

# *What the Best College Teachers Do*

Ken Bain, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA (2004)

The publication, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, is based on a fifteen-year study of nearly one hundred college teachers from various fields and universities. Author Ken Bain tries to “capture the collective scholarship of some of the best teachers in the United States, to record not just what they think, but most of all, to begin to conceptualize their practices.” In this book, you will find insights on how to engage and challenge students.

While the book offers an in-depth analysis of teaching and what we can learn from it, you may find the major conclusions the most useful. They are not a prescriptive list of do’s and don’ts because that simply is not possible. The conclusions, listed below, emerged from the following six broad questions asked to the teachers in the study.

1. What do the best teachers know and understand?

- Know their subjects well
- Study what others are doing in their field
- Read extensively in other fields
- Take a strong interest in the broader issues of their disciplines
- Use their knowledge to develop techniques for grasping fundamental principles and organizing concepts so that others can begin to build their own understanding
- Know how to simplify
- Cut to the heart of the matter with provocative insights

2. How do they prepare to teach?

- Treat teaching as a serious intellectual endeavor
- Begin with questions about student learning objectives rather than what the teacher will do

3. What do they expect from their students?

- They expect “more”
- They teach to embody the kind of thinking and acting expected for life

4. What do they do when they teach?

- Create a “natural critical learning environment”
- Provide students with intriguing or important problems and authentic tasks to challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink assumptions, and examine mental models of reality

5. How do they treat students?

- Reflect a strong trust in students
- Believe that students want to learn
- Are open with their students and talk about their own intellectual journey and encourage students to be similarly reflective
- Often discuss openly and enthusiastically their own sense of awe and curiosity about life

6. How do they check their progress and evaluate their effects?

- Use a systematic process to evaluate their own efforts and to make changes
- Check their own efforts when they evaluate students to avoid judging them on arbitrary standards

Kathy Jackson, [klj11@psu.edu](mailto:klj11@psu.edu), 814-863-2598