

ASSUMPTIONS THAT GROW COLLEGE TEACHERS

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- **Improvement is not a dirty word** - There's no need to base efforts to improve on premises of remediation and deficiency. The absence of certain skills or the inability to accomplish others well doesn't necessarily equal incompetence. Even athletes at the top of their games still work to improve certain skills and very talented artists hone new techniques. The fact is, all teachers can improve and that improvement can be aimed at two goals. They can do more of what works or they can do less of what doesn't. However, if teachers change by doing more of what works that means less time for what doesn't, plus the positive approach builds confidence and is way more motivational.
- **Focus efforts to improve on more and better learning for students** – Ask a teacher if he wants to improve and be prepared for a defensive response. “Why? Did somebody tell you I needed to?” Ask a teacher (even an old curmudgeon) if she cares how much and how well students learn and get a positive response. Taking what is known about how students (humans, for that matter) learn and working to figure out the instructional implications of that knowledge develops positive attitudes towards improvement. Here's the question that guides those efforts now: if a teacher aspires to teach in ways that promote learning, what should that teacher do about instructional nuts and bolts—like assignments, classroom policies, in-class activities, grading criteria and the presentation of material?
- **Don't trivialize what's involved in the process** – Stop thinking quick fixes, techniques and afternoon training sessions. 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 that's grounded on a systematic, thoughtful approach. The search for perfect techniques, sure fire strategies, and ideas that always work is a quest for Don Quixote, not for teachers trying to orchestrate learning in the dynamic milieu of the classroom.
- **Recognize the role of learning in the improvement process** – Most faculty aren't trained to teach and few norms expect ongoing growth and development for college teachers. As a result most of what faculty know about teaching they've learned by doing—not by study, analysis and careful reflection. That there is much to learn about teaching and learning—in the pedagogical literature written by fellow practitioners, in the theory and research of the disciplines associated with education or by thoughtful self-analysis—comes as something of a surprise. Generally it is quite a pleasant surprise because class tomorrow offers an opportunity to apply that new knowledge. As devoted lifelong learners, once faculty see teaching and learning as content to be mastered, excellence in the classroom transforms from a quest for easy answers to a robust intellectual endeavor.
- **Personhood is expressed through teaching** – Faculty do teach content and they teach students but just as surely they teach who they are. Conduct in and out of the classroom conveys messages about values, beliefs and attitudes. It reveals important things about teachers as human beings and thereby makes them vulnerable, open, exposed and able to be hurt by students who take advantage of those expressions of personhood. Teachers are not provided protective gear or hazard pay for this part of the job. However, the expression of personhood (even with its inherent vulnerabilities) offers two opportunities for affirmation. First, there's the chance to be valued and confirmed as a person, to be honored, respected and admired by students who validate what teachers do and who they are. Second, there's the chance to touch students, to teach those life lessons that matter way more than any content knowledge. Making the most of these opportunities means that better teaching isn't always about learning the content better or expanding the repertoire of instructional strategies. Sometimes better teaching is about becoming a better person.
- **Improvement begins and ends with the faculty member** – The teacher is completely in charge of the improvement process. Others may try to provide the motivation. They may threaten (no merit raise without improvement). They may cajole (students deserve better; the teacher is capable of more). They may try persuasion (students will learn more with this approach). But they cannot change one thing a teacher does in her classroom. They can (and should) provide conditions conducive to change, but teachers alone implement what changes in the classroom. In the same way no teacher learns anything for students, nobody can improve anybody else's teaching. It's something a teacher

does for himself and for his students. The importance of this principle to those who work with faculty on instructional improvement agendas is obvious. But the principle can empower faculty as well. It puts faculty members in the driver's seat, letting them determine where they're headed and what roads they will travel on their way to teaching excellence. The principle works best if there are consequences for faculty decisions—if they decide to park or get lost on back roads that don't lead anywhere. But if teachers recognize they have power and see the decisions they make leading to more and better learning for students, career long growth and development becomes much more likely.

- **Formative feedback guarantees the integrity of the improvement process** – Teachers need diagnostic, descriptive details that help them understand the impact of the policies, practices and behaviors they use 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 institutions owe faculty, students and the instructional process something better. The good news is that teachers can step in and make the process work for them. They can ask students about the impact of a particular assignment, activity, policy, exam, reading or any other aspect of instruction on their learning. They should be asking about many aspects of instruction if the goal is to make wise and well-informed decisions about improvement.
- **Set realistic expectations for success** – Too often teachers hold onto a standard of perfection. In order to be “good” a classroom activity has to thoroughly engage and involve every student. It has to work every time it's used, regardless of class level and content. Anything else than complete success means the activity is flawed or the teacher has failed. Anything done in the class has mixed results—usually it works well for some students, works for others and doesn't work at all for some. Although aspirations to perfection are lofty, they aren't very realistic, given the humanity of most teachers.
- **See teaching excellence as a career-long quest** – Teachers should not expect to finally get it right or arrive at a fixed level of teaching excellence from which they will teach henceforth. What motivates, inspires and satisfies is not teaching excellence, but the quest for it and that quest can be as long as any career.

From Maryellen's book: *Inspired College Teaching: A Career-Long Resource for Professional Growth*, published by Jossey Bass and available through the RIT Libraries at <https://connectny-eblib-com.ezproxy.rit.edu/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=496043&userid=9PVC4mnxyiA%3d&tstamp=1366455994&id=73F7A103E67E730AD876C29292126EB3894B93C8&conl=rit> (You will need to login with your RIT ID.)