



Ten Best Teaching Practices I've Observed

by Dr. Charles Taylor

This article is intended to share best teaching practices that great teachers display in the classroom. The author conducted over 150 classroom observations during a five year period.

Lessons Learned Can Lead to Great Teaching

As a former Dean and VP of Academic Affairs I made it a habit to go into classrooms to observe faculty with the goal of improving both teaching and learning. I think I completed over 150 classroom observations over a 5-year period and I learned a lot about the teaching strategies that effective teachers use to motivate students.

Now that I'm a full-time professor I try to integrate many of these practices into my own teaching. My end-of-class evaluations are among the highest in our school and I owe much of that to what I learned from my class observation visits. The intent is to share these practices with current and future instructors so you will consider adopting them and enhance the teaching and learning experience in your classroom. Although I observed many more outstanding teaching practices, I've only included 10 in this article.

The Instructor Provides a Road Map for the Student

The instructor provides an overview of what the class will cover through the class learning objectives. Learning objectives let students know the skills and knowledge that will be taught in a particular class. Think of them as a road map to follow. This is typically accomplished by the instructor distributing a clearly written syllabus to students. A well-written course syllabus is a very effective learning tool, that helps students prepare for the class, locate the resources that are available to them, understand the goals of the class, and the philosophy of the instructor (Parkes and Harris, 2002).

The Instructional Activities Support the Learning Objectives

The instructor links instructional activities to course learning objectives. This practice helps make the lectures appear logical and well-organized. Even the handouts result in a teachable moment. Whether the instructor uses a film, invites a guest lecturer to speak, requires group presentations, or facilitates a class discussion, students can observe how each particular instructional activity supports a specific course learning objective. As a result they are more likely to retain such information, (Slattery and Carlson, 2005).



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The Instructor Uses the Entire Classroom Space

The instructor circulates in the classroom to check all students' performances. This prevents students from internet surfing or talking in the back of the room. It helps keep students engaged and when combined with discussion questions, it helps to create an interactive learning environment as opposed to a passive one.

There is nothing that motivates students more than knowing that the instructor is actively participating in the lesson. Lack of interest or enthusiasm on part of the instructor can easily lead to lack of interest on the part of the students. Furthermore, by moving around, instructors make themselves more approachable, and less intimidating as they occupy the same physical spaces as their students, rather than always maintaining a distance by standing at the podium or the front of the class.

The Instructor Makes The Material Relevant

The instructor provides relevant examples, including real-world experiences and demonstrations to illustrate concepts and skills. S/he intentionally makes a connection between the content and the student's life. Critical pedagogue and noted scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), while analyzing classroom practices of successful teachers, notes that successful teachers utilize students' own cultural practices as a learning tool. One teacher used rap music to teach poetry and helped students understand literal and figurative meanings with the kind of music they were interested in. Great teachers always find a way to make the material relevant.

The Instructor Helps Students Develop Superior Learning Skills

The instructor uses instructional strategies that encourage the development of critical thinking, problem solving, and performance skills. The teacher asks questions that require students to synthesize, analyze, and evaluate information. Great teachers question students about their ideas, and the reason why they think a certain way in order to make them evaluate their own beliefs and the extent to which their ideas are a product of thorough research about something or unfounded beliefs passed on by family and friends. Hynd (1999) suggests using multiple instead of single texts, to teach history for instance, in order to allow space for multiple narratives.



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Students Learn to be Responsible for Their Own Learning

The instructor encourages students to be engaged in and responsible for their own learning. S/he challenges and motivates students to achieve at higher levels. The teacher communicates to all students their progress so they know where they stand grade-wise at any moment in the semester. When there is a guest speaker the instructor requires students to develop questions in advance. S/he has students go to the white board to demonstrate their knowledge in math and accounting classes.

Students who are actively engaged in the material they are studying tend to learn more. One way of promoting interest and to get timely feedback from students is to encourage them to keep a journal about the class (Park, 2003). Such a tool can provide useful feedback for the instructor and help the student to improve and understand their own learning issues pertaining to the subject matter.

The Teacher Re-Teaches When Necessary

The instructor sums up the learning objectives and answers any lingering questions students may have. The teacher re-teaches when necessary. The instructor makes him/herself approachable so that the students can get the most out of the classroom experience. There are subtle cues by which students can get more comfortable in the classroom, such as receiving encouragement upon asking a question, not being chastised for a question that is too 'simplistic', being encouraged to inquire when they don't understand and the willingness of the teacher to repeat themselves often and upon request from the student.

The Instructor Gives Every Student a Chance to Excel

The instructor treats all students in a fair and equitable manner. S/he tries to involve the whole class; doesn't just call on any particular group of students based on gender, race or ethnicity, and offers both shy and extroverted students opportunities to excel in the classroom. Maintaining an equitable, fluid and fair teaching relationship with all students is a key practice to discourage any unnecessary competition in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This sometimes involves switching the teacher-student role.

A diverse classroom means different ways of learning, and in order to encourage everyone to be engaged in the classroom, great teachers are flexible in accepting different modes of



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participation. Not every student will be a good public speaker, but that doesn't mean that they might not have good ideas to share. For those who might be too shy to speak up in class, there can be alternative ways to express their opinions and still be part of the class discussion, such as through an online discussion forum.

Instructor Provides Timely Feedback to Help the Student Grow Academically

The instructor provides supporting feedback after an incorrect response by probing, repeating the question, giving a clue, or allowing more time. S/he asks higher order thinking questions and allows appropriate wait time after the question is posed. Great teachers set aside time for students who are still struggling with a concept to get the assistance they need to understand it. This practice allows the instructor to collect student feedback on a regular basis to determine what was learned and what might have been confusing.

Students need to be challenged academically and they should be expected to meet high standards, because unless the teacher expects a high quality of work from them, they may not produce a high quality of work. Part of that process requires the teacher to provide excellent feedback, and give very specific comments so that students can improve their work.

The Instructor Keeps Students Engaged and Interested

The instructor uses observable techniques to gain and maintain student interest and attention. The best technique I observed was instructors simply displaying plain-old enthusiasm for teaching. That's contagious and it keeps students interested. Other techniques worth noting include demonstrating good rapport, using students' names, maintaining good eye contact, and maintaining a good voice volume. These are things that any instructor can emulate.

Research suggests that student interest has a positive relationship with learning. When students are interested in the material they tend to understand it better. Shcraw et al. (2001) stresses the importance of well-organized texts to peak students interest. Getting feedback from students and incorporating their ideas into the material is another way great teachers promote and maintain student interest in the course material.



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Conclusion

Good teaching practices help produce students who excel academically as well as who can engage critically with the world around them, and who are not merely able to reproduce what their text books tell them, but to develop a critical sociopolitical understanding of their world. The above practices are aimed at providing a framework for achieving the most out of a classroom experience and for creating a safe environment that promotes opportunities for mutual understanding and learning across students of diverse backgrounds. I hope you found them helpful

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