

VIEWPOINTS

Evaluating Teaching Using the Best Practices Model

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Annual faculty evaluations generally include evaluations of teaching, research and service. The research component is relatively simple to evaluate because the evidence of quality is easy to identify--grant dollars generated and their sources as well as numbers of publications and journal quality. Evaluating teaching activities, however, is another matter. Although teaching portfolios and student evaluations are useful tools, most faculty and administrators agree that good processes and comparative measures for evaluating teaching are difficult to find. To complicate the matter further, what constitutes good teaching is usually implied and not defined. A good definition of quality in teaching would be helpful, especially to assist new faculty in setting and working toward their teaching goals.

Ideally, any activity should be evaluated by determining the outcomes that the activity produces. For teaching, the desired outcome is student learning. This might be quantified by student performance on each section of standardized tests in comparison to their national peers, the number of essential practice skills that students have developed and how well prepared the students are for subsequent coursework and/or practice. Such a group of tests or skill measures does not exist, and with many team taught courses, employing these tools for individual faculty evaluations would be impossible.

An approach that is often utilized in other fields, employing "best practices," may be helpful. The underlying principle is that good outcomes are more likely to result if generally recognized good practices are employed. If we value good outcomes, we should

then value the best practices that are most likely to achieve the desired result. Applying this concept to our teaching efforts, employing best practices in education will more likely result in better learning.

Faculty should attempt to identify and agree upon best practices for teaching, i.e. those that they consider most valuable. The factors to be considered in developing a best practices list should take into account that students are humans, and as such, human characteristics and interactions between the faculty and students need to be considered. The nature of the interaction between teacher and student contributes greatly to interest in learning or to creating barriers to learning. A best practices lists should also recognize that faculty have educational responsibilities beyond presenting appropriate, contemporary material and testing on it. These responsibilities include serving as a role model of professionalism for students by helping students adopt the behaviors expected of a health care professional and by modeling those behaviors in the classroom. The evaluation process should attempt to gauge the extent to which the agreed upon best practices are being employed.

Characteristics, behaviors, and effective techniques that good teachers have in common and that are expected by our accrediting agency have appeared in several publications.^{1,2,3,4} A compilation of some of these, with additional suggestions, is provided as a starting point for developing a best practices list. After faculty agree on items most important to them, individual faculty members should be evaluated against these factors or good practices utilizing documentation provided by the faculty member being evaluated, end of semester course evaluations from students and any other appropriate information sources (i.e. peer review, student focus groups, etc).

At the time of each faculty member evaluation a plan for improvement or for achieving the best practices, if appropriate, should be developed and agreed upon. A

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follow up on implementation of the plan and the outcome of that implementation should be a formal part of the next evaluation.

Even if faculty teaching is not evaluated against a list of best practices, developing such a list helps make faculty members aware of and reminds them of what their institution values in its teaching efforts.

A Suggested Starting Point For Developing a List of Best Practices In Teaching

Instructor Characteristics

1. Knowledge or command of the material. What did the instructor do to achieve mastery of the material originally and what did he/she do to remain contemporary?
2. Creation of a classroom environment that is comfortable and conducive to learning. Is there a positive attitude on the part of the instructor and the students, and are controversies or distractions to learning eliminated or minimized?
3. Creation of an enthusiasm for the topic. Is there enthusiasm on the part of the instructor for the topic and for encouraging student learning of the topic? Do students ever indicate they find the material interesting or do they indicate it is always boring?
4. Explains concepts clearly. Do students indicate they understand what is going on in class and understand the answers to questions, or do they say they are lost? Do students ask good questions in class that indicate they are following the discussion?
5. Clear and understandable instruction style. Can all students hear the instructor? Do they understand what the instructor is saying? Are handouts legible and well organized? Are visual materials legible? Does the instructor talk to the class or to the board?
6. Inherently fair-minded and possessing common sense. Are all students treated fairly? For instance, are exams graded "blindly" and questions for all students addressed appropriately either in class or out of class? Is the instructor willing to make adjustments in grading exams if questions are clearly misinterpreted?
7. Present themselves as "real people." Does the faculty member admit to not knowing the answer to some questions but checks and brings back the answer later? Do faculty think

through problems or answers to questions out loud so students can learn logical thought processes? Are inferences drawn from models and are analogies or instructional tips that assist learning utilized? Do they maintain eye contact with the class while talking?

8. Treat students and fellow faculty members with respect and caring. Do faculty members care about student learning or are they in class because it is an assignment? Is the attitude in class one of concern for all students as individuals? Is public criticism avoided? Are lecture material and assignments spread relatively evenly throughout the semester?
9. Have a sense of humor and avoid expressions of being ruffled or miffed.

Course Management Processes

1. Concentrate on the essential material to be learned. Does the course concentrate on the essential topics that are required for a practicing pharmacist, an educated member of the health care community of the future? For example, does it address the most common diseases, the most commonly used drugs, the most common situations with which pharmacists will be faced? Is the course the proper bridge from prior courses in the curriculum to later courses? How does the instructor know that it is, or what do they do to ensure that it is the proper bridge?
2. Provide evidence of the relevance of course material. Do the students understand why it is important to learn the material? Are real world, practical, contemporary examples presented? Is basic science presented in the context of application to practice-related problems, commonly used drugs, common disease conditions, etc? What does the instructor do to provide evidence of relevancy?
3. Utilize contemporary educational techniques to increase the effectiveness of the educational mission in a manner parallel to utilizing contemporary research techniques to facilitate the effectiveness of the research mission. Are courses where students are expected to develop problem solving or disease management skills structured with opportunities for practicing such skills?
4. Incorporate active learning. Active learning provides opportunities for students to talk and listen, read, write, and reflect as they approach course content through problem-solving exer-

- cises, informal small groups, simulations, case studies, role playing, in class questions and other activities, all of which require students to apply what they are learning and/or think about what they are learning as they are learning.
5. Develop critical thinking and problem solving ability. Critical thinking is the ability to identify the basic elements of thought (purpose, question, information, assumption, interpretation, concepts, implications, point of view) and assess those elements using universal intellectual criteria and standards (clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, and logicalness).⁵ Problem solving involves the application of rules to solving a problem i.e. selecting the correct rules and applying them in combination.⁶
 6. Develop information integration skills. Are opportunities for integration of material between courses created or realized?
 7. Promote life long learning and an attitude of active self-directed learning by providing sources of information and opportunities for students to find their own answers to questions.
 8. Design the class at the appropriate level for the background of the student and the place of the course in the curriculum. Does the level of course instruction match the instructor's expectations for the students. At what level is the material in the course being taught (i.e. is it for knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation)?⁷
 9. Keep duplication purposeful and avoid unnecessary redundancy. Is material covered elsewhere in the curriculum covered again, or is it reviewed quickly as a basis for proceeding on to more advanced discussion? What does the faculty member do to minimize chances of unintended duplication?
 10. Provide clear and fair expectations. Do the students know what is expected of them? Are the goals of the course or the particular section described adequately? Is the grading system explained? Is the proportion of time spent on particular topics reflected in the proportion of weight in exams on those topics?
 11. Vary instructional modes. Are different techniques for learning utilized to accommodate different learning styles in students?
 12. Test the way the material is taught. Do exams reflect the skills taught in class? Do students get to practice in class the things required of them on exams? Do students get appropriate and timely feedback on performance? If the instruction is at the introductory end of knowledge mastery, is the testing at the same level.⁷
 13. Attend course planning and student evaluating sessions, and cooperate with fellow instructors in other courses on developing course topic sequences when appropriate.
 14. Be detail oriented. Is the class well organized and does the instructor adhere to the syllabus? Is time utilized efficiently? Does the instructor know and describe to the students what is to be accomplished each class period, and then get it accomplished? Does the class start with a brief review of what came previously and conclude with a short summary of important points? Is the coordination of material by the course director effective and appropriate?

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