

Learning to Teach

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, JUL 16 2013

College teaching is much like any other profession in that there is a certain skill set that one must develop in order to achieve best practice. It is a strange profession, though, in that much of the time there is little direction given to young and early career academics to teach them how to teach. Often the focus for a young academic is on their doctoral research, the first major manuscript length research project, the completion of which signifies at least acceptance into the halls of the academy, if not always a seat at the university table. Teaching while completing a PhD, while common, is oftentimes seen as a way of providing the young scholar with a subsidy, some form of compensation for efforts underway.

This lack of investment in teaching doesn't mean that the young teachers who emerge as full time college professors are somehow without skills or lack the classroom know-how to effectively engage their students. Indeed, the lack of training may do little more than delay the emergence of an otherwise strong teaching ability by a year or so as the newly minted PhD finds their feet in the academic world. But when we only have access to our students for maybe a semester or, at most, a couple of years, every delay we impose and every class that is not quite as good as it could be is really too heavy an imposition to bear. Research might bring in the money but it is instruction of students that will, in the longer term, provide the best return on investment for a school.

Where supports are missing for young academics, where do they turn to learn how to teach? I can speak only of my own case and point to a three avenues that have proved useful in my own case.

The first strategy I have employed is observation; that is, watching skilled professors work a classroom and seeking to understand exactly why they do so well. I had the privilege of being able to watch masters like David Lundberg and Rodney Fopp work a classroom at the University of South Australia when I first started to teach. I would later travel and see professors like Mark Burgess teach marketing at Rider University or sit riveted while listening to Enzo Le Fevre lecture on human rights and genocide prevention measures, both subjects outside of my field of interest but both master communicators. Observing others who do something well and building on those observations in my own classroom is one informal way I have made up for the lack of formal teaching supports in my own career.

A second strategy has been via reading books on the subject of teaching and the academic career. Two I keep in my office are Jeffrey Buller's *The Essential College Professor* and the Goldsmith, Komlos and Gold volume, *The Chicago Guide to Your Academic Career*. Both books, though Buller's in particular, identify how a college professor should prepare their classes, the ways to link pedagogy with student success, ways to deal with classroom behaviour that is unexpected or even frightening, and both books demonstrate how teaching is not something you are either born with or born without but rather something you can develop.

A third strategy is to stay current with teaching and pedagogical news. Whether it is a daily perusal of *Inside Higher Education* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the weekly skip over to the *THES*, the occasional dive into the Chronicle.com forums on teaching, or simply exchanging articles with colleagues here at CEFAM, reading about what is happening right now in teaching around the world helps me to think critically about my courses and how they are presented to students. One article passed on by a colleague this week – Pool and Sewell's 'The key to employability' – is a case in point: for all the politics I push towards my students, am I helping them to make the sorts of connections they can and should be making to get themselves employed?

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Universities and colleges can and should do more than they are to help early career academics become better teachers even while they are training them to become world class researchers. There are steps, though, that professors old and new can take on their own to improve their teaching and, as so often in life, being on the front foot about such things can only engender pay offs in the short, and long term.

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Read more from Dylan in his e-IR blog [Political Business](#)

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