

How Not to Be a Terrible Teacher
(And Maybe Be a Good One)

How Not to Be a Terrible Teacher

(And Maybe Be a Good One)

Gerald S. Reamey

Professor of Law
St. Mary's University School of Law



CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS

Durham, North Carolina

Copyright © 2023
Gerald S. Reamey
All Rights Reserved

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Reamey, Gerald S., author.

Title: How not to be a terrible teacher (and maybe be a good one) / Gerald S. Reamey.

Description: Durham, North Carolina : Carolina Academic Press, LLC, 2023. |

Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023005596 | ISBN 9781531027339 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781531026677 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Effective teaching. | Classroom management. | Educational tests and measurements.

Classification: LCC LB1025.3 .R4245 2023 | DDC 371.102—dc23/eng/20230310

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023005596>

Carolina Academic Press
700 Kent Street
Durham, North Carolina 27701
(919) 489-7486
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to students, who suffer terrible teachers, learn from good ones, and are inspired by great ones.

It is also dedicated to those teachers who treat our profession as the honorable, consequential endeavor it is.

Contents

Introductory Note	ix
One Who Should Read This Book?	3
Two The Golden Rule of Teaching	7
Three Before You Even Begin to Teach	15
Create the Goals for the Course	16
The Course Materials	16
The Syllabus	18
Preparing the Classroom	21
Four Teaching (Or, Life in the Crucible)	25
First (and Lasting) Impressions	26
Appearance	26
Pre-Class Activities	28
Technology in the Classroom	31
Using Your Stage	38
Five The Art of Teaching	43
The Power of Provocation	47
The Power of Surprise	50
The Power of Sincerity	56
The Power of Vulnerability	59

Contents

Six	What Terrible Teachers Do in the Classroom	65
Seven	Why Should I Care About Student Evaluations?	71
Eight	Teaching Outside the Classroom	81
Nine	Demeanor: Indirect Teaching	91
Ten	Teaching Through the Test	97
	How to Assess Knowledge and Performance	100
	Other Kinds of Assessment	108
	Administering the Exam	110
Eleven	The Joys of Grading	113
	How It's Done	113
	Teaching Through Exam Review	116
Twelve	Some Final Thoughts	121
	Acknowledgments	125

Introductory Note

Before investing precious time reading any book, it's important to know what it is—or at least what its author hopes it to be. Equally important is knowing what the book is not. In my academic career, I've written a lot of articles and books with footnotes or endnotes reflecting the research on which my writing is based. This is not one of those.

This book is not a memoir, either, although it includes anecdotes and examples from my rather lengthy teaching career. Instead, it is a reflection on what I've learned over more than four decades about the fine art of teaching. By this time, you'd think I should know pretty much everything about teaching, but like all artistic endeavors, being an educator is as much a continuous learning experience as it is a teaching experience. So it is with me. Every class I teach is full of lessons for me.

This is true partly because each generation of students brings its own challenges. The students I taught in 1982 were very unlike the ones I taught in 2002 or in 2022. Fortunately, human nature being what it is, every generation also brings with it common traits and values. Teachers don't have to constantly reinvent the wheel, but they have to shape it and modify it regularly, sometimes even during a single class period.

This book speaks to those immutable needs of students that exist within every generation. They don't change because of advances in technology, or because we switched from blackboards and chalk to whiteboards and dry erase markers. There are just some things that always drive students crazy and interfere with their ability to learn. Those things can be eliminated, or at least reduced, and it is my hope that this book helps teachers do just that. To that end, my observations focus on teaching in the classroom at the college, graduate, or professional school level.

This book is not comprehensive. Of course, no book is. I don't pretend to know or practice all the methods that can improve teaching effectiveness. I hope merely to provide a base upon which to build good teaching techniques.

When I joined the U.S. Army, my first duty assignment was to an Officer's Basic Course at Fort Gordon, Georgia. All Army officers receive their "branch" training in such a course. My branch was Signal Corps, and there was specialized training in the communications equipment and procedures used by the Army. But common topics are taught in all of these basic courses, subjects every officer is expected to know, regardless of branch assignment. Along with marksmanship, tactics, land navigation, and a host of other bits of essential knowledge for small unit leaders, every young officer is taught how to teach.

As you would expect, the Army has a step-by-step, by-the-book recipe for teaching a class. Like other military training in basic subjects, students do not become masters of these skills. But if they do it the way the Army prescribes, they will be competent. Not gifted, not masterful, but not bad. Competent.

In setting out to write this book, drawing on years of personal experience, observation, trial and error, research, and formal education, my goal is to go beyond the kind of formalistic, cookie-cutter approach the military takes to "educating the educators." In doing so, however, I want to leave plenty of room for teachers to practice the art of teaching, to bring their own style and focus to the endeavor.

I have had colleagues who used profanity in the classroom, shouted at students, and thrown chalk and erasers. That's not my style, but some of those colleagues were highly effective teachers. Their art was not mine, but it worked because they knew how and when to employ it. Other colleagues use media extensively in the classroom. Or require students to write journals daily. Or frequently use guest speakers, or engage in role play, or practice a strict form of the Socratic method, or employ experiential learning.

All of these things can be done well, and they all can be done poorly or ineffectively. It is not my purpose in this book to say which methods teachers should adopt. Rather, I will point out some of the ways in which various techniques and behaviors can actually keep students from learning. I've been to countless academic conferences where a presenter extolls the virtue of some "innovative" technique the presenter has used to great effect. Or so they say.

What these presenters rarely say, but always should, is, "I used this technique in a way that turned out to be effective in my class in a particular semester and under certain circumstances with a given number of students who largely had learning styles that were well suited to this technique. It may not work for you at all. In fact, it may not work for me under slightly different circumstances. But it's worth considering."

I've tried to stay away from extolling the virtues of particular techniques, although I do suggest some basic methods that most people can use effectively. Just keep in mind that nothing works all the time. Therefore, I'll spend most of my time talking to you about avoiding the things that almost never work or that are certain to interfere with learning.

Let me explain why I think that approach can be useful. Years ago, my wife and I took up sailing. We bought a sailboat and went to sailing school, learning, among other things, the basics of sailboat racing. One of the most helpful lessons I've retained from competing in a few boat races is that it's not the fastest boat that wins the race.

Oh, it's great to have a really fast boat under your feet instead of some moss-covered hull that sails more like a bathtub than a yacht. But regattas are won by sailors and crews who make the *fewest mistakes*. The same is true of excellent teaching. Not everything works. Not every day is filled with eye-opening wonderment. Sometimes things fall flat. Sometimes people fall flat. That's not fatal unless it happens regularly.

You won't be a perfect teacher. I've watched true master teachers, and there's always something that doesn't quite work, or could be improved. Master teachers aren't deterred by those "mistakes." They learn to trim their sails more carefully, or clean their hull more thoroughly, or tack a little sooner on the next leg. They're consistently good, but only sometimes are they great. And they're never really bad. They avoid the obvious mistakes.

I think I can say with some confidence to new teachers that none of the things I suggest in this book will hurt you. To the contrary, I feel confident that they'll help you. For more experienced teachers who want to improve, avoiding the things that drive students to distraction is far more important than finding a splashy technique to impress them. In other words, don't develop bad habits. If you already have them, get rid of them. This book aims to provide some guidance in doing that.