

# Teaching Tips from Experienced Teachers

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Teachers wanting to take their game to a new level are hungry for what this Observer page offers: tips for effective teaching, tips for teaching that informs, stimulates, energizes, and even entertains.

My favorite teaching tips, presented here, have been gleaned from the collected advice of master teachers and seasoned with my own experience. Some years ago, my collection began to extend beyond Bill McKeachie's classic *Teaching Tips* (2002). During an extended discussion of teaching tips for new teachers, experienced teachers participating in Bill Southerly's Teaching in the Psychological Sciences listserv (<http://faculty.frostburg.edu/psyc/southerly/tips>) offered their secrets of success. Here, drawn from the discussion, are my 10 favorites, in italics, with my own reflections:

- *Be positive.* Correcting mistakes is important, but so is catching students doing something right and reinforcing them. Poet Jack Ridl, a revered professor on my campus and Michigan's Carnegie Professor of the Year, harnesses this principle in his teaching of writing (as I can vouch from Jack's mentoring me with his feedback on several thousand pages of my writing). Jack offers not only specific wisdom — "Your point will have most impact if not buried mid sentence" — but also his delight when catching peak moments: "Dave, can you feel your rhythm here? The cadence is lovely."
- *Give frequent and fast feedback.* It takes no more time to read papers and exams immediately — and to return them the next class period. Students welcome the immediate feedback and instructors are glad to have the chore behind them.
- *Be enthusiastic.* As Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal (1992, 1993) have found, it takes but a few seconds for observers to "read" a teacher's warmth and enthusiasm, and thus to predict their course evaluations. Some people are naturally expressive (and therefore talented at pantomime and charades); others are less expressive (and therefore better poker players). Bella DePaulo and her colleagues (1992) have shown that even inexpressive people, when feigning expressiveness, are less expressive than expressive people acting naturally. Bill Clinton and Dick Cheney could not, for more than a few moments, imitate each other's styles. The moral: If you're a low-key person who needs to express more enthusiasm, don't worry about overdoing it. What's more, fake it and you may make it.
- *Don't expect them to be as enthusiastic.* Chronically sleep-deprived and sometimes self-conscious collegians may not visibly reciprocate our energy, warmth, and enthusiasm. Nevertheless, energy, warmth, and enthusiasm help awaken minds. And as alumni memories of a class sometimes indicate, the mind behind the blank face may register more than we're aware.
- *Give lots of practical examples.* My first textbook editor, in response to my first submitted draft chapter, offered this advice: "Remember, Dave, for every abstract point you must have a concrete example." This principle of good writing is also a principle of good teaching.
- *Make questions concrete.* After showing a video I used to ask, "Comments anyone?" and suffer the silence. But then a colleague modeled a more effective strategy for me: "How did you react to the argument that ... ?" An easily engaged, specific question can unleash a discussion.

- *Have patience awaiting answers.* Don't answer your own question. Allow a few moments of calm silence, and a hand, or perhaps an expressive face, may signal someone's willingness to answer. As a further step, inviting students first to *write* an answer virtually ensures that they will then have something to say.
- *Do say, "I don't know" and entertain ideas about how to answer a question.* We show our humanity and humility when acknowledging our ignorance. And we can use such times to engage students in thinking like scientist-detectives — by brainstorming how one might go about answering the question.
- *Assume your introductory students will never take another course in your field.* Focus on the big questions. What from this course should an educated person know? What are the big lessons you hope they will never forget?
- *Realize that in teaching, as in life, two things are certain: 1) You're going to make a fool of yourself at some point, and 2) You're going to have your heart broken.* Although teaching for me has been rewarding, even the best of semesters has offered at least one student evaluation that has seized my attention like a bee sting, as in these answers from one of my students: "What did you find beneficial about this course?" "Nothing!" "What could be improved?" "End the course." "What advice would you give a friend who is planning to take this course?" "Don't."

In hopes of harvesting the teaching tips of our master psychology teachers, Bill Buskist (2002) several years ago interviewed award-winning psychology professors, asking them for secrets of their success. Buskist and his colleagues confirmed some of the highlights (see Table 1) in a follow-up study that asked community college faculty and students what they perceived as the qualities or behaviors of effective teachers (Schaeffer, Epting, Zinn, & Buskist, 2003). Both groups agreed that these qualities were among the top 10: being approachable; being creative and interesting; being encouraging and caring; being enthusiastic; being flexible and open-minded; being knowledgeable; having realistic expectations and being fair; and being respectful.

From his dozen years on university teaching award committees, Dean Keith Simonton (2003) has also observed the qualities of great teachers. And he has observed the qualities of scandalously bad teaching — the sort of bad teaching that brings faculty to the attention of personnel committees or leads to their being denied promotion and tenure. Behaviors related to the Big Five personality traits are the key to success, he observes (see Table 2). Great teaching is marked by behaviors associated with high extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and by behaviors associated with low neuroticism.

To these teaching tips and marks of master teachers, I add but six more, drawn from my own experience of what has worked best while teaching dozens of sections of introductory and social psychology.

## **Advice for teachers from Award-winning Teachers (gathered by William Buskist)**

1. First, know the content
2. Study the science and art of teaching
3. Observe great teaching and reflect on what might work for you
4. Meet with people who value teaching

5. Be willing to experiment
6. View tests as learning, not just testing opportunities
7. You won't always be effective, but strive to daily give your best
8. Be enthusiastic!
9. Demand the best, with patience
10. Genuinely care about students
11. Talk with students outside class
12. Get to know your students
13. Remember being a student
14. Focus on students with varying needs & skills
15. Always ask for feedback; be grateful for criticism
16. When the passion ends, quit; if your humor is gone, become an administrator

### 1. Learn Students' Names Immediately

“Remember that a [person's] name is to [that person] the sweetest and most important,” advised Dale Carnegie (1937, p. 103) in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, as one of his six “ways to make people like you.” (The other five also are applicable to teaching: Become genuinely interested in other people. Smile. Be a good listener; encourage others to talk about themselves. Talk in terms of the other person's interests. Make the other person feel important — and do it sincerely.) At various times, I have used three strategies for mastering students' names.

#### **Rehearsal Exercise**

In classes of 35, I have simply invited the first person to say his or her first and last name, the second person to repeat that name and to add their own, the third person to repeat the first two names and add their own ... concluding with my repeating all 35 names, followed by my own. I would tell students that “we're here to help each other when names are forgotten — someone's forgetting provides our opportunity to learn and remember.” Still, forgetting happened less often than I expected. Moreover, memory lapses — often for the name immediately before one's own, for which there had been no rehearsal — provided opportunities for a preview of memory principles. Likewise, my noting the contrasting relaxed and tense body postures of students who had completed or were awaiting the task provided both humorous relief and a preview of stress and physiological arousal. Even so, the exercise — which also breaks ice by engaging every student in saying something, takes but half an hour. (Obviously, though, Jim Maas, who has taught 65,000 introductory psychology students at Cornell University, could not have done this in one of his student sections of 1,700.)

#### **Photo Lineups**

Needing more help as the years went by, I next turned to photographing each class. To create a panoramic sweep, three or four pictures can be stapled to a sheet on which students have written their names according to that day's seating. With a half hour of study at home, plus occasional retrieval practice — often just before class — their names become accessible during class discussion.

#### **Flash Visits**

Perhaps I have more capacity for anxiety than most faculty. Starting a new class has always provoked excitement but (while facing new students whose friendship and enthusiasm has not yet been won) also feelings of threat. To jump-start the friendship formation (as well as the name learning), I have dedicated one day within the first week to scheduling students for five-minute get-acquainted conversations in my office. Meeting, say, 10 students an hour, I could talk with the 70 students in two sections of introductory psychology (well, the 60 that remember to show up) during seven intense but enjoyable hours. After some easy questions — Where are you from? What drew you to Hope College? What interests do you have? Have you any questions I could answer? — I thank them for coming by and invite them to come back anytime. When next meeting the class, I have found myself noticeably more comfortable, as if surrounded by friends.

## 2. Minimize Exam-Related Disagreements

I suspect we all dislike handing back exams, and dislike even more taking class time to be publicly challenged regarding the interpretation of multiple choice questions or points awarded on essay questions. To preclude such hassle, I have asked students to speak to me about their exam-related questions after class. This also, I have explained, spares the rest of the class having to sit through my dealing with individuals' problems.

I have additionally given students an option when they confront a seemingly ambiguous question. The option is 1) to not answer the multiple choice question, and instead 2) to write a short essay that answers the question. If they can display an accurate understanding, they receive full credit. If not, they don't (and they will have passed up their chance to guess the right answer). Out of 35 students, a half dozen typically have elected this option in responding to one or two questions. Their doing so virtually eliminates complaints about unfair questions. Sometimes it also alerts me to a question that does have a valid alternative interpretation. (Other faculty achieve the same ends by allowing students to skip a question or to complete a form on which they can challenge a teacher's answer.)

## 3. Create the Space

Theater directors and sports fans appreciate that a "good house" is a full house. As social facilitation research reminds us, the presence of others is arousing. It intensifies reactions. Some years ago, Jonathan Freedman and his co-workers (1979) had an accomplice listen to a humorous tape or watch a movie with others. The accomplice could more readily induce fellow audience members to laugh or clap when they all sat close together. Likewise, a class of 35 students feels more warm and lively in a room that seats just 35 than when scattered around a room that seats 100. With heightened arousal and more awareness of one another's responses, jokes become funnier and discussion more animated.

To create a "good house" for our classes, we can create optimal classroom ecology. If possible, schedule the class for a room barely big enough to contain it. Arrange chairs in an arc so people can see one another's faces, while still orienting toward the instructor. Arrive early, stack extra chairs in a back corner, and group the others close together (or rope off the back rows).

**Big Five Personality/Behavior Differences Between Best and Worst Teachers (observed by Dean Keith Simonton)**

### **The Best Teachers Exhibit**

High extraversion  
Before-class chats/enthusiasm/interactive (e.g., shows of hands)  
High agreeableness  
Learn names/liberal office hours  
High conscientiousness  
Read text/complete syllabi  
Low neuroticism  
Relaxed/easy-going/flexible  
High openness to experience  
Show connections/use cartoons newspapers, TV shows, movies

### **The Worst Teachers Exhibit**

Low extraversion  
Arrive late/leave early/avoid eye contact/inaudible/  
Low agreeableness  
Dislike Q's/minimal office hours  
Low conscientiousness  
Unprepared/bad syllabi/dated  
High neuroticism  
Anxious/defensive/inflexible  
Low openness to experience  
Narrow perspective/Imposes own views/disdains application

## 4. Beware the Curse of Knowledge

Technology developers, authors, and teachers often find it irresistibly tempting to assume that what is clear to them will be clear to others. We realize that others lack our expertise, yet, after teaching a class 25 times, we underestimate how confusing an explanation can be. I may feel certain that I have clearly explained “negative reinforcement” and so am astonished when nearly half the class persists in thinking it is punishment.

“The curse of knowledge” describes our egocentric inability to see the world as it looks to those without our knowledge. Ask someone, “How long do you think it takes the average person to solve this anagram — to see that *grabe* can be unscrambled into *barge*?” Knowing the answer, it seems easy, perhaps a 10-second task. But as Colleen Kelley and Larry Jacoby (1996) have shown, if given similar anagrams without knowing the answer (*wreat*), the task proves surprisingly difficult.

Likewise, Boaz Keysar and Anne Henly (2002) have shown that speakers readily overestimate their effectiveness in communicating meaning. They asked speakers to read an ambiguous sentence (such as “Angela shot the man with the gun”) in a way that communicated one of its two possible meanings. The speakers routinely overestimated their listeners’ accuracy in perceiving the intended message. They presumed that what was obvious to them would be similarly obvious to their audience. This curse of knowledge is surely a source of much miscommunication not only among friends and lovers, but also between teachers and students, and authors and readers. Whatever can be misunderstood will be. Once we know something, it becomes difficult to appreciate what it’s like not to know. But we can, by restraining our assumptions, better enable students to cross the bridge from ignorance to knowledge.

## 5. Lecture Less

After authoring my own text — which stole my best lecture material — I was motivated to subdue my talking head and to offer students briefer synopses of key or difficult concepts interwoven with

experiences that more actively engaged them (see below). The resulting student evaluations proved gratifying, and without any performance decline on exams that covered all text chapters.

In hindsight, this makes sense. Given that even average readers can absorb words at double the speed of a teacher's speaking — and can pause to reread difficult material — lecture is an inefficient means of transferring words from one head to another. I believe I speak for fellow text authors in suggesting that, compared to lecture-based teaching, learning from textbooks can offer broader, less idiosyncratic, more representative, and more carefully checked coverage of a discipline. And I am confident I speak for the community of text authors in saying that all introductory texts are superior to their authors' pre-text lectures. Thanks to the magnitude of effort and the extensive quality controls, the resulting teaching package is more comprehensive, tightly organized, carefully reviewed, painstakingly edited, efficiently presented, and attractively packaged than any instructor could home brew. In the spirit of Winston Churchill's remark about democracy, textbooks are the worst way to present information, except for all the others.

## 6. Activate Students

Writing for this column a decade ago on "The Merits of Classroom Demonstrations," Doug Bernstein (1994) observed that "my 27 years of teaching have left me convinced that the best use of class time is not so much to teach things as to do things — tell stories, give examples, present new concepts, and of course offer demonstrations — in ways that motivate the students to read the book, ask important questions, and learn for themselves. ... Classroom demonstrations, like other breaks from the straight lecture mode, can provide highlights that make teaching more enjoyable for you as well as the students."

I concur, and have devised or gleaned from others a series of demonstrations that are 1) fairly quick, 2) utterly reliable, 3) dramatic (it doesn't take a statistical caliper to see the effect), 4) pedagogically effective, and 5) just plain fun. Thus, at different times of the semester my students have, for example, been found to be:

- Groaning, grinning, and laughing — after virtually 100 percent have labeled "unsurprising" a seemingly common sense finding that is actually opposite to what the people on either side of them also claim, in hindsight, to have known all along.
- Squeezing each others' shoulders and ankles in a human chain — demonstrating psychological measurement principles while measuring the speed of neural transmission.
- Befuddled by pseudoparanormal ESP tricks.
- Experiencing perceptual adaptation with special glasses that displace the visual field.
- Displaying dramatically greater memory for visually than acoustically encoded sentences.
- Exhibiting common illusory thinking tendencies.
- Illustrating group polarization after discussion in small groups.

All these demonstrations (Bolt, 2004) are fun and games — but with a purpose that links to, and makes memorable, a basic principle.

Nearly 20 years ago, Colorado State psychologist Frank Vattano and I sat down with a Corporation for Public Broadcasting executive, hoping to persuade her to allow highlights of the PBS series, "The Brain," to be made available to psychology teachers as affordable brief clips (rather than expensive 60

minute programs). To our delight, she did commission Frank to repackage the series in teaching-friendly modules, and then invited him to do the same with “The Mind” series. Thanks to these and subsequent resources, in nearly every class period we can now offer one or more brief video clips that enliven lecture and stimulate discussion. If we have been considering split-brain research, we can display a split-brain patient being tested. If we have been demonstrating illusory thinking principles, we can meet Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky on screen. Judging by the response of my students, this simple innovation — replacing long films and videos with vivid three to 10 minute clips that are directly pertinent to the topic at hand — has been a boon to the teaching of psychology.

Finally, I have engaged my students in active processing through out-of-class computer simulations. The best of today’s interactive programs can engage students as experimenters (as when training a rat), as subjects (as when being tested on a memory or perceptual illusion task), and as learners in a dynamic tutorial (as when harnessing dynamic computer graphics to teach concepts such as neurotransmission).

So, learn names and make friends, minimize exam hassles, create the space, beware the curse of knowledge, lecture less, and activate students — those are my echoes to the accumulated wisdom of master teachers of psychology.