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Reflections on Thirty Years of Teaching for Utah State University Distance Education

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Abstract

In this brief essay, author John D. Barton, Principal Lecturer, History, Utah State University Uintah Basin Regional Campus muses on teaching excellence and student engagement. His sources are largely his personal reflections of thirty years teaching and storied examples and quotes from former students. He defends the use of lecture and discussion as primary pedagogical tools, insists that concern and love for students is paramount, and gives five specific guidelines to become a master teacher and mentor of students.

Credo: We are all students—learners in search of ever-greater truths—first to understand, then impart. – John D. Barton, Principal Lecturer, Department of History.

I began teaching for Utah State University at the Uintah Basin Education Center (UBEC) fall quarter 1988. Since that time I have taught over 300 sections of upper and lower division history and Student Success Seminars. I have taught courses utilizing every delivery method offered by USU Distance Education from the 1980s to the present, including face-to-face, concurrent enrollment, dedicated telephone line audio only, slow scan (with 30 second screen renewal) Com-Net, Micro-Wave Broadcast, print-based independent study, and currently Interactive Video Conference (IVC) and Canvas supported Online. For distance education courses prior to the change from quarters to semesters, I often taught a five-credit course one evening per week in a single marathon session of 5:30 to 10:00 pm. Over the years, I

have learned (largely through trial-and-error) many things that work well in teaching pedagogies and support for students. I had to learn how to engage and maintain student interest or they would leave or fall asleep! There was no teaching support offered by the University. Good teaching was merely expected. Currently, there is a rapidly expanding body of published research on teaching excellence for college-level instructors. And while I am not an expert on all the latest trends, there seems to be some constant factors that set great teachers apart, regardless of subject matter, technology, or delivery. While pondering what has been successful for me, as well as observing many colleagues over the years, there are a few overarching points that stand out above detailed pedagogy, classroom techniques, or technological assistance. These include enthusiasm for the topic and student engagement using a lecture format, genuine love for the students, and specific practices that narrow the distance between instructor and student.

There are many differing opinions on the best pedagogical practices. Most of the current trends include an ever-increasing antipathy toward the lecture; yet I love to lecture, and most of my students enjoy hearing my lectures. Why, especially when many academics may suggest that lecturing is not a best practice, do I strongly defend a lecture-based class? First, I do not advocate that all instructors use a lecture format for their classes. Second, some professors lectures are unfortunately so boring that students tune out and dread coming to class. If you choose to lecture, be enthusiastic! There is overwhelming evidence that anything delivered with genuine enthusiasm and passion becomes contagious. Great lecturers master their material. They do not read lectures from lecture slides or lecture notes in a monotone delivery. Notes and presentations are fine for reminders of detail and to impose organization on the lecture, but the lecture needs to have a spontaneous feeling of being fresh and exciting, even if it is a lecture you have delivered dozens of times. New instructors will become more and more proficient at mastering both their materials and presentation with each course they teach. After 30 years and thousands of lectures on American History, I am still excited about the material. My secret? **I don't teach history – I teach students!**

It still excites me to see students gain interest and become engaged and even passionate about the material. When students communicate little interest in history, I try to energize them by making history (or any other topic) relevant. Unless connections are made to the past, history is of little interest, and honestly, of little value. We are who we are because of history. In every lecture, I point out connections

between the past and my students' lives. Note the student connections to the subject in the following emails from online students for Utah History:

Hey Mr. Barton, I just wanted to share a little interesting fact that came to my attention as I was reading the Massacre at Mountain Meadows book. John Urie who is mentioned in the book is my great-great grandfather (sic) (Name Withheld, personal communication, Spring 2017).

Hello professor, ... I really enjoy this class it's personal to me because on my mother's side I am Blackfoot Indian and on my father's side I had a great deal to do with the pioneers and the Mormons, my great-grandfather was Ephraim Hanks, so it's pretty cool to learn this history (sic) (Name withheld, personal communication, Fall 2015).

I encourage spontaneous discussion within my lecture. I want my students to ask questions, make comments, point out connections to them personally, and to our current time and situations. I prefer spontaneous discussions over set discussion times. Following these conversations, I then continue with the lecture and move to the next point that spurs a new discussion. To teach/lecture in this manner, one must know the material, be flexible, and have the a primary goal of gaining student interactions and interest rather than just “getting through the lecture.”

My lectures consist of a string of interconnected stories that advance a theme of history. History is made compelling and memorable by interconnected stories of the past, coupled with interpretations of why it is relevant and important. Stories are powerful. We relate to, remember, and understand stories. They endure the passing of generations. Perhaps history lends itself to this approach more than many other disciplines, but each subject—even math and science—has its stories, and students need to become engaged with those stories to help them internalize and become invested in the material.

Great teachers not only have a passion for the subject they teach, but they also have a genuine concern—even a love—for their students. In today's jaded world, using the word *love* in an academic essay might be considered misplaced, quaint, or even inappropriate. It is not! Those who decide to enter academia to make a lot of money, find an easy job, have summers off, or primarily to accommodate family schedules, are setting up themselves—as well as their future students—for disappointment. If teachers do not love their students, they fail at the most important academic

responsibility: to inspire students' understanding, to make the world in which we live relevant, and to then advance that understanding to ever greater heights and applications. Genuine love will impact how you interact with students on every level. To love your students means to give them the best of yourself: every time, every setting, every delivery system, every class period. Show love for the students, even the challenging ones, by listening with compassion. Love them enough to call them on their foolish or discursive comments or attitudes. Challenge them to learn and grow. You will not be able to connect with them all, but if you show concern for them and their success, they generally know/feel it and respond positively. Constantly and honestly appraise your classes, delivery, and course reviews. Put your assignments and syllabi together not for what is easiest for you, but for what will best enhance student learning and engagement. Seek genuine criticism about your teaching; be humble enough to change.

Demand respect from your students for yourself, the class, the course material, and the institution. No concern is unworthy of attention. Insist that students elevate their level of understanding, their critical thinking, and their analysis –not only to earn a good grade, but to become a quality person. Help them make the connections between the classroom and their world. Treat all students with respect: even hard and challenging students, including those who ask a question you recently answered. Listen to them. Demand the same from them. Insist they respect and be polite to each other. It is fine, even desirable, to disagree in academics, but not to be disagreeable. Be fair and reasonable in your procedures and policies. Listen to and respect students' concerns, mishaps, and genuine emergencies.

As a cautionary example, some years ago, during finals week, a USU graduate student was admitted to the hospital and placed in the ICU for what the physicians feared was a pending heart attack. In the ICU, he could not make or take phone calls. Upon release from the hospital, the student's first concern and phone call was to the professor whose exam he had missed. Hearing of the situation, the professor said there was nothing he could do; the exam had been missed. The student was not allowed to make up or take the final exam! With a 97% average in the class to that point, he failed the course! This kind of attitude and unwillingness to work with a student should have no place in academics or in life.

Learning should impart reverence and respect. Never assume that you know everything or that a student cannot know something about the subject that you do

not. Humbly learn wherever you find truth. If students ask questions for which you do not know the answer, tell them you don't know, but you will find out! If they point out an error you make, be humble enough to not only accept it, but thank them! The proud cannot learn, for they already know all.

I strongly believe in roles and responsibilities. As a class instructor, my role and responsibilities are different from those of the students, but neither is more important than the other. Regardless of my degrees, research, publications, papers read at conferences, awards, grants, or recognitions, can I be a teacher without my students?

The third part of this essay will advance some absolutes for successful teaching:

1. Impart expectations and instructions with clarity. Students fear misunderstanding the instructions and expectations. They seek reassurance. Reduce as much of that stress as possible. In every class I introduce myself and my passion for the topic, the course itself, and my expectation for their success. Using Canvas (USU's Course Management System) to manage my courses, I supply detailed written and recorded audio/visual instructions for each assignment. Some students are better audio learners than visual, and vice-versa. By offering both written and audio/visual instructions, student angst over assignments, as well as questions about how to proceed, have significantly diminished. Most students do their work confidently, knowing they are doing it correctly. I created and recorded a slide presentation writing tutorial that specifically details how I expect students to write and footnote in my classes. I make them review it and then take an open-note quiz on it to reinforce the details. This helps me to grade papers and explain the grades assigned. I also find great success and frequent positive student feedback by recording an audio/visual response for every student on each major assignment.
2. Never destroy a student's dreams. A good teacher inspires his/her students to reach for the stars. At times, a good teacher has to help students gain understanding of what it takes to achieve their dreams and goals, but never crush or even hint that those dreams are unattainable.
3. Give positive feedback on every assignment, despite how poor it may be, by finding something good to say. Couch your negative comments as helpful criticisms in language that is kind, supportive, and encouraging.

4. Understand that there is really no such thing as teaching –only learning. A good teacher strives to create an environment that enables a student to learn. Learning occurs when students pull information into their brains, rather than when the instructor attempts to push it there!
5. Teach beyond the classroom. Great teachers inspire and prepare their students for success in life.

When I accepted the invitation to write an essay on my teaching practices and experience, I feared some might think that I perceive myself a master teacher who reaches and motivates all my students. I yearn for that to be the case, but it is far from the truth. I often fail to connect with my students. I lament every poor grade I give, knowing that I failed to communicate and motivate that student to succeed in my class. I recently received the worst student evaluations of my career. It was a new course, and I thought my selection of materials and assignments was engaging, even creative. The students were brutal in their evaluations and comments. I was hurt, angry, and frustrated. But after wallowing a bit, I began to carefully review and change my upcoming syllabus for the same course to address their genuine criticisms. When I hear stories of how a teacher impacted the life of a student, it reminds me of why I teach, and why, after decades of practice, I still aspire to become better: to become a master teacher. I hope readers of these rambling thoughts find gems of truth worthy of consideration and, perhaps, of implementation.

References

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