



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Good Teaching is Common Sense

"I take it for granted that every teacher should be interested in teaching, that he should work hard at the job, and that he should have good common sense. If he does not have those qualities, nothing will make him a good teacher. If he does have them he will learn by educating himself."

While this view has been attacked by some as anti-intellectual, this dean at a Big Ten graduate school was right on target with the importance he placed on common sense.

K. Patricia Cross suggests that we generally want to cause learning, which she sees as a process composed mostly of common sense practices. Cross gives us three:

1. *Provide an active learning environment.*

When students are actively involved in the learning task, they learn more than when they are passive recipients of instruction.

2. *Allow and even demand practice.*

Students need to be actively and successfully involved in learning tasks that lead to desired outcomes.

3. *Set high but attainable goals.*

Academic performance, believe it or not, usually rises to meet expectations.

Looking at these practices, you may be saying to yourself, "I do that," or "Maybe, I should do more of that!" In fact, Cross contends these relatively straightforward strategies are only rarely implemented in college classrooms. Our own common sense should tell us that we can be more effective by applying simple practices that are known to work.

Some Things That Seem to Work . . .

What follows are a few general approaches that embrace strategies I have found to be effective in the teaching process.

1. *An Assumption About Student Interest*

I assume that students are motivated to be successful in my course. Furthermore, I assume there will always be topics of real interest, no matter how boring the general subject might seem. This positive

attitude is sensed immediately by most students and makes them more receptive and participative.

2. *Structure and Tasks*

Every teaching session has a definite structure. There is a logical sequence of tasks or objectives. The students know this and generally are comfortable with it. We may not always follow the sequence exactly, but there usually is a clear sense of accomplishment when the session ends. If for some reason we don't get through everything planned for the session, we carry it over. If time does not allow that, an alternative way of achieving that objective is found.

3. *Students Using My Personal Notes and Materials*

I lend students my lecture notes (not copies), reference books, and other resource material. They are always returned. Most often this occurs with part-time students who are not in regular contact with other students. This is one of those no-cost support systems a teacher can easily put into place and which will help the student who is not strongly committed to the course to stay with it.

4. *Accessibility*

It usually is not enough to be available to students only for scheduled course hours. Some students will want to see you in your office, so it is sensible to inform students of your availability. If necessary, give them your home phone number. Access is important to students, and these practices eliminate the old "I couldn't get in touch with you."

Our clientele will change. To a large extent, it already has. Students have jobs, children, and other responsibilities that often make communication difficult. If we can provide some alternative ways of keeping in touch, let's do so.

5. *Handouts, Handouts, Handouts*

In many situations where I could provide handouts to students, I don't. "Why?" you ask. "Is it not an easy way to share material?" Of course, it is; and sometimes it is a good and necessary practice. However, there are things on my agenda besides distributing the written word. If I do not distribute the material, it means I will have to find some other mode of transmission; therefore, I will have to



rethink it and be creative.

So let's say I decide to take a very conventional approach and deliver the material in lecture style, using the board and perhaps overheads. Now I am assured that many of the students will read or hear the material at least once. Hopefully, most will also have written, in note form, some or all of the material. The recording by hand of something seen or heard is thought to produce better retention than simply seeing it.

6. *Planning Carefully for Small Group Work*

Due to the nature of systems work, I often want students to work in small project groups. This can be a good simulation of what happens in the workplace, but it is necessary to provide a fairly rigid structure to make it a productive activity. I hold frequent, brief, scheduled meetings with each group; and I require all group members to attend every meeting. The time is used to check progress against a workplan and to discuss problems and future direction.

If a "people" problem is obvious in the group, I schedule a special meeting to deal with that problem. Often, the group will have worked out a solution before the meeting actually takes place.

Usually, I find I have to do very little. Groups perform responsibly. I suspect this is so because the assigned systems project is hard work and very time-consuming. In this case, group performance rises to meet expectations.

7. *Using Simple Devices Routinely*

By devices I mean methods of presenting material, ways to organize a teaching session, and processes for communicating with students. An example is the time-tested method (habit, really) of always briefly reviewing what was accomplished during the previous teaching session at the beginning of the present one. You might say, "Everyone does that!" And I would say to you that, based on feedback from students, it is a rarer practice than any of us would think. The value of this simple practice is that it ties sessions together, gets the student ready to move on, and helps the teacher focus more clearly on upcoming material.

Let me add a note of caution by way of a little story that might be called "The Professor Who Reviewed Too Well." Some years ago, I was enrolled in a course that dealt with the political history of Australia. The professor had been a very active participant in Australian federal politics in the 1940s and 1950s and had an astounding depth of knowl-

edge to share. He was a firm believer in starting each three-hour lecture with a review of the previous lecture's material. Unfortunately for us, this device completely took over, and it seemed sometimes the review was longer than the original presentation. As the end of the course drew near, some of us could "lip-sync" the first hour or two; after all, we had reviewed the material a dozen times!

In addition, I must mention a practice—implemented by my college—that is based on common sense and that, in my opinion, improves the student's probability of success. This practice is designating the faculty member as class advisor. In this role the teacher is the student's chief contact for course and program information. However, the primary value to the student is in having a real live person to talk to. This is critically important to first-year students who are struggling to adjust to the often frustrating college environment and those other students who are having academic difficulties and personal problems. This important contact point connects the student with many other more specialized services provided by the college. While this role is not teaching per se, it is something best done by the teacher and is a common sense contribution to learning.

How You Know . . .

Use student feedback as a gauge to measure your effectiveness: not some formal evaluation tool, but informal feedback. For example:

1. As you are teaching a course, students start to give you unsolicited articles from periodicals that pertain to a topic discussed in class.
2. After you have given a truly mind-numbing final assignment, students put notes on their submissions indicating how much they enjoyed a particular part of the course, or even the entire experience!

Common sense should tell us that when these behaviours take place, *we must be doing some things right*. We may not know specifically what, nor does it matter really, because most likely we have evolved a style of teaching that employs the simple, effective practices with which we are satisfied and comfortable.

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