

Book Review: Teaching Strategies for the College Classroom: A Collection of Faculty Articles edited by Maryellen Weimer (2013)

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Teaching Strategies for the College Classroom: A Collection of Faculty Articles is a compilation of 35 articles republished from *The Teaching Professor* newsletter, a leading publication with the goal of helping “faculty improve their teaching, share best practices, and stay current on the latest pedagogical research” (The Teaching Professor, n.d.). While the articles are not new (they were written between 2003 and 2013), they focus on teaching fundamentals that still typically apply today. The articles, written by contributors that include faculty from the United States and Canada, either share an author’s personal teaching experiences or review a longer article published elsewhere. Each article averages two pages, making this an appropriate professional development resource for busy faculty, especially those who may be new to teaching and who primarily teach credit-bearing courses in a face-to-face format. The collection is divided into four sections covering different areas related to effective teaching practice.

The Four Sections of the Book

The first section is appropriately titled “The Start of a Successful Semester” and covers the basics, such as when to introduce the syllabus and strategies for structuring the first day of a course. In one article, Sandra Allen from Columbia College Chicago discusses the importance of “warming” the classroom climate for learning. One of the key approaches to creating a productive climate for learning is showing enthusiasm for students’ own ideas. When a “teacher gives concrete evidence of valuing” these ideas, “that creates an energy that makes all students more attentive and cooperative” (p. 17). One way she demonstrates this valuing is through a twist on the usual approach for the midterm formative check-in: instead of keeping the results to herself, she shares the results with the entire class and talks about what she learned and will do differently. Another invaluable article in this section is “Establishing Relevance,” authored by Jeff Fox from Brigham Young University. He points out that it is critical for a teacher to explain to students the connection between “content and activities of the course and their future lives”: if this connection is not obvious, students will begin to question the instructor’s credibility (p. 25). A teacher can show these connections by clearly communicating course outcomes in the syllabus, explaining how each assignment relates to the course outcomes, and beginning each class session by answering three questions: “What are we doing in class today?,” “Why are we studying this?,” and “How are we going to address the content?” Going beyond just listing the outcomes by taking care to orient students to “what, why, and how” can help motivate students in their learning.

The next section moves beyond first day basics into the more challenging work of “Building Rapport with Students.” Indeed, in a heartfelt essay on the importance of making oneself vulnerable while teaching, Rob Dornsife of Creighton University writes:

I need my students to know that I care about what we are working on together, and thus that I care about them... I want them to take risks when they approach learning new material, and to encourage them I need to model such risk-taking myself, even as it leaves me open to criticism. (pp. 36-37)

Dornsife illustrates this principle by telling a story about how he approached one of his students in “a supportive spirit” to learn why the student was missing class and not handing in his work. Although the student lied to Dornsife about the cause of his performance, Dornsife recognizes this is one of the risks that naturally go along with what he sees as significant rewards (e.g., being open with students will help them thrive). In short, teaching can be both scary and rewarding!

Another aspect of rapport is being caring, which includes a need to both honor and challenge a student’s beliefs. To do this, IUPUI’s Natasha Flowers argues that a teacher needs to “balance and integrate” different perspectives in the classroom; she visualizes this through a triangle which she displays for students as a reference. The three points, which need to be in balance are 1) a student’s personal experiences and beliefs, 2) the experiences and beliefs of others, and 3) the expertise of scholars and practitioners. One way she discusses that balance:

If students are focused solely on their own perspectives, they risk having... an... ethnocentric perspective. ... [A] narrow focus on other people’s perspectives may... increase interest in diversity, but students must understand the danger in not seeing possible ways in which they may connect with others. (pp. 53-54)

The section “Managing Challenging Behavior” addresses topics related to “problem” students. Consider, for example, a student who complains “because a 2:00 a.m. email was not answered before an 8:00 a.m. class” or who “dozes off during an afternoon class” (pp. 65, 68). What should a teacher do? In the case of that student expecting an immediate response to their email, Maryellen Weimer (editor of *The Teaching Professor*), in a summary of an article about “entitled” students, might recommend heading off that problem by clearly delineating expectations about email communication in the course syllabus. Other

techniques to use with entitled students include giving them “something to lose” (p. 66) in any sort of negotiation about a grade (e.g., a requested reevaluation of an assignment may result in a *lower* grade) and requiring a written justification explaining why they deserve a higher grade or more points. Oh, and what about that sleeping student? Jim Guinee, a psychologist at the University of Central Arkansas, helpfully reminds teachers that they should not take many negative behaviors in the classroom personally. For example, that sleeping student “may be taking 15 hours and working full-time to pay the bills” (p. 68). Rather than trying to control one’s students, he recommends “improving classroom management by examining the individual you are in control of—yourself” (p. 69).

The book ends with the section “Strategies for Student Engagement,” which offers many ideas for encouraging discussion in the classroom. In the book’s longest contribution, E. Shelley Reid (an English professor at George Mason University) explores the tradeoffs a teacher must make when trying to increase their students’ participation. Some of these tradeoffs include correctness of responses (a correct answer actually may have the effect of prematurely *ending* a discussion), coverage (student discussion may leave a teacher without sufficient time to cover necessary content), and control (a teacher has to be prepared for unexpected twists and turns); Reid offers strategies for addressing these challenges, such as consciously developing questions that will engage students (e.g., ones that don’t have one “right” answer) versus questions that focus on knowledge (which can tend to focus on simplistic facts). The article concludes with a review of why teachers use student participation as a pedagogy to begin with. In the end, a teacher should be clear about *why* they are incorporating student participation into the classroom (rather than just including it for participation’s sake).

The Relevance of the Book for Instruction Librarians

In general, this book aligns with what many instruction librarians consider best practice, e.g., the need to be clear about learning outcomes and to connect pedagogies and student activities to those outcomes. But not all essays in this collection will reflect a reader’s own personal teaching philosophy or concerns in the classroom. For example, one author invites fellow teachers to be “strict when the conditions warrant.” He related a story in which he emailed a student, asking her “Why are you treating my course like a joke again?”, and then wondered out loud to her in a meeting “why she was jeopardizing her degree with [a] foolish approach.” This may be a form of “tough love,” but this shaming also verges on being unprofessional. The inclusion of two articles focused on students and their cellphones reflect what was likely early consternation by faculty about their use, but as an educator, this reviewer has “moved on” from such concerns. Additionally, it is important to note this book only can

cover so much in its 35 articles and thus does not address a number of concerns of instruction librarians such as assessment, universal design, student retention, equity and inclusion, and the needs of post-traditional learners in a multimodal learning environment. Other books or articles will need to be consulted for insight and recommendations on those (and other) topics.

The book does have value, though, and is best for a librarian who has the opportunity to teach multiple sessions or a credit-bearing course with the same students, especially in a face-to-face setting, but it does include articles that are relevant to instruction librarians who do not teach in that environment. For example, Maryellen Weimer’s contribution on “presence” (pp. 55-57) describes how teaching can suffer through “repetition and sameness,” a problem anyone teaching several sessions of the same one-shot session is familiar with.

Certainly, establishing presence by being mindful of yourself and your students is harder to put into practice than it is to write about, but teaching is hard work, a reality that *Teaching Strategies for the College Classroom* does not shy away from. The book offers both practical teaching tips and strategies and reflective think pieces for both new teachers and teaching veterans—including librarians.

References

The Teaching Professor. (n.d.). About us.
<https://www.teachingprofessor.com/about-us/>