



How to Become a Better College Teacher

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Harry Brighouse, professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, writes in this personal reflection about his journey of becoming a better teacher. He opens the reflection by asking the reader to imagine hiring a plumber. The plumber you find has never done any plumbing, never read any books about it, and never attended classes about how to improve. Although she has been in the same room with some professional plumbers, she has neither observed the results of their work nor followed-up with clients to see if they were satisfied. However, the plumber you hired claims to be a very good baker!

Confused by this, you call the plumbing company to inquire if this person is really qualified, and the owner tells you that this is how all plumbers are trained. Moreover, you are informed that most plumbers are experts in other things, such as literary critics, physicists, and so forth. Perhaps most troubling is that the company does not evaluate employee performance based on results. The main criterion for pay raises and job security is showing excellence in their other expertise (e.g., literary critiques, physics), not plumbing. And, unless customer satisfaction ratings are horrible, the company just places them in a file folder.

Does this sound familiar? Brighouse implies that this is basically how we prepare and evaluate college instructors. Like the analogy of the plumber, the system does little to prepare academicians to teach, and it is set up to reward skills other than teaching.

Brighouse goes on to describe his own personal journey of becoming a better teacher. It began when he read Derek Bok's *Our Underachieving Colleges*, which signaled a problem with his teaching. He realized that adherence to lecturing enabled him to evade the question of whether or not his students understood the material. He became even more enlightened the first time he taught First-Year Interest Group (FIG) seminar, because it was obvious that the students were not engaged.

But recognizing that a problem existed was not enough to bring about change. He knew he needed to be motivated to improve. The incentive came when an undergraduate student (Emma), who had taken his FIG seminar, approached him about helping to improve the class. Then, the director of the FIG program offered to give them both a \$500 budget, which enabled Emma to observe his teaching, take notes, and provide feedback. Emma provided a student-centered perspective and offered Brighouse a sounding board for his plans about improving the course. He now regularly has students observe his teaching, and the program director facilitates biweekly discussions with instructors on such topics as grading practices, how to prompt discussions, and so forth.

Brighouse argues that instructional quality is "the most neglected—and perhaps the most serious—equity issue in higher education," because it affects everyone, including students from lower-quality high schools, students whose parents can't afford tutors, students who have to work to support themselves, and those who are not comfortable asking for help. First-generation students and low-income students are the most vulnerable to poor instruction, because they have the fewest resources for support. Consequently, Brighouse takes teaching much more seriously than he used to.

In closing, the author asks readers to imagine they are choosing between two plumbers. Both have been trained in baking, but neither has received training about plumbing. However, one has read a great deal about plumbing, has observed other plumbers at work, has a plumbing coach, has other plumbers observe her work, and frequently meets with other plumbers who are trying to improve their skills. Which one would you hire?