8 | What are the Characteristics of Effective Teaching?

Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” first appeared in the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Bulletin in 1987. In this article, Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson describe a set of pedagogical standards derived from decades of educational research, and designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in colleges and universities.

These principles have had an enormous impact on university teaching influencing research, faculty development and student learning across the world. They are referenced, quoted and remain a cornerstone of teaching and learning practices to this day.

Chickering and Gamson state that **good practice** in undergraduate teaching:

1. **Encourages contacts between students and faculty**
   
   Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students’ intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans.

   **Some examples:** First year seminars on important topics, students taught by senior faculty members, establish an early connection between students and faculty
2. **Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students**

Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort that a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding.

*Some Examples:* Even in large lecture classes, students can learn from one another. Learning groups are a common practice. Students are assigned to a group of five to seven other students, who meet regularly during class throughout the term to solve problems set by the instructor. Many institutions use peer tutors for students who need special help.

3. **Uses active learning techniques**

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

*Some examples:* Active learning is encouraged in classes that use structured exercises, challenging discussions, team projects, and peer critiques. Active learning can also occur outside the classroom. There are thousands of internships, independent study, and cooperative job programs across the country in all kinds of colleges and universities, in all kinds of fields, for all kinds of students. Students also can help design and teach courses or parts of courses.

4. **Gives prompt feedback**

Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. When getting started, students need help in assessing existing knowledge and competence. In classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. At various points during college, and at the end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how to assess themselves.

*Some examples:* No feedback can occur without assessment. But assessment without timely feedback contributes little to learning. Institutions assess entering students as they enter to guide them in planning their studies. In addition to the feedback students receive from course
instructors, students in many colleges and universities receive counseling periodically on their progress and future plans.

5. **Emphasizes time on task**
   Time plus energy equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task. Learning to use one’s time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Students need help in learning effective time management. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty. How an institution defines time expectations for students, faculty, administrators, and other professional staff can establish the basis of high performance for all.

   *Some examples:* Mastery learning, contract learning, and computer-assisted instruction require that students spend adequate amounts of time on learning. Extended periods of preparation for learning also give students more time on task. Providing students with opportunities to integrate their studies into the rest of their lives helps them use time well.

6. **Communicates high expectations**
   Expect more and you will get more. High expectations are important for everyone -- for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well-motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations for themselves and make extra efforts.

   *Some examples:* In many colleges and universities, students with poor past records or test scores do extraordinary work. Sometimes they outperform students with good preparation. Most important are the day-to-day, week-in and week-out expectations students and faculty hold for themselves and for each other in all their classes.

7. **Respects diverse talents and ways of learning**
   There are many roads to learning. People bring different talents and styles of learning to college. Brilliant students in the seminar room may be all thumbs in the lab or art studio. Students rich in hands-on experience may not do so well with theory. Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learn in new ways that do not come so easily.

   *Some examples:* Individualized degree programs recognize different interests. Personalized systems of instruction and mastery learning let students work at their own pace. Contract learning helps students define their own objectives, determine their learning activities, and define the criteria and methods of evaluation.
What Less Effective Teachers Do Wrong

Doing the right things with your teaching is of course critical but so is avoiding the wrong things. Richard M. Felder, North Carolina State University and Rebecca Brent, Education Designs, Inc., have come up with a list to the ten worst mistakes teachers make. They are summarized here in increasing order of “badness”.

Mistake #10: When you ask a question in class, immediately call for volunteers. When you do this most students will avoid eye contact, and either you get a response from one of the two or three who always volunteer or you answer your own question.

Mistake #9: Call on students cold. If you frequently call on students without giving them time to think (“cold-calling”), the ones who are intimidated by it won’t be following your lecture as much as praying that you don’t land on them. Even worse, as soon as you call on someone, the others breathe a sigh of relief and stop thinking.

Mistake #8: Turn classes into PowerPoint shows. Droning through lecture notes put into PowerPoint slides is generally a waste of time for everyone.

Mistake #7: Fail to provide variety in instruction. Effective instruction mixes things up: board work, multimedia, storytelling, discussion, activities, individual assignments, and group work (being careful to avoid Mistake #6). The more variety you build in, the more effective the class is likely to be.

“...The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”

— William Arthur Ward
Mistake #6: Have students work in groups with no individual accountability. The way to make group work function is through using cooperative learning, an exhaustively researched instructional method that effectively promotes development of both cognitive and interpersonal skills.

Mistake #5: Fail to establish relevance. To provide better motivation, begin the course by describing how the content relates to important technological and social problems and to whatever you know of the students’ experience, interests, and career goals, and do the same thing when you introduce each new topic.

Mistake #4: Give tests that are too long. If you want to evaluate your students’ potential to be successful professionals, test their mastery of the knowledge and skills you are teaching, not their problem-solving speed.

Mistake #3: Get stuck in a rut. Things are always happening that provide incentives and opportunities for improving courses. This is not to say that you have to make major revisions in your course every time you give it—you probably don’t have time to do that, and there’s no reason to. Rather, just keep your eyes open for possible improvements you might make in the time available to you.

Mistake #2. Teach without clear learning objectives/outcomes. A key to making courses coherent and tests fair is to write learning objectives—explicit statements of what students should be able to do if they have learned what the instructor wants them to learn—and to use the objectives as the basis for designing lessons, assignments, and exams.

Mistake #1. Disrespect students. If you give students a sense that you don’t respect them, the class will probably be a bad experience for everyone no matter what else you do, while if you clearly convey respect and caring, it will cover a multitude of pedagogical sins you might commit.

See this website for the origin of this list and other characteristics of effective teachers: https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/teaching/planning-your-approach/characteristics-effective-teachers

“In learning you will teach, and in teaching you will learn.”
— Phil Collins
Face-to-face (F2F) and Online Examples of Effective Teaching Characteristics

In 2008, Memorial University undertook a study to determine student perspectives on effective teaching in higher education.

The following chart gives an overview of these characteristics and examples of teacher behaviours that illustrate those characteristics. Adapted from: Delaney, J.G., Johnson, A.N., Johnson, T.D. & Treslan, D. L. (2010) Students' Perceptions of Effective Teaching in Higher Education. St John's, NL: Distance Education and Learning Technologies.
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<td>Respectful</td>
<td>Fair, understanding, flexible, caring, patient, helpful, compassionate, open-minded, sincere, diplomatic, concerned, reasonable, consistent, kind, empathetic, humble, trustworthy, realistic</td>
<td>Compassionate with regards to students' circumstances; open to &quot;stupid&quot; question; willing to explain many times and in different ways if necessary; uses common courtesy; tactful with criticism; shows concern for students' academic success; willing to admit own mistakes</td>
<td>Fair, understanding, flexible, caring, patient, helpful, compassionate, open-minded, diplomatic, concerned, reasonable, consistent, kind, empathetic, trustworthy, realistic</td>
<td>Prepared to answer more questions than F2F; offers expressive feedback; shows concern for students; must be able to trust teacher's answers; fair and reasonable with expectations, create real world tasks</td>
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<td>Responsive</td>
<td>Available, helpful, perceptive, accommodating</td>
<td>Timely, thorough constructive feedback; set office hours; responds to email ASAP; involves students more during class time; has awareness of students' needs; reads students' body language; accepts that students learn at different paces</td>
<td>Available, helpful, accommodating</td>
<td>Responds to posts and questions in a timely fashion; asks students for clarification to check students' understanding; builds on what students already know; gives students options to accommodate different learning styles; monitors and participates in discussion forums</td>
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<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>Flexible, competent, eclectic, credible, current, practical, reflective, qualified</td>
<td>Must be credible; conveys content that can be understood; shares real life experience; varies teaching strategies; relates content to real-life</td>
<td>Flexible, competent, eclectic, credible, current, practical, reflective, qualified</td>
<td>Must be competent; conveys content in a way that can be understood; shares personal anecdotes; uses a variety of resources to share content; must be up-to-date on research and practice in their field</td>
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<td>Approachable</td>
<td>Friendly, personable, helpful, accessible, happy, positive</td>
<td>Smiles; makes a comfortable atmosphere; maintains appropriate office hours and responds to email in a reasonable time</td>
<td>Friendly, personable, helpful, accessible, happy, positive</td>
<td>Understands that not everything can be communicated using a written approach; uses recordings to convey information; responds promptly to questions; makes students feel like instructor wants to be there; uses friendly tone in posts</td>
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<td><strong>Communicative</strong></td>
<td>Clear, understandable, thorough, constructive, attentive</td>
<td>Speaks clearly; has astute listening skills; uses a variety of teaching methods; is approachable; understands students questions and gets to the point; is organized; maximizes use of class time; gives prompt quality feedback</td>
<td>Clear, understandable, thorough, constructive, attentive</td>
<td>Clear, &quot;listens&quot; and gets points across via electronic (written) communication; uses a variety of teaching methods, quick response time; clearly communicates expectations; personal feedback helps connect student to instructor; offers constructive feedback</td>
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<td><strong>Organized</strong></td>
<td>Efficient, focused, prepared</td>
<td>Organized lectures, clear visual aids; stays on topic; provides sufficient feedback in a reasonable time</td>
<td>Efficient, focused, prepared</td>
<td>Organized online content; clear expectations at the beginning of the course; provides timelines; responds to emails and discussion posts promptly</td>
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<td><strong>Engaging</strong></td>
<td>Enthusiastic, interesting, passionate, motivating, creative, positive, charismatic, stimulating, interactive, energetic, assertive</td>
<td>Interacts with students, has a passion for course content; smiles; varies tone of voice; actively involves students in a lecture; uses creative approaches</td>
<td>Enthusiastic, interesting, passionate, motivating, creative, positive, charismatic, stimulating, interactive, energetic, assertive</td>
<td>Posts interesting info related to the course from news; relates material to real life etc.; offers creative discussion topics</td>
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<td><strong>Professional</strong></td>
<td>Dedicated, punctual, dependable, efficacious, hygienic, confident</td>
<td>Dresses appropriately; is punctual, trustworthy, honest; has well-planned lectures; be faithful to the syllabus; confidence helps students develop self-esteem</td>
<td>Dedicated, punctual, dependable, confident</td>
<td>Is willing to investigate effective teaching techniques for distance learning; makes sure all interactions are quality interactions</td>
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<td><strong>Humorous</strong></td>
<td>Friendly, available, positive outlook on teaching, kind, happy</td>
<td>Helps students feel more relaxed; creates a positive learning environment; humour prevents students from falling asleep in class</td>
<td>Friendly, available, positive outlook on teaching, kind, happy</td>
<td>Adds a personal touch to the course; makes the material come alive; makes light observations</td>
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