Feature Book Review

Teacher, Know Thyself

Review of: *The Joy of Teaching: A Practical Guide for New College Instructors*, by Peter Filene; 2005; 176 pp.; University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill, NC); ISBN: 0-8078-2942-0

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Being relatively new to the profession of college teaching, I regularly seek out and devour handbooks on teaching with the hope of making my learning curve a little bit steeper and a lot less painful. So it was with great pleasure and anticipation that I agreed to review *The Joy of Teaching* by Peter Filene. Surely, a seasoned history professor with six teaching awards and 75 semesters in the classroom has some sage advice to offer a young novice like myself. As expected, Filene dispenses plenty of time-tested, practical advice on teaching your first college course, from designing a syllabus to lecturing effectively to grading. What is surprising about this book, however, is the degree to which Filene delves into the “intangibles” of good teaching. The author rightly claims that, in order to be a truly effective teacher, you must know your students, and most importantly, you must know yourself.

In chapter 1, “Understanding Yourself as a Teacher,” Filene stresses the importance of self-reflection in developing your own unique teaching style. He notes that many new instructors make the rookie mistake of trying to imitate teachers they admire, often with awkward and disastrous consequences. Emulation does not work, he argues, because your teaching style should be a reflection of your own personality. Thankfully, Filene offers practical approaches to this otherwise murky process of introspection. For example, for developing your own individual style, he recommends that you ask yourself, “Are you fierce, funny, or gentle? Do you lecture, question, or coach?” He also provides a number of useful prompts to help you articulate your beliefs about teaching

and learning. Be true to yourself, he advises, and good teaching will follow naturally.

In chapter 2, Filene shifts the reader’s focus outward to the task of understanding your students. Here, he covers the more obvious questions concerning the academic and socioeconomic profiles of the student population, as well as more Socratic questions, such as “What do your students know, or *think* they know?” The author makes the somewhat obvious but important point that first-year students are at a very different stage of cognitive development than seniors, so the two groups should be taught very differently. Importantly, he offers quick, practical approaches for gathering feedback on students’ prior knowledge and preconceptions, and

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thoughtful advice on using a wide variety of assignments to reach students with diverse learning styles. This section is especially useful for teachers in the humanities and social sciences, who would be wise to know their students well before moderating discussions on sensitive or contentious topics.

Not until chapter 3 does Filene broach the topic of course design. He asserts that designing a course is not about what *you* want to do in the classroom, but rather about what you want your *students* to be able to do. Both your aims and your desired outcomes should be articulated clearly before you even draft a course outline. Filene asks, “What themes do you want to teach? What questions should students be able to answer? What skills will your students acquire?” Again, the author provides useful prompts to help you create a mental map of where your course should go, and why the course should go there. It is the inclusion of these prompts, scattered throughout every chapter, that is the primary strength of this book.

Chapters 6 through 9 tackle the nuts and bolts of day-to-day teaching, covering essential topics like drafting a syllabus, designing an effective lecture, leading a class discussion, and grading. With regard to syllabus design, one key point worth noting is Filene’s assertion that “less is more” when it comes to course content. He assures new instructors that it is not only permissible but ideal to sacrifice breadth in favor of intellectual depth, and he recommends using your newly devised list of aims and outcomes as a guide when deciding which topics to omit. Filene’s testing and grading advice is solid and straightforward; he highlights Bloom’s taxonomy in his discussion of test question design, preaches the importance of constructive feedback, and even offers pros and cons for penalizing lateness and grading on a curve. These middle chapters are most useful for a new professor who has not yet taught his or her first course; more practiced instructors manage to resolve these issues after a few semesters of trial and error.

The one drawback of this book is its focus on the traditional lecture and discussion format of college teaching, as demonstrated in chapters 5 and 6. Filene advocates the classic “actor on a stage” approach to delivering course content, suggesting that the instructor has a duty to entertain a mostly passive audience. He does pay homage to the think–pair–share technique as a means to break up the monotony of a lecture and increase student participation, but offers few fresh ideas in terms of group activities and other forms of student-centered learning. Advice on the innovative use of technology in the classroom is also conspicuously absent, aside from Filene’s suggestion that “slide projectors and VCRs are your friends.” Chapter 7 only skims the surface in terms of offering insight into the myriad ways we can teach and inspire outside the lecture hall. Readers would have benefited from a lengthy discussion on selecting, recruiting, and mentoring students as collaborators in original research. I also would have liked to see more emphasis on providing students with meaningful research experiences to encourage higher forms of learning.

This book is most useful for first-time instructors and can be regarded as a lighthearted companion to more comprehensive guidebooks on teaching. However, if you are an experienced teacher looking for truly innovative, outside-the-box teaching methods, this book will leave you somewhat dissatisfied. The author himself concedes that the book is limited in scope, and he kindly provides an extensive annotated bibliography to encourage further reading. Unfortunately for CBE—*Life Sciences Education* readers, books tailored to biology instructors are notably absent from the list of discipline-specific reading recommendations. In all, this book was a quick and enjoyable read, striking a good balance between sound pedagogical research and personal experience. It is not an exhaustive resource by any means, but *The Joy of Teaching* is a worthy primer for the brand-new professor and a useful exercise in self-reflection for new and seasoned professors alike.