

## What the Best College Teachers Do

By Ken Bain  
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### Reviewed by James B. Levy

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We already know that good writers are made, not born. It turns out the same is true of great writing teachers, as well as every other kind of teacher for that matter, according to Professor Ken Bain's recent book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, winner of the Harvard University Press Award for outstanding book on education.<sup>1</sup> Bain is the director of NYU's Center for Teaching Excellence. His book is the product of a 15-year study in which he and his team sought to understand why some professors become legendary for their teaching ability. Bain wanted to know what these teachers do that the rest of us are not doing, and whether it is possible to learn their secrets in order to improve our own teaching. The book compiles the results of a longitudinal study of more than 60 outstanding college and graduate school professors teaching in a broad range of areas, including law, at a variety of schools, large and small, elite and not-so-elite.

The teachers selected for Bain's study were not those who were merely considered excellent by their home institutions or who received consistently excellent student evaluations. Instead, the study focused on those teachers who are truly outstanding in terms of having a demonstrable impact on student learning. These are teachers who had a profound and lasting impact on the lives of their students; the kind of teachers who helped students learn "deeply and remarkably" as Bain puts it. The study ultimately concluded that although their

personalities and styles defy generalization, outstanding teachers share the fact that they are all passionate, lifelong learners who are experts in their field, care deeply that their students succeed, and possess an unfettered optimism about their students' ability to do so.

Bain recognized that many legendary teachers retire, or unfortunately pass away, before anyone has had the chance to record their stories and study their techniques. He recognized that these teachers have a wealth of insights and experience that other teachers could greatly benefit from, but no one had yet taken steps to preserve their collective wisdom. So, like a modern day Alan Lomax,<sup>2</sup> Professor Bain crisscrossed the country with a laptop in hand, rather than a tape recorder, documenting the secrets of local teaching legends before they were lost forever. His book is a summary of what he learned.

Those who qualified for inclusion in Bain's study were not just run-of-the-mill excellent teachers with a few teaching awards under their belts. Rather, they were bona fide stars. He was interested in studying only the kind of teacher who changed students' lives and reached the ones everyone else considered unreachable. For example, many of the teachers chosen for the study had a disproportionately large number of students follow them into academia because of their influence.

In selecting which candidates to study, Bain looked for the kind of evidence indicating that a teacher had a significant impact on student learning; but determining whether and how much students learn

<sup>1</sup> Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Legendary musicologist and preservationist who traveled the country, particularly the Deep South, in the '30s and '40s recording indigenous American music for the Library of Congress before it was lost.

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is not an easy task. The reality is that most of us don't have as much of an effect on our students' learning as we'd like to believe.<sup>3</sup> So, Bain looked for objective indicia of a teacher's impact on student learning, such as consistently superior performance on standardized tests like the Law School Admission test (LSAT) or the Medical College Admission test (MCAT).

Once they made the cut, Bain and his research team studied their subjects' teaching methods exhaustively, including observing them in the classroom (in some cases it meant enrolling in the teacher's class for a semester), conducting detailed interviews with the teacher, speaking with students past and present, in groups and individually, speaking to colleagues, and analyzing in detail all their classroom materials, even lecture notes. The researchers were looking for teachers who challenged the assumptions students brought with them to the classroom and who, by semester's end, had fundamentally changed their thinking.

After studying this elite group of undergraduate and graduate school professors for more than 15 years, Bain reached some general conclusions about what makes them so special. First and foremost, he concluded that outstanding teachers are lifelong learners themselves who have a deep, intellectual curiosity about the world around them and their chosen field of study in particular. A key to their effectiveness, he concluded, was that they shared their sense of awe with the students. Not surprisingly, outstanding teachers are considered experts in their field and thus are heavily involved in whatever scholarly debates are taking place within that discipline. They are inquisitive, and thus go deep in terms of their own thinking and are therefore able to take their students deep as well.

But Bain points out that great scholars are not always great teachers. Several additional

considerations go into making someone who is already a great scholar also a great teacher. Bain found that great teachers are fascinated by how people learn. They spend a great deal of time thinking about it and their instincts about human learning turn out to be remarkably consistent with accepted learning theory and empirical research.

They genuinely care about their students' learning and often share with them their own intellectual journeys, particularly the struggles, as a way of connecting with their students. These teachers don't just want to pass along whatever information is needed to successfully complete the course, but instead want to impart lessons that will stay with students well beyond the classroom. Their love of the subject matter combined with their inherent understanding of learning theory and their passion for helping students learn enables these master teachers to design a curriculum that broadens and deepens students' thinking. For example, these professors are able to frame for students the great intellectual debates raging within their own disciplines in a way that is both accessible and meaningful so their students are able to share their teacher's passion for the material.

Outstanding teachers know that knowledge is not imparted; rather, it is constructed. They understand that their students enter the classroom with certain mental models, or schema, for organizing and thinking about the world around them. To help these students grow intellectually means challenging those models so that they develop new ways of seeing the world. Outstanding teachers do this, for example, by presenting students with questions or hypotheticals that show them that their existing models no longer work. Students are thus forced to confront and reevaluate some of their fundamental assumptions, and in the process they learn to "think about their own thinking," which is the hallmark of critical thinking. These teachers have specific goals for their students' intellectual development. They know where they want their students to be by the end of the semester and have a plan for scaffolding from their existing cognitive models to new, deeper ones by semester's end.

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<sup>3</sup> Bain, *supra* note 1, at 23–24. There's a growing body of literature that finds students, even the best ones, don't learn as much as we think. Instead, they "plug and chug" their way through the course—figuring out whatever is needed to get a good grade—without any fundamental growth in their understanding. *Id.*

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Top-notch teachers also know and understand their students' academic background when they walk into class that first day. While they push their students in terms of intellectual growth, these teachers understand the difference between where the students are and where they need to be by the end of the semester. Framed in the law school context, that means a teacher who understands that although the ultimate goal is to prepare students for practice, first-year students are not yet ready for a “sink or swim” experience. Instead we need to begin in a way that is more commensurate with their existing skills.

Thus, the best teachers know how to simplify and organize the material in a way that is understandable to novices without losing essential nuances. Excellent teachers are able to explain the material in a way that helps students understand it on their own terms and shows students why it's important to their lives. As we already know, learning theory tells us that people pay better attention to, and care more about, that which they see as having immediate importance to their lives.

Bain found that the best teachers also set high, but realistic standards. They understand the importance of pushing students, but not overwhelming them. Outstanding teachers push their students intellectually because they fervently believe their students can meet the challenge. These teachers believe that, fundamentally, students show up to class eager and willing to learn. Because they believe so much in their students' abilities, outstanding teachers are able to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust in the classroom. These teachers recognize the power of self-fulfilling prophecies. They possess a “if you build it, they will come” ethos: establish high standards and students will work to meet them.

The point is well illustrated by a study described in the book involving minority students at Northwestern University who were having difficulty in a tough undergraduate biology class that was a gateway course for medical school. Their teachers worried that placing these students in a remedial biology program would only reinforce the students'

fear that they couldn't compete with the so-called “better” students. Instead, these teachers did the seemingly counterintuitive thing by inviting the students to participate in a biology honors workshop. The fact that teachers expected more from these students rather than less provided them with a needed morale boost that raised their standardized test scores significantly compared to a comparable control group.

While outstanding teachers place high expectations on their students, they are even more demanding on themselves in terms of their classroom teaching. When their students don't do well, rather than blame the students, the best teachers reflect on how they could have done a better job. Bain observed that outstanding teachers make mistakes, have bad classes, and screw up just like the rest of us. The difference, though, is that they use those mistakes as an opportunity for self-reflection and growth that ultimately leads them to better teaching.

The best teachers are also empathetic and sensitive to their students' needs. They scan the class observing body language and any other signs that their students might not be “getting it.” It's obvious to students that these teachers care that they learn. Teacher “warmth” is a theme mentioned throughout Bain's book; he found that the best teachers have “warm” personalities and they communicate their warmth and caring to their students.

Interestingly, with respect to the instructional techniques used by the best college professors, many of Bain's observations are reassuringly consistent with established legal writing pedagogy. For instance, outstanding teachers allow students to do multiple, ungraded drafts of an assignment, which lets them make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, and then try again without fear it will affect their grade. Bain found that the best teachers make extensive use of problem-solving exercises that illustrate important concepts to students in a way that is concrete, relevant, and authentic. The best college professors often use a Socratic-like approach in class that respectfully challenges students in order to get them to reflect upon and ultimately reevaluate their preexisting assumptions. Based on Bain's research, it

is safe to say that legal writing professors as a group are on par with the best professors in terms of instilling critical thinking skills in their students.

Confounding easy categorization, Bain found that outstanding teachers do not have a single personality type or classroom persona outside the fact that they all have a “warm” demeanor. Some are classroom dynamos while others are more shy and reserved. Some conduct class in an informal manner such as calling on students by their first name while others are much more formal. Some of them dress primly and properly and others teach in a T-shirt and jeans. Indeed, he found that personality played little role in their effectiveness. Rather, what they all shared was a noncombative style that one way or another communicated to students “I want you to learn, I believe you can learn, and I’m here to help you learn.”

In sum, the overarching characteristic of outstanding teachers, Bain concludes, is their attitude toward students and their belief in students’ ability to achieve. Every classroom decision these teachers make is motivated by a genuine desire to help facilitate deep learning.

These teachers possess a generous spirit that enables them to place their students’ interests above a personal agenda and accept responsibility whenever classroom outcomes fall short.

In this respect, Bain’s conclusions remind us that teaching is ultimately about the quality of our relationships with students. Oftentimes, the reasons we find for our students’ failings are rooted in our own fears and anxieties about ourselves rather than anything having to do with the students. Thus, one lesson we can draw from Bain’s research is that to become a great teacher, we first need to become a great person by letting go of our petty insecurities and self-doubt, which only serve to cloud our ability to believe fully in our students. Only when we learn to fully accept ourselves, will we be in a position to genuinely and authentically accept and believe in our students. It’s a laudable goal all of us should be working toward anyway.

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## Another Perspective

“Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.”

—Gerald F. Hess, *Learning to Think Like a Teacher: Reflective Journals for Legal Educators*, 38 Gonz. L. Rev. 129, 137 (2002–2003).