

## Can Good Teaching Be Taught?

In this thoughtful *New York Times Magazine* article, Elizabeth Green describes the work of Doug Lemov, a New York educator who has compiled a “taxonomy” of effective teaching, and Deborah Loewenberg Ball, a Michigan State researcher who has found that specific pedagogical content knowledge is important to getting classroom results. The gist of the piece is that Lemov and Ball, who had not heard of each other’s work until they were interviewed for this article, should combine their efforts to create an even more powerful strategy to improve classroom teaching.

Lemov created his taxonomy after watching a few too many ineffective teachers – “a dispiriting exercise in good people failing,” as he put it. He also remembered his own lame attempts as a beginning teacher – saying to himself as a lesson plan collapsed, “Oh, my God. I still have 45 minutes left to go.” Lemov came to believe that teaching was not an innate capacity possessed by a few born superstars – it could be *developed*. Rather than trying to hire and motivate a “different caliber of person” (as Washington D.C. school chancellor Michelle Rhee puts it), Lemov focused on how to improve the effectiveness of the existing teacher corps – building talent rather than trying to buy it. Teachers want to do better, he believed – they just don’t know how – and he set to work on a training program that would give them an incentive just as powerful as money: the chance to really make a difference for their students and be part of a winning team. In youth soccer (another Lemov passion), it’s not enough for the coach to tell players to “get better.” Good coaches tell them to “mark tighter” or “close the space.” The problem, Lemov found, was that educators didn’t have a clear idea of the specific components of good teaching. Even the best graduate schools of education were floundering in what educational historian Diane Ravitch calls “the contentless curriculum.”

So Lemov spent five years observing and filming teachers who had a track record of bringing about dramatic gains in student achievement. He found that what appeared at first glance to be a magical gift – the innate “stuff” of natural-born classroom geniuses – was really a set of specific techniques that ordinary mortals could master. At the core was a simple principle: students can’t learn unless the teacher knows how to capture their attention and get them to follow instructions. This is classroom management 101, and some teacher educators look down their noses at such mundane material, but Lemov believes it’s as specialized, intricate, and learnable as mastering a musical instrument. He has been presenting his taxonomy, backed up by videotapes of teachers, in workshops around the country (a book version, *Teach Like a Champion: The 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College*, will be published by Jossey-Bass next month). Here is a selection of the techniques:

- *Standing still when you're giving directions* – Don't do two things at once and students are much more likely to pay attention and comply.

- *Strong voice* – Adopting a different persona to get and hold the floor.

- *Being direct and specific* – Lemov is on a campaign to stop teachers from saying, *Shhh*. “It’s fundamentally ambiguous,” he says. “Are you asking the kids not to talk, or are you asking kids to talk more quietly?” He uses a videotape of Bob Zimmerli, a master teacher, to demonstrate direct and specific management. Zimmerli is teaching a group of inattentive fifth graders for the first time. One has headphones on, another is looking through a large three-ring binder, and none of them are paying attention. “O.K., guys,” says Zimmerli from the front of the room, “before I get started today, here’s what I need from you. I need that piece of paper turned over and a pencil out.” Almost no students comply and he says, “So if there’s anything else on your desk right now, please put that inside your desk.” He makes a hand gesture like an underhand pitch and a few students in the front rows put papers away. But it takes a second technique to get the whole class with him...

- *Framing a positive outcome, building momentum, and narrating the positive* – Zimmerli points to the students who are putting their materials away and says, “Just like you’re doing, thank you very much.” When another student clears his desk, Zimmerli says, “Thank you, sir.” When another does so, he says, “I appreciate it.” As the last desk is cleared, Zimmerli points to the student and says, “Nice... nice.” In the end, the headphones are off, the three-ring binder is stowed, and every student is paying attention. “It’s this positive wave,” says Lemov as he shows the videotape. “You can almost see it going across the classroom from right to left.” Lemov focuses on the student with the three-ring binder. Ten seconds into Zimmerli’s directions, the three-ring-binder student glances at a classmate to his left who has his paper and pencil out and is paying attention. For the first time, he looks at the teacher. “He’s like, ‘O.K., what’s this?’” says Lemov. “‘I guess I’m going to go with it.’” Half a minute later, the student closes the binder, puts it in his desk, and pays attention.

- *Warm/strict* – Teacher’s control should be “an exercise in purpose, not in power,” says Lemov. Correcting a student is done with a smile and an explanation, for example, “Sweetheart, we don’t do that in this classroom because it keeps us from making the most of our learning time.”

- *Cold calling* – Students are instructed not to raise their hands when the teacher asks a question; the teacher decides who get called on, asking the question first and pausing so every student has to do the work of figuring out an answer before one student is asked to respond.

- *No opt out* – A teacher should never allow a student to avoid answering a question, no matter how tough it is. “If I’m asking my students a question,” says Katie

Bellucci, a first-year teacher trained in Lemov's taxonomy, "and I call on somebody, and they get it wrong, I need to work on how to address that. It's easy to be like, 'No,' and move on to the next person. But the hard part is to be like: 'O.K., well, that's your thought. Does anybody disagree?'... I have to work on going from the student who gets it wrong to students who get it right, then back to the student who gets it wrong and ask a follow-up question to make sure they understand why they got it wrong and understand why the right answer is right."

- *The J-factor* – Ways of injecting joy into the classroom, such as giving students nicknames and handing out vocabulary words in sealed envelopes to build suspense.

On a parallel track to Lemov's, Deborah Loewenberg Ball at Michigan State has observed scores of teachers and found that pedagogical content knowledge is associated with higher student achievement – for example, the detailed understanding of third-grade mathematics, which is distinct from general math knowledge and the pedagogical knowledge that Lemov has catalogued. Ball calls it Mathematical Knowledge for Teaching or M.K.T. – in essence, knowing how 30 different minds might understand (or misunderstand) a specific math concept and bringing them all to mastery in a 45-minute class. At the heart of M.K.T. is teachers' ability to step outside their own heads. "Teaching depends on what other people think, not what you think," says Ball.

The Michigan State researchers believe that M.K.T. is crucial, but they know classroom management techniques are important too. As college teachers, they use many of Lemov's techniques intuitively, but they haven't had a vocabulary and a conceptual framework for them. "That's one thing our program doesn't address right now, how to get and hold the floor," says Francesca Forzani, who is working with Ball to revamp Michigan's teacher education program. So it's clear that they could benefit from Lemov's ideas.

Lemov sees the importance of M.K.T. and its brethren in other subject areas, but he has no doubt about what comes first. "I believe in content-based professional development, obviously," he says. "But I feel it's insufficient... It doesn't matter what questions you're asking if the kids are running the classroom." That said, Lemov and his colleagues in the Uncommon Schools network are working on beefing up the taxonomy with an added focus on content knowledge in math, reading, science, and social studies.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07Teachers-t.html?hp>