

Reviews

A Guide to Books on College Teaching: An Update

Reviewed by L. Dee Fink

In 1987 I wrote a review article in this journal about three books on the general theme of how to be a better college teacher (*Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 1/1, Spring 1987). Apparently that article proved valuable as a guide for busy professors. Many readers requested reprints and I have been asked to write an updated version.

This has proven to be a challenge, because many good books have been published on this subject in the intervening ten years. Consequently I will identify three books that are likely to be valuable to any professor. Then a number of other books will be described briefly that focus on more specific topics.

Barbara Gross Davis, *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

For anyone who wants a single reference book of good ideas on college teaching, this is the book I would recommend. It has forty-nine brief chapters (average length: eight pages), all of which focus on important topics.

This book is good for two reasons. First, the author has done a superb job of researching the material available on the various topics and of selecting and presenting numerous good ideas on each topic. Second, the organization and format of the book make it very easy to find the recommended practices on any given topic. The book is divided into twelve general sections, e.g., "Getting Under Way," "Lecture Strategies," and "Testing and Grading." Each section has three to five chapters. Each chapter has three to five easily recognizable subtopics, and then each subtopic has a series of recommendations, each of which starts with a sentence printed in bold type. This makes it very easy to scan the recommendations in order

to decide which ones you want to read and learn about in more detail.

The book does not advocate a general philosophy or strategy for college teaching. For that, I still recommend Joseph Lowman's *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*, described in my 1987 article. But for people who want a good collection of suggested practices on a good list of topics, *Tools for Teaching* is, in my opinion, the best book available.

Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

This book is also a collection of techniques, fifty of them. But these techniques are all concerned with classroom assessment, i.e., activities a teacher can use to collect information about "what students are learning in the classroom and how well they are learning it." The different techniques have been sorted into three sets: (a) techniques for assessing course-related knowledge and skills, (b) techniques for assessing learner attitudes, values, and self-awareness, and (c) techniques for assessing learner reactions to instruction. About half of the techniques are in the first category, and these have been subdivided into categories based on the kinds of learning being assessed: recall knowledge, critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, and application.

The description of each technique is about four pages long and is presented in a very helpful format. Each description includes comments on several topics, e.g., suggestions for use, examples of use with different courses, limitations, and caveats.

When I have introduced this book to faculty members on my campus, they have almost always found both the concept and the specific techniques to be quite valuable. The concept of classroom assessment helps people realize that they can, with only a modest amount of effort, put themselves on a learning curve in terms of how specific students are learning material in a particular course. This is a strong and empowering realization. They have also found the descriptions of the individual techniques to be helpful and clear.

To exemplify what is in this book, let me briefly describe two techniques that many people have used and found worthwhile. One

is the “Minute Paper” (also known as the One-Minute Paper or the Half-Sheet Response). The idea here is to ask students, usually at the end of a class session, to respond briefly to the question(s): “What is the most important thing you learned today?” and/or “What important questions remain unanswered?” Teachers often find that initially students are “all over the place,” meaning that the teacher needs to help the class identify the main points more effectively.

A second technique is that of asking students to draw “Concept Maps” that relate concepts just learned to other concepts. Drawing such a map forces students to think about and identify the connections and relationship between concepts. Reading their maps allows the teacher to determine whether the students have connected central concepts to related concepts, and see whether the kinds of relationships seen by the students are the important and correct ones.

One of the challenges facing the reader of a book like this is that it can be overwhelming to be confronted by fifty different techniques to learn about and to decide which to try. However, the authors have provided some help. Having introduced and led the national classroom assessment (CA) movement since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1987, they have followed and collected information from people who have tried CA techniques since then. Based on this experience, they have done two things. First, they recommend that everyone start small. Just try one technique, any technique, and learn from it. Then try one more thing, learn from it, and so forth. In time, professors who do just this will find themselves on a significant growth curve in terms of learning how to teach more effectively, and learning how to better assess student learning.

Second, they have added two chapters to this edition that guide the reader. Chapter Five, “Twelve Examples of Successful Projects,” provides a quick look at techniques that would be good candidates for a first-time user. Chapter Ten, “Lessons and Insights from Six Years of Use,” reviews the benefits teachers have found from using these techniques and ideas to keep in mind when using the techniques.

In sum, I believe that learning how to get the right kind of feedback from students is crucial to effective teaching and learning, and this book is the right place to start learning how to do that.

Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

If we assume that our job as professional educators is not only to teach effectively but also to periodically reflect on how we teach and on how we might improve our teaching, then the subject of this book is of paramount importance.

For Brookfield, becoming a critically reflective teacher means "(identifying and scrutinizing) the assumptions that undergird how we work." He also believes that the best way to become aware of our own assumptions is to view our practice from multiple perspectives. Hence he proposes that we view our practice through four distinct though interconnected lens: through our own eyes, through our students' eyes, through the eyes of our colleagues' perceptions and experiences, and finally through the lens of published literature on teaching and learning. The heart of the book presents two chapters on each of these perspectives: one commenting on the nature of that perspective and the other describing specific activities we can use to learn about ourselves from that perspective.

Brookfield has several characteristics as a writer that make his books stimulating and enjoyable to read. One of these characteristics is his ability to explore the human dimension of both learning and teaching. His writing makes it absolutely clear that teaching is much, much more than the "transmission of knowledge," which would require little more than a clear, well-organized series of lectures. Teaching and learning are human endeavors that have lots of human emotion associated with them and that involve multiple and sometimes conflicting purposes.

A second valuable feature of this book is Brookfield's gifted ability as a story teller. Most people will remember a good "story with a point" better than they remember a treatise. Consequently readers will remember many of the central points in this book because they are associated with a memorable story. My own favorites are about Brookfield himself learning how to swim and learning how to use computers.

A third feature is Brookfield's ability to coin a new phrase for an important concept. An excellent example of this is chapter eleven, where he writes about the risks involved for anyone who is courageous enough to seriously engage in critical reflection. He identi-

fies four risks, for which he gives the following labels: the Impostor Syndrome, Cultural Suicide, Lost Innocence, and Roadrunning. (You will have to read the book to find out what these mean.) When I first read these, they befuddled me, and I wondered what in the world these have to do with thinking about teaching. But now that I have come to understand the ideas behind the clever labels, I see these patterns everywhere. I should also add that, in addition to noting that these risks do exist, Brookfield offers suggestions on how to negotiate and deal with them.

In contrast to the first two books, which are intended as practical tips for the "front line" action of teaching, this book can be seen as a practical book for the education of the "general behind the lines" who understands his own need to review his assumptions about effective principles and strategies.

Material on Specific Topics

For people who have questions about specific topics, the following material should prove helpful.

Books on Multiple Topics. One of the classics in the literature on college teaching is *Teaching Tips* by Wilbert J. McKeachie. It is somewhat similar to *Tools for Teaching* described above in that it represents a collection of chapters on very practical topics. However, the latest edition (9th ed., 1994, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, MA) contains several chapters on new topics that were written by people asked to collaborate on this edition. Four well-written chapters on important topics include the following.

- "Teaching in the Age of Electronic Information" (Chap. 19, by Robert Menges of Northwestern University)
- "Taking Student Diversity into Account" (Chap. 22, by Nancy Chism of The Ohio State University)
- "Ethics in College Teaching" (Chap. 26, by Marilla Svinicki of the University of Texas)
- "Teaching Students How to Learn" (Chap. 32, by Claire E. Weinstein of the University of Texas)

Teaching Portfolios. A teaching portfolio is a narrative statement, generally four to six pages in length, with accompanying materials that describe what one is as a teacher. The narrative statement typi-

cally includes (a) a description of what experiences one has had as a teacher, (b) the person's philosophy of teaching and the teaching strategies generally used, and (c) an assessment of the person's strengths as a teacher and where there is room for improvement.

People have found that the process of creating a teaching portfolio almost always clarifies their own sense of themselves as a teacher and that the product is a valuable way of communicating to others what they represent as a teacher.

Peter Seldin of Pace University is unquestionably the leader of the "teaching portfolio movement." His initial book was *The Teaching Portfolio* published in 1991 by Anker Publishing Company in Boston. In 1993 he published *Successful Use of Teaching Portfolios* (by the same publisher). This book contains several sample portfolios and talks about how several institutions have used and found value in the teaching portfolio concept. In 1996 Anker published a second edition of the 1991 book.

Writing and Thinking. In the concluding section of my 1987 article, I noted the unfortunate lack of attention to writing in the three books reviewed. Since then, many books have been published about the value of and kinds of writing assignments for students.

In 1996, John C. Bean, director of the writing project at Seattle University, wrote an exceptionally valuable book on this topic: *Engaging Ideas: The Professors' Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, published by Jossey-Bass (San Francisco, CA). The author of the forward describes it accurately as an "owner's manual," that is, a well-organized book that describes the purpose for using writing assignments, practical guides for specific activities and assignments, and—best of all—troubleshooting guides.

Small Groups. The use of small groups, along with writing and technology, is one of the three most rapidly growing practices among college teachers that I see in higher education today. Used effectively, small groups can add a tremendous amount of energy, student out-of-class study time, and higher-level learning (e.g., problem solving, decision making, critical thinking) to a course. Used improperly, they can waste time, create unfair grading situations, and anger students.

To use small groups effectively, a teacher needs to think through five key issues. (1) How will you form the groups? (2) Do you intend to make the groups temporary or permanent, i.e., lasting the whole term? (3) Are you going to provide in-class time for the groups to work, or do you expect them to meet out of class? (4) Will the group assignments be graded? If so, will the group grades count as a significant portion of the course grade, and how will you provide for individual accountability? (5) What kinds of tasks do you intend to give the groups? This may look complicated. But once you work out your answers to these questions, the results will more than justify your learning time.

The people who have published their ideas on small groups have used different labels. Some write about "collaborative learning," others about "cooperative learning," and still others about "team learning." The various writers offer different answers to the questions above.

The best-known publication on this topic at the moment is *Cooperative Learning* by David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson and Karl A. Smith (1991 ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, No. 4, published by The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.). But, in my view, a more sophisticated set of ideas is associated with the concept of team learning. The idea here is that, if a teacher can provide the time and structure necessary for a group of students to evolve into a cohesive, committed learning unit (i.e., a team), they can be a very powerful agent of higher-level learning. The best source of information on team learning is from Larry Michaelsen, a business professor at the University of Oklahoma. He has been using and studying small groups for two decades, and has a number of publications on this topic. The best two are: (1) "Team Learning: A Comprehensive Approach for Harnessing the Power of Small Groups in Higher Education," in *To Improve the Academy*, Vol. 11 (1992), published for the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education by New Forums Press, Stillwater, Oklahoma, and (2) "What Every Faculty Developer Needs to Know About Learning Groups," in *To Improve the Academy*, Vol. 15 (1996), by the same publisher. (Note: If your library has difficulty finding these books, you may contact the author for copies by mail, or by email at: lmichael@ou.edu.)

Changing Context of Higher Education. As most people have noticed, the decade of the 1990s is ushering in the age of electronic communication, and this has the potential for creating a major revolution in the structure of all of higher education. My own belief is that, although traditional institutions and traditional forms of learning will continue, many important alternatives will develop that will be very different from the present model of "gather all the students together in the same place at the same time."

A visionary book describing what these changes might look like is Michael G. Dolance and Donald M. Norris, *Transforming Higher Education, A Vision for Learning in the 21st Century*, published in 1995 by the Society for College and University Planning, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Appropriately the best way to contact them is electronically: Phone - 313-998-7832, by email <scup@umich.edu>, or via the Internet <<http://www.umich.edu/~scup/>>.

Monthly Newsletter. Some people may prefer to read a short, periodic newsletter rather than a book. A popular and high-quality national newsletter is *The Teaching Professor*, published by Magna Publications, 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, Wisconsin 53704-3086. (Phone: 800-433-0499) The newsletter is six to eight pages long, and is published monthly (except July and August). The articles cover a wide range of topics but are very practical and come from a wide variety of sources.

One attractive feature of this newsletter is the sliding nature of the cost. For one person, the annual subscription is \$43. But if several people from the same campus subscribe and one person can take responsibility for local distribution, the cost can be reduced to as little as \$1.50-2.00 per issue per person.

When I look at this list of topics and imagine busy professors trying to learn about all of them, I feel (and can imagine them feeling) overwhelmed. Yet if we take our responsibilities as a teacher seriously, then it behooves us to set aside regular time for our own professional development as teachers, some of which can be used for reading. This is clearly a challenging task. But the good news is that, as the list above makes quite clear, there is now an abundance of good literature on college teaching that will reward us with big dividends on whatever time we can devote to this task.