Reflections on Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do*

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Abstract

This paper is a personal reflection on the qualities and best practices of select college teachers as presented by Ken Bain (2004) in *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Specifically, this paper looks at the concepts, theories and teaching models presented in my Adult Education and Training program at Colorado State University to date, and correlates these with the material presented in Bain’s book. It chronicles personal reflections and insights garnered from all of the elements presented.
Reflections on Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do*

When I began my college teaching career several years ago, I did so with dreams of inspiring hearts and minds to achieve unparalleled heights in their educational endeavors. I would motivate, exhilarate, and educate every student that crossed my path. I would be the teacher that everyone dreamed of having, the teacher that succeeded in transforming lives. Then, reality set in, I found myself struggling just to keep my head above water, with little time to even consider such things as student motivation, varying my teaching techniques, or adapting my lessons for alternate learning styles.

As a graduate student in the Adult Education and Training program at CSU, I am finally getting an opportunity to learn about and reflect on what it means to be an adult educator, what it means to actually facilitate someone else’s learning. While I delve into concepts and ideologies, theories and methods, I continue to ponder the question: How do I *inspire* my students? Given the opportunity to read Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004), I jumped at the chance to find an answer to this question. With this paper, I will explore some of the strategies and the mind-sets of college teachers who have been successful in inspiring student learning.

**Learning Theories**

Beginning with Dewey and continuing into the present, *experiential* learning plays a prominent role in current adult learning theory and practice (Boucouvalas and Lawrence, 2010). Dewey notes, “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (1938, p. 20). Bain (2004) found that many of the best college teachers believe this to be true. Each student enters the classroom with his/her own ‘mental models’ of how the world works. While it is the instructor’s role to challenge existing mental models and facilitate the construction of new ones, effective teachers recognize that mental
models change slowly. More importantly, they perceive what strategies will help to effectuate such change. Namely, that the learner must be presented with a problem/situation in which the current mental model will not work; the learner must care enough about the problem to want to solve it; and finally, the learner must be able to find the emotional fortitude to handle the trauma that sometimes accompanies such learning transformations (Bain, 2004).

This strategy impressed me from several perspectives. It acknowledges that students learn best when allowed to experience the learning, whether that be through a hands-on, practical challenge, a case study, a role-play, or any other problem-based learning technique. The strategy also relies on creating a problem/situation that is relevant to the learner, something the learner perceives as applicable to his/her life/work situation. “When adults can see that what they are learning makes sense and is important according to their values and perspective, their motivation emerges” (Wlodkowski, 2004, p. 143). Finally, the strategy recognizes how tenuous and fragile the act of learning can be, how necessary it might be to bolster our students with examples, applications, and feedback – all in a safe environment, that will allow them to fail, perhaps repeatedly, and come back for more until they can adapt to new mental models that work.

One of the teaching strategies I find myself using frequently is the use of questions, even in my current work with young learners. I find it instrumental in engaging my students, but Bain (2004) helped elucidate this concept for me from the learner’s perspective. He notes, “Questions help us construct knowledge . . . The more questions we ask, the more ways we can index a thought in memory. Better indexing produces greater flexibility, easier recall, and richer understanding” (Bain, p. 31). He goes on to explain that true learning occurs when our students begin to ask their own questions, again, providing relevancy to their learning.
Cognitive Development

Bain draws on the work of Perry’s developmental scheme and Clinchy’s work on *Women’s Ways of Knowing* as he explores how effective teachers incorporate their knowledge and understanding of cognitive development into student learning (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007). For me, it brought these theories to life, and illustrated for me, concrete examples of how to reach my students at whatever stage they might be. The best college teachers not only recognize the diversity of their students’ levels of cognitive development, but also know how to challenge the learner, at whatever level, to think at a higher level, while showing sympathy and understanding for the emotional trauma this might entail (Bain, 2004).

Student Motivation

Last semester, for EDRM 600, my research project focused on teacher effectiveness and student motivation, and our topic this week in AD 620 happens to be student motivation. I perceive that this is a theme that plays a vital role in the depth and quality of student learning. While Bain notes that intrinsic motivators are more effective than extrinsic ones, he also refers to studies by Deci and others that argue “most extrinsic motivators damage intrinsic motivation” (Bain, 2004, p. 33). If this is true, then the collegiate system of offering ‘grades’ as rewards for quality learning is actually inhibiting our students’ motivations for future learning.

So what do effective teachers do? Most avoid extrinsic motivators and foster the intrinsic ones. Specifically, they make students active participants in their own learning, giving them some control over how and what they learn. They avoid competition and nurture cooperation and collaboration. When it comes to ‘grading’ they provide numerous, and often various, opportunities for students to demonstrate their comprehension of the material.
In recalling my prior teaching experiences, I can see that, even though I offered varied opportunities to demonstrate learning, I required each student to take advantage of each opportunity. My thinking at the time was that if a student was not so good at writing papers, then perhaps he/she could ‘make up’ some points with another project that focused more on kinesthetic learning, and vice versa. This gave them little sense of control over their learning, and perhaps failed to allow them to learn in the manner in which they learn best. I think that providing options for how my students wanted to demonstrate their learning to me might have increased student motivation, and subsequently, student learning.

**Teaching Methods**

As Bain reiterates frequently, it is not what teachers do, it is what they understand. Some of what they understand is exemplified in seven principles that were found to be common among the teachers studied. I will not repeat them here, but instead, choose to focus on two that I found most salient.

The first principle I found inspirational was, “Start with the students rather than the discipline” (Bain, 2004, p. 110). I must admit that in my first years of teaching, I was truly “teacher-centered”, feeling that I had all this information that I needed to impart to my students. It never occurred to me that I could step back and look at where they were currently, what mental models they each brought to class, and start from there, guiding them to get where they needed to go. With this approach, I could design my instruction to question the “troublesome (from the discipline’s perspective) notions students are likely to hold” (Bain, p. 112) and challenge “each one progressively, picking the order that will best help students to develop an integrated understanding of the whole” (Bain, p. 112).
The second principle I found pertinent was, “Seek commitments” (Bain, 2004, p. 112). As was brought out in our discussions this week in AD 620, while it may be the instructor’s role to motivate each student, the student must also retain a sense of personal responsibility for his/her learning. Bain has found that, “Exceptional teachers ask their students for a commitment to the class and the learning” (Bain, p. 112). This is done in any number of ways, both written and verbal, but never with a sense of the ‘drill sergeant’ mentality. Rather, the commitment is sought in order to let the students know they have a choice. If they choose to participate in the class, then they have obligations and responsibilities to themselves, their classmates, and the teacher (Bain, 2004).

While teaching in the dental hygiene program, we did provide our students with a long list of “rights and responsibilities”, which we reviewed with each student, then had them sign, along with the teachers. In hindsight, I would suggest that we consider allowing the students to come up with their own list of rights and responsibilities to sign. Perhaps then, it would be more meaningful and students might actually take ownership of their learning.

In addition to the seven underlying principles of good teaching, Bain found that the art of productive conversation also played a significant role in the effective teacher’s classroom. Good teachers had acquired the skills needed to provide “stimulating talk, clear directions, and thorough explanations” (Bain, 2004, p. 118). They engaged their students in meaningful dialogue, whether in short one-on-one conversations or in a fifty-minute lecture.

One of the most practical tips, for me, to come out of this book was the concept of “think/pair/square/share” (Bain, 2004, p. 130), a technique that good teachers employ to encourage classroom dialogue. It begins with a few minutes of private think time, followed by a one-on-one conversation with a partner, followed by a small-group discourse of four people, then
finally, a full-class discussion. This gradual expansion of the conversation appeals to me as a way to include everyone in the discussion, while respecting the shy, reticent members of the class.

Bain also spoke of a highly effective teacher’s ‘intentions’ prior to starting a class. Most of the good teachers interviewed asserted that they took a few minutes before each class to prepare mentally and emotionally for the teaching experience. While the techniques varied, all agreed that this few minutes made a difference in the outcome. It set the tone for how they perceived they wanted the class to proceed. Rather than going in prepared to ‘just get through the hour’, they garnered their enthusiasm and contrived to reach every student at some level, convinced that each student had the capacity to learn. I can only imagine the impact this would have had on my classes, had I taken the time to do this.

**Evaluation and Assessment**

For the best college teachers, student assessment and teacher evaluation go hand in hand. Only through assessing what my students have learned can I evaluate the quality of my teaching efforts. Last semester we looked at the various assessment methods as described by Galbraith and Jones (2010), which included criterion-referenced assessment, norm-referenced assessment, qualitative and quantitative assessment, performance assessment, formative and summative assessment, and analytic and holistic assessment. While the teachers studied may have utilized any or all of these various assessment techniques, the emphasis was always more on the learning outcomes, rather than performance.

To make learning-based assessment work, teachers need to know their students—what are their goals, how do they think, how do they learn, and what mental models do they bring into the classroom? This is an ongoing process that continues throughout the course, so that in the
end, a teacher can see if any change has taken place. Bain notes that the fundamental assessment question for an effective teacher should be: “What kind of intellectual and personal development do I want my students to enjoy in this class, and what evidence might I collect about the nature and progress of their development?” (Bain, 2004, pp. 152-153). It would appear that establishing quality objectives at the start of a class would help to insure that learning will take place and that the learning will be evident in some tangible way.

I would like to close this section on assessment and evaluation quoting what Bain considers one of the central conclusions of his study: “Excellent teachers develop their abilities through constant self-evaluation, reflection, and the willingness to change” (Bain, 2004, p. 172). I would hope that by completing the program in Adult Education and Training at CSU, I will have personified those tenets, polished and refined my teaching skills, and raised my pedagogical abilities to new heights.

**Conclusions**

In summary, I would assert that Ken Bain’s *What the best college teachers do* was an inspirational and motivational read, replete with numerous practical tips and advice for improving my teaching skills. I found it exciting to see references to concepts and theories that were discussed in our textbooks, bringing these concepts to life, page after page. Utilizing the skills learned in EDRM 600 last semester, I was able to discern the breadth and scope of Bain’s inquiries, the quality of his research methods, and the relevance his explorations hold for future teachers. I’m sure I will refer to this work again and again as I progress along my teaching career.
References


