

# **PATHWAYS TO EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING**

**From the Christian A. Johnson  
Excellence in Teaching Conference  
held April 2011 at Hamilton College**

Edited by  
Ernest H. Williams, Jr.  
Christian A. Johnson Professor of Biology  
Hamilton College

Clinton, New York  
June 2012

### Epilogue: What Students Tell Us

Ernest H. Williams, Jr.

Department of Biology, Hamilton College

In preparing for this conference, I wondered about the characteristics that make our six speakers such successful teachers. These individuals differ in what they emphasize, as is clear from their essays for this book, so their success doesn't point to a single style required for excellent teaching. Good teachers do share certain traits, however, such as deep concern for their students, and the passion these individuals feel for their teaching is evident. But I also wondered what our strongest students would say about their most memorable learning experiences. What do students identify as characteristics of the best learning environments? Even the best teachers cannot make students learn something, of course; faculty simply engage and encourage students and facilitate their own learning. I wanted to find out what highly successful teachers do that helps students grow the most in their understanding of a subject.

To find the most important features of effective teaching, I asked Hamilton College seniors elected to Phi Beta Kappa from the classes of 2008-2011 to respond to two questions: What makes a teacher effective? And what makes a class a good learning environment? I left the questions intentionally open so that student responses wouldn't be guided by my expectations, intended or not, in the wording of the questions. Fifty-six students responded with detailed, thoughtful answers. They wrote about a number of different components of successful teaching, and their responses pointed out the overlap of effective teaching and positive learning environments. In the summary below I've merged student responses to both questions, and when possible, I've let the students speak for themselves. Although these 56 individuals were just a sample of graduating seniors, they represent a motivated and academically successful group. Despite these students' diverse interests, majors, and personalities, certain responses emerged at a frequency high enough to illustrate important components of a successful learning environment.

The characteristics below are given in order of the frequency with which they appeared in student responses, beginning with the most frequent.

1. ***Passion.*** Without a doubt, passion for the subject was the characteristic described as most important and listed most frequently (stated explicitly in more than 60% of the responses). As one student wrote, “There is just no substitute for the experience of taking a class that the professor himself or herself is genuinely, deeply excited about. It’s truly transformative; those are the classes that change lives.” Numerous students commented that a professor’s infectious enthusiasm pulls them into the subject, and without it, coursework can become tedious. When faculty are unenthusiastic about the material for a class, they should choose different material, material that they *are* enthusiastic about. And it helps for them to describe their own scholarly interests, which are bound to be ones that they do care about deeply. “The best classes...have been the ones in which it’s clear that the professors care deeply about imparting their knowledge of the subject. This comes through as an impassioned personality as well as an openness to discussing his/her personal work and research.” Students respond accordingly when they encounter an instructor’s passions.

2. ***Intellectual challenge.*** Good students come to our institutions expecting to be challenged, not just to recall information they have been told in class or to work at a level at which they are already comfortable. High expectations from an instructor can lead to high accomplishments by the students. One student wrote, “In class, rather than simply reviewing reading, the professor challenged me to wrap my head around the text in a different, deeper way.” As Prof. Mertens said in her talk in this conference, students’ intellectual development is greater when they are pushed. Faculty attitudes about student ability can have a strong influence on the efforts students expend in the class, too. Another student wrote, “The assumption of an intellectually advanced class made all of us rise to the occasion.” But students also commented about needing some rewards for their accomplishments to be interspersed with the challenges.

3. ***Clear standards and organization.*** Many students wrote about the need for clarity of expectations, including “an established framework structuring the class.” Their comments included, “It is essential that an instructor make his expectations unquestionably clear from the very start” and “no matter the teacher’s style, students should have an idea of what they need to do to succeed and learn in the class.” One student wrote about a correlate to clear expectations in that “self-evaluation must be possible.” That is, a student should be able to gauge his or her own success in working toward the professor’s expectations.

4. **Active discussion.** Active learning leads to deeper understanding than does passive exposure to information, as several speakers in this conference noted, and many students commented about the importance of discussion in the classroom. Discussion draws students into active participation. The best learning environment is one that “incorporates both student and professor contribution” and one in which the class takes “the ideas that are being covered and discuss[es] them with others.” One wrote, “The teachers who don’t let their students sit passively in class...are the ones that resonate with students long after the semester has ended.” Another added, “A professor must ensure that all students are heard and that each student can contribute to the class in his or her preferred way.” Of course, most classes include a few individuals who are too shy to speak openly. Some respondents said that instructors should call on students, although others preferred that instructors provide alternative ways for students to respond. “A good learning environment is one in which every student feels comfortable contributing,” but depending on the size and composition of the class, that feeling is not always easy to create in a classroom.

A number of students, however, noted the need for some boundaries to open discussion: “a good balance between teacher explanation and student input is key” and “even in intimate upper-level classes, a little direction is necessary to keep the class comfortable and on track.” As all instructors know, open discussions frequently veer away from the stated topic, so, as one student wrote, “One of the most important skills for a good teacher is to have the ability to balance a focus on the subject at hand with digressions off topic.” Instructors should remember, though, that open discussion is not appropriate for all material: “It is never helpful when professors try to create discussion about topics that really aren’t conducive to it.” (I encountered such a situation once when trying to merge class discussion with tree identification; that discussion did not work!). Ideally, the professor must choose the right approach to match the material being covered in each class.

5. **Listening and respect.** “Professors are the most effective teachers when they listen to their students.” All successful speakers know how important it is to “read the audience,” as one student phrased it; another said, “The teacher must listen to his students to be able to gauge their progress ... and to guide them forward.” Listening to students implies that what the student has to say is important. “The most effective teachers are those who respect their students,” and “when I feel respected in the classroom, I think I am more apt to take responsibility for my performance.” Students share their thoughts during class discussion when they sense that their ideas are taken

seriously and respectfully. An added benefit is that respect is shared; faculty respect for the students is reflected in student respect for the instructor.

6. **Support.** “An effective teacher is one who genuinely and profoundly cares about his or her students.” This comment parallels the discussion of teaching roles, including coach and mentor, that Prof. Jin described in her talk in the conference. One student noted that showing compassion does not mean that the instructor loses authority. Responding to assignments, instructors should be firm and constructive rather than harsh and critical. Students respond positively when faculty take an interest in them personally.

7. **Classroom features.** Many students added comments about how to improve learning in a class. In addition to saying that they prefer smaller classes (no surprise in that), they wrote about the importance of:

- a. establishing a classroom environment comfortable for everyone and accepting some humor.
- b. being approachable and available out of class.
- c. mixing lectures, discussions, and student presentations that engage discourse. “A good learning environment is comprised of different approaches to avoid the class from going stale.” Different approaches may include written and oral assignments, independent projects, group work, problem sets, use of a range of media such as films and the internet, field trips, use of both Blackboard and Powerpoint, and hands-on activities.
- d. adjusting “course material or teaching methods [to] the conditions of the class.” An effective teacher is flexible.
- e. being able to “relate the material in class to things that happen in real life” or to ideas from other disciplines. Students are more likely to engage in material when they can apply what they’re learning to something they feel is relevant; this also makes them more knowledgeable of what is going on in their local and national communities.
- f. making assignments meaningful and serving specific purposes. (I’ve found it helpful to tell a class explicitly why I give them each assignment and what I want them to get from completing it.)
- g. varying the form of the assignments.
- h. having more, smaller assignments rather than few, large ones.
- i. grading “in a timely fashion or the valuable feedback they provide is wasted.” Students need timely feedback to improve their work; they need to know if their work is meeting expectations.
- j. soliciting student opinions through the term about how to improve

the course — and then following through on useful suggestions and adapting the course.

These ideas can help create an effective learning environment, but teaching experience clearly matters; one student wrote that “All standouts were veteran professors ... enormously comfortable in the classroom.” Every new teacher gains confidence and an awareness of what works by actually teaching. In fact, the speakers in the conference uniformly expressed the value of practice for becoming good at an activity, and that advice applies to teachers as well as to students. Of course, what works well in a small seminar is different from what works well in a large lecture setting, and each teacher must develop a style that works well for him or her.

Many of the students who responded to the survey spoke about the importance of good teaching to them personally. One stated that effective teachers “travel with me in spirit and ... serve as a constant reminder that [I am] prepared extremely well for the challenges that await me on this journey.” That is the outcome all of us strive for in working with our students. And faculty can create better learning environments by heeding what we hear from experienced, successful teachers such as the six speakers in this conference and from students themselves.