



Ten Comments on Effective Teaching¹

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Author's Note: A valued and trustworthy colleague asked if I would find some time to write a short document for use in his educational leadership seminars in East Africa. This paper is my attempt to fulfill his request. I wanted to produce something that would give attention to some of the issues that I have come to believe are central to major problems that many people encounter while trying to make formal education function well. Further, I expected that he could make best use of a format that would encourage discussion. *After all, without the give-and-take of discussion, education walks the world half-blind.*

With the “do not” advice as warnings, I have attempted to turn these reflections around toward pointing out ways to become more competent and effective. Thus here are the warnings, along with the recommended actions. Using a negative word or phrase as an introduction is rarely the best way to communicate an idea. This principle is like most principles: often there are exceptions. The best advice is to hold to your principles, but to keep yourself open to judging the worth of the exceptions! This will sometimes lead to change. Such change is one of the sure signs of learning. Although stubbornly clinging to the old ways can be a sign of virtue, it sometimes is a clue that someone has ceased to be a learner.

By writing this advice as a list of ten warnings, it may suggest the biblical list of Ten Commandments. No, the intention is not to rewrite or attempt to improve upon the divine revelation; the model in Scripture is a very good one: not too long, not too hard to understand, and easy to remember—if the reader tries!

The Ten Commandments are not “ten suggestions” or “ten guidelines.” They are intended as firm rules for godly and effective living. Rules and laws are commonly written in the plainest of “do” and “don’t” language. Most certainly these recommendations do not carry the level of authority of God’s word through Moses. The list following is based on understanding and wisdom that reflects a career of sixty years of teaching, from mid-twentieth into the twenty-first century.

1. **Don’t preach your principles; live them.** This is the most important of all items in this list! Even preachers need to know that a person’s life, habits, and interactional style will be far more convincing than whatever the person may say. “What you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying.” In simplest terms, the competent teacher will engage learners as a community of pilgrims, valuing one another and working together to find the ways the content being studied can relate to and enrich the learners’ competent dealings with life itself.

2. **Don’t assume that telling will teach.** Partly because of the way we focus attention on the pulpit, the podium, and the platform up front, schools of the world put the words of the teacher at the top of the list of things that are important to hear and remember. But the lectures are often half-understood and less believed to be important. People often discover

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that the words from the platform are not very important, anyway. Experience teaches; words are just so much chatter. A really effective teacher will encourage reading, include activities, and guide learners to think through and find meanings from the many facets of life.

3. **Don't tell students how; show them.** The typical classroom emphasis on *words* causes many teachers to talk endlessly about how something should be done. With far less words, less misunderstanding, and more practical outcomes, a demonstration can accomplish much more. At its best, demonstrations should include learners as *demonstrators*.

4. **Don't control students by punishing them.** The major argument against this “teaching” practice is that it does not result in effective control nor effective learning. Regardless of how “heavy handed” the punishment may be, learners are not likely to respond with the outcomes the teacher wants. The old adage, “you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar” suggests that kindness and smiles are two of the teacher’s best tools. When a teacher “gets tough” with misbehavior, the classroom environment quickly turns partisan and the teacher can suddenly become lonely and in conflict with a large portion of the students.

5. **Don't try to be the best teacher; instead, try to help your students become the best learners.** It is not unusual for a teacher, especially a beginning teacher, to see oneself as a competitor, attempting to prove one’s merit by “doing such an outstanding job” in the classroom that students will give nothing but praise. To become “the teacher of the year” always turns out to be a useless goal. Most often it is replaced by the simple hope and prayer to be able to finish the year without being dismissed. But aspirations can be redirected. Never mind what people think of the teacher—that can follow. What is really worth achieving is learners who think well of themselves and are pleased with what they have been able to accomplish. That is a worthy objective and accomplishment. And the learners perhaps will rise up to call the teacher blessed.

6. **Don't suggest that you know everything; turn your learners' attention toward what they know.** Part of the problem here is that learning is generally misunderstood. It is **not** gathering information, memorizing it, and being ready to spit it out (no matter how poorly digested). If the teacher isn't well grounded in the field and competently ready to recall and explain its basic structure, he/she/**you** are not ready to teach, but learners need not be treated to demonstrations of the teacher’s brilliance. Far better, they need to learn to use what the teacher can show them and guide them through: how to explore, how to put ideas together in order to find the whole of things, how to judge, how to deal with the gaps, how to clarify, how to share ideas with others.

7. **Don't look down on students, instead teachers can adopt sit-stand habits that enable looking from face to face at level.** Perhaps the habit comes from teaching children—and they are smaller than the typical teacher. Whatever might have been its origin, the teacher generally looks downward at learners. In the ordinary school, learners all look toward the teacher—generally upward. Up-and-down in almost every culture distinguishes rank and the flow of power, from on high to down there with the little people. Collegiate professors thus commonly stand to lecture. Whether or not so intended, the authoritarian symbolism is there. Many faculty dislike the seminar with its communal “sitting in a circle.” How can you tell who is in charge? Shouldn't we be able to spot the authority the instant we look in the door? AH!! POWER!!!

8. **Don't depend on the book to be the teacher; books are vital tools, but they lose much of their value if used alone.** Since Gutenberg's powerful invention, books have become the major focus of the scholarly community. In the twentieth century books were designed to do the whole job; if you have a "programmed" text who needs a teacher? Surely, technicians can "program" books (and computers) to relate constructively to information. But it is quite another thing to "program" learners to relate constructively to knowledge. We are still needing competent teachers. Since the invention of children's workbooks ("Now turn the page and fill in the blanks with the right answers"), inferior teachers have trusted the books to work alone. That mistake can explain much of the weakness in American students that the standardized tests are picking up.

9. **Don't talk more than you listen: Listening is a skill that must be developed.** Unfortunately, many teachers and professors lose their willingness to listen—a trait that can be lost along the way, especially if ignored. Listening is an active process. Unfortunately, many teachers don't try to listen. They are thinking too far ahead, focusing on what they will say next rather than what the learners are saying (or thinking). The verbal continuity of the classroom may thus be more in the imagination of the teacher than in the chain-of-thought among the learners. For many, the sound of one's own voice is beguiling. Some who are employed as teachers or professors actually fall in love with it.

10. **Don't ignore the institution's customs.** Make no mistake about it, the school is a flawed institution. Whatever its aspirations and intentions, its heritage is that of an agency of society whose purpose is to control and regulate. Not a bad idea, but so very often the operation is carried out in ways that are autocratic and coercive. To function well within such an environment, the teacher must daily engage in a balancing act. Regulating oneself to the standards and practices common to the particular school requires compromises of almost all teachers. Certain ideals must be adjusted to the norms maintained by the traditions and peculiarities of the situation. This need not be seen as an absolute abandonment of one's values, but it does mean that every teacher will need to engage in some self-accommodations in order to function productively as a part of the academic whole. One of the best bits of advice is to avoid conflicts that are less vital in order to save one's energies and good standing for the really important issues that compromise one's moral and ethical fundamentals. Herein lies the beauty and worth of an educational institution: improvement and progress has its roots in the virtue, love of learning, and respect for community that is perpetuated by the continuing discourse and quest for truth. Schools and human social welfare are intimately intertwined.