

*Defining Effective Teaching of Post-Secondary Students:
Competencies for Graduate Teaching Assistants*

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Effective teaching in post-secondary contexts has historically been equated with *instruction*, and has been viewed as an essentially didactic activity likened to “...the systematic beating of learning into dumb subjects” (Eble, 1988b, p. 3). Germane to this belief is the assumption that learning and teaching are frequently as painful as a beating, to be—at best-- endured. Particularly vulnerable to this ontology are graduate teaching assistants upon whom teaching responsibilities have been assigned within institutions that routinely devalue teaching at the expense of almost any form of research.

A persistent view in many post-secondary institutions is that lecturing is synonymous with teaching. This stance reflects a limited understanding of the reciprocity between teaching and learning for, as Angelo (1990) suggests, “Teaching without learning is just talking. It is common practice, nonetheless, for faculty to assume that when we are talking, our students are learning...” (p. 75). Moreover, professors and university administrators may not be the only people for whom the terms *teaching* and *lecturing* are synonymous. Sheffield (1974) notes that many different groups, including former students, when asked to identify excellent teachers, selected 23 professors, all of whom “used the lecture method as the chief vehicle of their teaching” (p. 62).

Characteristics of Effectiveness

Several authors outline characteristics they contend represent effective teaching. For example, Joyce and Weil (2000) present four “families” of teaching skills that constitute an effective repertoire of strategies to enhance student learning. These categories include the *personal* family of skills, which revolve around the teacher’s responsibility to offer learning opportunities that heighten students’ self-esteem and facilitate healthy independence; the *behavioral* family of skills, which incorporate teaching techniques such as mastery, direct instruction, and simulation; the *information-processing* family, which provide “emphasize concept formation and hypothesis testing, [while] other generate creative thinking” (p. 14) and; the *social* family, which facilitates learning in ways that are cooperative, social, and based in the notion of responsible citizenship. As another example, Arends (2004) offers a profile of the effective teacher as characterized by three

aspects: the *leadership* aspect including skills in planning, management, and assessment; the *interactive* aspect involving skills in presenting and explaining, and facilitating cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and discussion and; the *organizational* aspect involving professional and community collaboration.

Table 1 provides a compilation of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that define effective university teaching. Importantly, the skill of *instructional effectiveness* is offered not as a pedagogical activity in itself, but as one of several important components of teaching.

Table 1. Major Domains in of Teaching Effectiveness

Domains of Teaching Effectiveness		
KNOWLEDGE “An effective university teacher is someone who...”		Questions to Ask
1. demonstrates content knowledge and expertise.	This is one of the most frequently identified determinants of teaching success as indicated by student evaluation ratings. However, in the absence of any formal faculty development training, this too often becomes the <i>sole</i> indicator of teaching quality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I demonstrating up-to-date knowledge of the discipline area? • Do I have an understanding of the specific course curriculum? • Do I know how this course and knowledge relates to lower and higher level courses in the discipline?
2. understands the learning process .	Knowing about the science of learning and subsequently organizing curricular expertise based on this knowledge is a prerequisite for effective teaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I present material in clear sequence such as simple-to-complex, whole-part-whole, or comprehension-to analysis? • Do I rephrase or re-teach

		course content in several ways to support a variety of learning preferences or conceptual levels?
3. can apply knowledge of psychological and cognitive development .	The integration of theories of learning cycles, moral stages, brain development, and cognitive maturity levels contributes in important ways to teaching effectiveness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I know and can I apply multiple intelligences in the presentation of course material? • Do I encourage use of various levels of Bloom's taxonomy of cognition? • Do I understand the differences and similarities between how university and high school students learn, and apply this to my teaching?
SKILLS <i>"An effective university teacher is someone who..."</i>		Questions to Ask
1. is an effective communicator .	Verbal, nonverbal, and written competence is an active process involving proficiency in explaining, questioning, responding, projecting, clarify, directing, and redirecting. Communication as a skill that contributes to effective teaching is also highly linked with active <i>listening</i> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does my voice project to all parts of the classroom? • Do I use appropriate grammar, with interesting changes in inflection and tone? • Do I make eye contact, and ensure that my verbal and nonverbal messages are congruent? • Do I listen to student questions and concerns, and respond or rephrase in ways that demonstrate that I have heard them? • Do I provide clear directions and frequently checks of student understanding?

<p>2. pays due attention to course and lesson planning.</p>	<p>Organization and presentation of content should be planned in ways that maximize understanding and abstraction of the discipline curriculum.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I know the “big picture concepts” that students must know as a result of this course? • Do I clearly identify well in advance student learning objectives for each lesson? • Do I align these learning objectives with individual lesson plans? • Do I alter my method of content delivery to accommodate course and lesson objectives? • Do I plan for a variety of instructional strategies with appropriate integration of technology? • Do I have a clear introduction and close to my lessons?
<p>3. implements a variety of instructional strategies.</p>	<p>Successful teaching and learning is achieved through a wide variety of learning activities accompanied by <i>active</i> teaching methods.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I encourage a balance of independent and collaborative learning experiences? • Do I use illustrations, examples, models, and demonstrations to explain concepts? • Do I use frequent questioning as a way to encourage interaction and re-teach or extend concepts? • Do I encourage students to participate in teaching, explaining, and presenting concepts?
<p>4. creates an environment conducive to</p>	<p>Accepting responsibility for creating and contributing to the <i>conditions of learning</i> in a classroom will facilitate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I know students’ names? • Do I establish rules for

learning.	higher levels of student engagement and success.	<p>respectful inquiry in my classroom?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I encourage compliance and passivity, or curiosity? • Do I set up facilities and equipment to accommodate active learning? • Do I respond positively to student differences? • Do I react enthusiastically to student questions?
5. provides relevant links and examples .	The effective teacher is most likely to demonstrate a deep understanding of the explicit and implicit curriculum, and make links to “real life” applications of knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I incorporate strategies for making abstract concepts more concrete? • Do I use examples and scenarios as concrete applications of concepts? • Am I aware of many of the key issues that surround concepts?
6. aligns course objectives with assessment techniques.	Some of the highest levels of reported student dissatisfaction are related to professors’ evaluation practices, their inconsistent assessment and feedback, and their perceived non-negotiable attitude towards grading practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do all of my evaluation instruments align with my stated course objectives? • Do I use a wide variety of types of assessment? • Do I divide course content into clusters of objectives to be assessed? • Do I consider evaluation to be a way to allow students to demonstrate their learning? • Do I assess student understanding frequently and incrementally in order to promote the development of higher levels of cognition? • Do I use evaluation as a process or as a punishment?

ATTITUDES <i>“A effective university teacher is someone who...”</i>		Questions to Ask
1. demonstrates compassion and empathy toward students.	Sometimes described as generosity of spirit, concern about students’ interests and progress as learners is often identified as one of the most important characteristics of exemplary teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I attempt to get to know as many students as possible? • Do I accommodate, within reason, their unique interests and challenges?
2. is approachable and available to students.	Availability, interest, and explicit practices of “reaching out” to students increase the likelihood of student success, and are most characteristic of teachers who are able to maintain high levels of learner motivation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I infuse humor as a strategy to encourage participation? • Do I employ motivational strategies at key times throughout the semester? • Do I allow students to contact me outside of class time?
3. exhibits enthusiasm and passion for teaching and content.	“...teaching is not like sublimely inducing a chemistry reaction; it is more like passionately painting a picture or making a piece of music” (Highnet, 1950, p. 6).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would students describe me as innovative, passionate, and excited about my lessons and course content? • Do I inspire students to take further courses in this discipline?
4. makes decisions in a spirit of fairness, reasonableness and negotiation.	Effective teachers understand and value the ongoing paradoxes and multiple perspectives of learners. They demonstrate a balance between leading, guiding, and facilitating.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I flexible in dealing with student concerns and challenges? • Do I demonstrate value for the empowerment of students? • Do I provide opportunities for students to participate in the democratic process in my classroom? • Do I encourage

		responsible citizenship to be demonstrated in my classroom?
5. understands the moral imperative involved in the act of teaching.	The definition of teaching must be guided by the elements of ethical awareness and moral insight, demonstrated by teachers who have a sense of proportion about the importance of content versus relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I maintain appropriate standards of professional conduct? • Do I care if students don't learn? • Do I understand the issues of ascendant and descendent power involved in teaching?

The clear direction promoted by these guidelines for graduate student teaching assistants in university settings is toward more negotiatory and reciprocal learning activities. Mezirow (1990) concludes that, “every adult educator has a responsibility for fostering critical reflection, and helping learners plan to take action” (p. 357). This implies that *all* tertiary teachers must examine their pre-existing attitudes and assumptions about students and learning.

The authentic exploration of the kinds of questions offered in this article requires more than a mechanical checklist approach or the simple acknowledgement that some techniques may help increase teaching effectiveness. Rather, it demands an intense, complex, and sustained career of examining and refining the craft and science of teaching. As Harrison (1961) points out, “most post-secondary educators cannot describe what they do in practice, let alone say why they do what they do” (p. 214). A university teaching career upon which many graduate teaching assistants are about to embark must be considered to be an ongoing process of creatively and enthusiastically engaging in a shared learning of skills, information, and values in ways that expand the hearts and minds of students and teachers. This definition implies, of course, that learning and teaching are reciprocal and interchangeable activities of the teacher *and* the learner. To teach is to learn. Such is the nature of teaching.

References

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