

# The Reciprocal Act of Teaching and Learning: Are We Doing What the Best College Teachers Do?

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*"A true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination." – Albert Einstein, Physicist (1879–1955)<sup>1</sup>*

What does it mean to be an excellent teacher? How often do we reflect on our professional goals as an educator, and how often do we take risks by trying something innovative in the classroom? How often are we so focused on the content that we fail to even acknowledge whether the students understand the content and can apply it in authentic situations? I would challenge each of you to dig deeply into the educational literature to carefully reflect on what we do in the classroom each day. Are we investing completely in the educational process each session? Are we really working diligently to foster student learning and critical thinking, or are we focused on content delivery to stay on track with our course outline? Are we using the best pedagogical strategies in the literature, or are we simply continuing what we have done each semester as we teach our courses?

In the past year, I was fortunate enough to attend a seminar presented by the world-renowned teaching scholar and Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at New York University Dr Ken Bain. Best known for his work *What the Best College Teachers Do*,<sup>2</sup> Bain sought to define excellence in college teaching through his research. He defined excellence as those faculty who "achieved remarkable success in helping their students learn in ways that made a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel."<sup>(1, p.5)</sup> Throughout his presentation, I was struck by how many of the ideas he was presenting seemed so simple, but as I reflected and debriefed with other faculty, I realized that many of us, despite our formal training in pedagogy, failed to use many of the key constructs discussed in his work. Why was that? What we realized was that we often are so caught up in the structure of the semester or time constraints of the schedule that we fail to think creatively about how to engage our students in the learning process in a meaningful, substantive way. What was equally surprising was, after just a short discussion with colleagues, we came up with several innovative ways to change what we do so that we might better foster student learning. What we really remembered was that

just because we are teaching, learning is not always guaranteed.

Dr Bain's research revealed several major tenets regarding excellence in college teaching. Clearly, subject matter mastery is critical, but equally important is the instructor's understanding of human learning as a discipline and striving to create instructional materials that are "intellectually demanding."<sup>2(p.17)</sup> Although Chickering and Gamson<sup>3,4</sup> validated the idea of maintaining high expectations of students as one of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education in the late 1980s, Bain reinforces this concept and contends that excellent teachers also provide optimal support so students can rise to meet those expectations. This supportive yet challenging relationship fosters trust that intuitively encourages creativity and growth without fear of failure stifling their endeavors. Embarking on a collaborative educational journey encourages self-discovery and critical thinking which ultimately deepens the learning experience.

So is it all about what the teacher does that matters? Bain's subsequent work *What the Best College Students Do*<sup>5</sup> provided the integral link defining the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning. This book identifies key attitudes that separated exceptional college students from their peers. His conclusions, anchored in motivation and learning research, contend that intellectual curiosity, problem solving, and risk taking are essential skills for today's student. My question is: Are we allowing students to engage in these critical activities in our current model of education so that we can prepare self-directed, autonomous learners who are able to apply content knowledge in authentic situations with the confidence they need to be a successful professional once they graduate?

Reflexivity is critical in education. Just because we teach does not mean that students learn. If we look carefully at the mirror reflection of the word *teach*, it can be reflected as the word *learn*<sup>6</sup> (Figure). This powerful image demonstrates the interconnected nature of these 2 processes. It is our professional responsibility to ensure that we are teaching in a way that promotes deep learning.

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**Figure. The mirror reflection of the word teach can be reflected as the word learn.<sup>6</sup>**



In an academic setting where many faculty members are balancing the rigors of research and teaching or perhaps teaching and clinical practice, we must be committed to prioritizing teaching. We need to commit to doing what the best college teachers do and encourage and, more importantly, enable students to do what the best college students do so that our graduates are prepared to face the future challenges of our profession. These stewards of the profession have a huge burden to bear as our discipline and health care in general undergoes significant change. They deserve to be able

to think in authentic situations and not fear failure, as our most valuable lessons come through some level of failure if followed by reflection. Our profession is struggling with the transition to practice dilemma that is multifaceted but potentially exacerbated by the way in which we teach our students. It is our professional obligation to do what the best college teachers do so that we can foster deeper learning and intellectual curiosity so that our ever-changing discipline can be sustained. This generation of scholars will face challenges beyond our imagination, and if we do not teach them how to think, we have failed them and our profession.

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