Letter from the Editor-in-Chief:
A Pinch of This and a Dash of That -
A Recipe for Teaching Excellence

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In past Letters from the Editor-in-Chief I drew from my experiences. The recent letters had dealt with technology, such as open source options for productivity applications, the pressing problems of alternatives to expensive textbooks, and even the impact that cloud computing may have on how we do things. Many of these issues reflected recent concerns as to how we might deal with tightening budgets. But, this time I thought I would write about our main goal – teaching excellence.

Again, I sought to draw upon my experience. In a past life I worked as a chef in several kitchens. Over time I evolved from a novice cook, relying on recipes, to an experienced chef, being able to glean recipes and internalize both the process and the skills needed to combine ingredients into a final product. I had developed an attitude that one need not follow recipes exactly. I would look over several recipes to see how the major ingredients contributed to the dish and then added my own touch. Before long, I would not even need to look up recipes unless it was for something I never cooked. Even then, I could look at one recipe and know how it should taste. I had even toyed with the idea of writing a book, which I called, A Pinch of This and a Dash of That. I would explain how anyone could go through the same process, learning how to read recipes by internalizing the main aspects of cooking without relying on the details of using measuring devices.

In many ways, teaching a course is like preparing a meal. There are several courses, each consisting of one or more components that blend into a coherent whole. Each separate component needs to be prepared and often the novice cook needs a recipe to insure success, especially when preparing the meal for guests. In the same way, a novice teacher looks for recipes for success in the classroom, internalizes the main processes, and delivers a course tailored to the individual teacher’s style combined with the learning styles of the students.

In the recent television program, Chopped, experienced chefs face off to show that they can produce a creative, edible, dish without a written recipe using a hodgepodge of ingredients. In some ways, teachers experience the same thing in the classroom. They come to class with a collection of ideas and goals for that time period. They have to use the tools...
from their teaching experience to provide a relevant learning experience for their students.

It is not enough for the Chopped chefs to deliver one dish after another. They need to prepare an entire course, an appetizer, an entrée and a dessert. In fact, it often comes down to how well the chef has brought together a whole meal. In this analogy, the whole meal is an academic course. A teacher can walk into a class day after day and deliver individual parts, but an effective teacher should show how each day, or each assignment, is part of the whole course.

Not every day is a success in the kitchen or the classroom and you cannot satisfy every patron or every student all of the time. On Chopped there are judges who have a problem with particular ingredients, like raw onions. In your classroom, there will be students who have different learning styles and may not appreciate some parts of the course, or may have some specific anxieties. Just like cooking in a restaurant, you need to be ready to improvise. You should be prepared for that one student to ask an unpredictable question and grab that opportunity to let the education process begin.

One of the things I do at home is to keep the pantry stocked with enough ingredients so that when I come home from a long day, I can just stand there and pick out a few things to throw together for a meal. I do not need to rely on a rigid recipe. The same thing applies with teaching. As long as I have my teaching pantry filled, I am ready to encounter whatever might happen, keeping in mind the broader picture of where that class fits into the grand scheme of the goals I have set to accomplish. And I have the confidence that if it turns out just “okay,” there is always the next meal or the next class to tweak it some more.

What do I need in my teaching pantry, what tools should I have, and where are the cookbooks? You can build up your pantry by going to learning centers, talking with others inside and outside of the discipline, perusing teaching journals, and reflecting upon your own experiences. There are many books with teaching tips, web sites devoted to teaching and most campuses have teaching and learning centers. There are journals such as the Journal of Effective Teaching. There are as many ideas as to what to do in the classroom as there are ways to make vegetable soup. As with cooking, one needs to find the style that fits best with your classes.

As an example, we have an interesting collection of papers in this month’s Journal of Effective Teaching. You will find papers addressing numerous topics in the areas of inquiry teaching, the effectiveness of e-learning, the evaluation of effective teaching, making sense of student evaluations, the role of science educators in science departments, student engagement and discovery learning, and the importance of activity based learning in accomplishing learning effectiveness. As usual, there is something to be learned from each paper that can be useful in adding to your collection of tools that can be called upon in your everyday teaching experiences.
We find that our tools change over time in both cooking and teaching. For example, there was a time that food processors were not part of the kitchen. Now, it is not uncommon to see food processors and blenders as items that some cooks cannot live without. However, I much prefer the old fashioned knives since they are easier to clean. There are all kinds of fancy pans, like Panini pans or special pans for poaching eggs. Our tools have evolved due as much to changing cuisines and clientele as to changing technologies and a shrinking globe. Thirty years ago a vegetarian dish was a plate of overcooked vegetables and the flavorings were salt, pepper, ketchup … Nowadays, there is more diversity in the ingredients and our meal choices … couscous, salsa, sushi, feta, cappuccino, chipotle, cumin, tamarind, … Today, we find similar changes in our classrooms, be it the ever changing technologies and ways our students communicate, or the need to adapt our curriculum to changing disciplines, the diversity of student learning styles, and new views of the world and how we help our students to fit in.

How does one keep up with all of the changes and still excel in teaching? Some ideas can be gleaned from a variety of sources. Some common tips are:

- Emphasizing Conceptual Understanding
- Explaining Clearly
- Being Well Prepared
- Giving Lectures That Are Easy to Outline
- Summarizing Major Points
- Identifying What You Consider Important
- Encouraging Class Discussion
- Knowing If the Class Is Understanding
- Giving Personal Help to Students
- Relating to Students
- Being Accessible Outside of Class
- Keeping Students Informed of Their Progress

It should not be surprising that these come from a list that was compiled almost thirty years ago. How one carries these out, be it in person, by email, through social networking, the basic processes are the same. It is your choice whether, or not, to use a processor or a knife, a book or a podcast. What is important is to know how to affect the result that you want, be it flavored couscous, or mashed potatoes and gravy.

As you reflect upon what you see and what you have learned, you need to produce your own recipe file for teaching success. Not only write down lists of thoughts, but form these ideas into a teaching philosophy, which like a good recipe for a family spaghetti sauce, can evolve over time as you change and as your students change. Perhaps you can someday pass down your recipe for teaching excellence to another generation.

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