

WHAT MAKES A GOOD INSTRUCTOR?

By
Allen R. Crise

Many people believe that good instructors are born; that instructional excellence is somehow innate or genetically determined. Instructors such as this, so the logic goes, typically possess a kind of charismatic presence that results in aroused or highly motivated listeners. Such an affect is of course desirable, even laudable, but it tends to emphasize individual instructor characteristics at the expense of criteria focused on what happens to learners. This view also tends to result in instructors more likely to credit their own performance as the key to learning regardless of consequences for learners.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who believe that instructional ability is something acquired; it involves training, discipline, and a good deal of patience. These type of instructors are constantly at work trying to improve themselves and their teaching. They strive for instructional excellence, tend to be learner advocates, and assess their effectiveness in relation to how well learners perform. Instructors such as these are usually aware of the conflict over how their instructional efforts are measured. For example, they readily understand the differences between one's public reputation and the objective assessment of their instructional quality. For them, career success is less tied up in the size and frequency of salary increases and promotions, and more in the satisfaction of assisting learners to become more than they were.

Writers who have studied this situation offer similar conclusions. Ericksen (1985) believes that "good teachers select and organize worthwhile course material, lead students to encode and integrate this material in memorable form, ensure competence in the procedures and methods of a discipline, sustain intellectual curiosity, and promote learning how to learn independently" (p. 5).

Hight (1950), in his classic, *The Art of Teaching*, describes three essential elements that constitute good instruction: knowledge of the subject; personal love of the material; and a high regard for learners. He goes on to describe some personal qualities that tend to distinguish good instructors from poor ones. These include exceptionally wide and lively intellectual interests and a good sense of humor. Speaking about essential personal abilities, Hight suggests that good instructors possess a well developed memory, a strong sense of will-power or determination, and a limitless store of genuine kindness.

McKeachie (1986) has studied the subject of good instruction for several decades in the context of colleges and universities. He maintains that instructors who are more attentive to individual learners are more likely to be effective instructors than those less attentive to learners.

McKeachie also notes that "students in classes stressing competition for grades show more tension, self-doubt, and anxiety than those in classes structured for cooperative achievement" (1986, p. 250).

Another perceptive observer of good instruction is Kenneth Eble, who like McKeachie, has devoted considerable attention to instruction at the collegiate setting. Eble (1979) believes that although master instructors may have a combination of personal qualities and behaviors that

seem to defy precise analysis, they share in common a love for instructing and learning. He summarizes his stance on instruction this way:

I believe that teaching is a presence of mind and person and body in relation to another mind and person and body, a complex array of mental, spiritual, and physical acts affecting others. Moments of direct interaction expand into the lives of both students and teachers, keeping alive the desire to learn and the will to make learning count. Any one part of teaching--conducting classes, making assignments, testing and grading, directing work, counseling and advising, writing books and preparing means for independent learning--is but a small part of the forces that affect a student's learning. Before that fact, teachers must necessarily be humble. But humility should not stop one from recognizing that teaching does matter and that developing teaching skills is a good way of furthering learning (1979, p. 8).

One of the earliest adult educators to write on the subject of good instruction was Overstreet (1941). He believed that a competent instructor should possess at least four qualities: (a) must want to personally go on learning; (b) must have some expertise that gives a vertebrate character to what is said and done; (c) must have a sense of relationships broad enough to counter any narrow specialization; and, (d) must have a sense of community--a power to think and act in terms of any real problems and resources.

Writing some years later, Kidd (1973) examined the attributes and motivations necessary to be an accomplished instructor. He concluded that a good instructor must be clear in speech and writing, possess enthusiasm and a good sense of humor, be personally engaged in learning, exhibit imagination, be tolerant of opposing points of view, and be able to deal effectively with controversy. Above all, Kidd believed that a good ". . . teacher must be a learner, must . . . possess strong motives and a positive attitude toward learning" (1973, p. 296).

Another adult educator, Knox (1986), has studied how instructors can enhance learning. He suggests that there is a strong relationship between effective instruction and effective learning. For him, pertinent characteristics that contribute to effective instruction include aspects of an instructor's personality such as enthusiasm, humor, and clarity of expression, attitudes toward learners and their subject matter, as well as their expertise and content mastery. Knox believes that effective instructors are those who look for ways of matching individual learning styles to their own instructional style. By matching both of these learners are more likely to learn effectively in the present as well as in the future.