

The soft skills of teaching

By [Adam J. Copeland](#)

September 20, 2016

The fall semester has begun, and I'm back in the classroom teaching a course called Proactive Ministry in a Media Culture. After teaching online all summer, it's a joy to engage face-to-face with students in the classroom again. Online classes have their place, mind you, but there's nothing like a live classroom. That arena is the most exhilarating, most exhausting, most challenging work I do all week.

I teach with a social-constructivist pedagogy. This brings out a constant stream of fast-paced, important, in-the-moment decisions. It started, this week, the second I walked in. The tables weren't ideally arranged, but they were pretty close. Should we take the time and energy to take two out of the rectangle so we were closer together? Yes. Seeing each other well, and leaving few empty seats at the table, helps to build the learning community.

Then there are my opening questions that require everyone to share something of themselves, and some connection with the reading, because every voice matters, and students are much more likely to speak again if they speak once early in class.

Especially early in the semester when students look at me rather than at each other when they make a point or ask a question, I work to intentionally shift my gaze back to the other students so the student who's talking follows my eyes and speaks to the others, and not me alone.

There are questions of how and when I should speak, write on the board, stand up, and sit down. I have my own direction intended for our discussion, but I want also to honor and learn from alternative areas students surface. Often, especially early in the semester, I'll refrain from making a point because it will come up in a reading planned for later weeks. I embrace the split-second decisions regarding whether to speak—and how long—as crucial, minute-by-minute mental battles.

There's balancing talkative students with quieter ones, group work with individual responses, verbal discussion with writing, drawing, mind-mapping, and genre-shifting.

There's the challenge of when to take a break, and how to organize the three hours of class so the energy peaks, not dwindles, at the close.

There's the question of pushing students back to the text or quoting and summarizing myself. There's the balance of theory and application, personal sharing and appreciation of others' experiences.

Years ago, [an essay](#) by Martin Copenhaver appeared in the *Christian Century* on the ritual of shaking hands after church. It's an act that's never mentioned in worship liturgies, but always expected. When I supply-preach in congregations, I always know to stop and shake hands at the door afterwards. To get in my car before the handshakes would be seen as beyond rude (though, it's sometimes hard to know at what door to stand).

Copenhaver writes of the mental energy expended in that receiving line. Will he recognize visitors? How to recall names? What pithy phrase should be said to the grieving? When should the pastor speak again, and when should she listen? How to remember the appropriate follow-ups with the right people on Monday? And how in the world does one respond to that *uncompliment*, "Well, pastor, you certainly gave us a lot to think about"?

It's a lovely essay because it breaks down, in unusually honest, reflective ways, the immense challenge of that ritual of shaking hands.

I wish pastors spoke more about such key, hard-to-teach moments of ministry like shaking hands. What tactful words will best end a pastoral visit? How to choose when to hug or shake hands? When do you write a hand-written note, send an e-mail, text, or call?

These so-called soft skills are the heart of pastoral ministry. They require attention to detail, a strong ability to self-reflect, and a sense of integrity. Plus—and this is key—a sense of humor because even the smoothest, wisest, most pastoral leaders will trip over their stoles from time to time.

So, at the beginning of a new semester, I'm embracing anew the soft skills of teaching: reading a room, surfacing a question that allows the student to make the connection and not me, listening for the unsaid, riffing off what is said, nurturing the learning community, pushing us to new discoveries, and laughing along the way.

It's not quite shaking hands, but it's close.

Originally posted at [Copeland's blog](#)