

# The principles of superior high school teaching

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# The Principles of Superior High School Teaching

Robert R. Newton

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**Two very important threads wind themselves through all nine of Dr. Newton's observed "norms": teacher concern and teacher expectation. Teacher concern is implicit in each of these, and a teacher who expends the effort to expect such complete learning from students must be a natural, aware and concerned educator. Even William Watson Purkey would call that teacher excellent.**

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Recently, as principal of a high school, I had the opportunity to visit an unusually large number of classrooms. The supervisory plan for the academic year focused on visiting departments rather than individual teachers; the objective was to offer to the departments a general evaluation of their efforts rather than to analyze the performance of individual teachers.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the year, after reviewing each departmental report, it was clear that these reports contained a series of themes about the practices of the best teachers who had been observed. These generalizations resulted in a set of nine, relatively uncomplicated norms which are applicable to most classroom situations. Though scientific approaches to classroom interaction have significant value, often certain teachers are more receptive to less technical analyses and observations of their classes. The generalizations that emerged from a year of departmental visits provide a set of 'principles' which, when validated by concrete references in classes observed, supply a context to evaluate performance which may be more acceptable to teachers than other methods.

## 1. Student Activity

The best teachers had carefully organized their classes around the principle that *students must be active*

in order to be learning. They implemented this conviction by creating and enforcing the expectation that students:

- a. come to classes *prepared*,
- b. *participate* in classes, and
- c. *listen* attentively both to the teacher and to other students

This is not to suggest that the only superior classes observed were those in which every student participated several times during the session. There were excellent classes where the teacher 'dominated,' e.g., lectured throughout part or most of the class, but at the same time expected students to be attentive and actively following the class—by injecting a challenging question at a critical moment, by giving students time to reflect on potential solutions, by insisting on careful note-taking, by an imaginative or articulate presentation, etc. The essential characteristic was not the method of instruction but the way in which the teacher used the method to actively involve students. The principle seemed to hold on every cognitive level, on the level of simple recall or comprehension, not just on the higher 'thinking' levels of application, synthesis, etc.<sup>2</sup>

In numerous instances observations involved the same material being taught to different classes by different teachers. The better teachers either intuitively or explicitly seemed to have asked themselves the question: how can I present this material so that students will be actively involved? The less effective teachers (who were equally and in some cases more knowledgeable in their discipline) seemed to have been content with the first half of the question: how can I present this material? At the conclusion of these visits, it was apparent that the single, clearest visible measure of superior teaching

was the level of constructive student activity in the class.

## 2. Variety

It was virtually impossible to maintain the attention of even bright high school students without incorporating variety into classes. An observer can not only see but almost 'touch' the decline in interest as the feeling of sameness begins to emerge and permeate a class. Superior teachers used three devices to counteract this sameness and corresponding deterioration of interest. In each case it took the form of a clear crisp transition:

- a. from one objective to another,
- b. from one type of activity to a different type of activity, or
- c. from a slow pace to a quicker pace (or *vice versa*).

Where a teacher had planned or (on the basis of student feedback) spontaneously created a change in focus, method, or pace, there was inevitably a *resurgence in the energy level of individuals and the group*. Though there were occasional exceptions, the rule was more obvious—the attention span of an adolescent group requires constant renewal and refocus if it is to be maintained throughout a typical class period.

## 3. Expecting Care and Precision

Visiting a large number of classes over a prolonged period of time adds to the conviction that teaching can be defined as *the process of setting expectations*. A class will vary its behavior from teacher to teacher dependent on the expectations encountered. This is most obvious in the area of student behavior: a group that is attentive and cooperative for one teacher may be disorderly and inattentive for another. What changes is not the group but the explicit or

implicit expectations of the teacher and the degree to which the teacher insists that expectations be met.

Teacher expectations also controlled another important area: the care and precision with which students handled the course materials and developed the habit of being careful and precise. For example, the best teachers observed insisted that students come to class not merely familiar with an assignment but also carefully prepared to participate in the class, i.e., capable of restating the assignment's main ideas, able to organize and relate the various issues raised, prepared to articulate and argue their personal reactions to the assignment, etc. Where the teacher did not insist on this careful preparation or where students had been half-hearted in their completion of homework assignments, the level of discourse possible in the class was visibly a 'quality level' lower than that of classes where careful preparation had been required. The same observation could be made about the students' activity in the class itself and in evaluations--where precision and care were expected and demanded, students rose to this expectation.

#### 4. Intensive Use of Time

The superior teachers had devised a routine which allowed them to become *immersed immediately in the purpose of the classroom activity*. They treated the class period as a limited and precious commodity which had to be used economically; they communicated this attitude to their students. There were established classroom procedures which both allowed quick disposition of otherwise time-consuming clerical tasks, and also created the freedom to concentrate on the primary purpose of the class. Time was not wasted in explaining or repeating directions on how specific activities were to be conducted. Rather students appeared familiar with these procedures and routines and adjusted to the activity immediately and completely.

Often such classes included some variation of a 'prelection'--a classical teaching technique in which the

teacher briefly (3-5 minutes) prepared students to make intensive and effective preparation for the next class. The prelection was not a series of offhand remarks about the next assignment, but a *carefully constructed introduction to the homework* assignment which usually had most of or all of the following elements:

- the objective of the assignment,
- its connection with previous lessons,
- special difficulties which needed explanation,
- the method the student should use to master the material, and
- the criterion by which the student will know that he has mastered the lesson.

The time spent preparing students to master the assignment seemed to result in dividends that far outweighed the 3-5 minutes invested.

#### 5. Note-Taking

Though note-taking is not essential or appropriate in every class, it was a valuable exercise in most. One clear conclusion emerged: in classes where teachers insisted that students take notes, there was a *visibly higher level of attention* throughout. The discipline involved in taking notes, in restating and organizing what is occurring in class, requires a level of concentration which both promotes activity and reduces distraction and daydreaming.

Note-taking was an effective device not only in lecture sessions, but also in discussion groups or classes where the teacher developed insights or conclusions through the Socratic method. One of the most peculiar aspects of many seminar-type discussion groups (15-20 students) observed was the casual disregard for the 'product' generated by this common effort. A 40-minute group discussion with 20 students, each of whom had done 30 minutes of preparation involved an investment of about 23 hours of student time. Add two hours of teacher preparation, involvement and evaluation, and there were 25 hours invested in the outcomes of the discussion. Yet how many students (or teachers) regarded

the results of this common effort as important enough to record in their notes? How many teachers wrote down and perhaps later included such conclusions as part of the material for which students were responsible and on which they were evaluated?

Some teachers periodically examined students' notes, especially when students were doing poorly. Time invested in developing the skill of note-taking seemed important not only for success in high school but also for the future learning of students.

#### 6. Requiring Students 'To Think'

There was a significant variation from class to class in the amount of 'thinking' expected by different teachers. On several occasions it was obvious that a group of students in one teacher's class were expected to respond to questions that were mainly on the level of recall or understanding; the same group in another teacher's class were expected to operate on the higher cognitive levels, i.e., go beyond what they already know to new conclusions through analysis, evaluation, synthesis, etc. What was interesting was that the focus on higher or lower level questions seemed to be a *recurrent pattern of the teacher* which moved with him from class to class. The students' level of activity, however, was always a response to the demands of the teacher.

Some teachers focused intuitively on the higher levels. Others seemed to have planned a pattern which moved from the basic to the higher levels. The naturally gifted teacher seems to focus on the higher cognitive levels without a great deal of conscious effort or planning. However, it was also apparent that the majority of teachers must explicitly plan into their classes 'thinking' questions or activities. Whether, after a definite period of time, higher level expectations become part of a teacher's recurrent pattern of behavior was not obvious. It was clear that the best teachers observed were encouraging and insisting on responses or activities which required students to think.

## 7. Structuring Discussions

In recent years, great efforts have been made in many schools to reduce class size. In numerous instances, classes have been reduced to the point where group discussion is possible. However, although the size of classes had changed in many cases, teaching techniques frequently have not. In classes where productive discussions were held, the teachers were quite deliberate in their efforts to involve students in the discussion, even though the aim was student rather than teacher activity. In other words, teachers *did not simply allow students to talk but structured the discussion with devices similar to the following:*

- set the context in which the discussion was taking place, i.e., how it was related to the rest of the unit or course,

- had a definite physical arrangement, e.g., face-to-face seating which prompted rather than hindered student-to-student interaction,

- throughout the discussion focused or refocused attention on the topic or objective of the discussion,

- insisted that students document what they said by reference to the common assignment, e.g., what all students had read,

- made connections with material with which students were familiar from other parts of the course,

- tried to involve everyone when he sensed that serious imbalances in participation were occurring, and

- summarized insights or conclusions at various important moments throughout and at the end of the discussion (or invited students to make such summaries).

In general, the best discussions observed gave the impression that the teacher was definitely 'in charge' but not dominating. The students, because of the logical progression of the discussion, had a sense that the time had been productively used and that something valuable had been accomplished by their effort; in other words, they had not just talked but their exchange had been informed and purposeful, and, as a result, a satisfying experience for them.

## 8. Focus on How to Learn

The best teachers spent time teaching their students 'how to learn' the subject. It was clearly important to certain teachers not only that their students know something but that simultaneously they develop skill in the process of mastering the subject, e.g., how to read a short story, how to translate a Latin passage, how to approach a problem in mathematics, how to listen to a piece of music, how to organize a scientific experiment. Rather than simply learning or doing, students were expected consciously to reflect on *how* they were learning; they were being invited and encouraged by the teacher to learn 'how to learn.' Their explicit attention to developing this capacity seemed to reflect these teachers' awareness of the insight expressed by William Cory at Eton in 1861.

You are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism. A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours that you have spent on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions. But you go to a great school, not for knowledge so much as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual posture, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the habit of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. Above all, you go to a great school for self-knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Superior teachers were not only concerned with teaching their students *something* but were also insistent that

the students leave their course skilled in *how to learn* the subject.

## 9. Regular Patterns of Accountability

The final element that characterized the superior teachers observed was a *regular pattern of accountability*. In classroom observations as well as conversations with students and review of students' tests and papers, it became apparent that it was essential that the teacher make clear to students what they were accountable for. Accountability is the reverse side of teacher expectations. For example, a teacher who insisted that students come prepared to discuss a specific reading assignment and held the student accountable by an occasional quiz or direct questioning found that the students came to class prepared. The teacher who told students to come prepared but in no way enforced this expectation found a very mixed pattern of student responses.

Whether we like it or not, except for the unusual student, adolescents judge something important if they are held accountable for doing it. If the teacher does not think it important enough to hold them accountable, it takes a much lower place on the students' list of priorities.

There were fewer complaints about teachers who made reasonable demands and regularly evaluated whether these requirements were being met. And usually a pattern of clearly defined norms of evaluation or performance, and evaluation on the basis of these expectations, reduced student anxieties and created an acceptable and productive pattern of learning.

## Summary Conclusion

Initially it was indicated that the intention of this presentation was to describe the conclusions that were reached as a result of extensive observation of about 40 teachers over the period of an academic year. What emerged from this experience was a series of nontechnical norms which were not only useful to the principal, but also more acceptable to teachers

(and many department chairpersons) who typically reacted with anxiety and annoyance to the more scientific analysis of classes. By way of a summary statement, it might be suggested that teachers and supervisors can work toward superior teaching by agreeing to analyze the degree to which the teacher:  
--has created active student

involvement with the material,  
--has planned variety into classes,  
--demands care and precision from students,  
--makes intensive use of class time,  
--insists on student note-taking,  
--requires 'thinking' responses,  
--structures discussions,  
--explicitly teaches students 'how to learn' the subject, and

--has established clear patterns of accountability.

Though other qualities could be advanced as equally important, a year of observation and reflection led one principal to the conclusion that the above were the defining characteristics of the superior teachers. ♣

### NOTES

1. The departmental visit in each case involved: 1) an initial meeting with the members of the department to hear their concerns and ideas on how the visit might be most useful, 2) a review of the self-evaluations and outside reports written on the department over the past five years, 3) perusal of the general goals and detailed course descriptions of each department, 4) several visits to the classes of each member of the department, 5) extensive sampling of randomly selected groups of students for their opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of the department, 6) a summary written report, and 7) a follow-up meeting with the department to review their reactions to the report and to discuss their plans for implementation of its recommendations.
2. The thesis of the recent popular 'memory books' has been the importance of activity in memorizing; if a person wishes to recall something, he/she cannot passively receive the information but must *do something* with it, e.g., associate it with information already possessed, restate it in a comical or unusual way.
3. Quoted from "What makes the best college education?" by Henry Rosovsky in *Harvard Today* (Fall, 1976).

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