

# **KEN BAIN**

# **WHAT DO THE BEST**

# **COLLEGE TEACHERS**

# **DO**

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**Reviewer: Hafeez ud Deen**  
**College of Management Sciences**  
**PAF-Karachi Institute of Economics and Technology**

What makes a great teacher great? Who are the professors students remember, long after graduation? This book, the conclusion of a fifteen-year study of nearly one hundred carefully selected college teachers, from a wide variety of subject areas and universities, offers valuable answers for all those concerned with education. A team of researchers, eminent professors in their own right, led by Ken Bain, the author, orchestrated the study. Its conclusions should also be of interest to students and their parents.

The short answer to questions posed in the previous paragraph, according to the author, is that great teachers have the ability to engage and challenge students and provoke impassioned response from them in their own unique ways. Lesson plans and lecture notes matter less than the special way teachers comprehend their subjects, communicate with their students and value human learning. Whether behavioral scientists or physicists, in one university or the other, the best teachers know their subjects inside out and believe in two things fervently: that teaching matters and students can learn.

In stories both humorous and touching, Ken Bain describes examples of ingenuity and compassion, of students' discoveries of new ideas and the depth of their own potential. *What the Best College Teachers Do* is full of insight and inspiration for new teachers fresh out of college and for seasoned educators as well.

The book is the winner of the Virginia and Warren Stone Prize awarded annually by Harvard University Press for an outstanding book on education and society.

The author, Ken Bain, is the Director of the Centre for Teaching Excellence at New York University.

Major conclusions of the study on which the book is based are presented in broad patterns of thinking and practice that the researchers found among the group of professors under study. One word of caution, however: anyone who expects a single list of do's and don'ts may be greatly disappointed. Grasping the ideas presented in this book requires deep professional learning, and some fundamental conceptual shifts.

The conclusions presented in the book emerge from six broad questions the researchers asked the teachers they examined:

### **1. What Do the Best Teachers Know and Understand?**

Without exception, the outstanding teachers know their subjects extremely well. They are all active and accomplished scholars, artists, or scientists. Some have long and impressive publication lists, the kind that academic world has long valued. Others have more moderate records or in a few cases, virtually none at all. But whether well published or not, the outstanding teachers follow the important intellectual and scientific or artistic developments within their fields, do research, have important and original thoughts on their subjects, study carefully and extensively what other people are doing in their fields, often read extensively in other fields, and take a strong interest in the broader issues of their disciplines: the histories, the controversies and the discussions on the nature and theories of knowledge. The quality of knowing is not particularly distinctive, however. The people in Bain's study, unlike so many others, have used their knowledge to develop techniques for grasping fundamental principles and organizing concepts, which others can use for building their own understanding and abilities. They know how to simplify and clarify complex subjects, to cut to the heart of the matter with provocative insights, and they can think about their own thinking in the discipline, analyzing its nature and evaluating its quality. That kind of capacity to think drives much of what was observed in the best teachers. They are concerned about helping learners to grapple with ideas and information, to construct their understanding rather than transmitting knowledge and building a storehouse of information in the students' brains. These issues are dealt with in detail in chapter 2.

### **2. How Do They Prepare To Teach?**

Exceptional teachers engage in serious intellectual endeavor and a rich line of enquiry to design a class, lecture, discussion section, problem-based session or any other element of teaching, and they begin with questions about student learning objectives rather than what the teacher will do. Chapter 3 examines the pattern of such questions, and the conceptions of teaching and learning reflected in those enquiries.

### **3. What Do They Expect of Their Students?**

Simply put, the best teachers expect “more.” However, they avoid objectives that are arbitrarily tied to the course and favor those that embody the kind of thinking expected for life. Chapter 4 explores such practices and thinking in detail.

### **4. What Do They Do When They Teach?**

While methods vary, the best teachers often try to create what the researchers have come to call the “natural critical learning environment.” In that environment, people learn by confronting intriguing, beautiful, or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality. These are challenging yet supportive conditions in which learners feel a sense of control over their education; work collaboratively with others; believe their work will be considered fairly and honestly; and try, and receive feedback from expert learners in advance of and separate from any summative judgment of their effort. In Chapter 5, the author discusses in detail the various methods the best professors use to offer a lecture, conduct a discussion, teach a case, or create other learning opportunities that help build this environment.

### **5. How Do They Treat Students?**

Highly effective teachers tend to reflect a strong trust in students. They usually believe that the students want to learn, and they assume, until proven otherwise, that they can. They often display openness with students and may, from time to time, talk about their own intellectual journey, its ambitions, triumphs, frustrations and failures, and encourage their students to be similarly reflective and candid. They may discuss how they developed their interests, the major obstacles they have faced in mastering the subject, or some of their secrets for learning particular material. They often discuss, openly and enthusiastically, their own sense of awe and curiosity about life. Above all, they tend to treat students with what can only be called simple decency.

### **6. How Do They Check Their Progress and Evaluate their Efforts?**

All the teachers studied by the author, and his team of researchers, have some systematic program to assess their own efforts and to make appropriate changes. Furthermore, because they are checking their own efforts when they evaluate students, they avoid judging them on arbitrary standards. Rather, the assessment of students flows from primary learning objectives. In Chapter 7, the author discusses some methods they use to collect feedback on their teaching, how they use evaluation of students to help accomplish that end, and how they design the grading to keep the focus on real learning objectives.

It must be pointed out here that, firstly, this is a book about what outstanding teachers do well; it's not intended to imply that they don't ever come short or they don't struggle to achieve good teaching. They all had to learn how to foster learning, and that they must constantly remind themselves of what can go wrong, always reaching for new ways to understand what it means to learn and how best to foster that achievement. Secondly, outstanding teachers don't blame their students for any of the difficulties they faced. Some of them taught only the best of students; others only the weakest; but many worked with individuals from a variety of backgrounds. Thirdly, the researchers found that the teachers in the study group had a strong sense of commitment to the academic community and not just to personal success in the classroom. Fundamentally, they were learners, constantly trying to improve their own efforts to foster students' development, and never completely satisfied with what they had already achieved.

The book will hopefully inspire readers to make a systematic and reflective appraisal of their own teaching approaches and strategies, asking themselves why they do certain kinds of things and not others. Most of all, readers will hopefully take away from this book the conviction that good teaching can be learned.

