

Are We Too Preoccupied with Teaching Techniques?

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College teachers love techniques. If you're invited to lead a teaching workshop, you can expect to be asked, "Will you share some good techniques?" Suggest them in the workshop and watch lots of smiling participants write them down with great enthusiasm. Why do we love teaching techniques so much? Because many of us come to teaching not having many? Because they work? Because they keep our teaching feeling fresh?

I have been fretting about this attraction to techniques for years now. They aren't inherently bad or wrong, in fact they play a necessary and important role in effective instruction. It's our thinking about them that seems off the mark. Let's start with definitions. What is a teaching technique? A gimmick, a trick, a strategy? Something that keeps basically bored students engaged? A plan of action used to accomplish a particular goal? Are we right to assume that we're all talking about the same thing?

A lot of us tend to think of teaching techniques as solutions to problems. "How can I get students coming to class with the homework problems done?" "What's a good technique for getting students to realize how much they don't know?" "My students are posting comments to the discussion board, but they're not really having a discussion. Any advice?" "What can I do to get students to make use of my feedback?"



Are questions like these motivated by a belief that all we need to solve our teaching challenges are the right techniques? Something that can be plugged into a formula like we're trying to solve a mathematical equation? Unfortunately, even a good technique doesn't work well for all teachers all the time. There are no cure-all solutions that function effectively with all kinds of content and for all kinds of students. No technique is going to be implemented equally well by all teachers. Our thinking about what a technique can accomplish needs to be a bit less optimistic.

In most teaching situations, there are multiple techniques that can be used. Say you're responding to a wrong or not very good student answer. You can fix the student's answer. You can ask for other answers. You can try to get the class to correct the answer or make it better. You can say it's wrong but laud the effort. You can inquire how the student arrived at the conclusion. You can say "no" and move on to someone else. You can respond to the one promising part of the answer, and build on that. This only starts the list of possibilities.

There's a tendency to think that having more techniques is all that's needed to become a better teacher. Collecting techniques is fine, but it's the first and easiest part of a pretty complicated process. When there are multiple ways to respond to wrong answers, you've got to figure out which one to use. Having a large number of options is of little value unless you make a good choice about which technique is best, given the circumstances. And how we choose among techniques is not something considered or discussed all that often. What sort of guidelines or criteria are we using?

The use of certain techniques can be planned ahead, but others must be selected on the fly. A student has answered incorrectly and we must decide how to respond, but without time for thoughtful, scholarly consideration of the options. The online environment offers more time to reflect, but do we take advantage of it, or do we simply default to how we usually respond when an answer isn't very good? Whatever choice we make, we must then live with the consequences of how we've responded. There's no director yelling "cut" so we can regroup and try a different response. Of course, we can always try to make a bad situation better, but if we've chosen poorly there's no way to erase what happened. So, a collection of techniques has got to be monitored and managed, and that requires a lot

more sophisticated skills than those needed to acquire a collection.

And finally, there's this. Teaching techniques are essential. If you don't think so, try teaching without any. However, even though techniques make effective instruction more likely, they offer no guarantees. Good techniques are never enough, and too much focus on techniques sidetracks us from what really matters. Parker Palmer offers this reminder, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." (p. 10)

We can love techniques, but let's not love them for the wrong reasons.

Reference: Palmer, P. *The Courage to Teach*. 10th Anniversary Ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.