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Review-Article

GUIDES TO BETTER CLASSROOM TEACHING:  
A REVIEW OF THREE BOOKS  
AND ADDITIONAL POSSIBILITIES

L. DEE FINK

College teachers, unfortunately, do not have a lot of time to read books about college teaching. The reason, of course, is that they are too busy teaching and doing research. What this means, though, is that they have to be very selective about what they do read. In the last few years a number of valuable books have been published on college teaching, and three of them are being reviewed here. These three are quite different from each other and hence fill different needs. This review essay will comment on each in turn and then add a few ideas on college teaching not covered well in any of the books.

Joseph Lowman, *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984).

The characteristic that distinguishes this book from most others is that it is built on a carefully articulated model of college teaching. Noting that the college classroom is a *dramatic* and *human* arena as well as an *intellectual* arena, Lowman proposes that masterful teaching has two critical dimensions: intellectual excitement and interpersonal rapport. You can be a "good" teacher by being skilled on either dimension alone, but only by being skilled in both can you be a "master" teacher.

The content of this book is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it is integrated, meaning that many of the chapters are a direct product of the special perspective on teaching noted above. Thus it has chapters on classroom dynamics and tips for developing interpersonal skills as well as on more traditional topics. Second, the book is full of practical suggestions. Each chapter lays a conceptual base but then turns immediately to the question of "what should I do as a person wanting to teach effectively?" Third, the scope of the book is comprehensive in

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covering all the main activities of classroom teaching: planning a course; developing learning activities; lecturing; leading discussions; evaluating students' performance; evaluating one's own teaching; and assessing the institutional context.

The book also has an unusual origin. The author has been an associate professor at the University of North Carolina since 1971 and has supervised graduate instructors there for several years. To develop the material for this book, he spent two years observing and interviewing twenty-five college professors reputed to be master teachers at schools in the Southeast and New England, including one full year as a visiting associate professor at Williams College. This led to the development of his model of teaching, which earned him an award in 1984 at the Sixth National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology to Undergraduates.

In my view, this is probably the best book now available for anyone who wants a single, comprehensive guide for effective teaching. This is a strong statement but I make it because of the book's clearly articulated model of teaching (with whose philosophical and value premises I happen to agree) and the large number of practical recommendations.

As an instructional consultant at the University of Oklahoma, I have loaned this book out to faculty members wanting to improve their teaching more frequently than any other book in my professional library. In preparing for this review essay, I asked one user what she thought of the book. Her response was that the book had succeeded in reassuring her that there was a science to the art of teaching. Traditional wisdom in her discipline (Law) has it that teaching is very idiosyncratic, hence very dependent on intuition, and even then, limited in its ability to really change students. This book gave her a solid definition of effective teaching and helpful tips on how to develop the necessary skills for achieving it. Since reading the book, her teaching has become more effective in the eyes of her students (as reflected in student ratings) and more enjoyable for the teacher herself.

Barbara Schneider Fuhrman and Anthony F. Grasha, *A Practical Handbook for College Teachers* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1983).

This is very different from the Lowman book, but nonetheless excellent. Although it could be read cover-to-cover, most readers are likely to use it a chapter at a time. It has eleven chapters on eleven

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discrete topics (e.g., the role of personal values in teaching; getting students involved in the classroom; and considering alternative course designs). Much of the material came from workshops on college teaching conducted by the authors, and hence has a "workshop feel" (i.e., every chapter directs readers to actually reflect and write on their thoughts, feelings, values, and behavior, or to produce something). Although each chapter has historical, theoretical, and/or research literature in it, none of the chapters is meant to be a mere thought-piece. It assumes that if you want to change your teaching and do it differently in order to do it better, then you have to begin by actually doing something like writing, creating, etc.

As a result, any chapter can be used by itself. In fact, this is how I have used the book myself and in consulting with other faculty. If a person has a question about the subject of one of the chapters, this is an excellent and—as the title suggests—practical handbook. Each chapter contains an extensive range of ideas and information on the topic, always coupled with exercises designed to increase one's self-awareness and to open up new possibilities.

As an illustration of how well this is done, the authors take a topic that would be an afterthought or throwaway chapter in most books: the history of college teaching. But, in their hands, this becomes an opportunity to analyze where the reader's philosophy and expectations fit, in terms of earlier or contemporary traditions.

In addition to the topics already mentioned, the book has chapters on cognitive perspectives on learning classroom application; designing classroom experience based on students' styles and teaching styles; evaluating students; assessing one's own teaching; using media; and defining effective teaching. One final comment on the book: it is extraordinarily well written. The text flows easily from idea to idea; the wording is clear and straightforward, yet the explanation of ideas is thorough.

Stanford C. Ericksen, *The Essence of Good Teaching: Helping Students Learn and Remember What They Learn* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984).

This book is also slightly different from the two preceding ones. Although it contains a generous quantity of recommendations, it is more reflective and speculative. The stated purpose of the book is "to give the teacher a conceptual base for making decisions about how to do a better job of managing the classroom hour."

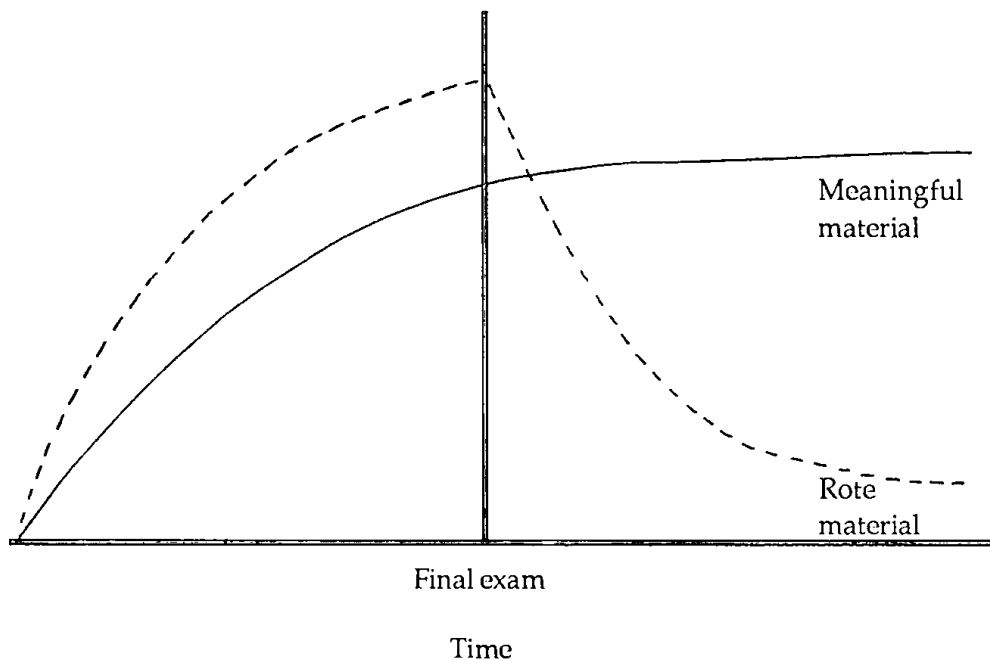
The strength of the book grows out of the author's rich experience.

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He is a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Michigan and the first director of that university's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) established in 1962. Much of the material for the book comes from essays he wrote for the CRLT newsletter over many years. Having been a college teacher for over forty years and having as his specialty the study of human learning and thinking, Ericksen clearly has a well-seasoned and mature perspective to offer on the subject of college teaching. Although this book does not have the density of practical recommendations as the two preceding, it is nonetheless enjoyable and worth reading for several reasons.

As a senior scholar-teacher in psychology, Ericksen does a superb job of assembling and succinctly summarizing research findings on college teaching. The book is full of pithy, quotable statements, either by Ericksen himself or by others whose work he mentions. A couple of examples will illustrate this point: "Exposing students to the light of knowledge by covering the field—the sunburn theory of instruction—is inadequate as the aim of a course" (p. 15). "Higher education succeeds or fails in terms of motivation, not cognitive transfer of information" (p. 154, quoting from Csikszentmihalyi, 1982, p. 15).

Figure 1. Retention Contrast of Meaningful and Rote Materials



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Also, Ericksen does have underlying value assumptions that he makes explicit in the preface and chapter one: the lasting measure of good teaching is what the individual student learns and carries away. Translated slightly, an effective teacher is one who can generate learning that lasts. Figure 1 (from chapter one) illustrates Ericksen's view. The rest of the book discusses further how to achieve this.

### ADDITIONAL POSSIBILITIES

There are three additional ideas about teaching that I was surprised to find missing in these three books—or only mentioned in passing. I will describe them briefly here because I believe they represent important developments in the professional lore on college teaching.

The first is the model of ethical and intellectual development created by William Perry and his collaborators at Harvard as a result of their longitudinal study of college students there (Perry, 1970; 1981). He postulates that all human beings have to work through a series of ethical-intellectual stages, and that this often happens during the college years. The main stages are:

Dualism - Sees issues as right or wrong, good or bad; teacher is an authority who must therefore be right; student should learn what the teacher has to say.

Relativism - Different authorities have different answers; everyone has a right to his own opinion; no one is wrong.

Commitment - There are different ways of looking at issues in life. But if I am going to live a meaningful life, I must make some choices and a commitment.

This scheme has become fairly well-known in the last five to ten years, hence, my surprise to discover no reference at all to it in any of the three books reviewed. Part of the problem may be that even though this scheme seems to be valid and understandable, it is not clear what the implications are for teachers, other than to be aware of such differences among students and between ourselves and students. Practitioners are currently thinking and working out the practical applications of this scheme.

The two remaining ideas are related in my view. I see college teachers as needing to find sources of energy within students that will allow them to accomplish the work of learning. Two very important sources are small groups and writing. The effective use of small groups

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releases energy by putting students in touch with each other, writing by putting students in touch with themselves. Both techniques, that of breaking a class into small groups and having students write, have been around for a long time. But recent practitioners have developed more sophisticated and more effective ways of doing this.

The growing body of literature on small groups (Michaelson, 1982; Bouton & Garth, 1983; Michaelson, 1984-1985) suggests a number of general guidelines, including the following: make the groups heterogeneous and permanent; allocate a significant portion of class time (40-80%) for group work; make the groups responsible for mastering the reading material and for solving the problems of the subject matter; and make the work of the groups and peer evaluation within the groups a substantial part of the course grade. If this is done properly, students discover they can learn from and excite each other. They become much more active participants in the teaching-learning process. And they learn how to work collectively on intellectual problems and questions, an important skill in contemporary life.

The use of writing activities in courses outside the English department is rapidly gaining national momentum, often under the label of "writing across the curriculum" (Maimon, 1981; Griffin, 1982; Barry, 1984). The significance of this movement is that writing can be valuable as a means of furthering students' understanding of a subject, not just as an evaluation tool. The use of frequent, short, in-class writing activities forces students to articulate for themselves what they really think about a question or topic. Having done this, students are ready to read and/or listen to new presentations with more interest, and are in a better position to incorporate new ideas and information into their own thinking because they now know what their own thinking is. The use of other students to review what one has written and then to re-write (i.e., re-formulate) one's ideas presses students towards more refined ideas as well as towards more effective and correct ways of expressing them. Finally, the use of out-of-class course journals (a kind of focused, intellectual diary) can integrate the content of a course with the students' personal thoughts and life in a way that would be very difficult for a teacher to accomplish in a class of any size. And notice: in all the examples described thus far, none require (although they may allow for) grading of papers by the teacher!

Some exciting things are happening in college teaching today. Many of these are discussed in the books reviewed in this article. Hopefully future guides will incorporate additional developments such as those described above.

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