

Seven Years a Teacher: Five Lessons Learned as a Two-Year College Instructor

Frederick Douglass is attributed with the following quote: “Without a struggle, there can be no progress.” With this quote in mind, I would like to introduce you to a story about progress achieved through years of reflection. My seven years as a two-year college instructor have provided me with many lessons. Therefore, my goal in this discussion is to boil down the countless hours of preparation and teaching into five lessons I have learned—lessons I believe we all wish we were taught before we began our path to teaching.

Lesson #1: Content is NOT King

Many of us remember cramming for tests during our undergraduate years in college. Meticulous notes were critical to our success. Then came graduate school where we consumed copious amounts of literature and wrote high-level papers. All of this content was drilled into our minds, if not our very soul. Certainly, the other end of academia (teaching) would require us to yet again be drilled with a barrage of continuous learning, right? Not entirely, at least not for me. One of the first major changes I noticed as I moved from being a student into the role of teacher is that I didn’t have to learn new information. I only had to harness that information and package it for my students. Content became the dodo bird of education.

Now, you may be horrified to read or even imagine that instructors do not consider content to be of primary importance—and you would be right. However, and this is the important issue, content is quite important, but it may no longer be the sole or primary issue for instructors. The primary focus for instructors at many two-year colleges has become disseminating content. The creation of novel instruction (not novel content) is the focal point for instructors.

Lesson #2: If Content Is King, He Has a Twin Brother Named Technology

So where exactly is the focus in education at two-year colleges, if not on content? In a word: technology. For learners, it’s about online learning or learning with online resources. Increasingly, publisher-based technology, along with a barrage of third-party applications, is becoming the new normal in two-year colleges.

For instructors, teaching is now the navigation and employment of new technological tools. I dove into my first semester as full-time faculty instructor with an abundance of course sections that ranged from web conferencing to recorded lectures, along with a wide range of online teaching practices. Oh, what I would have given to have been a student in a course about teaching in the internet age! By the way, my bachelor’s degree is in education. Therefore, it’s not as if I haven’t been trained in the area of instruction.

This conversation is not turning into a “technology is making our lives harder” dialogue. Rather, this conversation is presenting us with the fact that content is not “the only show in town.” Effective instructors cannot simply instruct. Rather, they must deliver education, and doing so requires technological tools, which begs the question, “Does technology make teaching easier?”

Lesson #3: This Is as Good as It Gets

Jack Nicolson, in the film *As Good as It Gets*, famously wondered if life could get any better than the exact moment he was living. Does teaching get easier or is this as good as it gets? Optimistically, I was told by a fellow instructor that after three years of teaching, teaching becomes easier. I couldn’t disagree more. With the continuous flow of politics, budget constraints, and competition in the world of education, there is an ongoing onslaught of challenges that motivate, if not force, instructors to adapt to an ever-changing classroom, whether virtual or on campus. No, teaching does not get easier. So what are we to do if this is the case?

Lesson #4: You Have to Run Twice as Fast to Go Anywhere

Lewis Carol’s character, the Red Queen, in *Alice in Wonderland*, said, “My dear, here we must run as fast as we can, just to stay in place. And if you wish to go anywhere, you must run twice as fast as that.” This quote precisely sums up teaching in the field of education. I always expected that after a semester or two, or even three, that my assignments would be solidified and that few to no changes would need to occur after that. What I have found is that change in education is a very certain and reliable creature. Even if assignments were to stay the same, leadership at the college, politics (i.e., funding), and other factors outside of instructors’ control do change. Moreover, even if these forces do not change, those motivated instructors who do engage in continuous improvement (e.g., conferences) will continue to see their own attitudes and goals adapt, change, and ultimately improve overall.

Consider the following—by some estimates, Americans upgrade their mobile phones every two years or less. Now consider the discipline you teach. Does your field continuously evolve or change? Consider how often CPR techniques undergo modification. Change is mandatory. Change is the blend of the first three lessons I discussed: content, technology, and improvement. Continuous improvement, like selling the latest gadget, is necessary to be a good instructor. Notice the words “good instructor.” We have to improve to maintain a decent level of instruction. Why? Despite the level of instruction we perceive our students are getting, students and administrators are comparing us against some type of standard. The notion that an instructor’s performance is “good,” “above average,” or “excellent” is relative from one administrator to the next. Much like whether you feel that the customer service at the local retailer is good is largely the result of previous experiences. Therefore, your level of instruction is continuously being compared to other instructors or courses seen by administrators and students. Sites like RateMyProfessor.com illustrate that our perceived performances—either fairly or not—are constantly undergoing evaluation. Therefore, to be rated as a good instructor, we must continuously evolve. How to be a great instructor is a debate for another time.

Lesson #5: Attitude Is Everything

Car engines require oil to reduce friction and ensure peak operation. If a classroom is like a car, then the instructor’s attitude is the oil. I have either comforted students, or witnessed other instructors comfort students, through kind and motivating words. To this day, I am astonished how a few simple words can instantly reduce, and sometimes remove, doubts and fears students may have during a class or semester.

Our attitudes shape the way we approach and teach within our classrooms. However, the attitude we adopt has similar effects outside the classroom. Our attitude affects our lesson planning, collaboration, and accomplishment in our praxis of instruction. We cannot simply act positively within the classroom for the sake of presenting a good attitude.

Consider the role of lying. Lying is often a performance one acts out to convey authenticity. However, Pamela Myer’s TED talk, *How to Spot a Liar*, teaches us that our subconscious thoughts and our body’s micro expressions give away our true thoughts and intentions. Similarly, our attitude, either positive or negative, comes out during our instruction. The role of the instructor and his or her instruction is multifaceted. These various tasks tax us continuously and daily. Our approach to these challenges is based on our attitudes about how we view our role as educators.

Clearly, attitude is not simply an indicator of our ability to get along with colleagues or to develop a rapport with students. Rather, attitude in education is a

shadow-like mental construct that continually follows us on our paths as educators.

To sum up my observations as a two-year college instructor, consider what I previously wrote: teaching does not get easier. This idea may scare some instructors. However, this idea may also challenge us and excite us into action. Taking action to be better educators is a motivating idea. And if you indeed are motivated to be a better instructor, you will undoubtedly have many of your own lessons to share with the rest of us.

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