

# Good Talk About Good Teaching

## *Improving Teaching through Conversation and Community*

By Parker J. Palmer

After 25 years of teaching undergraduates, graduates, and older adults, I am still trying to fathom the mystery of how people do and do not learn. I have been edified by research on the subject and by experts who share what they know. But, like most college faculty, I have often been deprived of a deep reservoir of insight about teaching and learning. Faculty, unlike many other professionals, lack the continuing conversation with colleagues that could help us grow more fully into the demands of the teacher's craft.

No surgeon can do her work without being observed by others who know what she is doing, without participating in grand-round discussions of the patients she and her colleagues are treating. No trial lawyer can litigate without being observed and challenged by people who know the law. But professors conduct their practice as teachers in private. We walk into the classroom and close the door—figuratively and literally—on the daunting task of teaching. When we emerge, we rarely talk with each other about what we have done, or need to do. After all, what would we talk about?

This privatization of teaching may originate in some misguided concept of academic freedom but it persists, I believe, because faculty choose it as a mode of self-protection against scrutiny and evaluation. Ironically, this choice of isolation leads to some of the deepest dissatisfactions in academic life. I visit dozens of campuses each year to lead faculty workshops on teaching and learning, and I often hear about the "pain of disconnection" among faculty, the pain of people who were once animated by a vision of "the community of scholars" but who now find themselves working in a vacuum.

This pain takes quite specific forms. For example, many faculty suffer from the common institutional practice of evaluating teaching with a standardized questionnaire—one that forces all teaching into a Procrustean bed by reducing it to ten dimensions on a fivepoint scale. The nuances of good teaching cannot possibly be captured this way. But if we insist on privatizing our work, how else can administrators evaluate us except by tossing some questionnaires over the transom at the end of each term and hoping that students will make marks on them?

Privatization creates more than individual pain; it creates institutional incompetence as well. By privatizing teaching we make it next to impossible for the academy to become more adept at its teaching mission. The growth of any skill depends heavily on honest dialogue among those who are doing it. Some of us may grow by private trial and error, but our willingness to try and to fail is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks. The most likely outcome when any function is privatized is that people will perform the function conservatively, refusing to stray far from the silent consensus or what "works"—even when it clearly does not. That, I am afraid, too often describes the state of teaching in the privatized academy.

The good news is that the academy's resources are considerable, a fact I rediscover on virtually every campus I visit. Much of what we need in order to foster good teaching can be generated by any faculty worth its salt—and there are many—through continuing, thoughtful conversation. The question is, how can we help that conversation happen? I want to explore three elements that seem essential to creating a community of discourse about teaching and learning: *leaders* who expect and invite conversation, topics of conversation that can take us beyond technique, and *ground rules* that keep us from defeating ourselves before our conversation begins.

### **Our Need for Leadership**

On a recent visit to a college that bills itself as a "teaching institution," I found, as I often do, that this phrase has its limits. This college hires people who care about teaching, it gives student

opinion real weight in making decisions about promotion and tenure, and its official rhetoric is full of exhortations about teaching and learning. But the college does not have regular occasions for its faculty to explore teaching with each other, except for an annual workshop where the emphasis is on learning from an outside expert rather than from colleagues.

When I observed a need to create more opportunities for "good talk about good teaching," one person spoke, with all earnestness, what seemed to be the mind of many: "I'd like to talk with my colleagues about teaching, but I feel awkward about walking into someone's office and saying, 'Let's discuss the various learning styles among our students.'"

What strikes me about that comment (in addition to the evidence of privatization it provides) is how subtly it reveals the weak culture of leadership in academy. The comment assumes that cultivating a conversation about teaching depends entirely on the wills and wiles of individual professors; there's nary a hint that academic leadership might play some role in fostering such conversation. The comment reveals a kind of silent conspiracy between faculty who do not want to be led and executives who find it safer to administer than to lead.

But very little talk about teaching—good or otherwise—will happen if presidents and provosts, deans and department chairs, do not expect and invite it into being on a regular basis. I chose my words carefully, because leadership that tries to coerce conversation will fail. Conversation must be the free choice of free people. But in the Privatized academy, conversation will happen only as people are surrounded by expectations and invitations from leaders about new ways to use their freedom. The most powerful kind of leadership is to offer people pathways and permissions to do things they want to do but feel unable to do for themselves. That sort of leadership evokes energies within people that far exceed the powers of coercion.

I first learned about this kind of leadership as a community organizer working on white racism. The whites in our community, contrary to their racist reputation, wanted to have a humane dialogue with their new black neighbors, but, having no idea how to create that conversation, sank into deeper and deeper isolation from the newcomers and into the racism that isolation breeds. The leadership task in that community was to offer excuses for those conversations to happen, and so we did—by offering "Living Room Seminars" on coping with community change, by creating something we called the "Community Foundation" as a forum for discussion, by sending people door-to-door to collect public opinion data with the implicit purpose of giving them a way to meet their new neighbors, etc.

Of course, this kind of leadership depends on our ability to look beyond the masks people wear and into their true condition. Some faculty may wear a mask of indifference about teaching, but the best academic leaders know that beneath the mask there may be real concern—if only because most faculty spend so many hours in the classroom that self-interest cries out for those hours to be made more fruitful. And beyond narrow self-interest, there are reasons to care about teaching that are rooted deep in the human soul. "Teaching" is simply another word for the ancient and elemental bond that exists between the elders of the tribe and their young. When the bond is broken, both groups feel fearful and incomplete, and both will wish to reweave the relationship, no matter how profoundly alienated they may be.

Experience tells me not only that there is a deep reservoir of insight about teaching among faculty, but also that faculty have a deep need to draw upon that life-giving source. The reservoir waits to be tapped by leaders who perceive its presence, who expect and invite people to draw upon it, who offer excuses and permissions for the dialogue to happen—and who can help make that dialogue less woeful than it sometimes is and as winsome as it can easily be.

### **Good Teaching Is More Than Technique**

Last fall, minutes before I was to begin a two-day workshop on teaching with some 200 faculty at an urban university, a large and angry-looking man strode up to me, glared, and said, "I am an organic chemist. Are you going to spend the next two days telling me that I have to teach organic chemistry through role-playing?"

His anger (humorous in retrospect, but a bit dismaying in the moment) reflects one factor that has made our discourse about teaching more woeful than winsome: our constant habit of reducing teaching to "how-to-do-it" questions. We share an American cultural bias that every problem we face has a technical "fix," if only we can find it. That bias is fostered by armies of experts who make a living "fixing" things. But at its source, the bias is created by our penchant for evading the human challenges of selfhood and community by seeking refuge in the safer, technical dimension of things.

When we frame our talk about teaching only in terms of technique, we may make the conversation "practical" and safe, but we miss the deeper dimensions that could make such talk more real and rewarding to faculty: the challenge of ideas, the exploration of shared practice, the uniqueness of each teacher's genius, the mystery at the heart of the educational exchange. If leaders want to create a new conversation about teaching, they must find topics that do not exclude technique but that take us into realms more truthful, more demanding, more productive of insight—topics that do not deny the need for technical knowledge but that bring us into a community of discourse fed by the richness of our corporate experience.

From the myriad topics that emerge once one starts looking deeper than technique, I want to describe four that I have found effective in my work with faculty:

- *critical moments* in teaching and learning,
- the *human condition* of teachers and learners,
- *metaphors and images* of what we are doing when we teach, and
- *autobiographical reflection* on the great teachers who helped bring us into academic life.

**Critical moments.** In some of my workshops with faculty, we explore classroom practice using a simple device that allows us to talk about methods in the context of larger meanings, not ignoring technique but avoiding the dangers of a "fix-it" approach. I draw a large arrow from left to right through the center of the board and ask people to start naming the "critical moments" they have experienced as a course moves from beginning to end. I define a critical moment as one when a learning opportunity will either open up or shut down for your students—depending, in part, on how you respond. (The "in part" is important because not all critical moments are under the teacher's control.)

The moments are many and marvelous. The first day of class, or even the first 15 minutes, are often mentioned. So are the first "stupid" question, the first graded assignment, the first time the teacher is challenged. Equally as critical as these moments of tension and dissension are moments of a more positive sort: the moment when the class seems to "get it," the moment when students start talking to each other rather than to the teacher alone, the moment when the teacher's carefully planned agenda gets derailed in favor of something more important.

As we brainstorm these moments, and locate them on the time line with a word or two, a simple but vital thing happens. People start speaking openly about events that have perplexed and troubled and defeated them in classroom teaching—and also about those they have managed and mastered and turned into teachable moments. That is, they do the one thing most necessary if we are to help each other grow as teachers: they speak honestly with each other about how challenging it is to teach and to learn.

The "critical moments" time line invites honesty by being utterly nonjudgmental. It soon becomes evident that in this conversation, no one is going to say what should or should not happen in other people's classrooms (and if they do, I ask them to stop), but everyone is invited to tell it like it is for themselves. As the conversation continues, and as the moments get recorded on the line, the board soon evolves into a "map" of the classroom learning experience that everyone has helped to draw, that has all of us reflecting on the educational journey, that reminds us of how many

different starting points, routes, and destinations that journey can embrace. Everyone can feel both honored and challenged in his or her own teaching style.

As the map-making slows down, we choose three or four of the most important critical moments and we talk to each other about what we have done in those moments—for better and for worse. The choices are somewhat predictable; e.g., the first class meeting, the first grade given, a key idea that remains opaque, a moment of overt conflict. But what faculty say to each other about what they have done, and might do, in those moments is marvelously unpredictable. There is no "right way" to handle these problems. In this dialogue, one has the empowering experience of reflecting on practice with fellow teachers in a way that deepens one's feel for the situation and makes one's practice stronger.

The critical moments exercise creates what I have come to call a "triangulating" conversation, as in surveying or navigation. It allows us to plot our own locations as teachers by relating to the locations of others. As we listen to others speak about their teaching, we are free to say an inward "yes" to the things that sound like us and "no" to the things that do not. We are free to speak about our own practice in a way that makes us only as vulnerable as we choose to be—a freedom that makes the conversation both possible and fruitful. We can explore our own identities in relation to other teachers' without ever feeling that we are being told to do our work in someone else's way.

The "critical moments" exercise offers a simple illustration of how leaders can establish an inviting expectation of free exchange about teaching among independent people.

**The human condition.** A second topic for good talk about good teaching is the human condition of teachers and learners. An obsession with technique often leads us to ignore the human dynamics of the classroom. But when we reflect on teaching in a more open-ended way (as in the critical moments exercise), we soon see that our response to any given moment depends primarily on what is happening inside of us—and on how we diagnose what is happening inside our students—and only secondarily on the methods at our command. Good teaching depends less on technique than it does on the human condition of the teacher, and only by knowing the truth of our own condition can we hope to know the true condition of our students.

Let me illustrate. As I speak with faculty about the human condition, I am increasingly convinced that one of the biggest barriers to good teaching is our diagnosis of students today. Briefly stated, this diagnosis holds that the classroom behaviors of many students (e.g., their silence, distraction, and embarrassment) reveal them to be essentially brain-dead (due to poor preparation, the dissolution of decent society, MTV, etc.), and that they therefore require pedagogies that function like life-support systems, dripping information into the veins of comatose patients who are unable to feed themselves. If that is a caricature, it is nevertheless instructive: nothing is easier than to slip into a low opinion of students, and that opinion creates teaching practices guaranteed to induce vegetative states even in students who arrive for class alive and well.

I believe we need a deeper diagnosis of those classroom behaviors that we so cavalierly classify as "brain-dead"; that those behaviors can in fact be more powerfully explained by the ancient aspect of the human condition called "fear." Young people in this society live with a level of fear that is nearly invisible to their elders—fear that their lives have little meaning, that their futures are dim, and that their elders do not care about their plight. The young have been thoroughly marginalized by the elders of this society, and their deepest response is not an angry rejection of us but a fearful internalization of our rejection of them. This fear leads them to hide behind masks of silence and indifference in the classroom—the same silence that marginalized people have always practiced in the presence of people with power.

I realize that many of our students are not chronologically "young"; they have returned to school in mid-life. But I believe that much of my diagnosis applies to this group as well. Though our image of non-traditional students is often of self-confidence and expressiveness, it may be that adult learners are simply mature enough to know how to mask their fears. Their return to school is often triggered by an experience of marginalization—a divorce, the death of a spouse, the failure of a

career. These students relate to their teachers as "elders" even if the age difference is reversed, and they can be as fearful of the teacher's response as the young often are.

To diagnose our students well, we must diagnose ourselves. Why are we, the mentors, unable to see the fear within our students? Why do we insist, instead, on accusing them of banality? The answer, I think, has to do with our own fearfulness: we cannot see the fears that haunt our students because we ourselves are haunted by the fear that our students have rejected us. One of the occupational hazards of college teaching is to walk into classroom after classroom, year after year, and look out upon a sea of faces that seems to be saying, "You're out of it." We take this silence and apparent indifference personally, and we defend ourselves against the implicit judgment on our lives by declaring our judges intellectually and morally bankrupt.

Our fear of the judgment of our students helps account for the tendency of too many academics to grow more cynical about students and teaching as the years go by; we are growing a shell of self-protection. But once we "decode" the fear that is in our students, and in ourselves, we find alternatives to cynicism. Once we understand the fearful condition of teachers and learners, the classroom can become a place where fear is faced and overcome.

I know of no technique to overcome fear. But I do know that whenever I can see past my students' silence and into their fear—and can teach to their fear rather than to their alleged indifference—my students learn more. I also know that I cannot see my students' fear until I have seen my own. And I know that I am less likely to face my own fear if I do not have a community of honest and open colleagues with whom to explore my struggles as a teacher.

The human condition is vast and varied, and fear is only one of its faces. But whether the focus is fear or power or ego, or grace or humility or love, an effort to understand the inner lives of teachers and learners not only makes for compelling conversation but for better teaching and learning as well.

**Metaphors and images.** A third approach to good talk about good teaching is to explore metaphors and images about who we are, what we are doing and what we would like to be and do—when we teach.

The ultimate source of good teaching lies not in technique but in the identity of the teacher, in those persistent but obscure forces that constitute one's nature. There is no empirical science for determining one's nature. There is only the indirectness of imagination and poetry and art, and that is the value of metaphor: it offers us a way of glimpsing from the corner of the eye things that elude us when we try to view them directly. By articulating and exploring the metaphors that arise when we reflect on our own teaching, we touch the deep dimensions of self and vocation that defy headlong analysis.

This process is not as precious as I may have just made it sound, as my own case will illustrate. Early in my teaching career, I had a persistent, unromantic, and intellectually embarrassing image of myself as teaching "like a sheepdog," more specifically, like a border collie. Though the image seemed insane to me at the time, I now understand that it was an apt and amusing challenge to my actual practice as a young teacher: sheepdogs do not normally do their work by standing on their hind legs behind a podium and lecturing non-stop to the sheep. It took me years to appreciate that this strange metaphor was calling me to new insights about my work, insights more consistent with my own nature as teacher and learner.

I worked doggedly (sorry) to unpack the metaphor, looking, for example, at the various functions a sheepdog performs: allowing the sheep to feed, protecting them from danger, keeping them together, guiding them toward shelter, etc. How does a sheepdog do these things? By creating an invisible but firmly enforced boundary around the sheep, by holding them within a space where they have a certain freedom within a certain discipline and demand.

Eventually, that became the key to my own best work as a teacher: I needed to learn how to create a learning space for my students, a space in which they could "feed" themselves by moving freely

within limits, limits created by the demands of subject matter and by my own sense of what they needed to learn about that subject matter. That insight alone became an immense challenge. The image of teaching that I had absorbed from the academy requires the professor not to *create* space but to fill it up, a task I had learned to perform with a vengeance.

Over the years, the metaphor has continued to unfold for me. I began asking deeper questions about what needed to happen within the space I was creating. Unlike the sheepdog, who wants unquestioning obedience from the sheep, I wanted my students to come into selfhood and community within that space—not just any form of community, but a learning community, one in which the interactions between students and teacher are disciplined by the subject that is at the center of our circle.

As time went by, the seemingly crude sheepdog metaphor evolved into an image that continues to help me teach from my own deepest identity: "To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced." There is a sophistication about this image that seems far removed from the sheepdog. But had I not taken the metaphor seriously, I do not think I would have evolved an image of teaching that speaks so deeply to my condition and that continues to challenge me in daily practice.

Sometimes, in the workshops I do with faculty, we combine the "critical moments" exercise with an exploration of metaphors. After we have talked "rationally" for a while about how to handle a particular critical moment (e.g., a moment of classroom conflict), I will invoke one of the metaphors the group has previously identified (we've worked with images ranging from a wilderness guide to a CEO to a weather system) and ask, "How would a \_\_\_\_\_ respond to that?" When the conversation about critical moments moves from practical strategy to the realm of metaphorical imagination, what happens is often remarkable. We reveal ourselves at levels that makes us vulnerable to real growth, and we discern solutions that no rational strategy could generate.

In short, talking about teaching through metaphors can make us available to ourselves, and to each other, in fresh and surprising ways. They are antidotes, if you will, to our "theories" of teaching, which—valuable as they may be—are also subject to sophisticated self-deceptions that mask who we really are and what we're really up to. The gift of honest metaphor is that it comes to us rough and raw and full of psychic energy, unedited by the conventions of the rational mind. If I give you my metaphor, I am likely to be speaking honestly about myself—in ways that even I do not understand until I have listened carefully to what the metaphor is trying to teach me.

**Great teachers.** A fourth focus for good talk about good teaching that can take us beyond technique involves telling stories about the origins of our teaching vocations—especially stories about the great teachers who set us on this path.

Sharing something of each other's stories is a minimum essential for community (the more you know of some one's story, the less possible it is to hate him or her), and yet we rarely do it in academic life. Perhaps we would do more of it if we understood how it can help us do our work better. By telling the stories of our great teachers, we can learn much about the shape of good teaching, and we may reconnect with the passions that led us to teach in the first place—passions long lost in the demands of daily life.

In the more extended faculty workshops I do, I begin by inviting the participants to tell such stories, and the exercise quickly goes beyond self-introductions or "breaking the ice." As the stories are told, we are reminded that good teaching comes in an astonishing array of forms. More deeply, we are reminded that while great teachers may have mastered a particular method of teaching, it was not the method that mattered: it was the congruence between that method and the teacher's identity that made the teaching great.

As one listens to these stories, one hears less about the technical virtuosity of these teachers than about their personhood—about their presence and passion and commitment, about their capacity to "live the questions" that they asked others to consider. But just as there is no common technique

among great teachers, so there is no common personality profile. The personhood that makes for great teaching comes in many forms; some great teachers are testy and some are infinitely patient, some are noisy and flamboyant while others are quiet and calm. What they have in common is self-knowledge, trust in their own nature, and a willingness to teach directly from it.

These observations sound like truisms only until one seeks their implications for one's own teaching—then they become challenging demands. In one workshop where participants told stories of their great teachers, a professor became visibly moved as he talked about the mentor who had turned him toward teaching. Over the next few days, the source of his emotion became clear: he had spent 15 years trying to ape his mentor's teaching style, even though he and his mentor were quite different kinds of people. He had spent 15 years trying to be someone he was not, and both he and his teaching had suffered from the effort. He was a man haunted by the feelings of fraudulence that threaten American professional life more generally.

Behind the attempt to imitate someone else there lies, of course, a lack of trust in one's own gifts. This professor is not alone in his self-distrust. There is little in our formation and development as academics that invites us to examine, let alone to understand and value our selfhood; indeed, a good case can be made that one function of graduate education is to replace any sense of the unique subjective self with a standard-issue guild identity. Some of us will grow as teachers only as we recover our sense of identity and learn to trust it as we teach. Recalling the roots of our own vocations by sharing autobiographies can help that process along.

### **Ground Rules for Creative Conversation**

If we are to move past privatization toward good talk about good teaching, not only do we need leaders to invite that conversation into being and topics that take us beyond technique; we also need ground rules for dialogue that will keep us from killing the conversation before it even begins.

The tacit ground rules that have traditionally shaped academic dialogue are much like the "rules of engagement" practiced by the military—ways of putting a civilized veneer on behavior that is nonetheless barbaric. We have a hard time talking to each other without falling into competition and even combat, into an unconscious rhythm of defense and offense that allows for little openness and growth. (In the middle of writing this essay, I received a solicitation to subscribe to a higher education journal. It highlighted this blurb from an academic dean: "I need to read \_\_\_\_\_ in order not to be blindsided by someone who has.") Good talk about good teaching requires a conscious effort to alter the norms that shape our dialogue so that its outcomes can be more creative.

For example, in faculty workshops I sometimes ask for volunteers to offer course design problems as case studies for work in groups of six or eight peers. Volunteering to do so entails a risk—a vulnerability—since it exposes the inner sanctum of one's teaching to the scrutiny of others in a way that can set us up to be used and abused. So, to make the process more trustworthy, I have devised simple ground rules that govern the small groups.

The groups meet for an hour and a half, and during that time no one can speak to the "focus person" in any way except to ask an honest, open question. That is, no one can advise the focus person on how he or she ought to teach the course, and no one can ask questions that are advice or judgment in disguise: "Don't you think you should assign Schwartz's brilliant essay on this issue? You don't know his work? Oh, don't you read German?" For the final 15 minutes, the "questions-only" rule can be suspended if the focus person requests it, and he or she can invite "mirroring" from the group—not judgment or gratuitous advice, but reflections on what the questioners think they have heard the focus person saying.

When the faculty I work with hear about these ground rules, they have mixed feelings—disgust and despair. How could anything worthwhile happen when we are forbidden from arguing and making points? But when the small groups have finished their work, most participants have not only

learned important things about teaching; they have experienced a rare sense of community with colleagues.

The focus persons often say that they have never had better help in thinking through a course than comes from a process that gives them a safe space to explore their own experience and identity. The questioners often say that they have never listened to a colleague so carefully, that they understand anew how teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher, and that what constitutes good teaching for one person may have little to do with another. The questioners also speak of gaining new insight into themselves, of seeing problems and potentials in their own teaching in the process of taking another person seriously.

The "questions-only" rule is radical, and I do not suggest that we need to follow such a draconian drill every time we gather. But people who want to encourage good talk about good teaching must find ways to change the dance that we academics tend to do with each other, so that we spend less time stepping on each other's toes. We need ways to listen more openly to each other; to judge and advise and "fix" each other much less; to find the strengths—not just the weaknesses—in each other's proposals; to leave each other feeling heard and affirmed as well as stretched and challenged when our conversations end.

Every faculty I have ever visited contains a wealth of wisdom about teaching that waits to be tapped. If we would practice these modest graces of conversation, encouraged by leaders who invite us and by topics that engage us, good talk about teaching will flourish—and good teaching will have a better chance to flourish as well.

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# *American Historical Association*

From the Graduate Students Forum in the October 2004 Perspectives

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## Graduate Students' Forum: Getting Started

By **Terry Seip**

✦ *A Recipe for a Successful Lecture*  
by **Peter Filene**

✦ *Teaching in High-Intensity Mode*  
by **Rudolph M. Bell**

A question for graduate students who intend to spend a good portion of their adult lives in the classroom: As a part of your professional preparation, why not make a commitment to begin learning to teach in the same way you learn to research and write? In doing this, you are, of course, likely to be largely on your own; although systematic pedagogical training is being made available in some graduate programs, it is not yet widespread. A compelling argument can be made, nevertheless, that some ongoing, proactive investment of time and thought about teaching as a graduate student will pay-off in the long run, making one a more effective and efficient teacher. To begin this process, well before you enter your first discussion classroom, let me suggest that you engage in some serious self-assessment, read a little pedagogy, and start to explore a variety of classroom tactics and techniques to-match method to material.

### 1. Self-assessment

We all practice self-assessment as a matter of course, but it seems particularly important for budding teachers to engage in some thoroughgoing thinking about their likely strengths and weaknesses as teachers. For example: (1) How would you judge your verbal communication skills? Do you speak in clear, logically structured, easy-to-follow ways? Do you vary your delivery in pace, pitch, and tone? Or do you usually talk too fast or mostly in a monotone? Is your expression sprinkled with "uums" and "uhs" or valley-speak crutches of "like" and "you know"? Not sure how you sound? Audiotape yourself talking for 20 minutes about your research or something you know well and then listen carefully. (2) Are you a good listener? By that I mean a focused, interested, activist listener who reassures the speaker that you are involved in the conversation? Or are you sometimes easily distracted, disengaged, or impatient? (3) How would you characterize the outward appearance you present to others? What sort of a countenance do you typically sport—pleasant, serious, varied? What type of body language—use of hands, facial expression, movement—do you display? Do you naturally show animation, open enthusiasm, even a bit of passion—all of which will serve you well in the classroom? Not sure how you look or act? Videotape yourself giving a mock lecture or making a presentation about your research, and review your performance with a critical eye. (4) Are you generally good at thinking on your feet? At least quietly self-confident? Does your comfort level in front of an audience depend heavily on your degree of familiarity with the material? (5) How would you evaluate your organizational skills—are you a list-maker, outliner, planner? Like enthusiasm, organization ranks high with students. In sum, what kind of first, second, and lasting impressions do you believe you can leave?

This close, introspective examination is not intended to strip you of your individuality and eccentricities and force you to reinvent yourself, but rather to stimulate thinking about how to

highlight and utilize your strengths and prompt work on areas where you sense you could improve. Just as there are differing learning styles for students, so are there diverse teaching styles—refine yours through regular reappraisal.

## **2. Read some pedagogy**

We are by nature and vocation bibliophiles—we read widely and constantly inside and outside our broad areas of professional interest. Doesn't it stand to reason, then, that we should read at least a little about teaching philosophies and methods if we plan to teach? But despite good journals such as *Teaching History* and *The History Teacher*, by and large we read little if any pedagogy because no one in graduate school encouraged us to do so, partially because of time constraints and some lingering adherence to the absurd notion that good teachers are born not made.

Purchase a book on teaching techniques, put your name in it, and indulge. Still quite helpful is Wilbert McKeachie (and nine other contributors), *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers* (2002), a frequently updated classic now in its 11th edition. But if your budget will only allow one book, I strongly recommend Barbara Gross Davis, *Tools for Teaching* (1993), which has its origins in the handbook provided for graduate instructors at the University of California at Berkeley. Particularly useful for beginning teachers, this nearly exhaustive, 400-page compendium offers tersely annotated strategies and tips ranging from first thoughts about class design to writing letters of recommendation. With your appetite thus whetted, browse in other recommended readings scattered throughout this forum and the extensive bibliographical notes in my AHA pamphlet, *"We Shall Gladly Teach": Preparing History Graduate Students for the Classroom* (1999).

## **3. Begin to develop a repertoire of classroom tactics and techniques**

While you peruse methods of stimulating class interactivity in Davis and other sources and think about the most effective practices of your past teachers, pose two sets of questions: (1) Does the tactic fit me? Would I be comfortable using this method? (2) Does the approach fit the material? Does it seem to have potential as an effective way of pulling students into problems and issues?

As you develop an understanding of four or five approaches, start to match method with material. Begin with traditional questioning and problem-posing techniques. Good questions lie at the heart of our discipline, and while we may know how to question ourselves and our colleagues, most of us could benefit from reading and ruminating about differing ways of formulating questions for various levels of students. Consider, for example, ways of creating and reshaping good questions to stimulate and sustain discussion by getting students to talk to each other, how to structure analytical, "developmental" discussion—working from the particular to the profound or vice-versa, and techniques of tying questions to something in the students' common experience—often easily done in areas of gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, value systems, popular culture, politics/ideology, international relations, and the like. Many of your best discussions will flow from an experiential, emotional link between the student and the material.

From here, expand out and explore a broad range of other active learning methods including group work, issue and problem panels, role playing, case studies, and out-of-class collaborative learning tasks that might be effectively applied in certain situations. And do not neglect the learning retention potential of routinely integrating a variety of daily writing assignments into your discussion class: one-page summaries of three key points in the readings, one-minute essays on a particular point covered or to be covered in discussion, three-minute entry essays on the topic of discussion, five-minute exit essays, and the like. If in practice a method effective with one cluster of students fails to work as well with another, despair not. You will steadily develop the ability to modify tactics on the spot.

As you prepare, take heart in McKeachie's old saw: "*Teaching skillfully may be less time consuming than teaching badly.*"<sup>1</sup> Why endure the distracting misery of teaching poorly and dreading the classroom? Self-assurance, satisfaction, and an accelerated learning curve flow from thinking about teaching methods and from careful preparation in the material. Most immediately, you can enter your first classroom with confidence, even as 25 pairs of eyes watch your every move. A good start will positively shape their critical first impressions of you, now the teacher.

*Terry Seip teaches—among other courses—about teaching methods at the University of Southern California, where he is an associate professor of history. He is the author of the AHA pamphlet, "We Shall Gladly Teach": Preparing History Graduate Students for the Classroom (1999).*

## Note

1. Wilbert J. McKeachie, et al., *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, 11th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 5 (emphasis in the original).

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# *American Historical Association*

From the Graduate Students Forum in the October 2004 Perspectives

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## **Graduate Students' Forum: A Recipe for a Successful Lecture**

By **Peter Filene**

✧ **Teaching in High-Intensity Mode**  
by **Rudolph M. Bell**

✧ **Getting Started**  
by **Terry Scip**

Close your eyes and picture the best history lecturer you recall from college. Perhaps she is striding back and forth across the stage, never looking at her notes, her voice ringing out, each sentence flowing eloquently into the next and the next. She delivers a complex, passionate argument, spiced with vivid details and wit. She reaches her last sentence as the bell sounds.

Are you feeling inspired? Or are you discouraged, thinking: "How in the world can I emulate that?"

Like other aspects of teaching, lecturing is less mysterious than it seems. Let me begin to demystify it by providing a three-part recipe for designing and delivering effective lectures. I wish someone had given me these suggestions when I was starting out or even when I was 15 years into my career.

### **1. Don't Be Brilliant**

First, don't emulate that lecturer whom you just now imagined; don't try to write and deliver a brilliant lecture. Although you were inspired, you were not a typical undergraduate. You are a lifelong academic. After too many years in graduate school, it's hard to remember college students' mentality. Recently I overheard a TA remark: "Can you imagine! One of my students asked 'what is a monograph?'" Few of your students will be history majors and fewer still will be looking toward an academic career. They arrive in your classroom for a myriad of reasons: maybe they enjoy watching the History Channel, or they are fulfilling a college requirement, or they needed a class at noon.

Moreover, the questions that interest you as a professional historian are probably not ones that will interest them. As scholars we're interested in certain questions because we were once interested in earlier questions, which intrigued us because of even earlier questions. Don't forget that our students have not yet taken that intellectual journey. While we are digging deep underground at rich intellectual ore, they are standing on the surface wondering why anyone in his right mind would be engaged in that subterranean expedition. / So, brilliance will likely be counterproductive. It may dazzle you but leave your students with drooping eyelids.

And then there is this very practical consideration: you won't have time to write trailblazing lectures for every class. Let's suppose that you're teaching three different courses three times a week, while also grading papers, holding office hours, shopping for groceries, and (one hopes) spending time with family or friends.

Under such circumstances, how can one write nine even *semi*-brilliant lectures every week? The answer—gather three or four textbooks or general sources, subject them to a critical reading, and synthesize a coherent narrative lecture from them. Give the students a bibliography of the sources you used. You can then use the opportunity to introduce the students to the important notion that although the *information* in different books may be the same, interpretations can (and do) differ. After all, a lecture is a live communication—an interaction with an audience. Imagine sitting at a café with someone who spreads his notes on the table and reads aloud nonstop for 50 minutes!

As you gain experience and self-confidence, you can transform these rough lectures along more original lines.

## 2. Communicate

How do the best teachers engage their students' interest and understanding? *Enthusiasm* is one ingredient that undergraduates almost unanimously cite.<sup>2</sup> *Clarity and organization* form the second ingredient and, intellectually, the more important one.<sup>3</sup> Undergraduates typically can absorb no more than two new ideas in a single session. So you will do well to divide your lecture into two parts—two main ideas, themes, or issues.

Moreover, audience attention sags halfway through the hour.<sup>4</sup> So, before launching into Idea Number Two, do something different. Create an intermission—like a bench beside the mountain trail, allowing the hikers to appreciate what they have accomplished thus far.

- ❖ You may pull out that lame expedient, "Are there any questions?" But I recommend several more effective ways to elicit critical reflection.
- ❖ Tell students to write a one-minute synopsis of what they've heard. Then ask for questions or confusions.
- ❖ Better yet, add two steps: Think (pose a question, about which they briefly write); Pair (compare answers with a classmate for three minutes); Share (ask a pair to report their answers, then ask whether other pairs have different answers).
- ❖ Pose a question and divide students into five-minute "breakout groups" to devise answers.
- ❖ Show a slide or a video excerpt.
- ❖ Walk away from the lectern and say nothing for 30 seconds, allowing time for mental digestion. Silence also teaches.

## 3. Hook Them at the Start

I've used up my quota of two main ideas. But since this is an essay, not a lecture, let me cheat and add a third recommendation.

The most effective lecturers open the hour with a question—a problem—a grabber. *Something is at stake today, so stick around and see how I solve it.* You can dramatize this "so what?" with a vignette.

- ❖ Perhaps a quotation.
- ❖ Or an anecdote that dramatizes the day's topic.
- ❖ Or a cartoon.
- ❖ Or a device like the one with which I began this essay.

All of this may sound dauntingly complicated, but it soon becomes second nature. After a few weeks you'll structure your lectures automatically.

As you become familiar with your 60 or 100 students (and they with you), you will develop a rapport. They will laugh at your jokes. You will learn at what level to pitch your ideas and vocabulary. They will trust you and their classmates enough to answer your questions or even ask their own. Your lectures will not be "an essay standing on its hind legs."<sup>5</sup> Rather, they will form one half of a dialogic relationship in which you teach and your students learn.

*Peter Filene is professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This essay is adapted from the author's forthcoming book, *The Joy of Teaching: A Guide for New College Instructors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).*

## Notes

1. Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 37.
2. For tips on how to display enthusiasm, see Joseph Lowman, *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching* 2nd
3. Thomas M. Sherman et al., "The Quest for Excellence in Higher Education," *Journal of Higher Education*, 58 (January/February 1987), 66; Peter Seldin, *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions* (Boston: Anker, 1991), 1.
4. Lowman, *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*, 136; J.R. Davis, *Teaching Strategies for the College Classroom* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1976), cited in "Improving Lectures by Understanding Students' Information Processing" Wilbert J. McKeachie ed., *Learning, Cognition, and College Teaching: New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2 (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1980), chapter 4.
5. James Winans and H.H. Hudson, *A First Course in Public Speaking* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1931), 17, quoted in Elisa Carbone, *Teaching Large Classes: Tools and Strategies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998), 21.

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# *American Historical Association*

From the Graduate Students Forum in the October 2004 Perspectives

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## **Graduate Students' Forum: Teaching in High-Intensity Mode**

By **Rudolph M. Bell**

❖ **Getting Started**  
by **Terry Scip**

❖ **A Recipe for a Successful Lecture**  
by **Peter Filene**

Once upon a time there were semesters lasting 15 weeks and courses that met three times per week for about 50 minutes each session. For those of you who like big bundles and/or small particles, that adds up to 2,250 minutes per course. Then a few decades ago, the West Coast went to trimesters, cutting the weeks to 10. Summer school as a moneymaking enterprise blossomed after the 1960s and the number of weeks declined to six, with classes meeting more often and for longer sessions. Most recently, we have winter sessions of just three weeks, with classes meeting four days for four hours each day.

This may be a great way to structure a language immersion program or to teach web design programming but whether it works well for the introductory survey of American or European history is another matter. Profit motives may have trumped pedagogical concerns in fostering the proliferation of such compact courses in the humanities, including history. Whatever the reasons, high-intensity instruction now abounds, and the people doing most of the teaching in these courses are often the least experienced graduate students and part-time lecturers willing to take on grueling tasks shunned by regular faculty.

How shall the aspiring graduate student teach gladly, and effectively, when offered the possibility of teaching Western Civilization from the Greeks to the Enlightenment, or the United States survey since 1877 in a mere 12 sessions, compressed into only three or six weeks, and running over three hours each? Is "coverage" possible? Can there be equivalency of any kind between this course and its leisurely, semester-long, cousin? What follows is crudely non-theoretical, a mere laundry list of do's and don'ts that may help you cope with such a daunting task.

First, the don'ts. Do not give in and show too many feature-length films. Do not throw away the first class with a quick handing out of the syllabus and see you tomorrow. Allow stretch/bathroom time after the first and second hours but no going on long trips to get coffee. Avoid endurance exams lasting many hours. Do not assign *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *War and Peace*.

And then some do's. Pile up the reading and written assignments over the weekend, even if it ruins students' leisure plans but go lightly for the mid-week intervals. Divide the material into weekly units that end sharply and move right along, since the intra-week sessions will become a blur. For our Western Civilization survey example, this might mean one week for each of six standard chronological divides:

- 1) Ancient World;
- 2) Heirs of the Roman Empire;
- 3) High Middle Ages;
- 4) Renaissance and Reformation;
- 5) Expansion of Europe;
- and 6) State Building, Science, and the Early Enlightenment.

Huge chunks, to be sure, but you do whatever it takes to get from here to there in the allotted time.

Go ahead and give an hour of straight lecture at the beginning of each session, following the recipe provided by Peter Filene, but do not repeat the textbook. Here is the place for historiographical presentation, for sharing with students your view of what is really important, for themes to develop and tie one class to another.

Devote the next hour to discussion. Provide questions in advance and require written answers; a few paragraphs is fine, and sometimes longer—whatever it takes to get to a total of about 20–25 pages of written work over the six weeks.

Controversial, short, even complex primary sources seem to work much better than historiography as the basis for discussion. In summer or winter, no less than during the regular academic year, students can be intimidated by historians but have much more to say in response to original evidence. Division into subgroups with reporting back to the whole group works well, especially if class size pushes beyond 30 or so. Use brief but frequent written assignments and return them super promptly, preferably at the very next class.

The third hour is the toughest. Most teachers do best by holding out to the very last minute and making it clear that that is how it will be, every class. But even though students know they cannot get out early, during the last hour they become even more brain-dead than the teacher, and discussion may flounder. A lively lecture with lots of visual and audio material works better. Use the Internet to get great images, lots of them, and also video clips. Prep everything with great care and an abundance of extra material. Use PowerPoint or the equivalent presentation software. The survey is something you will do many times in the years ahead; well-chosen images and clips, saved on several hard drives or CDs, will repay many times over. Make sure everything you do is yours for future use, not locked away in some departmental cabinet and unavailable when you get a real job thousands of miles away.

The last day can be the easiest. Use a rigorous test, some identification questions and an essay, selected from a list of 50 or so identification questions and 5 essay questions given out at the end of the prior class. Make the whole test worth no more than half the total grade, and let them out early when they finish. Handle any grading questions by e-mail and get back to a normal life.

This approach to teaching effectively in difficult circumstances has been tested again and again by our graduate students at Rutgers. They do appear to survive the ordeal and even find apparently that the experience steels them for better performance levels in less pedagogically unsound settings.

*Rudolph M. Bell teaches history at Rutgers University.*



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*Some faculty find their working situations and their careers to be energizing and productive. Others are frustrated, unproductive, and will "burn out" quickly, leaving behind a trail of effort without success and ill feelings toward their institutions and the professoriate. What are the differences between these two types and can we capitalize on the skills and working styles of the "quick starters" to help those less fortunate?*

## Quick Starters: New Faculty Who Succeed

*Robert Boice*

Most of what we know about how professors teach comes from studies of already experienced teachers. As a result, we understand little about how teaching is learned or about why some of us master it more readily than do others.

This chapter demonstrates a simple strategy for identifying new faculty who make quick starts and it suggests that we can profit in comparing them to other new hires. The result is a new way of looking at instructional improvement, based on communication of the basics of teaching that work so impressively for "quick starters."

### **Normative Behaviors of New Faculty as Teachers**

In a decade of studying new faculty as teachers, I have made a point of interviewing a whole range of colleagues, even those who would ordinarily avoid faculty development programs. The advantage in this patient style, beyond the eventual rapport it builds, is its potential for uncovering aspects of teaching that faculty ordinarily do not verbalize. For example, when new faculty were interviewed and observed over several successive semesters (see Boice, 1991, for details), they revealed some striking commonalities about how most professors start as teachers. As the following list shows, many of the initial habits of new faculty seem less than ideal:

1. Most new faculty, even those who had taught at other campuses, tended to teach in a facts-and-principles style of lecturing (Fink, 1984). As a rule, new faculty equated good teaching with good content. Almost without exception in my sample, new faculty volunteered plans to teach in

more interactive styles, but not until they felt comfortable as teachers. Curiously, new faculty with considerable prior teaching experience admitted that they had rarely strayed from familiar patterns of lecturing.

2. Most new faculty taught defensively, with the specific aim of avoiding complaints made by students to senior colleagues, especially chairpeople. New faculty at all three study campuses showed an awareness that such complaints, once registered in retention/tenure/promotion reports, could persist and become reasons for termination. Almost invariably, new faculty tried to defend themselves against this potential danger by focusing on content (what they called "getting their facts straight"); the most indefensible criticism imaginable to them was not knowing their lecture material. Incidentally, new faculty almost never worried about the kinds of factors that faculty developers typically assume are critical to excellence in teaching, such as displaying enthusiasm for teaching and assessing student learning.

3. The majority of these few hundred new faculty under study received student evaluations that fell well below their expectations. As a rule, they blamed these mediocre-to-poor ratings on external factors such as the quality of students, teaching loads, invalid rating systems, and class times and sizes.

4. Few new faculty planned improvements as teachers beyond making their lecture notes better organized and error-free.

5. New faculty's most important goal as teachers, a priority revealed only after several semesters of contacts, was to get to the point where teaching no longer took as much time to prepare or as much emotion to conduct. That is, they looked forward to lecture preparation that would not dominate work weeks and to classes where they would feel comfortable. New faculty in their first three years at large campuses expended surprising amounts of time in lecture preparation: Norms for new faculty with two-course-per-semester assignments were thirteen to twenty-two hours per week; with three-course loads, eighteen to twenty-seven hours. One result of this pattern was busyness and stressfulness (Boice, 1989). Another result was a growing aversion to teaching as an activity that took too much time and paid too few rewards.

6. By their own admission, new faculty typically went to class over-prepared; that is, they prepared so much to say that they had to rush to say it all. In so doing, they inadvertently discouraged students from active participation in classes.

7. Most new faculty established comfort, efficiency, and student acceptance slowly, if at all, during my two to four years of regular contact with them. Even by the fourth year the majority of inexperienced new faculty reported feeling tense, worrying about not being in control of classes and doubting that students liked them.

Overall, this is a disheartening pattern, one that probably holds true on a variety of campuses. Its generality is easily enough tested. But even

