

Review Essay: Six Books Every College Teacher Should Know

JOSÉ ANTONIO BOWEN

Few of us would assume that the experience of watching other people cut hair, drive trucks, or play football would qualify us to do the same, but that is our assumption about college teaching. Despite stacks of empirical data and controlled studies by our counterparts in schools of education, most of us base our teaching methods on the discipline-specific models we observed as students. We make assumptions about what techniques are appropriate or effective based only upon our own experience with theory teachers who made us sing in class and music history teachers who did not. We could and should, of course, run our own experiments, but we do not need to start from scratch: there is a large body of research on how college students learn, what they remember, and how professors can have the long-term impact we all desire. Some of this will need to be adapted for music classrooms, but reading a few standard and practical guides can quickly make you a more effective teacher and feed your creativity in the classroom.

**Ken Bain, *What The Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. 207 pages. \$27.00.
ISBN 978-0674013254**

I buy a copy of this book for every new faculty member we hire in my school. I send the book to incoming faculty over the summer and ask them to read it before coming to my home in the fall for discussion and dinner. I do this partly because I want to emphasize that teaching will be a part of the tenure decision and that creating innovative curricula requires risk and failure, but also because this book can inspire a lifetime of good teaching.

The premise is simple: Bain asked students which teachers they remembered years after they had left the classroom and why these teachers mattered to them. He then sought out these teachers, talked to them, and observed their classes. What he discovered is equally simple: it is not about what teachers do, but what they understand. There is no one magic technique or style.

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The best teachers are truly focused on how students learn; they engage, provoke, and challenge students in a *supportive* environment. (The combination is essential; just having high standards will not be enough to help students learn.)

His initial conclusions may not seem surprising: the best teachers know their subjects, prepare thoroughly for class, expect more of their students, treat them well, and give them a sense of control. They constantly seek out feedback and are willing to confront their own weaknesses and change. But how do they do this?

Most of us recognize that changing the way our students think is difficult. Students, like faculty, perform “all kinds of mental gymnastics to avoid confronting and revising fundamental underlying principles,” but many still receive high grades (p. 23). So the best professors model *change*; they teach the history of their subject and demonstrate how knowledge changes. They present problems instead of solutions and model how to suspend judgment until they have a better understanding of context. They focus on big questions, show how scholars disagree, provide many opportunities for feedback before grades, and stress making judgments and taking risks. Good teachers, Bain found, teach facts only “in a rich context of problems, issues and questions” (p. 29). They understand that learning is emotional and that mental models (or “deep learning”) change slowly.

Music history classrooms are an ideal environment for this approach, since most of our students think of music as performance. Professors and students both lose when we view music history either as necessary background for performance or entirely separate from it. After reading Bain, I decided to stop being apologetic. I took his suggestion to write “WGAD” (“Who gives a damn?”) on the chalkboard each day in my survey course for majors and challenged my students to interrupt *at any moment* with “WGAD!” I challenged myself, and them, to make music history relevant to performance at every moment. In return, I required them to keep an open mind and honestly debate both sides of every “WGAD” objection. The results were a more intense but intellectually open atmosphere.

Taking Bain’s advice, I allowed the question of musicology’s relevance to be part of the course and was explicit with students that Schenker, Tovey, and Taruskin make radically different assumptions about what matters. I did not segregate the facts from the theories, or the compositions from the interpretations. We read contradictory interpretations of the same works. After reading Tchaikovsky’s letters to Nadezhda von Meck, one student asked “WGAD, how can it possibly matter if he was gay?” This led to an engaged discussion about how we might imagine a gay performance of Symphony No. 4. I kept my word and often interrupted with my own “WGAD.” Does theory improve our performance? Does cultural context or biography affect a performance?

Should we abolish program notes? Can your personal story with a piece of music influence an audience? These were the questions that students debated after “WGAD” interruptions. As Bain predicted, by giving students the authority to have opinions about these fundamental issues, and by valuing their interest in performance, musicology suddenly mattered to them.

Bain concludes that this combination of “faith in abilities, concentration on outcomes, rejection of power in favor of creating opportunities, and the perception that external factors do make a difference” (p. 83) adds up to a purpose that the best teachers share: since the personal and the intellectual are intertwined, the point of our courses is not the accumulation of knowledge, but change. The most effective teachers see true learning as an engine for change in human beings.

L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003. 320 pages. \$41.00. ISBN: 978-0787960551

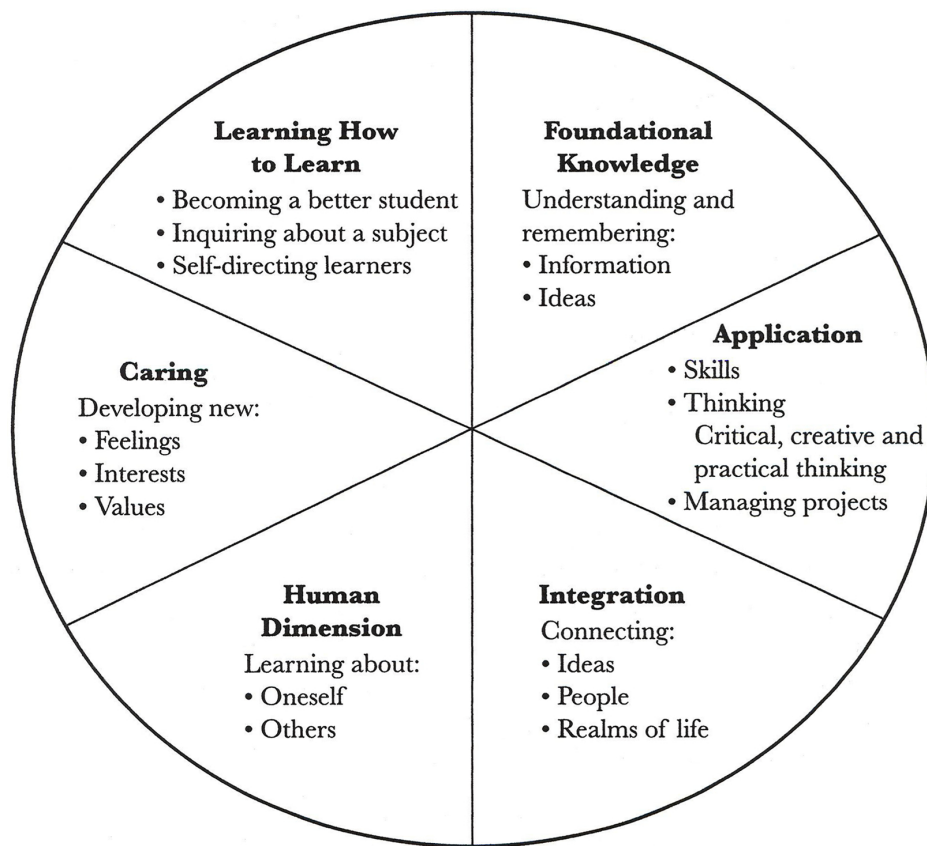
Dee Fink also sees change as the very root of learning: “Significant learning requires that there be some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner’s life” (p. 30). So Fink revised educational psychologist B. S. Bloom’s linear progression of six levels of cognitive learning (memorization, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation)¹ with a new taxonomy of significant learning that he places in a circle, showing that each type of learning enhances the others (**Figure 1**, below). Fink then takes us through the process of creating course goals that will integrate these six dimensions of learning. A music history course might have the goals shown in **Figure 2**, (below) mapped onto Fink’s six categories.

Limiting yourself to what you want students to remember in a few years will help both your students and your course design: integration is more important than volume of content. Falling in love with music requires listening, and setting personal goals for future listening will motivate the analysis of style. Fink also suggests that you focus on your own dreams as a teacher. If you want students to “‘find a lifetime joy in continued learning’ about your subject, you need to translate those dreams into explicit goals for the course you teach” (p. 81)

The rest of Fink’s book is devoted to detailed instructions on how to design courses that will result in the sort of significant learning we all want

1. B. S. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain* (New York: David McKay, 1956). Bloom’s taxonomy was revised by Lorin Anderson. Designed for higher education, this taxonomy is pervasive in almost all current curriculum design. Even dog trainers use it.

Figure 1: Fink's taxonomy of significant learning (p. 30).

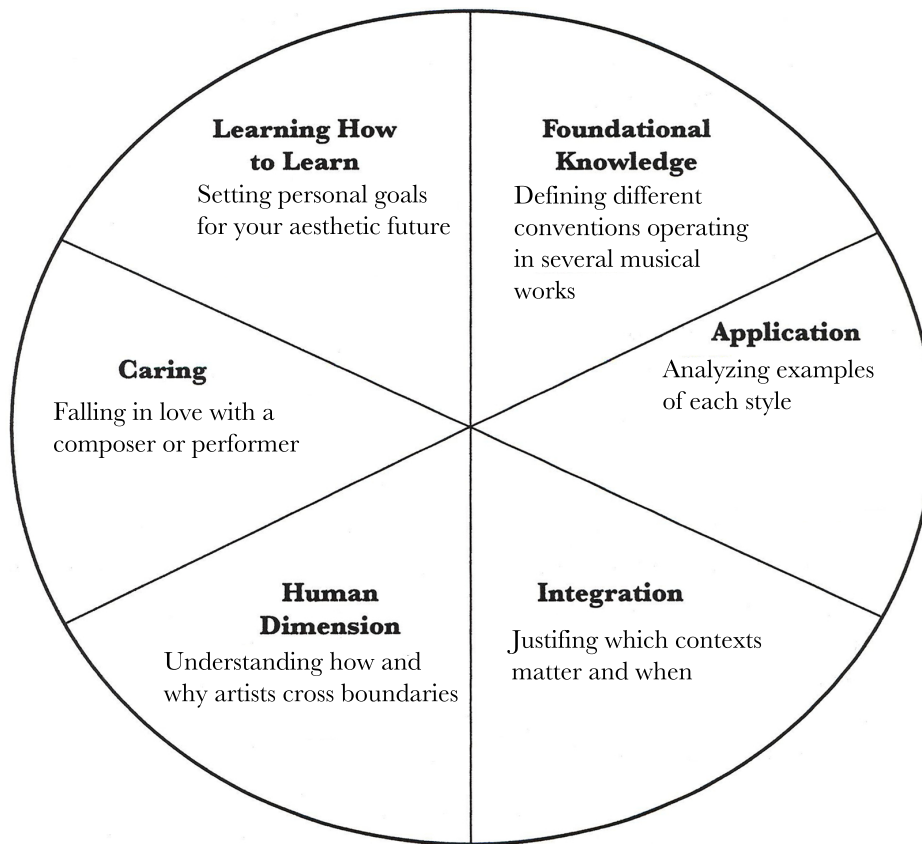


from our students. There are examples from many fields, a variety of instructional strategies, help on structure, assignments, and assessment, and honest talk about the personal risks and rewards of his approach.

Barbara Gross-Davis, *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993. 608 pages. \$50.00. ISBN 978-0787965679

Elizabeth F. Barkley, *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009. 416 pages. \$40.00. ISBN 978-0470281918

Both of these books are handy when you need a quick idea. If you are not sure how to prepare a new topic or need help with a lecture that bombs every year, here are two books that can spark your creativity in minutes.

Figure 2. Fink’s taxonomy applied to music history.

Tools for Teaching is a classic—the book I used to buy for all new faculty. It covers everything, from first day introductions and lecture strategies to exams and chalkboards. Some of Gross-Davis’s suggestions will seem obvious in hindsight, but given their clear organization and detailed references, you will learn something every time you open the book, knowing there is research to back up each tip. For example, try asking “students to refrain from sitting in certain rows of the classroom” (p. 127) as this allows you to use those rows to walk among and behind students.

Two ideas that have immediate application for the large music history survey include creating an exam question on undiscussed readings and giving a written assignment to students who have not completed the reading (pp. 200-201). While it is generally ineffective to “cover” large periods of history in a semester, we often have more repertoire or content than time. If you use simple multiple-choice exams in Blackboard (scalable for large classes since they grade and record to the gradebook automatically), some accountability for the reading will allow your class time to be more focused on specific issues.

Gross-Davis's advice eventually led me to create very short online exams on the reading before *every* class. Simple, but effective.

A similar approach that focuses on student engagement techniques comes from Elizabeth Barkley. Like Gross-Davis, Barkley combines proven research with specific techniques. Sitting passively for long periods of time diminishes the brain's ability to concentrate and absorb information, so Barkley suggests adding some physical movement to class: try tossing a bean-bag around the classroom, asking questions of each student who makes a catch. A classroom "snowball" involves students writing responses to a brief prompt on a piece of paper, crushing the paper into a snowball, and throwing it around the room. When you say "Stop," students then read or respond to the snowball they are now holding (p. 145).

Barkley's work as a professor of music leads to some particularly relevant examples. She suggests introducing academic controversy, like Bains, and includes an example from art history ("Who owns the past?") that translates easily to musicology. Putting many of Bain's and Fink's principles into action, Barkley demonstrates how she reorganized her own music appreciation course from a chronological European survey into Musics of Multicultural America, offering more flexible learning activities and greater control over grades (pp. 54-58).

Thomas A. Angelo, and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1993. 448 pages. \$48.00. ISBN 978-1555425005

Barbara E. Walvoord, and Virginia Johnson Anderson, *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment in College*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1998. 272 pages. \$40.00. ISBN 978-0470502150

Finally we reach "assessment," a word we have sadly come to distrust. But assessment is not a necessary evil. It is the way we improve our teaching and demonstrate (to ourselves as well as others) that our students are learning, and learning what we hope they will learn. All of the authors discussed here advocate creating your learning outcomes first—without regard to what is easy to measure. But in the end, we also need to ensure that we are assessing what we want students to learn and that we are indeed teaching to the test. These books show how to design assessments that will save us time and measure the significant learning we desire.

The heart of Angelo and Cross's book is fifty Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs). One of my favorites is the "Minute Paper" (p. 148) done at the

end of class on an index card. (You can also give students five minutes and a larger piece of paper.) It is an easy diagnostic tool if you ask, “What is still unclear after today’s class?”, but it can also be a way to help students think and frame their understanding of the material. Note the difference between these two prompts: “List five reasons why jazz developed in New Orleans” versus “How are cultural and aesthetic histories intertwined in the creation of jazz?” I often tell students that at the end of class, they will pose a question on their index cards, suggesting a new research project that scholars should investigate. This assessment doubles as a motivation for students to think and interact with the material in a particular way.

Walvoord and Anderson will change the way you think about the roles of assignments and grading. They take a holistic approach, looking at tests and assignments as a way both to teach and assess: grading, when used well and integrated into course design, can indeed be part of the process for guiding student learning. Their chapter on “Fostering Motivation and Learning in the Grading Process” convinced me that “drop the needle” exams were encouraging students to be “grade-oriented” rather than “learning-oriented.” At first I created practice exams that students could take online, but eventually I decided that mastery of the practice exams was enough. When a technical support person cautioned that a student could “cheat” by memorizing all of the 150 music examples, it gave me pause. But Walvoord and Anderson made me realize that memorizing was not cheating but learning. The repeatable exam that allows students to retake until they achieve mastery gives students more control and motivates them. That insight led me to move my online identification exams (“click on the file”) into a gaming format where students move up levels as they master genres, composers, or players. The game “level” converts to a grade in Blackboard, so students know at the beginning of the semester that they need to get to level 9 to get an “A” on this assignment.

Clarifying standards and expectations will save you time. Walvoord and Anderson devote a chapter to what they call Primary Trait Analysis (PTAs, or what we now call “rubrics”).² They demonstrate how you can move from unstated criteria (“It feels like a B”) to more explicit criteria, and how you can move from norm-references scoring (grading on a curve) to criterion-references scoring (p. 67). For them, the PTA needs to be both. Though Walvoord and Anderson’s examples come from a wide variety of disciplines, music historians will gain particular help from the sections on grading argumentative essays.

Most useful, of course, is their chapter on “Making Grading more Time-Efficient.” Their strategy to separate commenting from grading (p. 120) will

2. If you want the latest research on rubrics and many more specific examples, see Antonia J. Levi and Danielle D. Stevens, *Introduction to Rubrics* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2005).

change your life. They offer simple tips that work: offer comments but no grade, perhaps giving credit that will be folded into a larger work. The corollary is “Do not give to all students what only some need.” Walvoord allowed students to write “please grade” on credit-only papers, and then gave unofficial grades only to those who asked. The savings for both might be small, but in a large class these time savings really add up.

The message from all of these books is that there is research and experience available to guide you in becoming a better teacher. Teaching does not need to be all trial and error. Bain has demonstrated that the best college teachers understand key variables of the classroom environment and focus on changing mental models. Fink has provided an approach for structuring courses to encourage these changes and foster deep learning in your students. New tools for classroom activities or grading can provide quick fixes to stimulate your teaching, but they are also good ways to improve by increments while you wait for an opportunity to reorganize your course.

Ultimately, the two approaches work together: assignments affect course goals and vice versa. You can improve your grading by creating a rubric, but your rubric should reinforce and support your learning outcomes. As you refine your learning outcomes and course goals, eventually you may want to restructure how you present the questions and answers you consider most important. That may require you to rethink what you do in class time.

The good news is that according to the research, small changes really do make a difference. It might take ten years to reorganize a course completely, but a few “minute papers” or writing WGAD on the board might increase learning today without adding to your workload. By the same token, changing a course every time you offer it is counterproductive. Each group of students is different, and a bad joke one year might bring down the house next fall. An activity might be great, but perhaps you were distracted the first time you tried it. Offering the same version of a course a few times before you make a major overhaul will allow you to collect better data on efficacy, create less work, and encourage you to think about larger issues.

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Good teaching involves risk and practice, as all of this research demonstrates. The very best teachers get things wrong, correct mistakes, and try new approaches. Mostly, the research is emphatic that good teaching comes from hard work and thoughtfulness about student needs, stimulation and challenge coupled with support, active engagement during class time, clear grading strategies that correspond to articulated learning outcomes, and a focus on creating an environment where students can change.