



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## **Book Review: What do the Best College Teachers Do?**

by Ken Bain. *Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2004.*

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Ostensibly a summary report of a fifteen-year study of nearly a hundred carefully selected college professors in various disciplines across the country, this book resists simply presenting the reader with a list of the practices of its elite study participants. Instead, Ken Bain, Vice Provost for Instruction at Montclair State and founding director of four major teaching and learning centers, organizes the book around several central questions. At first glance, these questions seem to offer simple and practical advice (e.g. "How do these professors conduct class?"). However, as a group, these chapters, and the book itself, make a case that what makes the best teachers the best is not what they do, but rather what they believe.

What do the best college teachers believe? First, they believe that teaching is a serious and challenging intellectual endeavor. This belief informs every other aspect of their teaching. As they prepare, conduct, and evaluate their classes, these teachers regard their students' learning with as much interest as their own process of discovery in their field of study. Indeed many see great synergy between their own research and their teaching, in that each informs and complements the other. For this reason, Bain reveals, teaching is always fresh to these teachers. Each class of students (indeed, each individual student) presents a new set of challenges and insights.

Second, they believe that their students are capable of true learning, and can be trusted with their own education. What is meant by "true learning" in this

case? The teachers in this study see learning as a process of both personal and intellectual development, rather than a gathering of facts and concepts. In other words, these teachers want their students to develop the capacity for critical thought in their field, and with it, the intellectual maturity to exercise that capacity. As Bain puts it; "People can change, and those changes – not just the accumulation of information – represent true learning. More than anything else this central set of beliefs distinguishes the most effective teachers from many of their colleagues."

This belief in the nature of learning is reflected in the goals of these teachers. Rather than outlining a set of concepts to be mastered, these teachers emphasize the depth of the mastery and a personal identification with the material. Donald Saari, from the University of California offers a prime example of this sort of goal: "When I finish this process," he explained, "I want the students to feel like they have invented calculus and that only some accident of birth kept them from beating Newton to the punch."

The third and final belief is a belief in the uniqueness of each teaching situation. The high value that these teachers place on learning is not confined to their students. In other words, in each class they teach, they are also continuing to learn how to teach. Each assessment of students' learning is also an evaluation of their own teaching. Therefore their classes are filled with such feedback from students, ranging from formal exams to informal one-minute papers.

What makes them the best? It is here that Bain makes his most impassioned and central case. Great teachers are made, not born, he insists. Anyone who embraces the beliefs and attitudes of these teachers, will find improvement in their

teaching. I was reminded of research on the development of expertise in a variety of fields, from surgery to professional baseball. While most might believe that extraordinary natural ability is a prerequisite to reach the upper echelons of such elite worlds, the researchers found that the greatest commonality was rather the willingness to practice. Bain reminds us that the best college teachers are no different. These teachers are great because they love to practice – to teach their subject. To join their ranks, he offers no recipes or instructions, only two simple ingredients; a love of the wonders of your field and an earnest desire to communicate them to the next generation of scholars.