having internal conflicts. If you care, you may have to deal with personal feelings of being hurt.

5. Challenge

I have never had a teacher who was not “nice” to me. But, being nice is not enough. My best teachers challenged me. But, how do you do this? First, a teacher needs to continually challenge oneself, as well as let students know that you do not know everything and continually need to learn. Not only do you become a role model for students, but you also learn more about your subject matter and new ways to engage students. Thus, when you recommend that they

delve deeper into a topic or motivate them to further analyze a class experience, they learn to think for themselves and explore alternative solutions to complex problems. Current events are critical. Students do not commonly read newspapers or gain news on the Internet because coursework and communicating with friends via texting, Facebook or other social media take precedence. However, when you bring in current events that are applicable to your course content, it makes your course content more relevant to their lives and the world around them and gives them opportunities for creative problem solving.

To challenge your students, you will need to get to know them better. Taking time to meet with students individually, if you have a small class, or in groups, if you have a large class, provides insight into their lives such as what interests them and what are their learning styles. Some students may respond best to visual stimuli, while others may learn more effectively in auditory, physical, social, or experiential learning environments. Howard Gardner's (2011) "multiple intelligences" provides a perspective of human cognition that proposes students think and learn in different ways. While everyone has a blend of intelligences, some are more prominent in individual students or fields of study. In family studies classes, students are often oriented to linguistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal types of intelligence, but some may also respond to logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic or naturalistic intelligences. The awareness of multiple intelligences can motivate teachers to reflect on their manner of engaging students and broaden their use of different learning experiences that are meaningful and challenging to diverse student audiences. Still widely used today, teachers may also need to consider Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956, 1984)* when asking questions or creating assignments that foster critical thinking. Teachers can facilitate student learning by incorporating knowledge, comprehension, and application, but integrating higher levels of learning through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation can provide a greater challenge.

As you reflect on stimulating the abilities of your students, can you create learning experiences and assignments that allow your students to stretch and grow? Unless one tries to do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never evolve, which is true for both teachers and students. Similarly, if you refuse to accept anything but the best, you often get it. You have to evaluate your students' potential and create learning experiences that not only have high expectations, but also are not so high that they cannot reach some level of accomplishment. If we can challenge students in our classrooms, they may be better equipped to handle the challenges of life.

6. Commitment

Commitment to teaching is essential and multifaceted. Teachers need the commitment found in institutional and programmatic support. Universities should have administrators who value and support good teaching. Many universities have orientation and motivational sessions for new teachers, teaching award programs, and a tenure statement that values good teaching. In other words, even if you excel in research, if you are not a good teacher, you will not get tenure. At the college and department levels, there may be international exchange programs for teachers, peer evaluations, and assistance to teachers. Good teaching is about mentoring between senior and junior faculty, teamwork, and being recognized by and promoted by one's peers. But, if teaching is not "up to par," this also needs to be recognized and help provided through training and development programs or "coaches." If your supervisors don't suggest sources of support, you may have to seek out a colleague who is a good teacher and ask for his or her help.

Commitment also comes from former professors, colleagues, students, family, and oneself. Former professors have been wonderful role models and guided me in learning family sciences'

content, family life education methodology, and the excitement of research-based teaching. Sharing teaching methods, ideas, and policies among colleagues is also important along with being open to students who give feedback about your teaching. Most important is the support and commitment from family members who realize that it takes numerous hours of hard work and concentration when reading dissertations, grading papers, or doing research that helps facilitate your teaching.

Personal commitment is also essential. As a teacher you should be grading and returning papers quickly, having and maintaining office hours, preparing the best course you can, and not canceling class unless there is an emergency. One not only needs to be the best teacher he or she can be, but also committed to helping others be the best teachers and students they can be.

Now, if you have been counting, we have discussed the 6 Cs of being a good teacher: Competence, Connection, Creativity, Caring, Challenge, and Commitment. However, I always try to maximize what I provide to students, so I have two more Cs that deal with living your life personally and professionally.

1. Live Your Life With “Class”

We live in a society in which it is important to become #1. We often hear about being #1 when we talk about university athletics, Olympic gold medal counts, or being at the top of your class. However, not everyone can become #1 or maintain that status for long. Various teams, athletes, musicians, award winners, teachers, or students may be on top for a brief time, but this may not occur again. Moreover, sometimes one does not receive an award, win an election, get a promotion, or become the top producer. It is perfectly fine to be second, third, tenth, or twentieth as long as you did your best and gave it your best effort. When watching the Olympics, we frequently see an athlete who may be 17th or 27th in their sport, but is jumping for joy because it was his or her personal best. But, how does one handle being second or lower? You hold your head up high and congratulate those who did better than you. Remember in our culture, we like “good winners” and “good losers.” We often watch the concession and acceptance speeches after political elections or statements from coaches and players who win or come in second in championship games. Can you have “class” when supporting colleagues? Can you nominate colleagues and students for awards and recognitions? Can you write letters of recommendation for them, as well as be there for the ceremony or congratulate them when you do not get an award or recognition. In other words, can you help to create a culture of positive support by role modeling good behavior?

It is also important to build a culture of support by showing appreciation and gratitude to those who have helped you. Do you remember to thank colleagues, staff, and students who assist you? Do you remember retired faculty members who have contributed to the history and development of your program or department? Have you told former teachers of their importance to you? Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it (William Arthur Ward, n.d.). So, never leave unsaid what needs to be said!

2. “Create” a Life for Yourself That Will Provide You With Happiness

At the retirement celebration of a former colleague, a college administrator said that this person “had a life.” This colleague was a researcher, administrator, and an award-winning teacher and adviser, as well as a dedicated wife and mother, airplane pilot, political candidate, and a person who loved to entertain and dance. While this college administrator indicated that she often told others to “get a life,” she was still trying to “find a life.” Family life educators are high achievers, but we also need to work on “having a life” beyond our work. We need to create a balance in our lives between work, family, play, or whatever is important in your life. We can

use the analogy of a bicycle so that going forward depends on balance. We can also use an analogy of a “teeter totter,” whereas one side may get weighted down because of work pressures, the other side may dip down when there are family issues. At times during a term or year we have more responsibilities that are work related and then later have personal/family commitments. We may not have an even balance in our daily lives as may be needed to ride a bicycle, but as long as we can have a dynamic equilibrium regarding our responsibilities, we can make progress and advance. If we include all the important elements in our lives, we can better manage and attain satisfaction with our lives. I hope that you can create a life for yourself that will provide you with happiness in many different areas of your life and that teaching is one of the areas that brings you joy.

As an educator, one has never “arrived” at the top of your profession, even if you are an award-winning teacher. Teaching is a continual process of growth and development that involves a multifaceted support system and the continuing excitement and challenge to become even better. At the end of the day, good teaching is also about having fun, experiencing pleasure, and enjoying the intrinsic rewards of feeling good about what you are doing. Good teachers practice their profession not for the money or because we have to do so, but because we truly enjoy it and want to teach. Good teachers can’t imagine doing anything else. In closing, I would like to share the words of Katherine Graham (Lewis, n.d.). “To love what you do and feel that it matters, how could anything be more fun?” So I hope that teaching will provide you with a love for what you do, a feeling that it matters, and great fun. It certainly has for me!

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Dr. Carol A. Darling, CFLE, is the Margaret Sandels Professor of Human Sciences and Florida State University Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Department of Family and Child Sciences. As a two-time Fulbright Scholar at the University of Helsinki, she is currently on their faculty as a Docent in Family and Consumer Sciences. She received her B.S. degree from the University of Minnesota, M.S. degree from Utah State University, and Ph.D. degree from Michigan State University in Family Ecology. In addition to being a former president of the National Council on Family Relations and NCFR Fellow, she was one of the original developers of NCFR’s Certified Family Life Educator program, has been actively involved in its ongoing development, and received a special recognition award for outstanding service to the CFLE

program. She has received various university and national teaching awards including the Excellence in College and University Teaching Award, sponsored by the USDA Higher Education Programs, the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, and American Association of State Colleges and Universities, as well as NCFR's Ernest G. Osborne Award for Outstanding Leadership and Excellence in the Teaching of Family Relationships and the Margaret Arcus Outstanding Family Life Educator Award. She has also published several articles on family life education, parent education, international family life education, and sexuality education.