

College Teaching: Practical Insights From the Science of Teaching and Learning

A Review

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ABSTRACT: Achieving excellence in teaching at the collegiate level defies the conventional notions typically associated with superior teachers. Gifted students do not naturally become excellent teachers. Neither can excellent teachers assess student progress with the proverbial naked eye. Humility, rather than hubris, is the true hallmark of an excellent teacher. Within Scripture, God himself models for us the quintessential characteristics found in excellent higher-education teachers, namely through Christ’s simple yet profound interactions with his disciples two millennia ago.

INTRODUCTION

In order for a person to become an effective teacher in higher education, Forsyth’s (2016) assertion is that it is critical for such a person to recognize that the act of becoming an effective teacher is very much a process rather than an instantaneous or native state. “Teaching is an intentional intervention designed to result in a cognitive, affective, or behavioral change in another person: a student.” As such, Forsyth states that such recognition dispels several commonplace notions that seem to exist regarding the teaching profession in general and excellence within that profession, in particular, therefore comprising the balance of Forsyth’s book regarding the motivations and technical expertise that are required in order to become effective.

One of those notions is that if a particular person were a naturally gifted student and had achieved a doctoral-level academic status, that person’s aptitude in studying would, by definition, naturally translate into being an equally gifted teacher. “[In] many cases [professors] did not feel as though they were ready to teach...they had not been trained in teaching per se...[and] their expertise was often narrower in scope than the courses they would be teaching” (Forsyth, 2016). Nevertheless, it does seem that “[professors] who are active scholars in their fields tend to be slightly superior teachers” (Forsyth, 2016).

A second notion is that one’s level of academic achievement may commensurately translate into a higher level of personal pride and confidence, and thus the professor automatically becomes an effective teacher based upon that improved level of self-confidence. While it is certainly to be commended whenever a student achieves a doctoral-level status based on his or her intellect and aptitude for scholarly pursuits, an effective teacher must doubly possess a level of humility in order to become truly effective. Such humility should manifest itself in several ways, including the teacher’s willingness to adapt methods based upon the topic at hand as well as the particular needs of students. “Professor-centered approaches, such as lecturing, showing videos...can engage students, but many [better] professors adopt student-centered methods to increase engagement in learning...[when] student-centered teaching methods are used appropriately, they personalize and enrich the teaching-learning experience...[requiring] students to respond cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally...(increasing) both intellectual understanding and personal engagement” (Forsyth, 2016).

A third notion, related to the second, is a teacher’s ability to successfully ascertain how well students are responding to his or her teaching. This quality is self-evident and therefore good teachers who are self-assured based on their area of expertise are able to natively assess whether or not


the students are in fact learning. Yet, Forsyth (2016) notes, “Because teaching and learning are complex processes ... pointing to one factor as the crucial factor ... will oversimplify more than inform [Learning] has multiple influences, but the classes professors must build must nonetheless carry the students from a place of confusion and uncertainty to a place of wisdom.”

Interestingly, it may be argued that the profession of teaching within a Christian higher-education context can innately address each of these notions raised by Forsyth, doing so in a way that assures confidence in outcome as the teacher seeks to be obedient to God and his word in the Holy Bible. Through a reframing of Forsyth’s (2016) book *College Teaching*, the Christian higher-education teacher

should strive to carry out his or her profession exemplifying three characteristics: 1) integrity in purpose, 2) excellence in technique; 3) expertise in chosen discipline. As such, the balance of this review will reference selected insights from *College Teaching* to provide supportive elements for the above-referenced three Christian characteristics.

In *Mission Drift*, Greer (2014) declares a stark reality facing Christian higher education in the 21st century. “Without careful attention, faith-based organizations will inevitably drift from their founding mission.” While Greer’s statement is undoubtedly capable of striking fear into the hearts of Christian educators in higher education today, the statement may simultaneously become a clarion call for educators. As such, those who seek to preserve the practice

Table 1

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| Conventional Notions of Teaching Excellence | <i>“A great deal of self-confidence leads to good teaching”</i> | <i>“Good teachers automatically know when good teaching happens”</i> | <i>“Good learners are naturally good teachers”</i> |
| Scripture References | Humble teachers maximize student impact. (John 13:1-17) (Philippians 2:6-8) | Teachers use testing and truth to measure progress. (Hebrews 4:12) | Teachers are held to a higher standard. (James 3:1) |
| Christian Characteristics & Selected Forsyth Applications | | | |
| Forsyth Chapters | Integrity in Purpose | Excellence in Technique | Expertise in Discipline |
| 1 | Personal Development | Cognitive Competencies | Knowledge of Field |
| 2 | Consider Students’ Frame of Reference | Consider the Assessments | Use Most-Effective Methods based on Students’ Needs |
| 3 | Motivation to Write | Student-Centered Teaching Methods | Learning Groups |
| 4 | Build Rapport in Lectures | Organizational Elements | Enhancing Memorability |
| 5 | Formative Value of Testing | Reliability and Validity | Correct Use of Essay Exams |
| 6 | Formative Feedback | Helping Students Learn | Summative Feedback |
| 7 | Professor Code of Conduct | Managing Diversity (Cultural Competency) | Classroom Culture |
| 8 | Flipped Classes | Curating Web Resources | Tech Facilitating Learning Goals: Gaming Simulations |
| 9 | Formative Assessments of Teachers | Summative Assessments | Contributions to Discipline’s Mission |
| 10 | Evaluations by Students & Peers | Teaching Materials | A Practicing Teacher |
| <p>Professor  Professor Dynamic</p> | | | |

of the Christian faith within the academy must thus ensure that those educators continuously sharpen their teaching skills, maintaining relevancy to an ever-changing student population. To this end, Forsyth's *College Teaching* provides Christian educators a pragmatic tool, supportive of the Christ-followers command to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19, New International Version).

INTEGRITY IN PURPOSE

To better understand how to successfully navigate the journey toward becoming an effective teacher in higher education, one needs to look no further than the Lord Jesus himself. He "[who], being in very nature [a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8, New International Version). Through the washing of the disciples' feet and his eventual death on the cross, he demonstrated that transformational education is best delivered through humility (John 13:1-17, New International Version). While the conventional wisdom may be that a wealth of education leads to an abundance of self-confidence, expressing itself in teacher-centered success, Forsyth's text provides several highly applicable practices, which may be employed to foster a sense of humility in teaching that can be transformational for the student and the professor.

Whereas the outside world often views human beings as utilitarian tools built to satisfy our personal needs, wants, and desires, educators have the distinct honor of being paid to pour into our students a variety of core attributes and life-skills—including the ability to think, which will serve them throughout their lives. As Newman and Turner (1996) note, "It is the education which gives us a clear and conscious view of our own opinions and judgments... to see things as they are...to detect what is sophisticated, and to discard what is irrelevant...the educated person is at home in any society...knows when to speak and when to be silent." Beyond the acquisition of these cognitive skills, Forsyth (2016) asserts, "the place where one teaches will define...which outcomes are considered essential and which are thought to be just niceties." Given this, an educator within a well-grounded Christian institution of higher education will highlight for their students the importance of living out Christian values and the application of those values within each student's chosen workplace.

Along with the infusion of life skills for students' personal development, it is vital for the instructor—with humility—to empathetically consider students' frame of reference, or the mindset with which they approach the world and their place within the world. In particular, Forsyth (2016) mentions the Millennial generation are "comfortable with certain types of technology but usually not the kinds that are useful for learning...they are group-oriented...and can process information quickly...[and further research] suggests that Millennials are...uniquely insecure and anxious...[yet] narcissistic ... and self-focused... [less willing] to expend effort in the pursuit of academic goals." As such, it is incumbent upon the educator to strike a difficult balance between the delivery of objective, discipline-specific truth, in a manner that is relatable, purpose-driven, and others'-oriented, while simultaneously not indulgent in any way as to short-sell institutional or course-specific learning objectives.

An educator in a higher-education institution possesses a tremendous opportunity to provide formative assessments and feedback which may become transformational for the student, "[helping] students identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas that need work...[and helping] faculty recognize where students are struggling and address problems immediately" (Carnegie Mellon University, 2019). As such, the educator operating with integrity in purpose will intentionally allocate time and energy to provide student-specific counsel with the goal of furthering the students' lifetime potential. "Formative feedback [should be] tailored to the individual student...[to identify] any systematic types of errors... [or to identify any] particular cognitive skills [which may be required by the student]," which may be skillfully addressed by the instructor for the student's ultimate benefit (Forsyth, 2016).

EXCELLENCE IN TECHNIQUE

The calling of a teacher is to demonstrate excellence in the art and science of teaching. The word education is derived from the Latin word "educere" to lead out (Gioia, 2019). It would not be too terribly far afield to suggest that one of the truest ways in which one may lead another is to lead someone "out of darkness into His wonderful light," leading one from the darkness of ignorance into a marvelous future "ordained ... before [it] came to be" (1 Peter 2:9; Psalm 139:16 New International Version). As the quintessential leader, Jesus Christ himself provides the Christian educator with a perfect example of how to lead his or her students. That is, he carefully: a) taught his dis-

ciples how to think (Matthew 6:9-13, New International Version), b) demonstrated a student-centered approach (i.e., parables, Matthew 13, New International Version), c) proved that true learning happened (Matthew 16:15-17, New International Version), and d) restored a student to wholeness after the student fell short of the mark (John 21:15-19, New International Version).

Regarding cognitive competencies, Forsyth (2016) highlights that “[many] professors accept their cardinal objective the challenge of teaching students how to think more clearly, logically, critically, and profoundly.” Despite this acknowledged commitment by both faculty and the universities at large, a relatively recent longitudinal study conducted in 2011 and cited by Forsyth, suggests that evidence which would prove that this commitment is yielding fruit is lacking. “Many students are not improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing” (Forsyth, 2016). As such, Forsyth (2016) suggests that it is the role of the professor to “[nurture] the skillful application of knowledge to solve practical problems... [recognizing] that [applied] knowledge provides the means to improve human existence.” Moreover, it is incumbent upon instructors to guide their students so that the students [can build] conceptual structures, ...connecting the elements in specific cases to theoretically meaningful concepts, ... [identifying] key features of a new situation,... [retrieving] previous examples from memory, ... [and generalizing] . . . their existing store of knowledge to [a] new problem.”

The instructor’s use of student-centered (i.e., student-contextualized) rather than professor-centered teaching methods is consistent with the above-referenced approach used by Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry, wherein he used parables rooted in commonplace, disciple-centered, and contextualized activities in order to convey his message most effectively to his students. Moreover, this usage is also extolled by Forsyth (2016), who notes that “[these methods] personalize and enrich the teaching-learning experience, for they bridge the gap between the conceptual and practical, the hypothetical and the concrete, ...[requiring] students to respond cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally to the material...[and particularly within] field placements, internships, practica, [and] service learning” (pp. 72-73, 94).

Teaching with excellence requires the instructor to not only measure whether desired change through the learning process occurred but also to convey this assessment to the student in a healthy and constructive manner, whether the student met the objective learning mark or not. Interestingly, Forsyth (2016) notes “[students’] judgments of learning are often poorly calibrated... [and while] high scorers were quite accurate in the judgments [versus

actual performance], low scorers erred in their judgments.” Therein, it may be inferred that it is the instructor’s job to bridge that judgment gap between students’ perception and reality so that where a significant gap exists, the instructor may effectively communicate the gap and provide support and tangible study skills (e.g., setting goals, preparing materials, self-testing) in order to help the students effectively close the gap (Forsyth, 2016).

EXPERTISE IN DISCIPLINE

The calling of a teacher is to exhibit a level of expertise within his or her chosen discipline. In the New Testament, Paul exhorts Timothy, his disciple in the faith, to “[do] your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15, New International Version). Moreover, in the book of James, the author unequivocally states the gravity with which one must execute his duties as an instructor, stating, “[Not] many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1, New International Version). In fact, the Bible would instruct those of us who are called to leadership through teaching to demonstrate a level of competency such that we may be unreservedly approved as a teacher, not only within the profession of teaching but also within our chosen field of study. As such, we must live in the knowledge that God’s assessment of our performance will be commensurate with our God-ordained talents and lofty status (Matthew 25:14-30, New International Version).

In Chapter 10 of Forsyth’s text, the author provides a compendium of information intended to support an instructor’s continued growth and evolution within the higher-education system. In particular, Forsyth’s emphasis upon being a practicing teacher is an excellent reminder that our expertise in both our chosen field and the transfer of knowledge must be firmly rooted within the practical world, through both continuing their own education as well as serving within professional organizations or consulting with outside clients. “[Well-rounded] professors communicate their ideas and experiences...to others through articles and papers published or presented on educational topics...” (Forsyth, 2016). Moreover, this rootedness in practicality should be made manifest through the instructor’s development of a teaching portfolio, which would be designed and developed in order to achieve five purposes: “(a) documentation, (b) development, (c) enrichment, (d) innovation, and (e) assessment” (Forsyth, 2016). While the develop-

ment of such a portfolio, most especially within a secular environment, could—cynically speaking—become a tool of self-aggrandizement, this same portfolio could likewise become a tool to not only promote the instructor’s achievements but also lend itself to the supportive documentation of a teaching philosophy built on Christ-followership. As Forsyth (2016) notes, “Allport’s [psychological life] questions, when put to the professor, ask: How shall the life history of the teaching professor be written [and] how should you tell the story of your life as a professor?” Seen through this historical and somewhat epitaphic lens, the teaching portfolio may achieve a testimonial value of a life serving as a follower of Christ, who sought to use his lofty station to glorify his Creator and expand his Kingdom through the teaching profession, desiring to demonstrate excellence in the field of his chosen discipline.

CONCLUSION

In August 2019, Dr. Kevin Brown, the newly selected president of Asbury University articulated a vision of teaching which seems to reinforce the primary thrust of Forsyth’s book:

The modalities by which we seek to fulfill our mission may change (just as they have changed through the decades)—but the mission does not change. We will not seek to address these challenges/changes in spite of our identity...but through it. We are not a church; But we are not merely an educational enterprise. We do not exist to [simply] produce market-minded technicians; But we are not dismissive of the development necessary to make our students relevant to add value in a dynamic, global world.

In conclusion, Forsyth’s *College Teaching* is an essential tool for the instructor operating within higher education for three fundamental reasons. First, Forsyth’s personal experience as a work-in-progress instructor lends authenticity to his accomplished voice of stature. Second, Forsyth’s text provides a practical path forward for current and prospective instructors in higher education, helping the professor think through the myriad of considerations when seeking to become an excellent teacher. Finally, Forsyth’s text is rooted in evidence-based literature, with hundreds of references to other scholarly work in the pedagogical field, becoming therefore one of many other trusted instructional resources.

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