

Becoming a Better Teacher: Articles for New and Not-So-New Faculty

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A couple of months ago a colleague asked me to recommend a book for his new faculty reading group. I rattled off the names of several, but then wondered if a packet of articles might not be a better option. When I started to identify articles, it came to me that the what-to-read dilemma for new and not-so-new faculty goes beyond the articles themselves. It is more about the categories of work on teaching and learning rather than individual pieces.

Teaching and learning are multi-faceted phenomena—and that's how we should be thinking about them, right from the start. Books written for beginning teachers, in fact lots of teaching books, focus on techniques. Yes, new (and old) teachers need techniques, but when that's the main focus, it tends to narrow



the thinking and trivialize the complexities.

The literature on teaching and learning is diverse—one of its finest features, in my opinion. It can do a good job of shaping this broader thinking if it's sampled across disciplines, topics, and categories.

I've been trying to come up with a set of categories, not one that captures all the kinds of scholarship but rather one that is reflective of how those learning to teach (doesn't that include all of us?) ought to begin and proceed. So here's a set of categories to get us started and a couple of sample articles for each. I hope you will suggest other categories and examples that have helped you over the years, and feel encouraged to think about your pedagogical reading plans for the year ahead. How broadly have you been reading?

Learning to Teach at the Beginning and Beyond (with special respect for learning from mistakes)
More learning—possibly the most painful learning—happens early on (Collins), but learning to teach should be a career-long endeavor. Usually it involves change that grows out of new and evolving thinking about teaching and learning (Gonzalez).

Collins, H. "On Becoming a Teacher." *Teaching Professor*, May 2009, p. 3.
Gonzalez, J. J. "My Journey with Inquiry-Based Learning." *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 2013, 24 (2), 33-50.

Most of our students are dreadfully afraid of making mistakes. They fail to see the learning potential inherent in "error making." Are their teachers any different? If we want our students to learn from their mistakes, we ought to be learning from ours (Cohan and Delgado).

Cohan, M. "Bad Apple: The Social Production and Subsequent Reeducation of a Bad Teacher." *Change*, 2009, (November/December), 32-36.
Delgado, T. "Metaphor for Teaching: Good Teaching Is Like Good Sex." *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 2014, 18 (3), 224-232.

Challenging What's Accepted

We teach as we were taught, or as others in our department teach, or as those who taught the course before us did. Learning from others is great, but not if it is a passive acceptance that prevents us from challenging assumptions (Spence), questioning the unquestioned (Tanner), or pursuing the rationale on which a policy or practice rests (Singham). Reading in this category may or may not change our minds, but doing so challenges us to think and therein lies its value.

Singham, M. "Moving Away from the Authoritarian Classroom." *Change*, May/June 2005, 51-57.
Spence, L. D. "The Case Against Teaching." *Change*, November/December 2001, 11-19.
Tanner, K. D. "Reconsidering 'What Works.'" *Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education*, 2011, 10 (Winter), 329-333.

The How-To, But with High Standards

Writing about teaching techniques has not always been robust. That's changed significantly in recent years, but it still feels as though there's not much new under the pedagogical sun. Teaching techniques tend to get passed around—used so often they become old hat, failing to inspire students or teachers. What's needed are truly innovative techniques, ones that turn teaching inside out.

Corrigan, H., and Craciun, G. (2013). "Asking the Right Questions: Using Student-Written Exams as an Innovative Approach to Learning and Evaluation." *Marketing Education Review*, 2013, 23 (1), 31-35.
Hudd, S. S. "Syllabus Under Construction: Involving Students in the Creation of Class Assignments." *Teaching Sociology*, 2003, 31 (2), 195-202.

We also need in-depth explorations that help us raise regularly used parts of teaching to a whole new level of effectiveness. They focus on a small aspect of teaching (descriptions of writing assignments), or tackle the how-tos of a common goal (teaching critical thinking), or parse the details of a multifaceted practice (grading). They're explorations that shine a bright light on current practice and how to make it better.

Van Gelder, T. "Teaching Critical Thinking: Some Lessons from Cognitive Science." *College Teaching*, 2005, 53 (1), 41-46.
Rank, A., and Pool, H. "Writing Better Writing Assignments." *PS, Political Science and Politics*, 2014, 47 (3), 675-681.
Schinske, J., and Tanner, K. "Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently)." *Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education*, 2014, 13 (Summer), 159-166.

Learning from Research

There's growing recognition that research findings can make teaching more evidence-based. But here's the problem: research is tough to read. These articles typically feature a detailed review of related research, a meaty section on methods, a discussion of results understandable only if you're fluent in statistics or qualitative methods, and a section on implications, usually for subsequent research, not practice. Teachers

need scholarship that integrates (Michael and Prince) translates (Brame and Biel), and offers recommendations for practice (Dunlosky, et al.).

Brame, C. J., and Biel, R. "Test-Enhanced Learning: The Potential for Testing to Promote Greater Learning in Undergraduate Science Courses." *Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education*, 2015, 14 (Summer), 1-12.

Dunlosky, J., Rawson, K. A., Marsh, E. J., Nathan, M. J. and Willingham, D. T., (2013). "Improving Students' Learning with Effective Learning Techniques: Promising Directions from Cognitive and Educational Psychology." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 14 (1), 4-58.

Michael, J. "Where's the Evidence that Active Learning Works?" *Advances in Physiology Education*, 2006, 30, 159-167.

Prince, M. "Does Active Learning Work? A Review of the Research." *Journal of Engineering Education*, July 2004, 223-231.

Approaches That Promote Instructional Growth

In order to grow, one needs to know how—starting, I believe, with the personal narratives of others who have grown as educators. A well-written account of a teacher learning from his or her careful, critical analyses of teaching experiences can motivate a deeper level of personal reflection. But there are other approaches teachers have tried and found "growth promoting," such as learning about teaching by writing (Purcell) or growth prompted by "student" experiences (Gregory), or insights that come from our teaching stories (Shadiow).

Gregory, M. "From Shakespeare on the Page to Shakespeare on the Stage: What I Learned about Teaching in Acting Class." *Pedagogy*, 2006, 6 (2), 309-325.

Purcell, D. "Sociology, Teaching, and Reflective Practice: Using Writing to Improve." *Teaching Sociology*, 2013, 41 (1), 5-19.

Shadiow, L. K. *What Our Stories Teach Us: A Guide to Critical Reflection for College Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013.