Eight Principles of Effective Teaching

In Higher Education

In 1987 Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson consolidated the findings of several decades of research on college teaching to create a brief manifesto called “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.” (American Association of Higher Education Bulletin vol.39, no.7, pp.3-7). In 2012, as part of the work of the UAlbany Strategic Plan Implementation, a faculty task force reviewed the published research from the intervening years (see the select bibliography on page 2) with an eye toward creating an updated set of principles and standards that could be used to inform the work of contemporary university instructors. The faculty group found that these original “Seven Principles” are still valid and remain the most concise, comprehensive description of effective teaching practices available in the current literature. They serve as a guiding set of ideas that cut across all methods, all disciplines, and all personalities. The faculty task force has updated the list with some examples that illustrate the principles, and added one additional principle to bring the original list into alignment with evolving concerns about professional ethics. The resulting product is this draft of UAlbany’s “Eight Principles of Effective Teaching.” ITLAL presents them here as a means for reflection and a guide to best practices.

1. Good teaching communicates high expectations for students.

The expectations for learning, performance, and classroom behavior should be explicitly stated in writing at the beginning of each course, and reiterated verbally. Evaluation practices and grades should be based on students’ accomplishments related to stated expectations. Some best practices associated with this principle include:

⇒ Appropriately challenging standards for student learning
⇒ Clear statements of high-level learning goals in syllabi
⇒ Evaluation schemes based on clear criteria and standards that apply to all students

2. Good teaching encourages active learning.

Effective instructors place students in the role of active learner by means of practices such as writing assignments, problem-solving tasks, collaborative projects, research, and other hands-on activities. Some best practices associated with this principle include:

⇒ Tasks (in class or on line) that help students practice disciplinary thinking
⇒ Homework designed to help students master use of course content
⇒ Asking students to work together to solve problems or answer challenging questions

3. Good teaching includes clear organization and smart preparation.

Instructors should make explicit the learning objectives of their courses, and develop purposeful, structured learning activities based on those objectives. Some best practices associated with this principle include:

⇒ Creation of a syllabus that communicates clear goals and expectations, evaluation criteria and standards, policies and appropriate accommodations
⇒ Publishing a calendar of anticipated assignments and events at the beginning of a course
⇒ Management of work to ensure a short turnaround for grading assignments such as papers and homework

4. Good teaching respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Instructors should be committed to teaching all students, regardless of their talents. They should become aware of students’ prior knowledge and experiences and use that knowledge to inform course design and classroom teaching. Some best practices associated with this principle include:

⇒ Surveys/pre-tests of students’ background knowledge at the beginning of a course or a unit, for the purpose of shaping instruction
⇒ Use of varied task and assignment design, to promote and measure different types of learning
⇒ Presentations of content using a variety of media and formats

5. Good teaching ensures prompt, frequent, constructive feedback.

This can include feedback from instructor to student or from student to student, or opportunities for self-assessment. Some best practices associated with this principle include:

⇒ Assigning frequent activities such as short quizzes, problems, and tasks (both graded and ungraded) that allow students to check their own comprehension and thinking
⇒ Instructor feedback on writing that focuses on substantive improvements rather than only small corrections
⇒ Peer feedback in which students respond to the work of other students, for the purpose of helping improve their work

6. Good teaching involves productive student-faculty interactions.

Instructors should create face-to-face and/or on-line interactions in which students are provided an opportunity to learn directly from the instructor. As much as possible, instructors should involve students in their research and mentor their students in their discipline. Some best practices associated with this principle include:
⇒ Creating opportunities for students to conduct research, when possible
⇒ Meeting with students one-on-one or in small groups to provide direct feedback on their work
⇒ Using active learning activities in class to create opportunities for the instructor to respond directly to student work

7. Good teaching means maintaining respectful, ethical student-faculty interactions.

Instructors should create a safe space for their students and not take advantage (including sexually) of the power relationship they have with students. Some best practices associated with this principle include:
⇒ Avoiding categorically romantic relationships with students currently enrolled in the instructor’s course
⇒ Valuing students’ contributions as well as diverse identities
⇒ Maintaining and applying consistent evaluation criteria and standards

8. Good teaching invests in continuous improvement.

Instructors should frequently refine their practice based on inquiry, feedback, and reflection. They should remain aware of advances both in their field of expertise and in instructional methods, tools, and technologies. Some best practices associated with this principle include:
⇒ Reading books and articles or consulting other resources on teaching
⇒ Participation in professional development opportunities focused on teaching offered on campus, on-line, or at conferences
⇒ Participation in peer observations, both as an observer and an observee

Select Bibliography of Research since the 1987 Publication of Chickering and Gamson’s “Seven Principles” (Nearly all of these works are available in the ITLAL Reading Room inside the LI 069 ITLAL Suite)