

Thriving in Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ Are You A Model Teacher?

Anyone who promises to show you a clear and easy path to teaching greatness in a college classroom is probably trying to sell you something. But being a model teacher is within your, and everyone else's, grasp.

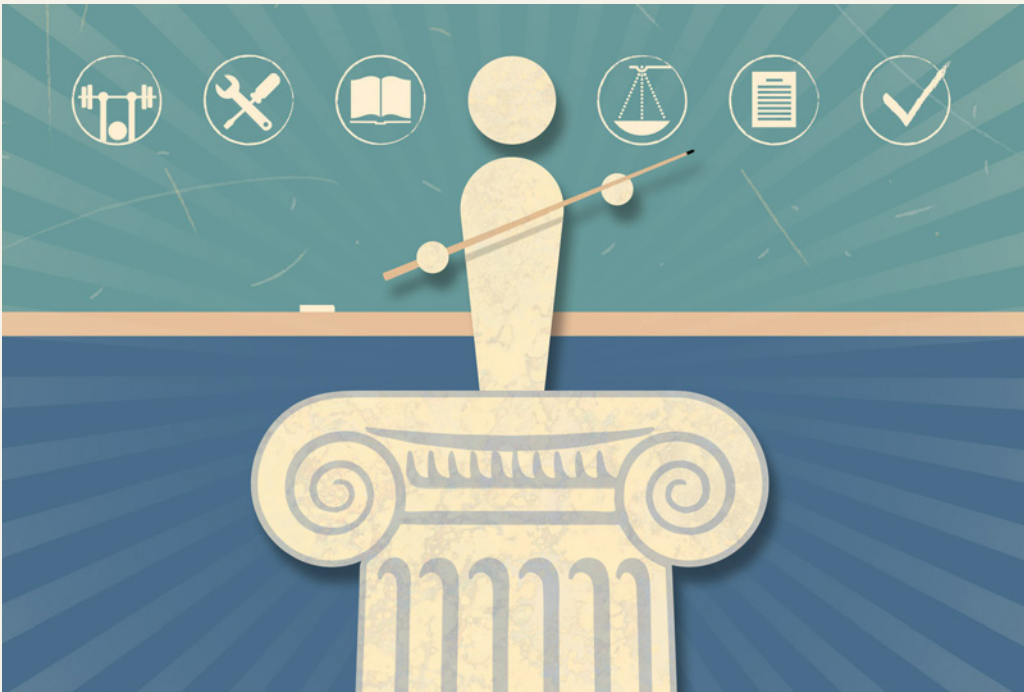
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Have you seen any good movies lately? Chances are it starred Meryl Streep. The only thing more impressive than the number of awards she has been nominated for (355) and won (173) is the variety of roles she has played. She does obligatory dramas (*The Post*), but also sings (*Mamma Mia*), portrays real-life characters (*The Iron Lady*), gets laughs (*The Devil Wears Prada*), and does a pretty fantastic fox voice (*The Fantastic Mr. Fox*). No offense to Kate Hudson, but great actors do not play just one type of role. The best competently take on a variety of parts—model teachers are similarly well-rounded.

Everyone knows a pedagogical Melissa McCarthy who avoids some roles in teaching: great lecturers who can't organize syllabi, masters of content who ignore skill development, winners of teaching awards who spurn assessment. The solution is to have a multidimensional definition of college-teaching competency and to seek guidance on developing those essential competencies. In our book, *An Evidence-based Guide to College and University Teaching*, we outline six key areas of competency that make up the model teaching criteria: training, instructional methods, course content, assessment, syllabus construction, and student evaluations.



Six Keys to Model Teaching

Good teaching isn't one thing: it is many things. That is why you can't ignore any of the six keys to model teaching when training or evaluating college teachers.

How do you tell if someone is a competent teacher? You could check transcripts, but that might omit pedagogical training. Syllabi could be examined, but even perfectly designed courses fall flat when faculty can't deliver. Assessment results? Sure, but what if students hate every second of the class?

Traditional definitions of good teaching are incomplete when considered in isolation. Many college teachers are great in some aspects but have blind spots in others. Perhaps you know well-regarded teachers who are stymied by technology, who reject the value of active learning, or whose syllabi are anachronistic. To address the limitations of single-concept measures of good teaching, the model teaching criteria cover the full range of instructional responsibilities—preparation, design, implementation, evaluation, and revision—to help identify and eliminate pedagogical blind spots. Here are brief summaries of the keys areas of model teaching.

Meet the Authors



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TALES FROM REAL LIFE > MODEL TEACHING

While good teaching has to be defined and promoted, “I love student evaluations” is not a sentence any of us have heard. Use the model criteria instead. Here’s one way: I (Regan) had coffee with the director of my university’s teaching

center and overviewed the model teaching criteria. It was great. The director saw the benefit of a multidimensional model for faculty development and evaluation. I then had a chat with the college dean who was committed to changing how faculty teaching was evaluated.

With the director’s backing, the dean pushed for a college-wide culture shift. I served as an ex-officio member of a faculty task force comprised of faculty from various disciplines. I overviewed the six criteria, shared the background research, and advocated a switch to the

model criteria. By semester’s end, department chairs volunteered to pilot the criteria as a basis for merit review, faculty promotion, and professional activity reporting. The instructional technology gurus also created a Canvas course that is free to

anyone who wishes to evaluate themselves on the model criteria and explore resources for further development, so now there also is a tool that can be shared beyond the university to promote “good teaching” anytime, anywhere.

Training: Are You Avoiding Pedagogical Malpractice?

Bad news, you need brain surgery. Good news, your surgeon conducts and publishes cutting-edge neurological research. More bad news, your doctor has never actually cut someone's head open. Does that sound ludicrous? It is exactly the situation for college teachers whose only training before walking into a classroom—and doing serious work on students' brains—is content-area expertise.

Model teachers train not only in content but in pedagogy. They know how people learn and methods for facilitating learning. But training goes stale. So model teachers also stay current with changes in their discipline and in teaching and learning. Ongoing professional development through workshops or conferences is a must.

Instructional Methods: Do You Have Enough Tools?

Model teaching includes both big and small instructional skills. Small instructional skills include classroom practices and behaviors that traditionally have been used to evaluate faculty, such as organization, public speaking skills, rapport with students, use of technology, and so on.

Big instructional skills refer to what faculty might say when asked “What is your teaching

method?” They include broad pedagogical approaches such as direct instruction, collaborative learning, team-based learning, and problem-based learning. The model teaching criteria do not stipulate one specific method. Model teachers have a toolbox of methods they can capably implement to fit the needs of students.

MODEL TEACHERS
CREATE A BALANCE.
THEIR STUDENTS ACQUIRE
BOTH KNOWLEDGE
AND SKILLS.

Course Content: To Cover or Not to Cover?

Teachers tend to fall into one of two camps: content-focused or skills-focused. Content-focused teachers believe students must understand the basic ideas of a discipline, and they design their course goals, instructional methods, and evaluations to emphasize expansion of students' knowledge. “Why not just Google it?” skills-focused teachers reply. Rather than emphasizing the memorization of facts—the stuff students will likely forget or just look up later—skills-based instructors focus on the intellectual tools needed to evaluate and communicate knowledge. Critical thinking and communication skills, they argue, are useful everywhere and forever.

Meanwhile, model teachers create a balance. Their students acquire both knowledge and skills. In addition, they provide students with the values needed to implement their knowledge and skills for good, not evil. That is, model teachers ensure students can use and evaluate what they learn in the context of core values such as respect for ethics and diversity.

Assessment: Where's the Evidence?

Although assessment gets a bad rap when it is dictated by administrators or accrediting agencies, most good teachers design learning experiences that follow an assessment cycle. It starts by setting learning objectives, and then selecting an evaluation method to reveal whether those objectives are met. Next is the really hard part: selecting and implementing instructional methods to move students toward the objectives. In other words, they have to teach. Evaluation of learning occurs simultaneously. Finally, teachers reflect on the outcomes of evaluations and plan how to do it better. Just about every teacher does something like this—they just call it teaching, not assessment.

Model teachers go through the assessment cycle systematically. In addition, they ensure the assessment process benefits students. Tests, papers, presentations, simulations—model teachers use many types of evaluation to assess whether students achieve learning goals. However, the evalu-

■ BEST PRACTICES > HOW TO BE A BETTER TEACHER

SELF-EVALUATE USING THE MODEL CRITERIA. Use the checklist of competencies to determine your strengths and areas where your teaching practices are inconsistent with the criteria (see References and Resources).

SET SPECIFIC GOALS TO IMPROVE AREAS OF INCONSISTENCY. For example, “revise syllabi to use a positive,

rather than punitive, tone.”

EXPLORE THE LITERATURE. There is extensive research on how people learn and what it means to be a competent teacher.

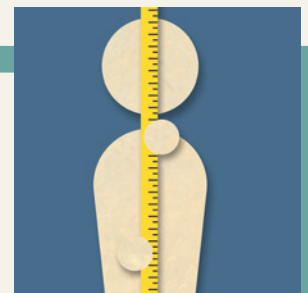
CONSULT AND COLLABORATE WITH COLLEAGUES. Research shows that improvement of teaching is best done with help from friends. Consult

with colleagues who are experts in a specific teaching competency, use their knowledge to set goals and find resources, and set a date to give them an update on your progress.

TAKE BABY STEPS. Do not address all criteria all at once. Instead, set goals to make one improvement in all six categories, or attack

one of the categories with full force.

REPEAT THE PROCESS. Teaching development never ends. Keep assessing yourself, setting goals, and working toward a fresh pedagogy.



ation should match up with the objective, and the feedback to students should help them learn and improve.

Syllabi: What Does It Say About You?

A well-known study in psychology asked students to judge a college teacher based on 10 seconds of silent classroom video, and it found that those snap judgments matched the end-of-semester evaluations by students who had spent a whole semester with the same professors. Yes, our students judge us quickly. So, what impression are you making when you hand out your syllabus on the first day? Students judge us based on syllabi, and they are right to do so because model teachers produce syllabi that are comprehensive learning tools.

WHAT IMPRESSION ARE YOU MAKING WHEN YOU HAND OUT YOUR SYLLABUS ON THE FIRST DAY?

Syllabi play multiple roles; they are both a factual record of a course and a learning aid for students. Even if you don't like thinking of syllabi as a contract, that is how they are used during accreditation, program reviews, and transfer evaluations. So, they must be coherent and complete when outlining learning objectives, course content, assignments, and evaluations. Syllabi also guide students on how to learn in a new setting by explaining what they need to do and when to do it, how their learning will be evaluated, and the tools available to help them succeed.

Student Evaluations: What Do the Diners Think?

Should Yelp restaurant reviews be abandoned? After all, Yelp reviews are written by people untrained in culinary arts, sometimes biased against certain foods, and often swayed by presentation rather than flavor or quality of ingredients. But the same might be said of student evalua-

tions. And, if you think diners have a valid perspective, then it's hard to argue that students can't provide meaningful feedback on their experiences.

Model teachers take student evaluations seriously and use them to improve their courses. They solicit student feedback not just at the end of the semester but throughout a course. Research shows that mid-semester reflection and goal setting, based on student feedback, can improve teaching. So, model teachers ask students about their experiences throughout the semester, consider their opinions, and make adjustments as necessary.

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ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Q & A ABOUT USING THE MODEL CRITERIA

Q: Is there evidence to support the model criteria?

A: The model criteria are based on what we know about the science of teaching and learning. Consider the results of a national survey of psychology faculty that assessed their consistency with the six model teaching criteria (Boysen, Richmond, & Gurung, 2015). Averaged across all six areas, 77 percent reported teaching practices consistent with the criteria. Tenured faculty and award-winning faculty reported greater consistency than untenured faculty and those who had not received a teaching award. In other words, these competencies are standard practices of good teachers.

Q: How can the model criteria be used to train teachers?

A: In workshops across the nation, we have used the model criteria to train graduate students and faculty of all ranks, at associate's, baccalaureate, and graduate levels. We recommend teachers learn about the model criteria, self-evaluate their competencies, make plans for change, and then evaluate the outcomes. For example, a teacher might design an innovative assignment (pedagogy) to help students achieve a new learning objective (assessment) related to discipline-specific critical thinking skills (content). Then, we recommend teachers share their findings at a teaching conference or in the pages of a pedagogical journal.

Q: Are the model criteria useful for experienced teachers?

A: Absolutely! Continuous professional development is

built into the criteria. We have had both new and seasoned teachers implement aspects of the model criteria into their pedagogy and courses. In particular, many experienced teachers do not realize the profound impact of syllabi on students. Learning about the model criteria often leads to make drastic changes to syllabus design and content.

Q: So, this is all I have to do to be a great teacher?

A: No, these are just the basic competencies. It's a scaffold to climb toward greatness, but it is up to you to implement these criteria in ways that build on your strengths and ameliorate your weaknesses.

