Book Review
Sharon G. Johnson

What the Best College Teachers Do, Ken Bain (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

According to Ken Bain, director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at New York University, teaching is both an intellectual creation and a performing art (p. 174). It is best done by those eager to seek real answers to such questions as:

1. What do I need to know and understand to engage my students in the great questions of my discipline?
2. How do I need to prepare myself and my students to attain significant learning objectives?
3. What should I expect of myself and my students?
4. What approaches should I take in the classroom to foster excitement about and engagement with the ideas, issues, and controversies of my discipline?
5. How might I assess my real impact on student learning so that I can continue to challenge myself to grow as an individual?

This is certain: the best teachers *do not* simply plow through a textbook, grind out the same multiple-choice exams, nor recite from last term's course lecture notes. The best teachers when compared to ordinary teachers are different:

Table 1

Excellent teachers …	Ordinary teachers …
Know that knowledge is discovered.	Believe that knowledge is delivered.
Focus on how students think.	Focus on what students know.
Major on provoking questions.	Major on providing answers.
Motivate students through passion and persuasion.	Motivate students through procedures and punishment.
Are committed to being active participants in and contributors to the developmental dialogue of their discipline.	Are merely observers of others in their disciplines and reporters of what others are saying.

What Do the Best Teachers Know About Learning?

Bain discusses a variety of perspectives about student learning that were shared (though perhaps articulated in their own ways) by the best teachers.

Knowledge is constructed, not received. Learning occurs at the end of a process whereby sensory input is received and moved through some mental model that classifies and connects that input to what we already know. Learning is an active process of engagement, not a passive process of reception.

Knowledge is active, not passive. We do not learn because we have been told something. We learn because what we have been told is connected to problems, issues, and questions that matter to us.

Knowledge is motivated by promise, not command. We learn because *we* want to, not because someone else wants us to. Students learn by having as much control over their own education as possible (p. 35). Students learn through collaboration and cooperation, not competing to outdo others or to seize a prize grade. Real student learning is encouraged because it is embraced by both student and teacher.

Knowledge is encouraged by big issues, not small facts. Students learn not as they listen, but as they explore the puzzles, contradictions, and paradoxes of a discipline. Students learn because they encounter the novel, the incongruous, and the unsettling (pp. 39-40).

Knowledge is developed, not delivered. A student learns a concept by piecing its parts together, handling it, looking at it from different angles, taking it apart again, and rearranging it in an individually unique shape. The best teachers stimulate students to engage in the often-messy process of self-instruction.

What Questions Guide the Best Teachers as They Prepare to Teach?

Bain argues that two powerful notions — teaching is fostering learning and requires serious intellectual work — give rise to significant course/class planning questions (pp. 49-61):

1. What are the big questions my course will help students learn to develop answers for?
2. What reasoning abilities must my students have to answer the questions my course raises?
3. What mental models are students likely to bring to the course that will help/hinder their learning development?
4. What information will students need to understand and answer the important questions of the course, and how can they best obtain this information?

5. How will I help students who struggle with understanding the key course questions and/or using evidence and reason to answer them?

6. How will I encourage students to grapple with the conflicts, contradictions, and competing theories in my discipline?

7. How will I determine what my students are learning, and how do I provide them a means of feedback?

How Do the Best Teachers Conduct Their Classes?

Bain argues that seven fairly common principles emerge in the practice of effective teachers:

1. Create a natural critical learning environment — students are equipped and encouraged to think about issues naturally arising from the questions and tasks of the course.

2. Grab and keep student attention with some provocative act, question, or statement.

3. Start where the students are — initially focus on what students care about and know (or think they know) about.

4. Expect and ask students to make commitments to the course, each other, and the professor.

5. Help students learn outside of class.

6. Engage students in disciplinary thinking (teaching students to understand, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate evidence and conclusions as those active in the discipline do).

7. Create diverse learning experiences.

Some Action Conclusions

Bain concludes his book by offering action suggestions for teachers and their institutions.

1. Teachers must move from a "telling model" to a "transformation model." A teacher is effective *only* when the way students learn has been changed (p. 173).

2. Part of being a good teacher is knowing that we always have something to learn — not so much about teaching techniques, but about the particular students we are teaching and their particular aspirations, confusions, and potential (p. 174).

3. Effective teaching is creative and adaptive and arises out of our own intellectual curiosity and professional development (pp. 174-175).

4. We must learn to see our departments not just as courses

and a cluster of independently contracting faculty. We must be about the grand task of building and sustaining a community of learners (p. 176).

5. All disciplines can benefit both from vigorous epistemological inquiries into what it means to "know something" in the field and from research on how people learn to think (p. 176).

Some Personal Observations

Bain's book has been personally challenging, even though most of his observations are, at some level, unsurprising. Those who have spent any time studying the literature on learning and teaching will find the focus on engaging, equipping, and energizing students quite expected.

Perhaps the book's impact is a function of Bain's concentrated and concrete writing style. The text of the book is less than 200 pages. A variety of examples from a broad array of disciplines make the concepts very real.

Perhaps, though, the real impact is a function of this book's encouragement to rethink my own teaching … to boldly venture into "out-of-the-box thinking." We can get used to approaching our courses in ways that become comfortable and predictable. Significant change is uncomfortable and unpredictably risky.

Pick up Bain's book and open yourself to being provoked and pushed into imaginative and inventive teaching.

Sharon Johnson
Cedarville University