

## Book Review: *What the Best College Teachers Do*

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Ken Bain, in his 2004 book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, delves into the topic of best teaching practices in college education. This review focuses on the key elements Bain identifies as those which frame the unique components that help define best teaching, which can be divided into three broad categories: knowledge about teaching, knowledge about students, and knowledge about learning. The review includes detailed descriptions of each of the three categories.

When first reflecting on a statement such as the one Bain puts forth in his book title, we cannot help but think about our own experience in the classroom, both as students and teachers. It often seems easy to identify key characteristics of exemplary teachers in isolation, but, as Bain points out, it is not one particular set of traits that characterizes teachers who form part of this cluster of best teachers. Rather, it is the combination of unique traits, strategies, idiosyncrasies, techniques, and, ultimately, awareness of who our students are and what they need in order to be(come) successful learners that defines best teachers.

In a clever and systematic fashion, Bain takes the reader on a journey that explores six key elements that help frame the unique components used to define best teaching. What distinguishes this book is that, as Bain posited, its aim is not to present a list of teaching tips, but rather to inspire teachers to engage in deep reflection about the elements discussed: knowledge about how people learn, preparation strategies for teaching, expectations for students, organization and structuring of class sessions, treatment towards students, and evaluation of students and themselves. These elements can be divided into three broad categories: knowledge about teaching, knowledge about students, and knowledge about learning.

When discussing knowledge about teaching, Bain points out that a key element of best teaching is the desire to take learning beyond rote memorization and bring it to a deeper dimension: one in which students become the protagonists of their educational process and engage in reasoning that leads to deeper understanding. Bain also highlights the importance of creating a critical learning environment where students find themselves immersed in a setting which fosters learning through authentic tasks and where students engage in critical thinking. Moreover, this type of environment is one in which students focus their attention at the beginning of class, feel at ease and are safe, are unafraid of making mistakes, receive periodic feedback in the form of warm and cool language, and are encouraged to be active participants in class discussions as well as engaged in self-evaluation of their work.

Bain also addresses the importance of teachers' knowledge about students. When he looks into teacher expectations of students, one of the key elements he identifies as part of successful instruction is the awareness of stereotypes and how they affect students' ability to succeed academically; coupled with strategies that help students gain confidence in themselves, this awareness can lead students to become more successful learners. In addition, Bain points out that the best teachers put trust in their students, thus making them accountable and true agents of their own learning. In this sense, the best teachers reject the position of power in which they would otherwise naturally be. In an environment like this, teachers can help foster interactive participation and class discussion in which students are not afraid of giving their opinions or making mistakes, and where students are encouraged to give and justify their points of view within a framework of respect.

As Bain discusses knowledge about learning, he highlights the importance for teachers to have awareness of their own metacognitive reasoning, which can help them visualize their own learning and the thinking strategies applied in their disciplines. Bain also states that knowledge is constructed rather than received; the way students construct their own knowledge is determined by their preconceived ideas and paradigms. Thus, best teachers work towards breaking those preconceptions, challenging students to think critically and providing students with the necessary scaffolding so that they can modify existing mental models that detract from learning. Moreover, best teachers consider assessment as a form of helping students learn rather than just rating or ranking students' efforts. They also share the criteria they will use to assess student performance with their students. In addition, instruction is based on the overarching goals of helping students develop intellectually and personally, for which purposes evidence is collected through carefully-thought assessments that help students improve and learn better.

One of the key notions laid out in this book is that teachers should aim at creating a safe learning environment in which students can negotiate and

actively engage with new material. With respect to this, the notions of care and respect are of paramount importance. In this sense, as Bain notes, students who stereotypically are expected to fail will not be successful unless they feel at ease and comfortable in the classroom setting. This, in turn, will not only allow all students to become successful, but it will also foster a relationship of care and respect in the learning community.

By the same token, particularly inspiring is the idea of granting students agency to design and monitor their own learning, especially by shying away from a model of instruction that reminds us of the banking model (Freire, 2000). In such a model, the teacher is the sole actor in the learning process who makes decisions regarding content, format, and assessment, perpetuating strategic and performance learning rather than deep learning.

In the model Bain proposes, the relationship of trust that exists between students and teacher needs to be established at the very beginning of the semester and nurtured until the very end. An effective way of doing so is to start class on the first day by setting out the broad goals and expectations the teacher has of the students and engage in a dialogue where students can actively contribute to the design of the syllabus of the class. Although this idea sounds somewhat utopian, especially in undergraduate classes, it is feasible if there is careful scaffolding provided by the teacher.

In addition, throughout the semester the teacher can plan instruction that fosters active participation of students in class discussion, that is designed around critical questions posed by teacher and students alike,

and that carefully and purposefully guides students into gaining deeper understanding and engaging in critical thinking and constant self-evaluation.

All in all, Bain's book provides an insight into best teaching practices to teachers who truly care about students and their education and, more importantly, are willing to embrace new practices that will foster lifelong deep learning. Bain proposes that teachers strategically design instruction and relinquish the spotlight. Teachers who do this will be satisfied knowing that they have created a learning environment where students are active participants in their own learning and engage critically with the material; furthermore, they will extend the impact of instruction and learning beyond their classroom and their discipline.

#### References

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