

Doing What Works: On the Mundanity of Excellence in Teaching

Daniel F. Chambliss

Mark Schubert is a great teacher or, to be more precise, a great swimming coach. He has been a member of six Olympic team staffs and has coached several dozen Olympic gold medalists and many scores of national champions. He has helped a number of athletes set world records. He probably is the most successful coach currently in competitive swimming and perhaps is the most successful swimming coach ever. I asked him a few years ago what makes him a great coach. He answered, to my surprise (for he is a very ambitious man), "I never wanted to be a great coach. I've never thought much about it. *I just wanted to have the best program.*"

Schubert is concerned not with his own place or status or even his abilities but rather with the results he gets, that is, with the success of the programs he has built for training great athletes. In practice, this means that, for example, he hires excellent assistant coaches and uses them; he will even hand over world record

holders to his assistants if he thinks they will help the athletes more than he can. He spends time on details of financing the program, getting the right equipment in the weight room, even getting the locker room showers properly cleaned. (I have seen him chew out the cleaning man for a maintenance company for not making the floors shine and then thank the man for his help and let him know that he was a part of a great team.) He can be very difficult to work for, demanding that his subordinates pay close attention to very small details—how loose cords are wrapped around false start poles, for example—but they *do* work for him. They want to be part of a great program, and Schubert builds great programs.

Schubert's example provides, I think, a counterweight to the fetishism of teaching that pervades public, and even academic, discussions of education. We glorify the great teachers—Jaime Escalante of the movie *Stand and Deliver*; Chipping, the beloved prep school hero of the classic *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*; or Mr. Holland of *Mr. Holland's Opus* fame. At our own universities, we have the local charismatic lecturers, the innovators, the in-your-face challengers, and the boundless enthusiasts of the classroom. All of these teachers garner public attention, attract crowds of students (and journalists), and drive the search for "how to be a

EDITORS' NOTE: For more discussion and some ideas on improving teaching, see Angelo's "A Teacher's Dozen: Fourteen General, Research-Based Principles for Improving Higher Learning in Our Classrooms"; Sherwin's "The Continuum of the 'Educational Self'"; Lowman's "A Table of Roles for Effective College Teaching"; and all of the pieces in the Developing an "Effective" Approach subsection in the *Fieldguide*.

great teacher.” And charismatic teachers can be valuable, certainly. But great teaching is not the same as great learning, and as Schubert’s comments suggest, what really matters is not who the teacher is but rather what results he or she can produce. The great teachers in this sense—that is, those who get great results—are, I think, pragmatists. *They focus on getting results. They do what works.*

In practice, we can see that many different styles of teaching “work” in this sense. Some teachers are great in the lecture hall, engaging students, conveying huge amounts of difficult material in accessible form, or transforming students’ perspectives on the world. Others are masters of the discussion group, sitting back and saying little, only a word here or there to turn the students’ thoughts in a new direction. Still others employ the bullying interrogations of Socratic method and force their students, in law school *Paper Chase* style, to lift their intellectual standards and powers of concentration to a far higher plane than they had achieved before. One of the best teachers I have ever known had none of these skills. She was a mediocre lecturer, a passable discussion leader, not a Socratic type at all, nothing of a leading figure in her discipline, and (frankly) not even as smart as a fair number of her students. But she was a great teacher and attracted good students who did first-rate work for her because *she never held them back*. As a professor, she did not know envy and so was not afraid of the best students. They loved her for it. That was her strength, and she applied it magnificently.

What all the great teachers—again, “great” not in the sense of being charismatic or innovative but rather in the sense of getting results—share is that they have made significant changes for the better in their students. They make what we can call *qualitative changes* in their students—marked changes in skills or knowledge, in love of a subject or of learning, in the ability

to see beauty, in perspective or point of view. There are many ways in which to do this. The idea that “great teachers are born, not made” assumes a few models of greatness, a handful of settings in which teaching is done, and a limited flexibility of techniques. My approach here looks instead for ways in which virtually anyone can become a great teacher in the sense of achieving significant, qualitative improvements in their students’ ability and performance. The rest of this chapter presents a method for developing teaching excellence with the aim of achieving such qualitative changes.

The Mundanity of Excellence

This chapter is based on personal experience in teaching and on earlier theoretical work, derived from a field study of world-class competitive swimming (Chambliss 1988, 1989). I call the theoretical approach the “mundanity of excellence” argument. The basic argument falls into four parts:

1. Excellence, defined as “consistent superiority of performance,” is a qualitative phenomenon. Different levels of achievement result from very different ways of behaving. In a sense, world-class performers are not playing in the same game as are lower level participants.
2. Excellent performance typically is accomplished in distinctive social worlds. Far from being isolated loners, excellent performers are in fact closely connected with others who also perform at very high levels.
3. “Talent” is useless as an explanation of varying degrees of achievement, being simply a reification of the performance it purports to explain.

4. Excellence, for the excellent, is mundane. It is "accomplished through the doing of actions, ordinary in themselves, performed consistently and carefully, habitualized, compounded together, added up over time" (Chambliss 1989:85). There is no magic to becoming an Olympic gold medalist, a Nobel Prize winner, or a great lawyer. In the colloquial phrase, "anyone can do it."¹

In the rest of this chapter, I try to apply these four ideas to the world of college and university teaching, working them together with some other semirandom observations and perhaps prejudices I have about that subject. Here, I am going beyond hard evidence and rigorous testing. I expect the reader to be skeptical but willing to consider what might be some new ideas.

First, consider how the four principles just listed apply directly to education.

Changes in Student Accomplishment Result from Qualitative Leaps

Student intellectual development in college rests less on the mass of experiences in classrooms, and certainly less on the average teacher's performance, than on *a small number of significant experiences* that make major differences in the students' skills, perspectives, sense of standards, and so on. Years after graduation, one remembers the few outstanding classes or teachers, the few critical discussions, or perhaps the four or five books that changed one's life. Most of what happens in college is a humdrum background, a time filler that students pass through in search of the few great experiences that really matter. Taking a few more literature courses and reading a few more

books provide few benefits unless combined with real qualitative changes.

If this is true, then some of our standard course design techniques are misguided. For example, having "writing-intensive" courses in which students are given a large volume of papers to write is not—barring marked changes in the quality of writing made at the same time—a good way in which to improve composition skills. Reading more books in the same inefficient way only reinforces reading inefficiency. Practice does not make *perfect*; rather, it makes *permanent*. Volume of work per se only drills in one's own (perhaps bad) habits. To use an athletic example, for a mediocre basketball player to take 100 foul shots a day, sloppily done, without upgrading his or her technique is simply to practice the wrong way of doing things; it would be far better not to practice at all. Similarly, too often we teachers have our students do more work, without attention to its quality, in the name of rigor or from a misplaced belief in the intrinsic value of hard work. We should not ask them to do more; rather, we should ask them to do *better*.

This also suggests that, in college, the few great teachers matter more than the many average ones. I would even argue that poor teachers do little damage because students usually can avoid them. This does not mean that colleges and universities should provide a comfortable haven for poor teachers or that deans should not care about incompetence in the classroom. But the top priority should be to support the great teachers first because they create the small number of significant positive experiences that shape students' experience.

Student Achievement Occurs in Social Worlds

Students learn best in a socially supportive environment. To put it differently, most people act

the way in which most other people act, and when the setting supports learning, most people will learn. For example, we already know in detail the importance of family background to one's intellectual and academic capabilities. Families differ dramatically in their attitudes about school, about learning, and about reading and books and ideas. Families with more books in the home produce children who read and learn; the childhood setting supports learning. Different cultural and ethnic groups also reinforce varying notions of the value of ideas, of critical thinking, and of listening to authority or challenging received wisdom. Different ethnic, class, religious, and occupational groups have different cultures of work, different habits and styles, and different relations to intellectual life. All of these are major predictors of an individual person's ability and willingness to learn.

At the micro level, I suspect that most students learn at roughly the level of their friends. They work as hard as their friends think is appropriate, and they talk about classes with people who want to talk about classes. Good students tend to hang out with good students, and uninvolved students tend to hang out with uninvolved students. So, students are either helped or hurt by those around them. Many are, in fact, held back by families who will say "You think you're getting too smart for us" or by friends who tease them about staying in the dorm to study rather than going out for pizza. Overall, in some colleges, the social atmosphere for learning is good; in others, it is quite bad.

That is why the old platitude "You can get a good education anywhere if you want to" is, quite simply, ridiculous. It is wrong because, first, even the most motivated student will not learn if he or she is taught the wrong things or is taught bad information, as happens when teachers are not knowledgeable. Second, it is wrong because the conditional "If you want to . . ." is dramatically shaped by one's friends and

colleagues. Few 18-year-olds can completely disregard their peers' reaction to how they spend their time and what they talk about at dinner. You cannot get a good education if your friends will not let you. That is why, whatever the quality of classroom teaching there, Harvard is a great university and a great college. There are lots of smart people there who value thinking; there are great bookstores, newspapers, and active research programs; really smart professors are paid lots of money and have their whims indulged; the admissions office values high SAT scores, creative thinking, and unusual achievement; and esoteric lectures by obscure foreign professors often are well attended. Harvard caters to learning and makes it socially acceptable.

A basic lesson of sociology (my own discipline) is that who you spend time with shapes who you are. So, our success in helping students depends in large measure on creating for them *social worlds* of excellence in individual courses, in departmental majors, and in colleges. Anytime we can put good students together so that they can support each other, we do more for learning; anything we do to support students eager to learn is more positive than all the lecture preparation in the world.

Talent Is a Useless Concept

"Talent" is the layperson's term for "unexplained variance in performance." When an athlete performs beautifully, with skill and grace and an apparent lack of effort, we speak of talent. When a student understands a difficult idea quickly and then casually moves to a sophisticated criticism of it, we speak of talent. When actions seem effortless, we speak of talent. In all of these cases, we see excellence and then infer behind it an inner ability, discrete from the performance itself, that has caused the

performance. But there is no measure of that talent apart from the performance it purportedly causes. Talent is a reification, an imputation of a thing where there is really only the abstract, invisible cause of a concrete, visible result. In academia, talent "explains" a quick answer, a clever analysis, or a brilliant lecture. In our casual efforts to explain ability, talent is really just a sloppy way of saying that "We don't know how they do it."

Applied to teachers, reliance on the idea of talent means that we look at the teacher's personality, believing that teaching excellence is a radiated function of personality that cannot be changed. Certainly, teaching is a deployment of one's personality. The vivacious, outgoing teacher can do well in large lectures; the thoughtful, quiet type might prefer small seminars. Our schools and universities have forms (e.g., classes, lectures) that favor certain personalities. Those teachers with a dramatic flair (or who have, as I do, actual theater training) generally have an advantage in those settings. If American colleges relied more on tutorials, as do those in Great Britain, then different teachers would be seen as "talented." And the superb teachers in graduate programs have nothing of the personality of the great introductory lecturers. So, although the personality of a teacher is important, more important is how one's personality is deployed—how it is used.²

Applied to students, talent and related notions—"disability," for example—reify performance, making it the outcome of a concrete cause, a thing lying in the student's head. We act as if ability is a set thing, given once and for all. But it is not. Several years ago, I had a student I will call Jason in my introductory sociology course. Jason had a problem in that he froze into silence when confronting oral examinations. My introductory course uses these examinations exclusively. There are three of them in the course, 15 minutes each, with

essay questions given to the students a week in advance and picked at random for the exam. At the first exam, one-on-one in my office, Jason sat in silent terror for 15 minutes, barely speaking a word. He flunked. Later, a dean called to tell me that Jason had been diagnosed in high school with a two-pronged "learning disability"; he could not handle time pressure, and he could not handle oral work. My oral exam was Jason's nightmare. "We have a stack of reports this high from counselors," said the dean. "It's diagnosed." He suggested written exams, more time in the orals, easier questions, and perhaps extra work that Jason could do rather than the exams. I declined and suggested, to the student, detailed preparation and verbatim rehearsal of answers. On the final exam, Jason got a B. When I asked how he had prepared differently, he said, first, "Well, I did all the reading" and then went on to explain his careful, targeted studying; preparation of detailed, clearly outlined answers; and rehearsal of all the answers. Certainly, he had been afraid, but he had learned with some effort to perform despite his fear.

I am afraid that too often a "disability" is just an observer's reification of a pattern of poor performance. Jason never had done well in oral examinations, so people said he *could not* do well. Likewise, "talent" is simply a reification of good performance. In each case, rather than trying to find such inborn dispositions, we would do better to simply teach the skills and information necessary to improve.

Excellence Is Achieved through Mundane Actions

Excellence is achieved through mundane actions; small, doable actions, added up and compounded, produce major results. Two examples might make the case here, one from a colleague

in my field (sociology), and the other from a student.

Randall Collins is an excellent sociologist who might tell us about what produces excellence. Collins is a leading synthetic thinker who has organized and made sense of large areas of sociology and presented their results in clear and powerful ways. He is very well known in the discipline, a leading theorist who at the same time has written some of the finest introductory-level works ever produced. I once asked Collins what made him so successful. I expected an analysis of his intellectual roots and cognitive capacities. He said two things, which I quote loosely. "First," he said, "I think of Marx and Weber as real people; they were smart guys but not gods. Second, when I get up in the morning, I work on my book." He does not fix some coffee, read the newspaper, or answer the mail; he works on his book. "It's not because I'm smarter than anybody else," said Collins. "There are people much smarter than I am who haven't published much significant work." (He then named one or two such people.)

Collins was saying that excellence is achieved through mundane actions—getting up in the morning and doing the things that matter, the things that produce big results. Being a successful sociologist involves not genius but rather painstaking craftsmanship, self-discipline, and persistence. It requires that one do the research and write the book—organizing, editing, rewriting. These mundane tasks are done, in part, because one believes in the "mundanity" of the people who have done great things. As Collins said, Marx and Weber were *real* people, a couple of guys who got up in the morning and worked on their books. And some of their ideas were wrong. They were pretty smart guys, yes, but probably not the smartest. They were consistent workers, focused on their projects, workmanlike in their approach to scholarship and writing, and self-disciplined.

They surrounded themselves with other people who were intelligent and did good work, and they read important books. They used their limited resources (limited by a badly damaged psyche, in Weber's case, and by near poverty and some political impediments, in Marx's case) carefully. Certainly, both benefited from superb educations in one of the best systems yet created for intellectual excellence, that of Germany in the 19th century. But that system was created; it did not just wait for the talent of individuals to emerge. The creation of excellent work is, in this sense, mundane. Anyone can do these things; there is no magic involved.

So, too, for teaching. Some years ago, I asked a small group of junior high school students, whom I coached on a swim team, who their best teacher was. They named a social studies teacher. I asked, "What makes him good?" They thought a minute, and one of them said, "He never yells at us." They all eagerly agreed. At first, I thought their response was silly or trivial—the way in which nurses sometimes think patients' concern with getting injections is trivial—but I realized then that whether it was trivial or not (and it really is not) did not matter. *Not yelling worked*. Yelling, I think, would have distracted them from the message and made our relationship problematic, it would have made practice time unpleasant, and they heard me no better when I yelled than when I did not. Not yelling showed respect, and the respect was reciprocated. I resolved at that point, as a swimming coach, never to yell at the kids. Similarly, in college teaching, learning and using all of your students' names seems a small thing, but it really does matter; it works. Again, small actions can have big results.

If excellence can be gained through mundane actions, then one needs to determine what actions are best leveraged, what skills really matter, and what concrete behaviors produce major results. It may be, as with learning stu-

dents' names, that we are surprised by the smallest of the effective techniques. Very easy actions might work very well. And it may be that we do not realize our own strengths. Both of these make sense in light of the "different worlds" principle described earlier. People at lower levels really do not understand what makes better performers better; they live in different worlds. One can passively agree with Collins' comment about "working on my book," but few of us actually take his advice to heart and do it. So we should (1) make qualitative leaps, (2) create social worlds of learning, (3) forget talent, and (4) find the doable actions that matter. The basic analytic technique always will be to ask what actions produce the best results—not what should or what we would like to, what students "should care about," or what we "need to work on" but rather what works—and then to *do* those things that get results.

So, How Do We Make Major Improvements?

How does a single professor implement these ideas? Does this program require dramatic changes to one's personality, abandonment of old methods, and denial of one's natural gifts or limitations?

Not at all. In fact, the underlying tone of my chapter should be that excellent work need not be difficult. In fact, it may well be *easier* to be excellent than to be mediocre. If you are doing excellent work, then you can get your social rewards from people who are doing great things—students doing exciting projects, colleagues responding to your writings—rather than struggling along with bored sophomores who are just filling distribution requirements. Excellence, I suggest, involves not much more work (if any) than mediocrity, but the work is

targeted differently. You need not change your personality, only how it is deployed.

At its heart, teaching is a deployment of personality, and personality is hard to change by the time one is an adult. Some teaching guides suggest that one should "be enthusiastic," develop a sense of humor, or learn to really listen to one's students. Shy teachers want to become theatrical, and awkward teachers want to be graceful. But these changes are very unlikely to happen. So, what can one do?

I suggest two steps. First, analyze your own strengths and weaknesses. This requires an empirical study, something any trained researcher should be able to do. I suggest looking over your old student evaluations and your old teaching reviews from colleagues and then conducting a handful of interviews with former students to determine where (in their view) you shine and where you do not. Several years ago, swamped with work and facing a physical collapse (I was working 60 to 70 hours a week, according to my time log, and I was rereading all the books for every course every semester), I devoted one week of spring break to this type of analysis. I reviewed all of my old evaluations and then called about 10 former students from a range of past years. Applying my best interview techniques, I found that what mattered in my best courses was that I listened to students, respected them, and challenged them intellectually. In fact, they said that I was one of the few teachers who truly paid attention to students and took them seriously. Obviously, this was nice to hear. On the other hand, no one complimented the detail of my lectures, my level of class preparation, or the fact that I had mastered the assigned reading. But those were the things on which I was spending tremendous amounts of time and effort. I was wasting my energy on tasks that I was not good at and that no one seemed to care about anyway. (I'll share my solution to this shortly.)

It is good to learn these weakness, not so much to eliminate them as to make them irrelevant. I once had a visiting colleague who was a very fine scholar but a bit dry in the classroom. He would come to me periodically and say, "Give me a joke. I need a joke. The students say I'm boring in class. Do you have any jokes?" I suggested that jokes were not the way for him to go. He *was* boring in class, but the solution was to stop droning through masses of material that neither he nor they enjoyed and rather to jump to the intellectually sophisticated issues he loved and hope then to at least engage the high-level students who would find the sheer challenge exciting. His department had made the great mistake of putting him in the introductory course (on the theory that "everyone should teach 'intro'"). He had great weaknesses, as we all do; the department had made those weaknesses his most visible characteristics. His strength as a scholar was wasted, the students were bored, and the poor man was utterly demoralized.

So, the first step is to recognize your strengths and weaknesses; the second step is to redesign your work to take advantage of your strengths. If you are a great lecturer, then drop those small seminars and do lectures. If in-class experiments provide the best learning that students take from your courses, then do in-class experiments. If you are strong at teaching social survey analysis, then do not keep struggling along trying to explain ethnography. Better that the students learn survey methods well, do some memorable experiments, or hear a riveting lecture than for you to marginally improve a technique you do not do well. In my own "redesign your work" project, I reduced my time on class preparation, stopped rereading old texts, and stopped covering the blackboard with detailed outlines. I began sleeping more, reading interesting new books, and getting myself into a good mood before class so that I

could really pay attention to the students. I asked them more questions, argued with them in class, and challenged their ideas. My evaluations went way up, I was happier, and the students got more out of the class. I worked less, and they profited—because I was giving them what I could give. And when students want great lectures, they go to my colleague, Doug Ambrose, who gives wonderful, fascinating, detailed lectures that I heartily recommend to students; that is one of several settings in which he is great.

The trick is to find the few things—perhaps the one thing—that you are really good at and then spend your time doing that. You need not be good at everything. Remember, it is the few great experiences that benefit students—the set of oral examinations you do in your economic statistics class that challenge them to new heights of concentration and precision of ideas, the criminology field trips to night court that open their eyes to the criminal justice system, the intellectual power of your 20th-century history seminar, or even the scintillation of your *son et lumière* postmodernist theory lectures, complete with slides and sound tracks and visiting "refugee professor" speakers. Each of these can be a major contribution; the key is in finding what your contribution can be.³

But these still are suggestions for the teacher. How can we get students to make great strides in their work? Return for a moment to Schubert, the Olympic swimming coach who built a great program without worrying about whether he was a great coach. I asked how he had achieved such success, and he said simply, "I built the program around the best people." He financially supported swimmers who made Nationals more than those who did not, he assigned the best coaches to the most serious swimmers, and he designed rules to benefit the most committed athletes. You build the program (your policies, grading, reading loads,

intellectual level, etc.) to benefit the best students, however you define that. (In my own case, I ask of each policy decision, "How will this affect the students who really want to learn?")

Of course, this is very different from how we usually do things. Most teachers design classes around the average students in the class—what amount of reading they will complete, what level of vocabulary and intellectual challenge they will understand, what demands on class participation they will satisfy. We usually aim to the middle. Class discussions revolve around people in difficulty rather than around those with sharp questions, and workloads are designed for average rather than superior students. Some professors, in fact, even aim to the low end, spending their efforts trying to help the needy, engage the uninterested, and motivate the slackers. They regard teaching as a form of intellectual evangelism and believe that their task is to save lost souls. But as a result, the good students too often are left to fend for themselves, are not challenged, and end up bored. In the long run, such teachers become demoralized and "burned out." Instead of playing to the bottom or even to the middle, I think you do better to "feed the hungry," those students who want your help; you should challenge the best students and support them. Go and ask your best students what you can do to help them. This approach will (1) keep you enthusiastic as you see real results for your work and attract more good students to your classes; (2) engage the vast middle, who will respond to the greater challenge; and (3) possibly even wake the near-dead, who might come to realize they are now in real trouble.

"Building around the best" actually means *not* focusing on the weak students. This comes hard for many of us. Reaching out to those in trouble sounds ennobling; it makes one feel virtuous. But if you build a college around weak

students, then you will, naturally enough, attract more and more weak students. They will be drawn to your sympathy and attention. The good ones, however, will feel neglected (rightly so) and, having other options, will choose another school or at least another teacher. Remember that learning occurs in social worlds; if you build a world that supports good students or students who want to learn, then you will attract those students. The great mass of average students, who are driven by the prevailing winds, will move more swiftly, and you will discover, *mirabile dictu*, that *the weaker students did not have to be weak; they have been rewarded for it*.

Realize, finally, that in the simple sense you cannot motivate people; that door, it has been said, is locked from the inside. But you can structure your program to benefit those who are motivated (by supporting and challenging them, supporting the teachers they like, etc.) and learn what does motivate them. The key to motivating people is to find out what motivates them—what they want—and then offer it to them. Let me recall two personal examples. When I was a little boy, I loved playing army; military things attracted me. I had an arsenal of toy guns, hundreds of toy soldiers, and even a modest library of books on military strategy and tactics. My father, a fine teacher, took full advantage of my interests; he tapped into my motivation. When I wanted to build a tank, he used that (eventually unfulfilled) project to teach me about engines, steering mechanisms, and axle differentials (so that the tank could drive around corners). When I wanted to build a cannon, he taught me the geometry used in range finders, and we bought potassium nitrate to mix some (pretty weak) gunpowder. When my young squadmates and I wanted walkie-talkies, my dad bought me an electronics kit and taught me about resistors and circuit boards. (For readers who see in war toys a harbinger of

violence, I should add that I never joined the military and never wished to do so. I burned my draft card. And I still enjoy war games.) Similarly, a teenage passion for competitive swimming led me, in my desire to eventually become a great coach, to study exercise physiology, group dynamics, and even some elementary fluid mechanics and, years later, to write a book about swimming. Again, tapping into a strong motivation can further learning in surprising ways. So, spend a few days in talking with your students and doing some quiet thinking, uncover what really motivates your students (especially the good ones), and then design your program and courses around those needs.

A Few Words for Administrators and Department Chairs

So, teachers should find and deploy their own strengths, building their work to benefit the type of students they want to teach. But if you are a department chair or dean, then what can you do to raise the quality of teaching—in terms of results—among your faculty?

Again, I think that traditional beliefs about the importance of talent and individual ability can easily lead to administrative quiescence around teaching. We seem to believe that one either is or is not a good teacher and that not much can be done about it. And the solutions we do sometimes propose involve workshops; little sets of “techniques,” tips, or gimmicks; or sending old Joe off to a conference. The aim throughout is to change Joe’s abilities as a teacher. That is all right, but it is hard to do, and besides, you can get good results without actually changing Joe.

We also should recognize that there is very little public or professional support for good teaching. Although some star professors are in fact wonderful teachers, professors rarely are

promoted for being great teachers. Obviously, the major prestigious figures in our field are not there for their teaching abilities. This actually can be an advantage for the department that does want good teachers. Because many prestigious institutions downplay teaching in their hiring, you can grab some great people who are dying for the right job. And if you actually support good teachers (with pay, promotion, visibility, influence, supplies, etc.), then you will keep them or at least will always be able to attract good new ones.

So, here is how to get great teaching in your college or department:

1. *Hire great teachers.* Don’t laugh. In most departments and colleges, such hiring is not the top priority. Instead, we water it down with preconceptions about “the areas we need to cover,”⁴ the identity groups we need represented, how candidates must have a strong publication record, or how the chosen one should be a good departmental colleague. If you hire people to be friends with you, then you will have some friendly people, not great teachers. If you want good researchers, then hire researchers. But do not think that this is hiring teachers. If there are 3 great teachers in your pool of 300 at the beginning of the search, then you will eliminate at least 2 of them with all these other considerations. In the sociology department at Hamilton College, we say that we want “excellent teachers for high-quality undergraduates.” Now in fact, the second part of that statement means that we typically hire strong scholars. Most applicants with the intellectual horsepower we want are serious about research. But research excellence per se is not our goal. Hiring great teachers is.

And how do you spot a great teacher? Look for a person with a record of great teaching, not “potential” for teaching or “interest” in teaching. Ignore those brilliant “philosophy of teach-

ing” statements unless you are hiring someone to write “philosophy of teaching” statements. Writing about teaching is not the same as doing it. Similarly, being impressive in an interview is not the same as being a great teacher, nor is having an impressive vita. So, if you want a great teacher, then take the candidate with a record of great teaching.

2. *Support great teachers.* Once you have hired a great teacher, give the teacher whatever he or she needs to do the work. When you are redesigning the curriculum, ask the best teachers how to do it. When you have extra money for office supplies, get requests from your best teachers first. Make sure they are not driven out by jealous colleagues. Again, this might seem obvious, but in fact conscientious administrators too often think first of helping weak performers, not supporting strong ones. Remember that the strong teachers are producing your results.

3. *Learn your faculty's strengths.* Then, place professors in courses and projects in which their strengths are used. One of my colleagues, a brilliant thinker, recently moved to our advanced Social Theory course, where his intellectual power can be fully exerted. And one of my junior colleagues loves, and excels at, working one-on-one with research students; she manages our senior project seminar, in which students carry out field research studies. The visiting professor mentioned earlier (who had no jokes to tell) never should have taught an introductory-level course. Try to place people where their strengths will show. This is how to handle old Joe, who is not very exciting in the big lectures but is good at teaching archival research techniques, statistics, or writing.

4. *Protect the great opportunities.* Remember, students forget most of their college experiences but remember the few really outstanding

ones. A few great classes, the one or two professors who really cared, a series of wonderful conversations, a challenging and rewarding time spent in community service—these will be formative experiences, the few qualitatively different moments that matter. As the old saying goes, 20 percent of your people (and experiences) produce 80 percent of your results. So, you must protect those 20 percent of faculty who do great things, the 20 percent of programs that work. The disproportionate productivity—the huge results—of those 20 percent is the best argument, I believe, for retaining tenure in higher education. Tenure gives your best people freedom to try new things that some colleagues think are silly or suspicious; it can let them experiment, take risks, or be outrageous. Soon after receiving tenure, I could dare to try using oral examinations in my introductory classes despite the misgivings of some faculty colleagues; the exams worked marvelously. True, tenure protects mediocre faculty, but the mediocre do not matter that much in college. They are mostly irrelevant because students usually can avoid their classes. But your excellent faculty—the superb 20 percent who produce 80 percent of the educational results—do matter a lot. It is far more important to keep and support the great teachers (and tenure does that) than to eliminate a few weak performers.⁵

Conclusion

When college administrators talk about improving the quality of education, they typically look first to quality of teaching. Faculties debate systems of evaluating teaching, student evaluation forms of teaching are revised, and periodic post-tenure reviews are established. Deans host workshops on teaching, prizes for teaching are awarded, and books on teaching (such as this one) are written. This approach to improv-

ing education suggests that it is the *teacher* who matters and that the teacher's ability is crucial to the learning process. And what I have just said about supporting great teachers acknowledges their important role. But perhaps we should focus more on discovering which techniques or practices get results in student learning and worry less about the quality of teaching *per se*. Again, as Schubert might point out, the goal is not great *teaching* but rather great *learning*.

The "mundanity of excellence" concept suggests that in teaching and in learning, excellence is not something magical or mysterious; rather, it is achievable with a little analysis, some steady effort, and application of a few basic principles. As a teacher, find out what works for you and do more of it. You need not do everything for your students if you can do one thing really well. And if you are in a position to hire or promote other teachers, then try to do so based on what they actually accomplish, not on what they say about teaching (their "philosophy"), on how they fit preconceptions about good teaching (lecture style), or on how "innovative" they are.

The good news is that if you want to foster good teaching in this sense, then there is little competition. Yes, some colleges give teaching prizes—a one-time, usually small, recognition that some professor does good work. In some large universities, faculty have begun to talk more about teaching. Some state legislators are giving speeches about higher education's need to reemphasize undergraduate education, and some college presidents are discussing it at their conferences. Some of our better community colleges always have valued good teaching and learning. But these are small gestures in a professional reward system that is infatuated with scholarly productivity. In the large research universities that dominate the academic world, the professional prestige system generally relegates

teaching to a secondary status at best. So, if you actually care about educating students, supporting teachers who are the catalysts for learning, or creating a department or college in which students enjoy those qualitative leaps that make for a wonderful college experience, then I think you have a relatively easy task, achievable through a simple, effective technique. It is not mysterious at all: *find out what works, and do more of it.*

Notes

1. Well, perhaps not anyone. But what is striking in the history of world-class sports is how many successful people had huge obstacles to overcome. If there is a base level of ability necessary, then it is hard to say where it is because there are such visible exceptions.

2. Until our colleges and universities understand this and begin to deploy faculty to maximize their strengths, we will continue to waste the abilities they bring to our programs. Elite small colleges tell faculty they should do well in "teaching, scholarship, and service." Gifted teachers, then, are reminded that they need to publish more; serious scholars are warned to spend more time on teaching; and all teachers are told, against their better inclinations, to serve on committees. At the end of the day, no one is spending their energy in their field of excellence. We should instead use people where they can excel, with different people filling different needs.

3. Of course, you do need to find a strength. I am not offering an easy excuse to avoid big lectures and then sit around playing computer games. If the dean gives you free rein to teach from your strengths, whatever they are, then you need to do it well.

4. This is the fastest way in which to eliminate large numbers of the best teachers or schol-

ars from consideration. An ad that says "must be able to teach statistical research methods" immediately disqualifies two-thirds of the finest teachers in any social science applicant pool. Certainly in some disciplines and in some departments, area coverage is necessary—but perhaps not so much as academic conservatives believe.

5. For other organizations, such as hospitals, this logic does not apply. Bad doctors kill people; bad professors just bore them.

References

- Chambliss, Daniel F. 1988. *Champions: The Making of Olympic Swimmers*. New York: William Morrow.
- . 1989. "The Mundanity of Excellence: An Ethnographic Report on Stratification and Olympic Athletes." *Sociological Theory* 7:85.