Academic fads come and go; administrators do, too. Buildings are torn down and new ones go up. Students seem to keep getting younger. Throughout these fluctuations, one thing about college life remains constant: professors are in the middle of it all. And in the middle, there can be a lot of pressure. From one side, there’s the administration, which must account for bottom-line finances and ultimately decide what programs are maintained, invested in, rightsized or cut. From another side, there are the students (and their parents) who, justifiably or not, are seen as customers who are always right -- or at the very least, customers who have paid for and deserve a good product. (Yes, for better or worse, education is a product and professors are its producers.) In the push-pull of these forces, professors are often left to their own devices. But what are these devices? What strategies are helpful in the daily work of teaching, research and university service? Put simply: How should a professor be?

Here are 22 suggestions:

1. Set an example. How you act in front of your students goes a long way. Don’t be a jerk and don’t be arrogant. You can be hard, as in a hard grader or hard on the eyes, but being a jerk for no good reason is only going to keep you (and your students) up at night. The fact is, sometimes you’ll feel on top of the world as you enter the classroom, and sometimes you’ll feel like hell, having just received three publication rejections in your mailbox. You win some, you lose some. But how you face your students on a day-to-day basis will be the best indicator of how you take the ebbs and flows of academic life -- and how they take you. You are not just teaching your subject; you are teaching your students how to be, how to comport oneself in the world.

2. Treat students like real people. It’s easy, and sometimes fun, to get whipped up in prescriptive cultural diagnoses and generational finger-pointing concerning students’ behaviors. It’s far more difficult, but ultimately more rewarding for everyone, if you treat your students as real, complex individuals who are there to learn. If you view your students simply as symptoms or indices of larger problems or trends, it may be no wonder that you have a hard time reaching them, much less teaching them.

3. Embrace ambiguity. Outside the college classroom, there are few places left to take on the uneasy and messy (though exciting) task of making sense of nonsense or fleshing out the nonsense from the apparently sensible. College is an exceptional place for grappling with ambiguity. Yet on closer inspection, the entire world beyond campus is rife with ambiguity (though we try to deny it) -- so in fact there’s no better reason to practice. How to begin? Try starting each class by acknowledging that your subject is difficult, confusing, complex, etc. - - then, invite students into the art of inquiry.

4. Teach your students the art of inquiry. Although acquiring proficiency in a discipline requires a certain amount of rote memorization and absorption, the ability to formulate specific, exacting, sometimes open-ended questions is what propels both teaching and learning. Inquiry can take many forms -- debates, Socratic dialogue, prepared questions, hypothesizing, scenario making -- and may even include questioning the basic premises and practices of the course itself as well as of the field of study.

5. Dare to be dumb. For example, admit when you are wrong or when you don’t know something -- this can be as simple as a syllabus scheduling snafu, or as difficult as a factual mistake or interpretive blunder. Venture to change your mind in front of your students. This will blow their minds; and it may blow yours, too.

6. Appreciate failed discussions. Even the worst class discussions, those that fail to address key points or to formulate digestible nuggets of truth, or end in screwed-up faces and sour comments -- even those are crucial. Discussion that veers far away from what you’d planned can still be productive, just not in ways you expected it to be. If you feel that a discussion is failing before your eyes, consider pausing and asking the class to reflect...
on the discussion so far: Have they noticed the failure, too? Or is the discussion succeeding in ways that you hadn’t anticipated?

7. **Pay attention to classroom structure.** Don’t be a helicopter teacher -- always looking over your students’ shoulders, making sure they are doing everything “correctly.” And don’t be a drone, lecturing at the head of the classroom or continually on autopilot, repeating what you’ve always said. Pro tip: aviation metaphors are usually a sign that something has gone wrong along the way.

8. **Be open to play.** The college classroom is the last place to experiment, to play. It can also be a place that sets a pattern of play that will continue throughout one’s life. You play a role in this, in determining if the classroom will be the end of something, or a beginning. Do something different once in a while: take your students outside, if possible, or hold class in an unusual place -- like in a library courtyard or on a theater stage. Even this level of play, achieved through simple physical reorientation, can reinvigorate a class.

9. **Go one-on-one.** The most effective way to teach is to tutor each student individually. This is virtually impossible in the classroom. So schedule an individual conference with each of your students at least once per semester, preferably somewhere around midterm. The student should prepare a question or set of questions of his or her choice, on items already discussed in class or in the reading or related to some aspect of the field of study. Ostensibly, this is the student’s chance to home in on a particular topic of interest or problem area. After all the student conferences, it is also a chance for you to assess how well you’ve been getting material across - or not -- and where you might make adjustments for the rest of the term.

10. **Dress the part.** Which may mean a jacket and tie or fitted skirt suit, or simply jeans and a flannel, or a Lady Gaga T-shirt. One can deny the performance aspect of teaching all day, all year long -- that the front of the classroom is not a stage -- but who’s everyone looking at for 90 percent of the class period? (Who are you looking at, by the way? Hopefully your students, making real eye contact. Forget microaggressions; tune in to microexpressions.)

11. **Allow yourself a spectrum of emotions.** It’s OK to love and hate your students. You may love them for their curiosity, naïveté, and energy -- all of which keep you young. And sometimes you may detest your students for those same qualities -- because you no longer are young. Be aware that some people object to the possessive -- calling these young adults “your” or “my” students -- but the practical fact is, you are more important to them now than their parents are. Whatever you do, don’t call your students “kids.” They are adults. Treat them that way. Or not. Treat them as children -- and then be a child, too.

12. **Be sensitive.** If you want to take the notion of “safe space” seriously -- as a sensitized college classroom -- you have to take it all the way. The space that is safe is the one in which students aren’t afraid to say what’s on their minds, even if it’s politically or sexually suspect/uncomfortable. The point is not to shield students from offensive claims, but for students to hash out why and how ideas and language are loaded and charged. There is no real comprehension or progress without lively discussion, arguments and -- dare one admit it -- possibly hurt feelings. Things may get awkward from time to time, but the real test is how you cultivate sensitivity throughout the semester, as a class unfolds. One of the real advantages of the college classroom is that you can linger on these awkward moments, rather than simply suppress or avoid them.

13. **Risk being blunt.** Sometimes you have to tell it how it is. Imprecations are not only permissible but sometimes absolutely necessary. The well-placed “Can we call bullshit on this?” or “Fuck if I know?” can have a powerful impact -- for its blatancy as well as accuracy.

14. **Reassess your grading practices.** Those profuse comments a professor scrawls in the margins of an essay … they are almost always ignored. The student often only cares about that bold or circled letter or percentage on the last page. Mark the essay or exam only enough to justify the grade, which means that the lower the grade, the more comments you’ll likely have to write. Then ask yourself: Do I really need to give grades at all? Or, try letting your students conduct self-evaluation and self-grading throughout the semester. You may be surprised how honest they are -- perhaps even more honest than you, when it comes to their grades.
15. **Have a healthy skepticism about teaching fads.** This includes your reading or perusing of essays and news articles about higher education, including the latest trends on college campuses, new ways of connecting with college students, the dumbing down or rising up of “critical thinking,” or anything else related to what’s happening to The University. These pieces may make you feel unhealthily paranoid about what you should and shouldn’t be saying or doing in class. On the other hand, if you are going to jump into higher ed discussions, don’t just sit around and speculate -- try bringing up salient issues in the classroom. Find out what your students think of being under the microscope.

16. **Publish only what matters.** Publish because you find the making of the work intrinsically valuable (the book, the article, the research, the exhibition), not because you want to validate your self-worth or get promoted. Publish because you want to bring something into being that you believe the world needs. Why? Because publishing work that you aren’t really passionate about leads to more of the same unpassionate work, and eventually deadens your interest in publishing anything at all.

17. **Take service seriously, but lightly.** The three parts of your job are likely teaching, scholarship and service. Service is the most hard to define, and can be the most consuming and draining. What is meant by “service” is an odd form of bureaucracy -- one of the things you thought you could avoid by joining academe instead of joining a company or a government agency. Meetings, flowcharts, assessment measures, strategic plans … all these things happen under the auspices of service -- though it can be difficult to see who is truly being served by all of this, especially when consultants can be hired to sweep everything off the table and impose their own corporate models. To the point: don’t get overly swept up in service, or you can lose focus on the other (arguably more important) parts of the job.

18. **Re-experience your own institution.** Go on a campus tour for prospective students -- find out what the student tour guides are dispensing about university academics and life. Then, give a few tours yourself. Meet the parents. The administration will appreciate the recruitment possibilities, and you will get to see again what your college is or can be.

19. **Eat lunch.** Contrary to conventional wisdom, lunch is your most important meal. Not only is going to class on an empty stomach while your blood sugar level is crashing a great way to ensure a bad mood, but having lunch affords an opportunity for commiserating or collaborating with a colleague or two. Or if a colleague is not available, try having lunch with your students! Start a program on your campus to take a few students to lunch once a semester; the administration will likely pay for this, and everyone benefits.

20. **Don't overlook your good fortune.** Your salary may never achieve anything above a middling level, and your professional status may rise and fall. But there’s no point in denying you are an academic, a person with an incredibly flexible schedule, a great deal of independence and a comparatively and inordinately long summer vacation. Make the most of your anomalous position.

21. **Accept the permeability between work and life.** Admit it: there’s no real escape from your job. Especially during the mayhem of a semester, when at home by yourself or with family, you’re almost always thinking about your courses -- what you didn’t cover sufficiently at the last meeting, or what to do about that student who’s always monopolizing discussion with inane banter. Or, when you’re out with friends or your children, you may be having a perfectly enjoyable time but somewhere in the back (or front) of your mind you’re still composing the outline for a new article, or mulling over some matter that still rankles from a committee meeting earlier in the day. The corollary is often also true: you find yourself bringing up, or wanting to bring up, your personal life in class -- as illustration of a certain point, as identification with a certain way of thinking, or simply because you’re a human being. And isn’t being human what college is about, finally?

22. **Begin again.** Very few professions allow you the chance to reinvent yourself, or to seriously rethink what your job is, on a regular basis. When fall semester comes each year, take stock of the opportunity. Try something new: a different textbook, a different haircut or way of presenting yourself, an unconventional grading procedure, a new outlook or method of investigating your field. Or eschew the new, and review what you did last year but with an eye to minor improvements. This is one of the most exciting parts of the job, and yet we often forget to take advantage of it. Not you must change, but you can change, and begin again.
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