

# What the Best College Teachers Do

reviewed by [Paul Keim](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

## In Review



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Ken Bain

Harvard University Press

Many of us have vivid memories of teachers who changed our lives. Whether or not we can say exactly what they did to nurture us, we recognize the hallmarks of

transformative learning. One of the turning points in my own development was the result of a course for which one of the texts was Van Harvey's *The Historian and the Believer*. Professor Dennis MacDonald created a safe place for our class of mostly pious freshmen to consider "the problem of faith and history."

I fought the new approach vigorously, defending the integrity of the faith in which I had been nurtured by family and church from what I perceived to be an assault. A record of my struggle with Harvey (and Professor MacDonald) is preserved in the furiously scribbled margins of the tattered volume that still sits on my shelf.

I made it through the course with faith intact. Then one day during the following semester, as I was walking across campus, the force of a sudden revelation stopped me in my tracks. I realized that the core of what I had been struggling to defend was safe and that what I had imagined I was protecting myself against was essential. Doors flung open. New worlds came into view. My faith was not merely intact, it was now capable of seeking understanding.

Ken Bain, a founding director of three university teaching centers who has spent 15 years studying practices in higher education, believes that the teachers who have the most profound and sustained impact on students share, almost without exception, a handful of characteristics that are keys to their success: The best teachers are not just masters of an academic discipline, but also understand how its underlying concepts are best learned. They treat teaching as serious intellectual work in its own right, and their intentional, though sometimes intuitive, scholarship of learning determines how they prepare to teach. Excellent teachers believe that transformative learning involves personal as well as intellectual development. They create environments that encourage learning both inside and outside the classroom, they foster trust, and they validate students' experience. Finally, the best teachers develop assessment strategies that are part of a feedback loop, enabling students to closely monitor and take responsibility for their learning.

Each of these areas is developed in a separate chapter and set in the context of the most recent scholarship on teaching and learning. The book contains a useful index, and the notes contain numerous references to relevant publications.

It is perhaps inevitable that Bain's portrait of the best teachers seems idealized. Few of us would have difficulty imagining excellent teachers who do not fit Bain's profile and students who remain unmoved by even the most transformative of pedagogies.

But the strength of this inductive approach is that the habits of mind and heart he describes are inherently practical and can be adapted to improve teaching and learning in a variety of settings.

Given Bain's assumption that teaching is a deeply moral activity, there is curiously little in the book about the way higher education affects moral development. To be sure, Bain does point out that the best teachers care about the personal development of their students, and because they are empowered to think for themselves these students come to know themselves as well as the course material. It remains unclear to me, however, whether the best college teachers consider this a moral imperative for higher education. The building blocks for moral reflection are embedded in Bain's profile of students who exhibit deep learning, but I would have liked him to address this more explicitly.

Bain's work has provided me a set of criteria to more effectively assess what I do as an educator, how I do it, and even why I do it. It combines a robust theoretical framework grounded in the latest scholarship, the wisdom of best practices, and a unique depiction of how successful educators think about their teaching. Prompted by Bain's profile, I found myself examining in a more systematic and informed way the structure of particular courses and the struggles of particular students, measuring my own teaching against the attitudes and practices of master pedagogues. Rather than providing me with the right answers, *What the Best College Teachers Do* has enabled me to ask better questions.