

Thoughts on Teaching

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Titian, The Flaying of Marsyas, ca. 1570–76, oil on canvas

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Words from my mother

Other people: What do you do?

My mother: Teach

Other people: What do you teach?

My mother: Students

Qualities of a good teacher

According to international students a good teacher is...

- Approachable
- Flexible
- Makes explicit expectations and assessment activities and makes offers of support (but not in front of other students)
- Understands challenges student may face both living and studying abroad

From Herrick, T., and Shotts, J., "More diverse and better informed: using student insights to improve teaching". Presented at Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference, Aston University, July 2018.

Teaching and leadership

According to Tom DeLong (Harvard Business School), good teachers and good leaders share the same characteristics:

1. Know your subject

Be a “mad scientist”, irrationally in love with your subject

2. Know your students

Look at their biographies and find out about them as individuals

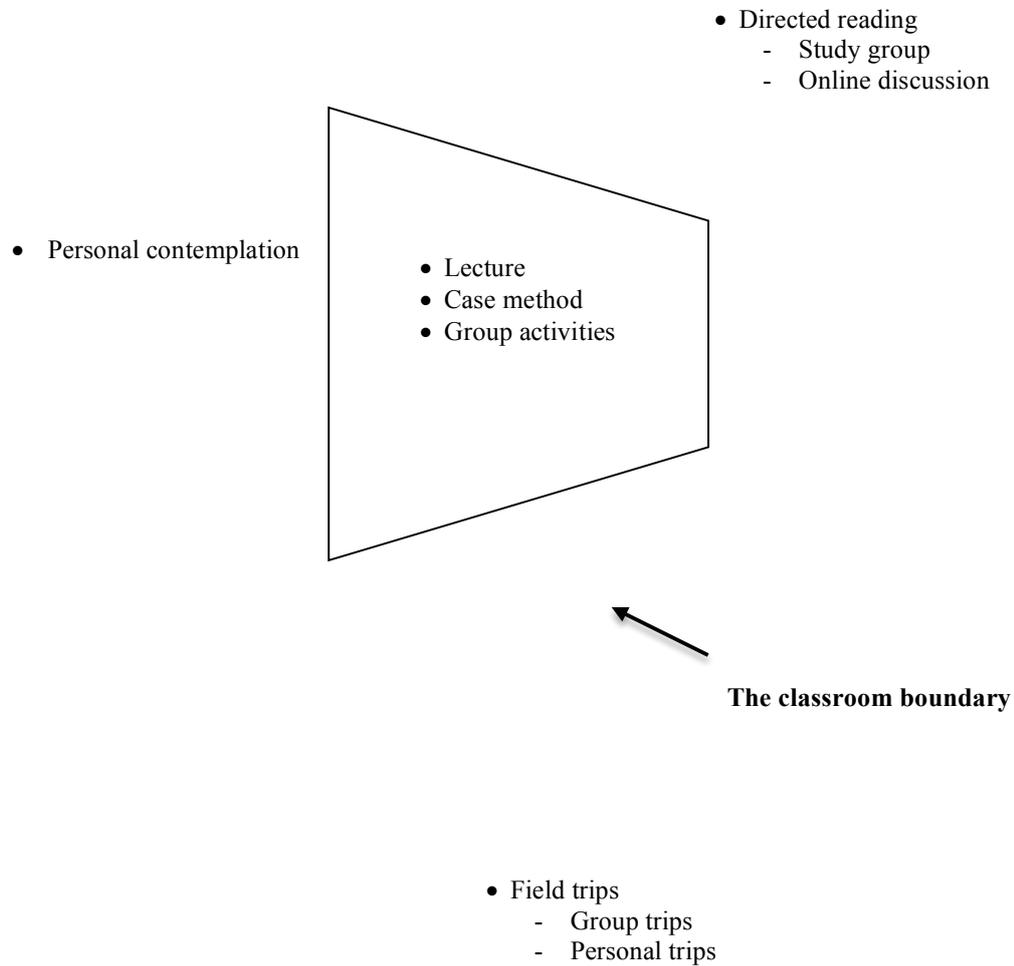
3. Create an environment where they can take risks

Don't allow people to be humiliated, but expose them if they're not prepared

4. Be believable

Your actions and conduct transcends the message

On pedagogy



Key message:

"Eliminate the tedium by changing the medium"

Class architecture

If I could design a lecture room:

The amphitheatre:

- 3 sections and 2 aisles (like a plane on a transatlantic flight)
- It should be *raked* so that I can see all students and they can see the front
- It should be *bowed* so that students can see each other
- Enough space to allow students to get to their desks without impeding others (*unlike* the theatre)
- Clock at the *back* of the classroom (not the front)
- Flip charts/boards at the back of the classroom to record the lesson plan (putting a brief agenda on the board allows you to move away from the front desk)
- *Assigned* seating (preferably in an assigned room)
- Name cards – first name (or nickname) *only*

Front of class:

- 1 centre screen and/or 2 side screens
- 2-4 large whiteboards (that aren't covered by the side screens)

Technology:

- Online polls – excellent way to motivate preparation
- In class polls – can reveal more information than a hand vote
- For software recommendations, see <http://econ.anthonyjevans.com/2019/07/classroom-technology/>

Case method learning process

1. Individual preparation

You must read the case before class and spend some time (i) thinking about the issues raised; (ii) conducting some preliminary analysis.

2. Small group discussion

Meet in teams ahead of class and share findings. This process helps you begin to establish some of the key points and gives you practice and making an argument to others.

3. Class discussion

Pay attention to the ideas of other people during the class discussion. Make sure you note points that you hadn't considered.

4. Personal reflection

Hopefully the class discussion will have left many questions open, and leave you with a feeling of uneasiness. Go back to your notes from individual preparation and ask yourself how your thoughts have changed. Don't feel the need to wrap things up but do try to reflect on what you have learnt. Reflect more on the learning outcomes, not the case itself.

Managing the class²

A successful class requires three things:

1. Instructors preparation
2. Students preparation
3. Mutual trust

Advanced assignments

- You can get a lot of the technical knowledge transfer out the way. If it's the case that in a standard lecture "you might as well just read the textbook", then just read the textbook

Rules:

- Be punctual
- Laptops are fine, provided they do not distract other students.
- To the extent that mobile phones can be used to access information, I do not mind them being used. The main thing is whether they distract others – at the very least they must be kept on silent

Set up in advance:

- Write up agenda
- Make sure technology is working

At the beginning:

- Jump straight into the class
 - Don't make administrative announcements (it's boring)
 - Don't have an "objectives" slide
- A good method is a brief exercise – getting them to write something down immediately focuses their attention on the class

² A lot of these thoughts are based on advice provided by Noam Wasserman and Thomas DeLong during the Global Colloquium for Participant-Centered Learning hosted by Harvard Business School, July 2009. I've also incorporate insights from the Case Teaching Workshop delivered by Ulf Schäfer in Munich, July 2019.

- If you're worried that a critical mass haven't read the case, you can give 10-15 minutes to discuss key questions in small groups.

What constitutes a good discussion topic?

- At least two different sides to it that can each be reasonably argued (i.e. you can establish that each is logically *valid*, and the debate focuses on *soundness*)
- Controversial, and likely to stimulate debate
- Accessible – i.e. all students possess the necessary facts
- Has a core takeaway...

...where a takeaway is an insight/lesson that is:

- Surprising (e.g. counter intuitive)
- Important
- Applicable

Role of the instructor:

- Sequence and transition
- Order and structure
- Tease out things students didn't realise they knew
- Set the rules of engagement
- Time management

The start:

- A good opening question has a clear answer (i.e. is not open ended)
- It should be related to the protagonist and frame the problem
- *Don't* ask someone to summarise the case
 - It takes time
 - Can be hard to arrive at a conclusion
 - It validates those who didn't read it

During a discussion:

- On the first day of class you can ask them to turn down their name cards once they've spoken so you can keep track on who hasn't contributed yet.
- Control the class – don't let students dictate where you're trying to lead the discussion

- Dealing with silence – there are ways to incentivise participation (e.g. part of the grade) and ways to break the silence (e.g. cold calling), but don't be scared of silence. In many operas the silence is more important than anything else.
- Cold calling – keeps them on their toes and encourages participation. Often it entices reserved students to make a pre-emptive strike, which is ideal. Students typically don't like cold calls because they expose a lack of preparation and put them on the spot. The former is a good thing, and the latter is down to a lack of experience. Once they've started talking they tend to grow in confidence. It's the instructor's job to provide a safe environment for them to develop. If you are uncomfortable about choosing a student at random, ask a student to pick a number. Count that many students along the row, and ask *them* to answer the question.
- Warm calling – you can give a student advanced notice that you'll call on them. As with cold calling it is important to make them realise that this is positive feedback - as in a boardroom setting you are calling on them because you think they will contribute.
- Pushback – it's important that students realise that a trivial comment doesn't constitute an effective contribution, so it's often a good idea to pushback and get them to expand. The simplest way is just to follow up their responses with "why?" This also exposes students who aren't prepared and reminds others that preparation is important. Often it's the 3rd or 4th level answer that contains the real insight. Also, by answering questions with "what do you think?" bolsters the aim of **using discussions to develop skills, not demonstrate them**.
- External experience – it's important to keep the playing field level so whilst you might call on someone to support a point you're trying to make (e.g. "Jake – you've worked in the construction industry, is Travis Perkins a big company or a small company?"), you do not want them to take control of the floor and pontificate. In theory all students tackle the problem with the same information to hand.
- If they haven't prepared then be tough. Push them. Let them know it's unacceptable, but do your hard work 1vs1 – never castigate them in public.
- If you are struggling to get a discussion going, use buzzgroups. Ask students to form pairs/threes and discuss the question that you've posed. This should warm them up and then help aid a full class discussion.
- Hand signals – Liberty Fund rules can be very helpful in a discussion (put your hand up to make a new point, point at your desk to come in on the current point), and obviously raising your hand must be a prerequisite for being given the floor. Do not let people jump in without raising their hands, and do not let them jump the queue. If they do so do a stop signal and take back control. Raising hands provide a good marker, since if someone takes you off on a tangent you can call back to someone who'd raised their hand at the same time.
- Positioning – you don't want to have a dialogue with a student, you want them to be addressing the rest of the class. So rather than stand at the front of the class you can either:
 - Move around – make it clear that you're listening, but if you move around the room they'll stop addressing you directly.
 - Stand across the room – they're then directing it to all the students in-between you.

- Stand *behind* them – they’re physically unable to address you and are forced to address their colleagues.

Role play:

- Stop it at the peak of its intensity – you want to capture it and keep it in the room.

Be entertaining:

- You have an obligation to keep their attention. During advanced screenings of his Broadway musicals, Oscar Hammerstein would be watching the audience to see at what point they began looking at their programmes. When you hear students ruffling their papers it tends to mean you’ve lost their attention. You can even permit them to have phones because that’ll be your signal for when they’re bored. The sign of success is when they’re not all ready to leave the room when the session ends...

At the end of class:

- Don’t have a “wrap up” slide
- As Philip Roth wrote, "At the bedroom door, before leaving for the market, Monty turned back to summarize. Bullies love to summarize"³
- Leave it open ended
- You don’t *want* them to think that they’ve finished learning. You *want* them to leave the classroom talking about the concepts, still wrestling with them, scratching their heads, talking to each other, etc.
- If you are concerned about this you can always appoint a student to make a few comments in closing, but these should be more like general observations rather than succinct outcomes.
- Any summary should be focused on summarising the *session* as opposed to the *case*. By the end of the session you should have left the case behind.

Grading participation:

- I don’t see how you can do this properly without having a TA that makes down on the seating chart those who made a contribution. You can retrospectively grade these, but it’s difficult.
- If you have a low expectation of what constitute minimal engagement, one way may be to start each student with a solid B. Then,
 - Assign lower grades for those who disrupt the class (and will, by definition, be easy to notice and keep track of)

³ Roth, P. *The Plot Against America* Vintage (2004)

- Offer the potential for a higher grade to students who use a name card, but make clear that they can only use one if:
 - They have read the case thoroughly
 - They have made notes in advance
 - They are willing to be called upon

A note on ambiguity:

- Ambiguity is a good thing because it's realistic. Exposing students to ambiguous situations is a key learning objective. But explain to them this philosophy, you don't want them to think its accidental, and you don't want them to interpret it negatively.

Teaching evaluations

The reason most universities use student evaluations as the sole measure of teaching performance is because they are easy to compile. We all appreciate that the correlation between student “enjoyment” and the accomplishment of key learning objectives is not always perfect, and whilst I have faith that students recognise and reward teachers that push them hard, we need a more holistic measure of performance. Ideally, we should balance five things:

1. Student evaluations

One of my main frustrations with student evaluations is their superficiality. I find out whether students thought my classes were good, but never really *why*. Even the qualitative parts fail to provide evidence-based constructive comments, and I am rarely able to implement any exchanges based on this feedback. To this end I provide an additional evaluation form that gets students to classify various topics on a 2x2 matrix based on how (i) interesting; (ii) important they thought they were. I also get them to do a “Stop. Start. Continue” exercise which is helpful.⁴ There is a longstanding suspicion that student evaluations reward popularity, superficiality, and the expected ease of the grading. I’m not sure if I buy into this, because I know plenty of instructors who challenge their students, are tough, but highly appreciated. I’ve also heard rumours of studies suggesting male teachers score systematically higher than females, and all sorts of other biases. They’re undoubtedly good for signalling genuine problems, but it’s dangerous to put too much weight on student evaluations.

2. Peer observation

It is crucial to cultivate a culture where faculty members regularly sit in on their colleague’s classes. Not only to familiarise themselves with the course as a whole, but to offer constructive advice. These observations need to be understood as an input to professional development, and not as a threat.

3. Full audit

Have an outside pair of eyes review all teaching materials that are used to create classes.⁵

4. General management

This is important because often the “best” teachers can abuse this system and become a burden on communal resources. It’s important to have 360° evaluations that allow everyone that is involved in the course delivery (e.g. programme office, library, facilities, etc.) to have input into the evaluation.

5. Self-reflection

How can we take meaningful but non-burdensome steps toward articulating and recording the development of our courses and teaching style?

⁴ You can download my version here:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/utejgknhrgfxqjz/aje_feedback.pdf?dl=0

⁵ For more see here: <http://econ.anthonyjevans.com/2014/10/faculty-audits/>

The Faculty Roundtable

I wrote a short article simulating a faculty lounge conversation, similar to Kitch, Edmund W., ed. 1983 “The Fire of Truth: A Remembrance of Law and Economics at Chicago, 1932–1970.” *Journal of Law and Economics* 26(1):163–234. It covers tricks and tips for how we teach. You can find it here:

<https://medium.com/@anthonyjevans/the-faculty-roundtable-cc6a74e0b318>