

Improving Teaching Skills

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One major objective of university instruction in home economics and agriculture is the development of skills. We want students to master skills which will be required in their chosen profession in the future. Just as there are basic skills which students should acquire, there are basic teaching skills which university professors should acquire. Although knowledge of the subject matter is important for the professor, the ability to use teaching skills to impart this knowledge is also important.

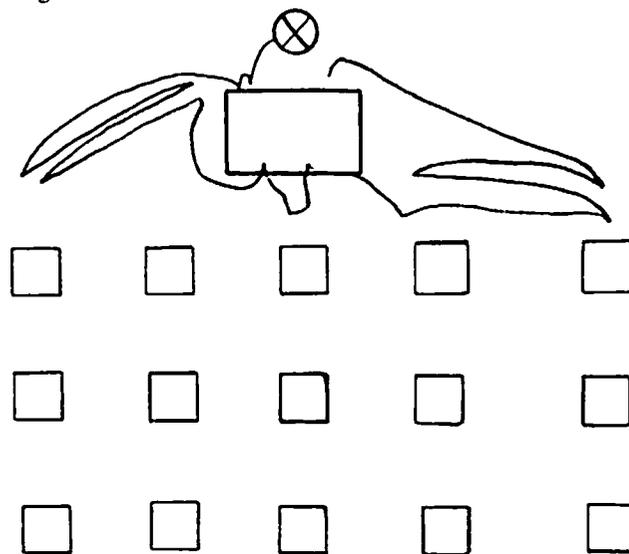
Basic teaching skills are defined as those behaviors and/or actions a teacher consciously and deliberately uses to increase learning. The mastery of basic teaching skills adds effectiveness and precision to our teaching. In this article ten teaching skills will be examined and discussed.

1. **Establishing set** is a skill used to prepare the learner for the lesson. This is often called "motivation" or an "interest approach." Common sense tells us if a student is interested in a topic he or she will be more receptive to the lesson. The challenge to university professors is to then figure out how to interest the students in the topic. The technique used in establishing set can take many forms. Telling an interesting story, presenting a problem to the students, telling a joke, using a gimmick, using the experiences of the students, or using an analogy are all techniques which could be used to establish set. To be effective such approaches should relate directly or indirectly to the lesson objectives and/or the students' previous experiences. A skillful teacher establishes set before each lesson, thus getting the students ready to learn. Over 150 years ago Horace Mann said, "A teacher who is attempting to teach without first inspiring the students with a desire to learn is hammering on cold iron." This statement is just as true today. Establishing set is an important teaching skill.

2. **Teacher movement** is the ability of the teacher to move about the classroom. Planned teacher movement is different from annoying pacing. Instead of hiding behind a lectern, overhead projector, or teacher's desk, the skillful teacher joins the audience. Even though this may appear to be a simplistic skill it is important because it accomplishes several things. Students are forced to turn their bodies and heads to follow the movement of the teacher. This tends to keep the students more involved in the lesson. Teacher movement allows for supervision of both the learning and behavior of the student. This powerful but subtle teaching skill permits the teacher to know what the

students are doing at all times. Students who expect the teacher to walk and stand among them at any time, find it difficult to do much else except participate in and pay attention to the lesson.

There is a simple way to analyze your movement. On a plain sheet of paper draw your classroom depicting all the desks and equipment. Draw a circle in the spot where you will be standing when the class starts. Ask one of your better students to take the drawing and diagram your movements during an entire class. You may be surprised to learn that you constantly move back and forth from one spot to another or you may move about the classroom. The following diagram illustrates a movement chart.



3. **Pausing** is the ability of the teacher to contrast sound with silence. A teacher pauses for several reasons during a lesson. Pausing can help divide complicated subject matter into smaller parts for easier learning. In addition, it can provide a natural break or transition into new subject matter and class activities. It can also highlight and/or draw attention to an important point. Pausing is also a good tool for maintaining discipline in the classroom. If the noise level in the room starts to rise a skillful teacher will pause (stop talking); in most cases the students will realize they are also to stop talking. Pausing can be a dynamic teaching skill.

4. **Focusing** is similar to pausing in that it is used to capture the attention of the student and to emphasize important points in the lesson. Focusing is the ability to emphasize something to which the student should pay special attention. Both verbal and non-verbal behaviors are used in focusing. Pointing at an object or word, frowning, snapping your fingers, and other movements and actions used for emphasizing are examples of nonverbal focusing. The purpose of these

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actions is to draw the attention of the students to a particular item, thought, or behavior.

Focusing also includes verbal gestures. The use of verbal phrases such as, "now watch this closely," "this is very important," and "are you with me," are examples of verbal focusing. Knowing when and how to focus can make the difference between an ordinary lesson and an outstanding lesson.

5. **Shifting interaction** rotates the teaching and learning between the teacher and the students (Cooper et al, 1977). It enhances student centered learning. Teachers who deliberately and continuously promote student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and teacher-to-group communication cannot fall into the deadly trap of daily lecturing. The goal is to use all three types of interaction during each lesson. The skillful teacher has control over the interaction in the classroom.

6. **Shifting senses** is the teacher's ability to have the students use more than just hearing to learn. Research (Foley & Smilansky, 1980) has revealed that an average of 80 percent of information delivered in lecture form is forgotten in eight weeks. Therefore, learning cannot be dependent on just hearing. The skillful teacher uses a variety of senses such as sight and touch in teaching. A teacher should supplement the lecture with visual aids. Slides, charts, and overhead transparencies help students learn. A professor should also consider passing items such as feed samples, plants, fabrics, seeds, etc. around the classroom. Students should be encouraged to touch, smell, and even taste the items. Using all the senses and shifting from one sense to another requires effort but helps the subject matter come to life.

7. **Spaced learning** is the skill of dividing subject matter and classroom activities into time frames which enhance learning. A skillful teacher can keep motivation and effort at a high level only for short periods of time before the students begin to tire or become bored. Lessons are planned to allow for a variety of activities. For example, a short period of lecture, interspersed with a small group discussion, followed with a problem may make it easier for learners to perform at or near the top level (Clark & Starr, 1981). The teacher who understands the concept of spaced learning realizes too much of any one teaching technique, whether it is active or restful, becomes boring after a while.

8. **Reading attending behavior** is the ability of the teacher to decipher the verbal and nonverbal messages being sent by each student throughout a lesson. The teacher carefully and deliberately studies each student's body language, emotional tone, and intellectual output to determine the level of comprehension and acceptance of the lesson material. Such clues can indicate to the teacher the necessity to review and reinforce information which is not being understood or to advance the material at a faster pace

when the students appear more knowledgeable than anticipated.

9. **Questioning** is the skill of probing into the thoughts, feelings, and knowledge of the students in order to increase learning. The effective teacher knows that information is easily forgotten, but the thinking process which is developed through significant questions that probe for solutions will contribute immeasurably to the students' education (Chamberlain & Kelly, 1975). Effective questioning is the teacher's guide to determining the level of understanding and comprehension of the students. It can build a foundation of basic knowledge, develop analytical thinking, and provide the impetus for creative thinking. Questioning is the safeguard of communication in the classroom. It helps to prevent the domination of teacher talk and promotes individual student participation.

Just as there is a right way and a wrong way to use certain skills, there is a correct way to ask questions in class. The correct procedure for using questions involves five steps:

1. State the question.
2. Pause to allow the students to think.
3. Call on a specific student to answer. (If you don't ask a specific person, often no one will answer. This also keeps all students on their toes since you may call on them. Please note that the question is stated before a student is called on.)
4. Redirect the question to another student or ask the student who answered to provide more information, probe; get the students to think critically.
5. Acknowledge the right answer and/or clarify any points which need to be made. Be sure the students know the correct answer before moving on.

10. **Closure** is a skill used to summarize the lesson and single out those aspects of the lesson that are of the greatest importance (Orlich, 1980). Closure normally occurs at the end of the lesson but could occur at any time. It is a procedure for "wrapping up" the lesson. It is human nature for people to want things to be complete. Closure provides teachers and students the opportunity to "complete" the lesson. Closure can be accomplished in several ways. The teacher may review the key points of the lesson. Students could be asked questions to see if they grasped what was taught. The teacher could even ask, "What did you learn today? How can you apply this information?"

Closure allows the teacher to see if the students learned what they were supposed to learn. This will aid the professor in planning for the next class session. Closure also helps the student mentally to organize and classify the information which has been taught so that it may be stored for further use by itself, or in conjunction with new and/or related learning.

Conclusion

First impressions of these teaching skills are misleading. Appearing simple to use, they are in reality, very difficult to master. The mastery of each skill requires the use of principles of learning, educational psychology, and talents such as creativity, organization, and practice. Mastery of these teaching skills takes as much practice as it requires to become a great football player, tennis player, or golfer. Professors, unlike athletes, are handicapped because they often do not have coaches, rule books, training films, practice sessions, and halls of fame to work towards. Teachers can, however, design their own training programs. As long as a teacher is in the profession (sport) of teaching, he/she needs to be on a training program. How quickly skills become rusty, even forgotten, when they are not practiced. Have you practiced your teaching skills today?

NACTA HISTORY

The Minnesota State Affiliate MACTA

Robert M. Collins
and Peter Fog

Can a state affiliate of the National Association of Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA) be an effective organization? Those working with the Minnesota affiliate during its eight-year history believe that the answer is **YES**.

Introduction

One of the purposes of this paper is to evaluate the question raised in the first paragraph, but a second and equally important purpose is to bring together pertinent information about MACTA. Although its history is relatively brief, already some information concerning the organization's formative years is becoming confused.

Collins and Fog are members of the University of Minnesota Technical College at Waseca faculty.



Recent MACTA Workshop on "Excellence in Agriculture" featured Dr. Richard Sauer, Deputy Vice President, Institute of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics, University of Minnesota as the keynote speaker.

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In the December, 1975, **NACTA JOURNAL** (Vol. XIX, No. 4), page 29 was titled, "MACTA ORGANIZED, First State Affiliate." Under the title, using the full page, the constitution of the organization was given. Dr. Edward C. Frederick was Vice President and President-Elect of NACTA at this time.

Frederick, Provost of the University of Minnesota Technical College, Waseca, visualized state affiliates as being a natural and logical extension of the National Association of Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture. As a member of the NACTA Executive Committee, he worked with the other board members in developing the idea. By 1984 there were four state affiliates, Minnesota, Missouri, Kansas and Louisiana. Several more states were planning affiliation.

Purposes

The purposes for which this state affiliate organization was formed are the same as for the National Association of Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture: