

Advice for New Faculty

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Middle Tennessee State University

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The Teaching Self

One of the most important goals of NIU is to offer effective instruction to the students who study here. The University strives to recruit the best faculty and teaching assistants possible and to support them in their teaching, research and service endeavors. As part of the support for teaching, this handbook provides an overview of some basic information on instructional strategies. To situate this information within the general context of effective teaching, this section provides an overview of what is meant by effective teaching, how faculty can continue to develop their instructional strengths through seeking and using feedback and how, given the pressures on instructors to perform well in several roles, they can “balance it all.”

Research suggests that certain characteristics are consistently associated with good college teaching as viewed by students, other teachers and administrators. In a study of winners of the Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award at Ohio State (Ebro, 1977), observation of their classes identified the following characteristics of effective teaching, which strongly parallel those found in other studies – these instructors:

- began class promptly and got right down to business
- were well organized
- taught at an appropriately fast pace, but stopped regularly to check student comprehension and engagement
- used a variety of instructional strategies rather than lecture alone
- focused on the topic and their instructional objectives and did not get sidetracked
- provided clear explanations
- used humor that was in keeping with their individual styles
- practiced good classroom management techniques, holding the attention and respect of the group
- interacted with students by providing immediate answers to questions or comments and corrective feedback when needed
- praised student answers and used probing questions to extend the answers
- provided a warm classroom climate by allowing students to speak freely and included personal humor or other attempts to relate to students as people
- used nonverbal behavior, such as gestures, walking around and eye contact to reinforce student comments

Lowman (1996) describes two main dimensions of effective college teaching that emerge in his studies: **Intellectual Excitement** (enthusiasm, knowledge, inspiration, humor, interesting viewpoint, clarity, organization) and **Interpersonal Concern/Effective Motivation** (concern, caring, availability, friendliness, accessibility, helpfulness, encouragement, challenge). Other studies (see, for example, Chickering

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and Gamson, 1991) consistently identify knowledge of subject matter, organizational skills, enthusiasm, clarity and interpersonal skills as marks of an effective teacher. Agreement across studies suggests that the characteristics of good teaching are not mysterious or extremely relative. They can, and have been, identified by researchers, students and professionals alike.

Inspection of these characteristics fails to support another commonly held belief about teaching: good teachers are born, not made. While certain characteristics such as humor and interpersonal skills come easily to some people and not others, people are not born with knowledge of a given discipline or competency in the use of instructional strategies. Furthermore, those who exhibit these qualities most consistently state that they work hard at attaining them and are very conscious of their actions and their effects.

The best instructors know not only what they are doing, but why it is working and why it is likely to work in one kind of environment and not in another.

These highly conscious teachers are examples of what Schön (1983) has termed the “reflective practitioner,” the professional who acquires expertise by learning in the action environment. Based on a study of Ohio State faculty (Chism, 1988), a model of faculty growth in teaching emerged that suggested that effective teachers develop by maximizing what they learn through experience. They engage in cycles of learning during which they try a practice, observe its effects and decide how and when they will use a similar practice. Most instructors often carry on the process unsystematically without a great deal of conscious attention to the learning process. What distinguishes those who learn best, however, are the very level of conscious reflection and quality of information they bring to bear in determining the effects of a practice in a particular context. The best instructors know not only what they are doing, but why it is working and why it is likely to work in one kind of environment and not in another. Although they may have some natural personality characteristics that support their success, they also work very hard at their teaching and continually try to improve.

A number of writers have observed differences in style among instructors. They classify them according to a number of dimensions that represent how the teachers approach their students, the ways in which they think learning takes place, and personal strengths and preferences. Lowman (1996) observes that exemplary college instructors “appear to be those who are highly proficient in either one of two fundamental sets of skills: the ability to offer presentations in clearly organized and interesting ways [intellectual excitement] or to relate to students in ways that communicate positive regard and motivate them to work hard to meet academic challenges [interpersonal rapport]. All are probably at least completely competent in both sets of skills but outstanding in one or, occasionally, even both of them” (p. 38).

Five Teaching Styles

Grasha (1996) advocates an “Integrated Model” of teaching and learning styles, recognizing that individual teachers will naturally exhibit different styles, but stressing that teachers must cultivate certain styles so that they can use approaches that are appropriate to the instructional situations and kind of learners they encounter. For example, Grasha observes that a blend of the *Expert-Formal Authority* styles works best with learners who are dependent and less capable with the content. Grasha advocates that teachers reflect on their stylistic approaches and make conscious decisions about these. His book, *Teaching with Style*, provides many exercises for faculty to use in thinking about style. Grasha’s five teaching styles are below:

- **Expert.** Concerned with transmitting information from an expert status; challenges students to enhance their competence
- **Formal Authority.** Concerned with the acceptable ways to do things and providing students with the structure they need to learn
- **Personal Model.** Believes in teaching by personal example; oversees and guides students to emulate
- **Facilitator.** Emphasizes the personal nature of teacher-student interactions; guides students toward developing their capacity for independent action
- **Delegator.** Concerned with developing students' capacity to function autonomously; encourages independent projects

Personal Adjustments

As with any new work environment, instructors new to the university will find it necessary to make anticipated as well as unanticipated adjustments. *The New Faculty Member* by Boice (1992) offers suggestions that can be useful for new university instructors, particularly those in their first-year of teaching. Boice interviewed and studied 200 new instructors on two campuses (one comprehensive and one doctoral) over two years, the majority of whom had little preparation for teaching in their graduate experience. For most new instructors in the study, the first year was full of surprises and disappointments in the areas of collegial support, preparation time and student ratings. Three groups emerged from the study:

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- **Inexperienced new faculty** (faculty with less than 2 years since receiving a terminal degree)
- **Returning new faculty** (faculty who came from careers outside academe)
- **Experienced new faculty** (faculty who were teaching full-time at another campus)

Inexperienced new faculty. A majority of inexperienced new faculty felt a lack of collegial support. They thought they should have received more concrete help from experienced colleagues, particularly with copies of previously used syllabi and other course material. Inexperienced new faculty characterized chairs and senior faculty as expressing the attitude that the 'best faculty' figure things out on their own. By their second year, many first time faculty turned to one another for support. They sought out senior faculty and used them as role models. Inexperienced new faculty were also open to trying various teaching methods and styles in the classroom. Inexperienced new faculty who were most satisfied and successful during their first two years (labeled as "quick starters"), expressed interest in learning the creative ways senior colleagues had devised to make learning easier and more interesting to their students.

Returning new faculty were most vocal about the lack of collegial support. Perhaps they expected to feel the level of acceptance similar to what they previously experienced as faculty. This would be a difficult expectation to meet and one on which returning faculty might want to reflect.

Experienced new faculty new to campus reported that they received useful advice and encouragement from senior faculty. Experienced new faculty also reported the least number of difficulties in adapting to all aspects of their new teaching position.

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Boice (1992) revealed that the majority of instructors in all three newcomer categories defined teaching in ways that viewed students as passive recipients of information. New faculty tended to seek to improve their teaching, but they did not seek external advice on how to make those improvements. The majority of new faculty reported that their teaching ratings from students were lower than they had expected.

All three categories of new faculty described themselves as being well prepared and knowledgeable, interested in students, good at explaining /conceptualizing and good at motivating students. They equated good teaching with clear, knowledgeable and inspiring lectures. Most new faculty described their classroom styles in ways that indicated to the researcher that the vast majority defined teaching at a very simplistic level; a level that has been called “facts-and-principles lecturing.”

At the end of the first semester, between 50 and 80 percent of all categories of new faculty received student ratings below the mean rating for their campus. Throughout their second year, student rating of their teaching improved but continued to be lower than desirable. However, by this time the new faculty began attributing the disappointing ratings to their students’ inability to handle challenging material. New faculty rarely sought out advice for ways of translating ratings into alternative styles of teaching. New faculty taught defensively, concentrating on covering the material and getting the facts straight. This “more of the same” approach was not a successful approach.

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Boice (1992) describes the quick starters as resilient, insightful, and positively identified with the campus. Quick starters demonstrated resilience by not taking their early feelings of isolation personally but rather sought support from senior faculty and identified those who could be helpful. They demonstrated their insight as they gathered information about their new role and new environment. Quick starters were able to separate gossip and small talk from valuable and reliable information. Perhaps because they quickly identified helpful senior faculty, quick starters began to feel themselves as part of the campus more readily than other new faculty.

After studying new faculty at different institutions over several years, Boice (1991, 1992) identified several characteristics of faculty he calls “quick starters,” those who adjust easily and make steady progress in their work. According to Boice, quick starters:

- Are concerned about students’ active involvement in the learning process.
- Avoid feelings of isolation by developing social and professional networks with colleagues and others
- Seek advice on teaching from colleagues and consultants
- Avoid being critical and negative about undergraduate students
- Learn to balance time across teaching, research and service
- Are highly energetic, curious and humorous

Quick starters quickly learned to carry out competently and efficiently their teaching responsibilities and integrate their teaching with their other scholarly activities. Critical to the success of new instructors was collegial support, a positive view of teaching, and control over preparation time vs. research vs. writing time.

Quick starters took a very different approach to their teaching. They were more relaxed and even though they taught in a facts-and-principles manner, they left time for student participation. Effective instructors had good rapport with students and encouraged classroom involvement through verbal and non-verbal cues. The quick starters enjoyed teaching and their students and expressed positive and optimistic attitudes about the undergraduates on their campuses.

The biggest mistake most new instructors made was spending too much time preparing material for lectures. Rather than providing students with the structure for thinking about the material and including only necessary content, many new instructors tried to cover too much. A good number of new instructors openly admitted to over-preparing lectures, to having too much material to present without hurrying their lectures and to being perfectionistic beyond the level that could be rewarded in most classes. Knowledge of these errors did not seem to make any difference in their behaviors.

For all new instructors in the study, there was a constant anticipation that the next semester would bring about greater balance between their teaching and their scholarly writing or research. As semesters came and went, this balance was not achieved by most.

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There was an expectation that the summer would provide the time for them to bring about a better balance between teaching, research and writing. Rarely did this occur. Most instructors were not as productive over the summer as they had anticipated. However, the **quick starters** were able to reduce their teaching preparation time by the first half of their second year. For many new instructors, it is rather frightening to consider cutting back on preparation time and giving up writing copious notes in advance of the lecture. Boice found that it takes a “leap of faith” and that colleagues can be helpful in encouraging their new colleagues to focus on particular goals for each class and to keep the details to what is necessary for student level comprehension.

Seven Attributes of Successful “Quick Starters”

The quick starters were those new faculty who, during their first two years, were exemplary teachers according to student ratings, Boice’s (1991) own ratings, and faculty’s self-descriptions. In summary, the attributes and behaviors of the quick starters included:

- Positive attitudes about students
- Relaxed paced lectures with student involvement
- Low levels of complaining about students, workload, etc.
- Actively seeking advice about teaching
- Quicker transition to moderate levels of lecture preparation
- Superior investment in time spent on scholarly and grant writing
- Readiness to improve their teaching

The most obvious advice for new faculty is to follow the model set by quick starters. Finding balance in time expenditure is critical. Boice suggests that new faculty keep

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With regard to teaching, Boice directs new faculty to seek advice on how to interpret student ratings and to improve teaching accordingly. Further, he suggests that new faculty attend to social networking, spend time on scholarly writing each day and integrate research and scholarly writing interests into lectures.

Eison (1990) stresses the importance of confidence for new teachers. Confidence is built upon good planning, setting clear goals and cultivating a sense of relaxation and self-esteem. Eison advises new teachers to avoid perfectionism, recognize their limitations and see it as scholarly, rather than a sign of failure, to admit that they do not have all the answers and to seek assistance from colleagues.

Sustaining Growth and Avoiding Burnout

Sustaining growth in teaching involves continuing to learn. Chism (1993), using a model of teaching development rooted in experiential learning, suggests that experienced instructors can avoid burnout and continue to improve through a range of activities such as:

- Stimulating their thinking by taking advantage of opportunities to learn of new approaches to teaching through reading
- Attending workshops and conferences, observing colleagues and joining book groups or seminars on teaching topics
- Relying on colleagues or teaching consultants to provide them support as they experiment with teaching or to challenge them to try new things
- Obtaining regular, systematic feedback on their teaching
- Reflecting on their teaching continually and making changes based on those reflections

Balancing the Work Load

The challenge of being the kind of instructor who continually strives to improve instructional technique is approached by instructors who are simultaneously conducting their own studies or research program as well as engaging in service activities and maintaining a personal life. Instructors can feel caught among all these roles and have the sense that they are not performing up to their personal standards. Severe stress can result. Psychology professor Grasha (1987) suggests ways to control stress and balance the work load:

1. ***Be more selective about which requests to accept outside the teaching and research duties.*** Avoid the feeling that you must please others at personal expense to yourself. It is acceptable to not provide a reason for refusing requests.
2. ***Set priorities.*** Look at your calendar before each week begins with the following questions in mind:
 - Does the task have to be completed as designed?
 - Is the task something that can be delegated to others?

Avoid the feeling that you must please others at personal expense to yourself. It is acceptable to not provide a reason for refusing requests.

... *schedule social and recreational time as well as uninterrupted "work" time for writing or extended projects.*

Reevaluate your expectations, seek small wins, focus on achievements rather than deficiencies and seek social support.

- Can completion of the task be delayed for a period of time?
- Is it absolutely necessary to do this task at all?

After addressing the questions to eliminate some tasks, schedule social and recreational time as well as uninterrupted "work" time for writing or extended projects. Make effective use of these designated times as seriously as you take scheduled meetings.

3. **Use quick relaxation techniques.**

A number of techniques can be used to enhance your well-being.

- Tensing the body for a count of ten and then breathing deeply in and out to a count of four for a period of three to five minutes is especially effective after a tension-producing event
- After an hour of repetitive activity (such as writing or grading) stop and stretch your hands, wrists, arms and shoulders.
- Writing, such as keeping a personal journal or writing letters that are not mailed, can help during extremely stressful periods.
- Feeling connected with your colleagues and students can increase your job satisfaction and productivity.
- Smiling improves your immune system and your perspective on life—laughter is even better!

4. **Positive thinking.**

Stress often occurs when people feel that they cannot perform to self-expectations. Reevaluate your expectations, seek small wins, focus on achievements rather than deficiencies and seek social support (Grasha, 1996 citing James).

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