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College Teaching: Practical Insights from the
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Abstract
As an advanced doctoral student and former college instructor for 12 years, I reviewed Forsyth’s (2016) book, College Teaching: Practical Insights from the Science of Teaching and Learning, to determine how the author created an accessible and contemporary text for novice and veteran higher education instructors alike. In a straightforward appeal, the book offers proven college teaching recommendations and debunks what the author, an experienced social and personality psychologist, considers faulty theoretical analyses by bolstering arguments in empirical studies grounded in psychology theory and research. The book’s discussions, which are backed by ample supporting qualitative and quantitative data distributed throughout 10 chapters, purport to inspire professors to consider how their students learn, and to closely examine how they, the instructors, should teach. The book offers observations into 10 crucial aspects of college-level teaching, which are covered as chapters: (a) identifying purposes, (b) course planning, (c) student engagement, (d) lecturing, (e) assessment, (f) grading, (g) classroom management, (h) using technology, (i) course evaluation, and (j) developing a portfolio.

A Book Review of Donelson R. Forsyth’s
College Teaching: Practical Insights from the Science of Teaching and Learning (2nd ed.)

Early on in his straightforward 354-page treatise, College Teaching: Practical Insights from the Science of Teaching and Learning (Forsyth, 2016), which is aimed at novice and veteran higher education instructors alike, author Donelson R. Forsyth asks professors to treat their first days of class as more than just occasions for administrative housekeeping: “That day comes but once, and it is an opportunity to be seized, . . .” (p. 66). Arousing students’ interest, setting classroom standards, amending any course misunderstandings, and revealing one’s excitement for upcoming lectures are ideal ways that professors can take advantage of the first meeting of class, asserts Forsyth, an experienced social and personality psychologist. It is with this same gusto, and backed by psychology theory and empirical research, that Forsyth offers proven teaching recommendations and debunks what he considers to be faulty theoretical analyses, whose predictions about teaching and learning he regards often as ineffective and based on hearsay or speculation. His bold ideas, which aspire to imbue readers with the experience and confidence of a 38-year veteran professor of undergraduate and graduate students and the esteem and prolificity of an author of more than 140 chapters and articles, form the book’s centerpiece, upon which an uncommon source of information about teaching – theory and research in psychology – is grounded. Forsyth, who qualifies his discussions and arguments with qualitative and quantitative data throughout the book’s 10 chapters, is unambiguous regarding his latest manuscript’s objectives; he purports to inspire professors to consider how their students learn, and, in effect, closely examine how they, the instructors, should teach.
Strategically, Forsyth arranges the book’s chapters in a pragmatic method familiar to novice and veteran professors, respectively, which is a key strength of the text; subjects are detailed “in the order they gain our attention during the . . . semester, and provide a guide one can follow from the semester’s start to its end” (p. 15) and experienced teachers may gain new perspectives from the book’s emphasis of academe’s most vexing and ongoing challenges. The book, reinforced by psychology theory and research, offers observations into 10 crucial aspects of college-level teaching, which are covered as chapters: (a) identifying purposes, (b) course planning, (c) student engagement, (d) lecturing, (e) assessment, (f) grading, (g) classroom management, (h) using technology, (i) course evaluation, and (j) developing a portfolio.

After reading the author’s early unflinching pronouncements that his evidence-based teaching suggestions are superior to analyses based on speculation and long-standing wisdom, it is surprising – if not a bit jarring – to later hear Forsyth apologizing for sections in which he doles out advice on teaching, extends personal opinions, and perhaps uses more words than necessary to make straightforward points. Such confessions, in the minds of some readers, may ultimately weaken the assertive stances he assumes later in the book.

As an advanced doctoral student, who taught undergraduates for 12 years, Chapter 1, “Orienting: Considering Purposes and Priorities,” and its ardent appeals that professors, before stepping into their classrooms, engage in practical planning strategies and careful consideration of their foci, immediately inspires me to reconsider my own teaching practices in hindsight, even after acquiring increased experience and maturity. The chapter also illustrates Forsyth’s intentions on treating novice and veteran professors on an even stature where improving college teaching is the primary goal. All teachers, Forsyth affirms, should reflect on their objectives in the classroom, and commit to providing instruction in areas that may seem naturally intrinsic for their students, such as the desire and willingness to learn. Forsyth cites 2011 and 2014 research by Arum and Roksa, authors of two controversial and revealing books on higher education’s culpability in students’ enduring academic shortcomings, Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses and Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates, respectively, to support his argument that professors, in addition to their numerous other demands, must reacquaint students with the principal objectives of college: (a) to learn, and (b) to develop their intellect. From my point of view, this suggestion, based on Arum’s and Roksa’s (2011) findings that students’ academic efforts have substantially weakened in the decades since the early beginnings of collegiate culture first reflected undergraduates’ preferred concerns with more social pursuits, and that as more students attend college, institutions “continue to support nonacademic pursuits” (Arum & Roksa, 2014, p. 14), aligns with the book’s early lofty charge to all college teachers: check your egos at the door and regardless of your experience, examine how effectively you teach. For professors who wish to skip this chapter or this part of the pedagogy, Forsyth offers a series of cerebral threats that include a warning that wayward instructors stand to become “test givers, attendance takers, experts, disciplinarians, or speakers,” (p.
There are indisputable confirmations that this second edition of Forsyth’s book is a contemporary revamped version of his first edition, *The Professor’s Guide to Teaching: Psychological Practices and Principles* (2003), in which he referred to the college learners as “inveterate doctoral students, disdainful upper-level majors, enthusiastic first-year students, and distracted high school students” (p. 3); however, none stand out as clearly as they do in Chapter 2, “Prepping: Planning to Teach a College Class,” where readers are reminded of and others are introduced to the new generation of students known as the “Millennials.” Realizing that professors in the 21st century will likely confront a roomful of “narcissists . . . [who require] redefined expectations, a change in instructional tactics, and renewed resilience” (p. 47), Forsyth’s characterization of many of today’s traditional students, may come across as exceptionally harsh, except by those experienced professors and new instructors, who, like Forsyth have studied this generation’s empirical data or have encountered Millennials in their college classes. But as it has been clarified in the book’s opening pages, any perceived wrath is never solely placed squarely on the feet of the students, whom Forsyth believes professors should be relatively acquainted; among other planning strategies that professors often dismiss, Forsyth clearly admonishes those who fail to demonstrate a commanding grasp of course material, who misjudge the level or size of the course, and who disregard how the use of technology and tests are effectively aligned with course goals. Forsyth, who peppers his book’s arguments with statistical data from the National Center for Educational Statistics and other sources, even suggests that when it comes to their classes, professors adopt advice offered by students. While more erudite readers will gravitate toward the chapter’s lengthy sampling of 31 teaching methods and practices, others will find more helpful an abridged list of the seven student-ranked recommendations for prompting them to finish their assigned class readings.

When following Forsyth’s arguments about adopting effective evidence-based theories for college teaching, I find it reasonable to acquiesce to his emphasis on student engagement teaching methods addressed in Chapter 3, “Guiding: Student-Centered Approaches to Teaching.” for unlike professor-centered approaches, such as lecturing, viewing videos, and working board problems, student engagement methods, among other outcomes, appear to “personalize and enrich the teacher-learning experience” (p. 72). His inclusion of student discussion prompts in this chapter, while beneficial, may come across as disingenuous to those academic traditionalists who are not accustomed to such engagement and prefer to cling to professor-centered techniques that do not include befriending their students. In a puzzling segue to Chapter 4, “Lecturing: Developing and Delivering Effective Presentations,” the book, which seems to emphasize a love/hate relationship with classroom lecturing, not only discusses effective lecturing strategies, but examines when and if those approaches should be used at all, amid sentiments largely buoyed by accompanying qualitative data. If Forsyth’s point is to reinforce lecturing’s contentious worth among academics, he has made it. He concedes
that both sides have merit. However, if his purpose is to instead have professors’ question, “When is lecturing most effective?” he might face a skeptical audience, whose members were told in the previous chapter to always opt for more student-centered teaching techniques whenever possible.

In Chapter 5, “Testing: Strategies and Skills for Evaluating Learning” and Chapter 6, “Grading (and Aiding): Helping Students Reach Their Learning Goals” Forsyth continues his admonishment of traditional academic practices being only as effective as their chief administrators: professors. While he argues that formative and summative assessments via “good tests” are advantageous for culling effective feedback for student performance, promoting learning, and motivating students, among a host of reasons that Forsyth cites for favoring testing, “poorly designed and haphazardly administered” (p. 139) evaluations garner few educational benefits for students and fail to inform faculty about their own performance. Furthermore, Forsyth offers professors more useful suggestions on grading, which center on providing students additional feedback “about strengths and weaknesses that they can use to guide their learning activities” (p. 170).

When reviewing these two chapters, what came to my mind was how the author, having acknowledged many professors’ academic obligations, which already are stretched to their limits by teaching, research, advising, administrative and other responsibilities, insists that faculty do even more to teach more effectively and to help their students gain greater insights. Chapters 7 and 8, “Managing: Fostering Academic Integrity, Civility, and Tolerance,” and “Upgrading: Using Technology Creatively in Teaching,” respectively, calls for professors to keep it moving, and to assume roles as classroom managers, performing more exclusive duties tailored toward individual students, and to become what Forsyth refers to as a “Professor 2.0,” an upgraded, more tech-savvy instructor, who can integrate new technologies into the classroom effortlessly with great success.

It is clear that the empathy Forsyth projects in his book is levelled more at students and not overextended instructors. As a doctoral student who intends to once again face classes and focus research on faculty writing groups, I wonder whether there can be middle ground, too, for committed professors, who are pressured to perform, publish and do all the things Forsyth demands for effective college teaching, and still maintain a semblance of rationality. A closer read, however, seems to reveal that Forsyth is imploring only the professors, who are not fully committed to their students, to begin behaving as if they are. The clue to this revelation is disclosed on the book’s first page, where, as a new professor, he deliberates over the evaluations he has receives from students, including some that were negative and critical of his teaching. It led him to ask, “If I had any faith in my own discipline, then why could I not use its accrued insights and findings to find ways to teach more effectively?” (pg. x) By vicarious extension, he asks the same of his audience of professors.

In Chapter 9, “Evaluating: Assessing and Enhancing Teaching Quality,” Forsyth brings his response full circle when he revisits the reliability of student ratings in instruction. His
qualitative and quantitative research findings in this area, so many years later, will surprise readers.

In what could be the book’s most beneficial chapter in terms of faculty advancement, Chapter 10: “Documenting: Developing a Teaching Portfolio,” offers readers comprehensive directions in effectively conveying teaching experience in a mobile format. In a step-by-step format, also presented in the book’s accessible style, the author encourages professors to monitor and adjust their teaching persona, which can be identified by such processes as evidence of academic purposes and priorities, student-centered teaching strategies, links between learning and testing, and instances in which civility and integrity were maintained in the classroom; in other words, all are chapter topics in which Forsyth provides greater focus.

Just as the author requests that professors consider their first days of class sacred for learning, he also beckons readers to take seriously its recommendations and best practices because they are validated by proven empirical research. Forsyth, who eschews comparisons to his bound research being compared to a self-help book, does not make promises he cannot deliver despite his books’ lofty ambitions; it is a sentiment he first disclosed in the first edition: “I tried to avoid these pitfalls by not oversimplifying the complexities of teaching or drawing conclusions that overstepped the limitations of the available data” (Forsyth, 2003, p. 7).

Overall, this accessible book, which does not require knowledge of psychology and includes just as many generous references to pop culture and as it does to snippets of teaching theories scattered throughout, should be of interest to professors of various levels, who wish to step up their classroom teaching prowess, not simply for their own sakes, but for the measurable and positive transformations of their students. After reading Forsyth’s book, I anticipate returning to the classroom with a renewed commitment and a more distinct purpose to affect my students and ensure that they are transformed effectively in some way.

References


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