



Becoming a Better Teacher: Principles That Make Improvement a Positive Process

Editor's note: These principles don't propose breathtakingly new insights, but they offer a context for improvement that should make efforts to teach better more successful.

- Improvement is not a dirty word—All teachers can improve; most should. Don't base efforts on premises of remediation and deficiency. Positive premises work just as well. You can improve your teaching just as effectively doing more of what works well as you can by seeking to eliminate weaknesses.
 - Focus efforts to improve on encouraging more and better learning for students—Asking if a teacher wants to improve often engenders a defensive response (more evidence of premises of remediation and a motivation to improve driven by the need to fix problems). Asking if a teacher cares how much and how well students learn engenders positive responses, even from curmudgeons. Take what is known about learning (much is) and work to figure out the instructional implications of that theory and research. Ask yourself this question: If a teacher aspired to teach in ways that promoted learning, what would that teacher do about instructional nuts and bolts such as assignments, classroom policies, and presentational approaches?
 - Don't trivialize what's involved in the process—Stop thinking quick fixes, techniques, and training. The "just-do-it" approach toward instructional change doesn't cut it. Discovering a good technique and attaching it to whatever's happening in class tomorrow trivializes the complex interplay of variables that contribute to success in the classroom. Effective, sustainable change rests on careful planning and a systematic, thoughtful approach to change.
 - Recognize the role of learning in the improvement process—Most faculty aren't trained to teach, and norms expecting ongoing growth and development are not strong. As a result, most of what we know about teaching
- we have learned by doing—not by study, analysis, and careful reflection. Most faculty are surprised when they discover how much can be learned by reading, by encountering research and theory, and by thoughtful analysis. Part of what makes this learning motivating and satisfying is that class time tomorrow (or sometime soon) offers an opportunity to apply that new knowledge. Most of us love to learn, and seeing teaching and learning as new material to master can make teaching a source of intellectual intrigue.
 - Personhood is expressed through teaching—We do teach content and we do teach students, but just as surely we teach who we are. Conduct in and out of the classroom conveys important messages about values, beliefs, and attitudes. Because students respond to us as people, because teaching reveals something about us as human beings, it leaves us vulnerable, open, exposed, and thereby able to be hurt. It's an occupational hazard for which we don't get extra pay or protection. But it also affords opportunity—the chance to be valued and confirmed as a person, to be honored and respected. This means that better teaching isn't always about learning the content better. It isn't always about the acquisition of new techniques. Sometimes it's about being a better person.
 - Improvement begins and ends with the faculty member—You play the central role in the improvement process. Others may try to motivate. They may threaten (no merit raise if you don't improve). They may cajole (your students deserve it). They may try to persuade (your students will learn more if you do it this way). But they cannot implement one change in your classroom . . . you alone can do that. In the same way that you can't learn anything for your students, nobody can improve your teaching for you. It's something done by you, for you (and for your students).
 - Formative feedback guarantees the

integrity of the improvement process—Teachers need diagnostic, descriptive details that help them understand the impact of their policies, practices, and behaviors on student learning. The systems used by most institutions to evaluate instruction fail to provide this kind of feedback. This failure is a good news/bad news scenario. The bad news is that most institutions could (and should) be doing better. This is an area in which much useful research has been conducted. The good news is that you can step in and make the process work for you. You can ask students about the impact of a particular assignment, activity, practice, exam, or reading on their learning. You can ask questions about the impact of any aspect of instruction on learning. You should be asking about many of these aspects if you want to make wise and well-informed decisions about improvement.

- Set realistic expectations for success—Too often we expect perfection. In order to be "good," a classroom activity has to thoroughly engage and involve every single student. It has to work every time we use it, regardless of class level and content. Anything less than complete success means the activity is flawed or we have failed. Realistically, however, anything we do or try in the class is going to have mixed results. Although

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Eight Roles of an Effective Online Teacher

TEACHING FACE-TO-FACE and teaching online are both teaching, but they are qualitatively different. In comparison, driving a car and riding a motorcycle are both forms of transportation, but they have enough differences to warrant additional training and preparation when switching from one to the other. The same is true when faculty move from the traditional classroom to the online classroom. There are some things that the two have in common, but there are also plenty of differences. With this in mind, consider the following eight roles of an effective online teacher.

1. **TOUR GUIDE** – A tour guide leads one or more people through a place or a series of places, usually revolving around some sort of common theme or subject. Similarly, the online teacher plays the role of guiding students through one or more online learning experiences. These experiences are most often designed and planned long before the course starts so that the teacher can devote more time to guiding the students and less time preparing lessons. Within this role, the teacher directs and redirects the attention of learners toward key concepts and ideas. A good tour guide doesn't want anyone to miss out on the highlights of the tour.
2. **CHEERLEADER** – As with all learning environments, learners often need some encouragement. Learning is hard work and studying online can sometimes feel isolating, confusing, or discouraging without this important role. As a result, the effective online teacher makes intentional efforts to communicate specific encouraging messages to individual learners and the group as a whole. Even when providing constructive feedback, the teacher as cheerleader finds a way to promote positive messages alongside the critiques, doing his or her best to maintain an overall positive morale in the class. At times, learners may fall into negative comments about themselves, the class, or their classmates (even the instructor, on occasion). The cheerleader strives to find ways to listen, respect the learner's frustrations, but to also help them reframe the situation in ways that are more positive and productive.
3. **LEARNING COACH** – Many people focus on the role of teacher as role model and that is valuable. However, the role of coach is just as important, even more important if we want learners

to develop high levels of competence and confidence. A role model throws a perfect spiral with a football while the learners watch. A coach gets the learners on the field, puts the ball in their hands, and then coaches them on how to throw a spiral for themselves. This is a powerful and essential role of the online teacher. Such a teacher must move beyond simply modeling a love for the subject and personal skill with the content. Instead, find ways to hand the subject over to the students to do something with it. Applied projects and papers work well for this, and it gives the teacher an opportunity to be a coach and mentor.

4. **INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP MIRROR** – Imagine waking up in the morning, getting ready for work, and heading out the door without ever looking into a mirror to see that your hair is sticking straight up in the air. That is good information to know before you walk into the office. Learners need this same sort of feedback about their work. How are they doing? Are they getting closer to meeting the learning objectives or not? The effective online teacher finds ways to give this sort of feedback to individual learners and, when appropriate, groups of learners.
5. **SOCIAL BUTTERFLY** – Without intentional efforts to build a positive social environment, online learning can feel lonely and impersonal. As a result, the online teacher must serve like a great party host, facilitating introductions, using discussion starters to facilitate conversations among students, and taking the time to get to know students and referencing that knowledge in interactions with them.
6. **BIG BROTHER** – Everything is documented in an online course. The teacher can tell when and how many times a student logs into the course, what pages were viewed or not, how many discussions posts the student contributed, and much more. This data can be abused, but it can also be used to make adjustments and informed decisions as an online teacher. If a student is not logging in, then contact the student. If students are failing to visit pages in the course with key instructions, point that out to the students or reorganize the content so that it's easier to find.
7. **VALVE CONTROL** – Online courses

are rich with content and sometimes students can get lost in all that content. The teacher as valve control intentionally releases content in chunks that are appropriate for students. Sometimes this comes in the form of only releasing content one week at a time. Other times, the teacher releases it all at once, but directs students to only focus on certain parts at a time. Another key is to break content into smaller segments. Rather than a twenty-page document of instructions, consider breaking it into ten two-page documents.

8. **CO-LEARNER** – Great teachers are lifelong learners, and they can model that learning for their students in a variety of ways in the online classroom. The teacher can be an active (but not too active or it will silence students) participant in online discussions, sharing what they are learning about the subject, and even complete all or parts of some assignments, sharing their work with the students. This goes a long way in building a vibrant and dynamic online learning community where every person in the community commits to embodying the traits of a lifelong learner.

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Dr. Bernard Bull, Faculty Focus, June 3, 2013 [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/eight-roles-of-an-effective-online-teacher/>] June 11, 2013

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aspirations to perfection are lofty, they aren't very realistic, at least for most of us.

- See teaching excellence as a career-long quest—Don't expect to finally get it right or to permanently achieve an exemplary level of teaching excellence. Once you think you've arrived, the journey is over. It's the quest for teaching excellence that motivates, inspires, and satisfies. Find pleasure in your travels. Once you reach one destination, leave shortly for yet another interesting place.

Reprinted from "Principles That Make Improvement a Positive Process," The Teaching Professor, 19.10 (2005): 5.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD, Faculty Focus, June 6, 2013 [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/principles-that-make-improvement-a-positive-process/>] June 11, 2013