

Effective University Teaching

24

S.M. Sungoh

Introduction

Teaching is more than the sum total of observable teacher behaviours. Teaching is also seen as a way of making a significant contribution to the world and experiencing the joy of helping others grow and develop. Teaching involves the teacher's inner dialogue about how to respond appropriately to the complex and constantly changing conditions of the classroom. Life as a teacher is attractive because it is exciting, varied and stimulating. Diligently pursued, such reflections lead the teacher towards greater understanding of the factors that promote and hinder learning.

Teaching in the university is a uniquely demanding profession because the work of teachers is evaluated not only in terms of what teachers do but also in terms of what their students do. Student should learn, and he or she can be the most powerful person in the teaching-learning situation. The student's intelligence, adaptability, creativity, motivation, and general configurations of personality are important determiners of how much he or she will learn than anything the teacher or curricular system can do. To be an effective university teacher, then, requires more than the ability to cover the text or deliver a lecture. The teacher must also be able to present himself or herself in a manner that inspires students to behave in a certain way. There are various types of techniques that can be applied in university teaching. Effective university teaching cannot be defined in any absolute way. However, university teaching involves diverse modes of instruction, including: lectures, seminars, labs, and thesis supervision. Therefore, student

evaluations, trained observers in classrooms, verbal reports by teachers and students, and the training of teachers in specific teaching skills can bring about quality in university teaching.

Objectives of University Teaching

One important distinction in determining effective teaching may be the relative importance of cognitive and affective goals. That is, some qualities of teaching may be more strongly related to such cognitive objectives as developing knowledge and skills, (i.e. knowledge and appreciation, organization of individual lessons, clarity of explanations and quality of presentation) whereas other qualities are more strongly related to such affective objectives as fostering student interest and curiosity, i.e. stimulation of interest, participation and openness to ideas, rapport and concern, disclosure and fairness.

Modes of University Teaching at both the Cognitive and Affective Levels

Cognitive Level

Any list of the major goals of university teaching would include such objectives as changing students' factual knowledge and competence in the course material, strengthening various cognitive capacities (e.g. study skills, reasoning, writing and speaking skills), and fostering intellectual appreciation of the subject matter.

Knowledge and Appreciation

University teaching is a creative endeavour in which the teacher should encourage students to think for themselves and promote intellectual curiosity. This will expand students' knowledge and appreciation of the subject. It will also help students develop skills like critical thinking and writing related to the course.

University teachers should update their knowledge by reading journals, attend conferences, do research, and talk about current developments in their subjects to be able to teach and relate the subject to current events and other fields. Thought provoking ideas (e.g. paradoxes, inconsistencies between expert and lay

beliefs) can provide insights or knowledge beyond that in the text. Challenging questions and issues should be presented in order to illustrate unresolved questions and issues.

These are some of the ways that teachers can promote knowledge and appreciation of the subject matter. More than other qualities of instruction, promoting these objectives requires teachers who can communicate their own knowledge and appreciation of the subject matter to students. In essence, students should feel that they have learned something valuable, and that the course has contributed to their knowledge, awareness, and intellectual curiosity. Students should also be intellectually challenged and stimulated to think for themselves, and have opportunities to develop competencies characteristic of the discipline. The higher-level objectives of developing knowledge and appreciation are also related to numerous teaching behaviors in other clusters.

Organization of Individual Lessons

Lectures and discussions should be carefully planned and organized in a coherent manner. Well-organized lecturers also demonstrate how ideas in specific lectures fit into the course as a whole and relate class material to other parts of the course. They can also offer well-prepared and organized classes, give useful indicators for following lessons like outlines, states objectives, and reviews main points. Course elements like lectures, texts, readings, etc. are integrated to help students appreciate and learn their course material. Effective organization can help students to learn the material, to take effective notes, to understand their weaknesses, and to apprehend the structure of the subject.

Effective lecture organization depends on considerable planning in advance of the class, as well as the use of organization related techniques during class. Perhaps the most important condition for well-organized lessons is a clear and well-articulated understanding of the subject matter at a level appropriate to the students. Such understanding can take years of teaching experience to develop, especially in subjects where much of the

knowledge is tacit or implicit (e.g. problem solving). The outline for developing a lecture is as follows:

1. Identify a theme and objectives.
2. Develop a plan for lesson (e.g. time, cause-effect, hierarchy, logical).
3. Organize lesson as a list of points or series of questions.
4. Outline the structure in point form.
5. Include outlines, headings, and other techniques to communicate structure.

A lecture can be planned in the following way:

(a) Beginning the Lecture

- (i) Review topics covered in previous lectures.
- (ii) State major objectives.
- (iii) Give preliminary overview at the start of class.

(b) During the lecture

- (i) Outline lecture on blackboard or overhead.
- (ii) Distinguish topics and signal transitions.
- (iii) Indicate end of sections and start of new topics, perhaps in concert with outline.
- (iv) Use explaining links (because, since, therefore) and other organizational cues.
- (v) Avoid excessive digressions from major topics, unless educational value warrants.
- (vi) Emphasize major points in plan (e.g. pause, raise your voice, repeat, speak slowly).
- (vii) Periodically summarize previous points.

(c) Ending the Lecture

- (i) Plan to close lecture effectively.
- (ii) Review main topics.
- (iii) Preview topics to be covered in future classes.

Planning is an important step in effective organization. It is also important to communicate the organization during the

lecture. A lecture can be divided into three units: a beginning, a middle, and an end. The bulk of the lecture is generally spent in the middle, but the beginning and end can be very important for communicating the organization of the lecture. Beginning and ending well may be particularly important when, as is often the case in university teaching, the material will be covered over several sessions.

Faculty will need to decide how appropriate are the ideas presented for their subject matter and for their teaching objectives. In particular, some balance may need to be struck between providing organizational details for students and giving students opportunities to discover and develop for themselves the relations among concepts. Even when independent organization is the ultimate goal, however, students who have particular difficulty in grasping, the organization of the material may need some initial models of the cognitive structures that underlie the course material, as well as some demonstration by the teacher of how such structures can be discovered or developed.

Clarity of Explanations

The next quality related to cognitive aspects of effective university teaching involves techniques that are used to explain concepts and principles clearly, so that students understand the individual thoughts and ideas being presented. The lecture should:

- (i) Provide clear explanations for concepts and principles, with concrete examples where appropriate.
- (ii) Emphasize major or difficult points (e.g. asks if students understand, repeats complex ideas, pauses).

Giving Clear Explanation

Clear explanations are important for university teaching to help students connect difficult materials to concepts, examples, and language that they already understand, and to provide concrete foundations for abstract ideas. The university teacher should use concrete, real-life, and relevant examples; present practical applications and experiences, use illustrations, graphs,

and diagrams where appropriate. The teacher should develop effective metaphors or analogies for difficult concepts, paraphrase technical explanations in understandable language, define unfamiliar terms, write key terms on the blackboard or overhead, repeat difficult ideas in diverse ways, speak more slowly for difficult or particularly important ideas and ask if students understand before proceeding.

Anticipating what material students will have difficulty with and developing appropriate explanations generally requires firsthand teaching experience; it is often surprising how teaching a subject reveals gaps in our own understanding of the material. Experienced teachers gradually develop a repertoire of paraphrases, metaphors, and other techniques that promote the learning of difficult concepts. As with organization, the skill of giving clear explanations requires considerable effort on the part of teachers. There is often a large gap between our own sophisticated knowledge about our subjects and the less rich knowledge that students bring to the classroom. Such techniques as those described above can help to bridge the gulf between expert faculty and novice students.

Quality of Presentation

A final factor that contributes substantially to the achievement of cognitive learning concerns voice and other characteristics associated with the quality of presentation by a teacher. The teacher should speak in a clear, well-paced, and expressive manner and use appropriate teaching aids effectively (e.g. blackboard, overhead projector, handouts).

(a) Effective Speaking

1. Speak at suitable speed, not too fast for understanding and note-taking.
2. Speak loudly enough for the room.
3. Pronounce words distinctly.
4. Modulate voice; speak expressively rather than in a monotone.
5. Speak fluently, without excessive pauses or “urns” and “ahs”.

6. Speak naturally without over reliance on verbatim reading (outlines can help).

(b) Effective Non-verbal Presentations

1. Use facial expressions (e.g. smiling, laughter), bodily gestures, and movement.
2. Avoid distracting mannerisms (e.g. playing with chalk, rocking).
3. Make eye contact with students.
4. Move about the classroom, do not be fix on a desk or lectern.
5. Display a relaxed manner.
6. Include humour.
7. Use blackboards, other audiovisual aids, and a variety of methods.
8. Be enthusiastic and dynamic.

Effective speaking is important because content will not be understood unless students attend to and perceive correctly what the teacher is saying. Teachers with effective presentation styles also communicate well nonverbally. Effective use of verbal and nonverbal techniques also stimulates student interest in and excitement about the subject, decidedly affective goals to which we now turn.

Affective Level

Stimulation of Interest

University teachers are to stimulate student's interest, show enthusiasm and interest in the course. Stimulation of interest is important for university teaching at the affective level because it increases student attention to lectures and class discussions, little learning occurs without such attention, and interest motivates students to think about the course material and to work harder. In order to promote students interest, the following suggestions can be made:

1. Describe relevant personal experiences.
2. State your point of view on issues.

3. Demonstrate interest in the subject matter and in teaching.
4. Present challenging and thought-provoking ideas.
5. Examine controversial issues.
6. Introduce topics in novel and interesting ways (e.g. a mystery or paradox).
7. Point out practical applications and interesting examples.
8. Relate subject matter to current events and student interests to activities.
9. Encourage new ideas from students.
10. Use varied activities, media, and formats (e.g. guest lecture, panel discussions).

Participation and Openness to Ideas

Many effective teachers try to foster active involvement, participation, and interaction of students in classes, and to communicate their openness to and respect for alternative and challenging points of view. University teachers can encourage student participation (e.g. asks questions, responds well to student questions or comments, ...). Student participation is desirable because it actively involves students in their learning, provides instructors with feedback about the progress and difficulties of students, and provides opportunities for instructors to model for students problem solving behaviours and applications of course material to novel examples. Openness to ideas is desirable because students should be encouraged to think for themselves in a flexible and creative manner, and because commitment to one view should generally follow critical evaluation of alternative perspectives. Therefore, the teacher should:

(a) Encourage Participation

1. Provide opportunities for and solicit student comments and questions.
2. Ask if students understand before proceeding.

3. Encourage quiet students (e.g. direct questions, pre-arrange questions).
4. Offer challenging and thought-provoking ideas.
5. Plan interactive activities (e.g. small-group discussions, student presentations, solving problems in groups).
6. Expect students to answer questions (e.g. wait for answer, rephrase question, provide hints).
7. Show approval for student ideas (e.g. positive comments).
8. Answer questions in a meaningful way.
9. Incorporate student ideas into lessons.
10. Do not criticize student ideas unreasonably.

(b) Demonstrate Openness to Ideas

1. Be open to different opinions and points of view.
2. Let students feel free to question you, to think independently, and to express dissenting views.
3. Present and explore points of view other than your own.
4. Be flexible in your thinking.
5. Contrast the implications of different theories.
6. Let students be creative (e.g. generate alternative explanations).
7. Demonstrate and encourage original and independent thought.

Rapport and Concern

Many effective teachers behave in ways that promote agreeable and friendly interpersonal relations between themselves and students, and that convey concern and respect for individual students. So teachers should treat students with respect in and out of class, they should be available for consult outside of class time and sensitive to whether students understand course material.

The purpose of good rapport is to create a sufficiently congenial and non-hostile atmosphere in which students having

difficulty will seek help from the instructor and in which students feel welcome to offer alternative explanations in class and to get feedback on their ideas. Unless students feel reasonably non-threatened, they are unlikely to come forward with concerns, questions, or even constructive comments. In order to build rapport, teachers should be reasonably available for consultation.

1. Talk with students before, after, and outside class.
2. Learn students' names (e.g. use class cards).
3. Show interest in how students are doing.
4. Show interest in students and their ideas.
5. Be sensitive to student progress and motivation (e.g. know when students are having difficulty or are bored).
6. Show concern that students understand and learn the subject matter.
7. Take action when students lose interest or have excessive difficulty (e.g. use more examples, modify requirements?).
8. Make students feel welcome (e.g. announce availability for help, be approachable).
9. When students seek help, be understanding, patient, helpful, and not overly critical.
10. Be tolerant of others points of view.
11. Provide opportunities in class for questions.
12. Engage in give and take with students.
13. Show approval for student ideas (e.g. positive comments, praise, smile, nod head).
14. Respect thoughts, opinions, and rights of students and others.

Communication and Fairness

The final cluster of qualities associated with effective university teaching concerns disclosure of pertinent information about the course (i.e. communication), especially with respect to student evaluation. So teachers should:

1. Provide helpful feedback (e.g. useful comments on student work, take up tests in class).
2. Evaluate students fairly (e.g. tests important material; gives reasonable work load; assigns appropriate percentages for term work, tests, and exams).
3. Mark and return work in a reasonable time.

Open and effective communication about evaluations and other aspects of the course contribute to student learning and performance by avoiding unnecessary or undesirable uncertainty associated with overly vague assignments, by permitting students to identify relevant activities and skills, and by providing students with constructive feedback about their performance in the course so that they can learn from their mistakes.

Effective Communication can:

1. Prepare clear objectives for the course.
2. Communicate objectives, course requirements, and grading criteria.
3. Reduce barriers incidental to student learning (e.g. undesired ambiguity).
4. Give students sufficient information to prepare for evaluations.
5. Provide detailed instructions and sample questions for evaluations where appropriate or necessary.
6. Perhaps remind students of dates and identify important topics for evaluations.
7. Use clear and reasonable evaluations (e.g. tests that reflect course materials).
8. Grade assignments fairly and consistently across students.
9. Considering class size, grade work promptly and provide helpful feedback
10. Provide answers as feedback for objective assignments.
11. Use enough evaluations for adequate feedback and a fair measure of student learning.

Conclusion

There is no formula for effective university teaching. We can all probably remember quite distinct teachers who have influenced us in positive ways: the dynamic and inspiring teacher who taught about stimulating topics and the rather dull and plodding teacher who nonetheless taught about exciting contemporary ideas and modern methods of scholarship. Many of our former university teachers and many of us are probably some combination of these two extremes, striving to explain contemporary subject matter in a clear and organized manner while stimulating student interest and curiosity. Although the ideas presented here might help you to better achieve the diverse and sometimes conflicting goals of effective university teaching, ultimately the quality of your future instruction will depend on your ability to benefit from experiences in the classroom, discussions with colleagues, and reading about teaching. University teachers should be concerned with developing themselves as persons so that they may learn to use themselves more effectively. In the words of Arthur Combs, a well-known advocate, "teacher effectiveness...is a function of how teachers use themselves. The skillful use of self and the creation of conditions for significant learning is a truly professional achievement". What this approach requires, then, is that teachers continually develop their powers of observation and reflection so that they can most effectively respond to the needs of university students. Teaching then, becomes an authentic, growth-oriented encounter between the teacher and the student.

REFERENCES

- Arends, Richard I. (1988): *Learning to Teach*, New York: Random House.
- Grossman, P.L. (1990): *The Making of a Teacher: Teacher Knowledge and Teacher Education*, New York: Teachers College Press.
- Naik, Dalaganjan (1994): *Teaching Skills through Micro Teaching*, New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications.
- Parkay, R.W. and Stanford, B.J.H. (1992): *Becoming a Teacher*, London: Allyn and Bacon.