Principles for the Professional Growth of College Teachers

The professional growth of college teachers needs to be guided by some sort of philosophy. I’ve opted here for a set of pragmatic principles that propose constructive ways faculty can think about and approach their growth and development as teachers. Unlike philosophical justifications that move ponderously from claims to conclusions, these principles function more like *topoi*, those common places where thoughts, ideas, insights, and questions gather in loose association. I’m thinking of how a clothesline creates a space where clothes hang out together, brightened by sun and freshened by the breeze. Though separate and individual, these principles are related. They gain power and relevance by virtue of their association with each other.

How teachers approach instructional change, how they think about their efforts to grow and develop as teachers matters. The assumptions they make and the beliefs that they hold affect their motivation to improve as well as the effectiveness of their efforts. This book proposes that developing teaching competence and maintaining instructional vitality can be positive processes—ones full of intellectual challenge and personal satisfaction, but not ones realized once and for all in three easy steps. A variety of factors conspire against growth, both initially and through the career. They make keeping teaching fresh and invigorated a challenging but doable task.
The principles set forth in this chapter offer a foundation of the contents to come. They introduce the bedrock ideas on which the approaches and activities explored in subsequent chapters are built. They represent a way of approaching instructional growth that accrues two benefits: better teaching and more learning.

Principle 1: Improvement Is an Opportunity, Not a Dirty Word

Improvement is an opportunity for several different but related reasons. First, it’s a chance to grow by building on strengths. There’s no need to base efforts to improve, to grow, and to develop as teachers on premises of remediation and deficiency. Too many faculty approach the process thinking they need to do better because they aren’t good enough, or there’s some problem with their teaching that needs to be fixed. The absence of certain skills or abilities doesn’t necessarily equal incompetence or make improvement something only the deficient do. Even athletes at the top of their games work to improve their skills and very talented artists search for new techniques.

There are two ways college teachers can approach improvement. They can do more of what works, or they can do less of what doesn’t. That’s about as straightforward as it gets, but don’t let the simplicity hide the very different premises on which the two approaches rest. If what’s driving efforts to improve is a sense of failure, of inadequacy, of only fixing faults, that makes a career-long commitment to growth and development highly unlikely. On the other hand, if improvement is about taking what works, using it or variations of it more widely, then improvement becomes a positive and affirming process. And it’s made even more so by principle 4, which makes better student learning the goal of any improvement.

The process of developing teaching prowess by building strengths deals with weaknesses indirectly but nonetheless effec-
tively. If faculty do more of what makes their teaching successful, that means less time for those aspects of instruction that aren’t effective. With this approach, weaknesses are resolved but in a way that removes the stigma associated with being deficient. For that reason this approach stands a much better chance of motivating growth and development across one’s career.

Beyond the chance to grow by developing strengths, improvement is an opportunity because it’s something that all teachers can do: those who need to and those who don’t. Some years ago a colleague of mine did a series of audiotaped interviews with some of Penn State’s very best teachers. Among the questions he asked was this one: “How do you know when a day in class has gone well?” I’ve never forgotten how Moylan Mills, one of the teachers interviewed, answered that question. After a pause, this celebrated teacher announced, “I don’t think I’ve ever had a whole day go well. I’ve had some 15-minute or 20-minute segments where things were good, but never a whole class session.”

Even excellent teachers can improve. True, some faculty need to improve more than others. They have more work to do, just like some students have to work harder to master the material. But getting into who and how much serves no purpose. Better to approach improvement recognizing that all teachers can improve—the best, the worst, and everyone in between. Improvement offers faculty opportunities from the beginning to the end of the teaching career.

Another reason why improvement is an opportunity to cultivate, not an activity to avoid, rests on the relationship among the words *improve, develop, change,* and *grow.* You may have noticed already that this discussion is peppered with these words, and they will continue to season content in the chapters to come. The words are inseparably linked. Improvement and development happen only when teachers change. Teachers change when they stop doing something. They change when they do something new or do something done currently in a different way. Even though all
teachers aspire to make changes that are improvements, the process of change itself helps to keep teachers alive and well. It refreshes and renews, it reinspires and energizes. Change helps teachers when they’re tired, and it keeps them from getting seriously tired, which can lead to burnout. Improvement is an opportunity because with it comes the chance to change—the chance to experience growth and see one’s teaching skills develop into something impressive.

Finally, improvement offers great opportunities for new and different kinds of learning. Most faculty learn to teach from experience. Ask any teacher with more than a few years in the classroom behind them if they are teaching now as they did in the beginning, and they will say no. Ask if they are better now than they were then, and they will say “Yes.” Some growth is an inevitable outcome of time in the classroom.

In most cases, however, instructional growth is limited when experience is the only teacher. Experiential knowledge tends to be intuitive, implicit—what Schön (1995) and others refer to as “knowledge in action.” It means that teachers take the same actions and respond in the same way repeatedly, often without even being aware of what they are doing or why. And there’s a second limitation of experiential knowledge. There’s no guarantee that the lessons learned are accurate. We can all point to colleagues who’ve learned very wrong lessons about students, assessment, and learning that lasts. What’s frightening is how tightly they cling to what they think they’ve learned from experience.

Reflection (explored at length in Chapter Two) offers a way to test and deepen experiential knowledge. It offers ways that teachers can develop an awareness of themselves as teachers. It works whether teachers are new or old, insightful or less so, fresh and enthusiastic, or a bit tired and used up. The essence of the process is very simple: teachers observe and think about what they do. However, accurate self-knowledge does not always come easily.
We do, after all, have a vested interest in what we do and how we do it. This means the benefits of critical reflection do not accrue effortlessly. The approach requires focus, a dedication to objectivity, and a willingness to look honestly at the premises and assumptions on which teaching practices rest.

Fortunately, learning about teaching is like other kinds of learning. The more study, more reflection, and the more things figured out, the more learning results. And nothing grows the commitment to learning more than learning. Most faculty have never studied teaching, as a discipline or how they practice it specifically. What they discover can be exciting and useful. A commitment to growth, to improvement, offers teachers the opportunity for substantive learning experiences—the kind most faculty savor. Learning like this also builds a healthy respect for the improvement process. Faculty quickly discover that it involves more than they previously thought.

**Principle 2: Instructional Growth Isn’t Always Easy**

Faculty tend to trivialize what’s involved in the process of growing and developing as teachers. For example, new faculty are led to believe (often by some not-so-new teachers) that teaching excellence emerges out of content knowledge. The more you know, the better you teach. Experience in the classroom makes very clear to most faculty (but certainly not all) that content knowledge alone doesn’t carry the day with students. Success with learners requires an understanding of teaching as a phenomenon in its own right.

Then there’s that still-prevalent belief that teaching excellence is a gift, an unrequested (perhaps even undeserved) set of natural abilities out of which excellence emerges with little or no effort. Standing against this notion are long years of research (for a couple of venerable references, see Feldman, 1988, and Sherman and others, 1986) devoted to identifying those characteristics, aspects,
or dimensions of instruction equated with excellence, and guess what? Most of them (organization, clarity, enthusiasm, knowledge and love of content, stimulating thought and interest, for example) look a lot more like acquirable skills than divine gifts, especially once they are defined behaviorally.

If these are skills that can be developed, does that mean teachers can be trained? Yes, but training as many teachers experience it also tends to oversimplify what’s involved in learning to teach and then growing and developing as a teacher. You don’t learn to teach during in a two-day orientation at the front end of a career, and you don’t get really good by attending a workshop once or twice a year. Beyond duration and frequency, there are problems with what “training” implies. Training works best when the task is simple and straightforward; when it can be done the same way time and again; when what’s required are techniques. Training isn’t about developing artistry. It doesn’t rest on in-depth analysis or require reflective critique. Training can start teachers on the road to excellence, but it doesn’t offer what teachers need for career-sustaining growth.

To illustrate, consider how much training focuses on the acquisition of techniques. Teachers do need good techniques: that’s another lesson learned firsthand and early on in the college classroom. As a consequence, training usually focuses on enlarging the repertoire of techniques, causing faculty to conclude that excellence results from having lots of good teaching techniques. Overlooked is the fact that having techniques and using them are not at all the same.

Case in point: the techniques a teacher might use when responding to wrong or not very good answers. Most of us understand that responding to less than perfect answers requires finesse. Students are easily intimidated; even those not answering can be prevented from participating if an instructor sledgehammers a wrong response. Instructors need a repertoire of techniques that they can use when a student gives a poor answer, but having a
repertoire does not ensure a good performance. The moment the teacher hears a wrong answer, a response must be selected. Not all techniques for dealing with wrong answers are equally effective in all circumstances or with all students. How does a teacher choose well without the benefit of time to reflect on the options? The student answered poorly, and the teacher needs to respond. So the choice is made. Whether it is a good or bad choice, whether the response selected works or doesn’t, the teacher and the class live with the consequences of that choice. If the student is embarrassed, if the student fails to see the error in the answer, if the student feels put down, if the rest of the class is bored, all those reactions become part of what happened in that class.

Given how much students can learn when they make mistakes, faculty need a range of techniques for handling wrong answers, but equally necessary is the ability to select and execute those techniques successfully. Rarely do faculty consider the management of a repertoire of techniques, and rarely is the topic addressed in training sessions. I’m not even sure “training” is suited to developing the nuanced, situated responses that effective instruction demands.

Stenberg (2005) observes that learning techniques does not convey the idea that teaching is “something that must be continually studied, reflected on and revised within specific contexts” (xx). More pithily, she writes, “Teacher learning has no end” (xxi). Palmer (1997) explains that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). The difference between having techniques and using them illustrates how training can trivialize what is involved in the process at the same time it shows why learning to teach is not easy. Eisner (1983) ably captures the complexity involved in managing a repertoire of techniques in his metaphor of the teacher as maestro. When the baton is raised and orchestra begins to play, a complicated scenario unfolds—just like what happens among a teacher, students, and content when the
beautiful music called learning is made. Making music with today’s college students doesn’t happen easily. As most of us ascend the podium, we do not find ourselves standing in front of the New York Philharmonic.

**Principle 3: Instructional Growth Involves Risk**

We teach who we are; we create in classrooms the kind of world we most comfortably inhabit. Palmer (1997) describes this with spiritual language that may be a bit unsettling, but he understands that teaching is about much more than developing content competence. “Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul” (p. 15).

Most faculty recognize that teachers influence students in ways that have nothing to do with content. Faculty have been influenced by their own teachers. They tell stories of those who captivated their imagination and conveyed a passion for learning. Many faculty come to teaching because they want to have that kind of positive influence. But teachers can also influence students in other, less positive ways.

Singham (2005 and 2007) offers an example in two provocative articles that challenge us to consider what course syllabi have become. In his 2005 article he writes, “We defend ourselves against potential challenges to our authority by wielding the course syllabus, our chief instrument of power, like a club” (p. 53). In many syllabi, there is a policy, prohibition, or contingency to cover every possible student violation. “The typical syllabus gives little indication that the students and teacher are embarking on an exciting learning adventure together, and its tone is more akin to some-
thing that might be handed to a prisoner on the first day of incarceration” (Singham, 2007, p. 52).

Why are faculty using the syllabus to push the power agenda? Does it benefit students? Does it make them want to learn, glad they are taking the class? Or is it more about how taking this heavy-handed approach establishes that it is the teacher who is in charge and controls what happens in the classroom? Have we crossed the line? How does this display of power influence students? Do we know? Have we even considered what we are doing and why? Both articles are well worth taking a look at. You may not agree, but they will make you think, and that’s the point. Instructional growth is risky because it requires a deep and critical examination of practice.

But challenges to how we teach aren’t all that makes growth risky. Personhood is expressed through teaching. Conduct in and out of the classroom conveys messages about values, beliefs, and attitudes, about teachers as human beings. These personal expressions make teachers vulnerable and teaching risky. Teachers can be hurt; most of us have been. Nonetheless, the expression of personhood offers two affirming opportunities. First, there’s the chance to be valued and confirmed as a person, to be honored, respected, and admired by students. That validates what we do and who we are. Second, there’s the chance to touch students, to teach those life lessons that make content acquisition pale by comparison. Making the most of these opportunities means that growth as a teacher is about much more than honing skills and acquiring new techniques. Sometimes better teaching is about becoming a better person, and that’s about as risky as a proposition gets.

Principle 4: Focus Efforts to Improve on More and Better Learning for Students

Doing so helps to manage the risks and makes finding the motivation easier for reasons not terribly profound. Ask a teacher if he
Inspired College Teaching  

wants to improve and be prepared for a defensive response. “Why? Did somebody tell I needed to?” Ask a teacher (even an old curmudgeon) if she cares how much and how well students learn and get a much more positive response. Faculty do care about how much and how well students learn. It’s part of what drew most of us to the teaching profession in the first place. If evidence shows (and it does—see Svinicki’s excellent book on motivation, 2004) that students grasp new concepts more easily when they are tied to something students already understand, what teacher wouldn’t want to make those connections?

Taking what is known about how students learn and working to figure out the instructional implications of that knowledge changes the paradigm. For years we have assumed (and not without some justification) that learning is the inevitable, automatic outcome of good teaching. Those dimensions of effective instruction mentioned in principle 2 have been empirically linked to learning. Students with organized, enthusiastic, clear, knowledgeable, and stimulating teachers do learn more. The focus on better teaching has garnered some positive results.

But when a teacher makes changes for the express purpose of helping students learn better, the perspective changes in several advantageous ways. The risks described in principle 3 are still present, but there is less personal angst. It is no longer about the teacher and whether she has natural ability, a charismatic personality, and can perform in the classroom. Now the attention is focused on learning and students. The role of the teacher is to support what students are there to do—learn the material. It’s a perspective that taps teachers’ intrinsic motivation and allows more objectivity, so that teachers can thoughtfully consider the impact of their teaching on student efforts to learn.

This principle does not diminish the importance of teaching. Most students in college today would not succeed without teachers. Teachers are essential; the number of first-generation, at-risk, and otherwise poorly prepared students who now enroll in college
is increasing. Moreover, this principle does not change teaching’s fundamental tasks. Teachers still lecture (we hope a bit less often), ask and answer questions, have students working in groups, monitor discussion (maybe online), and assess learning. It’s just that their activities are viewed in light of how well they support, guide, and facilitate learning—not whether they showcase a teacher’s pedagogical prowess.

**Principle 5: Improvement Begins and Ends with the Faculty Member**

Teachers control the improvement process. Others may try to provide the motivation. They may threaten (no merit raise without improvement). They may cajole (students deserve better; you can do better). They may try persuasion (students will learn more with this approach). But they cannot change one thing a teacher does in the classroom no matter how wildly they may wave the stick or how attractively they arrange the carrots. They can (and should) provide conditions conducive to change, but teachers alone implement changes in the classroom. In the same way no teacher learns anything for students, nobody can improve anybody else’s teaching.

I learned this lesson the hard way. One of the very worst instructors I ever observed taught an introductory science course. Before and after he arrived for class, conversation buzzed around the large room. The noise continued as he started. It abruptly stopped when he put a handwritten overhead on the projector. He stopped talking and students copied like mad. As they finished and he started talking, the noise in the classroom rose to not far below its original level. It stopped again when the second overhead appeared, and that was how the class proceeded. Ten minutes before the period ended, a final overhead went up, students copied it, packed up, and proceeded to leave the room, not quietly. When he finished and officially ended the class, there were only a handful of us left. After everyone left, I asked how he had decided on this
approach. “I can’t remember what I say in lecture so I make test questions off the overheads.”

Back in my office, I quickly listed thirty-eight changes, most of which I thought needed to be implemented immediately. I pared the list considerably and met with him to go over these recommendations. I planned carefully how I would present each. He listened, nodded, even took notes, and said thank you. Two weeks later, I revisited the class. Not one suggestion had been implemented. Improvement begins and ends with the faculty member.

Fortunately, few faculty are this cavalier about their teaching. On the other hand, few act as if they control the improvement process. Often they let others provide the motivation and set the agenda. Recently I worked with a new faculty member who had received written feedback from one student indicating that she did not have good control of the class. Her department head had queried her about this, and on the bases of this one comment (from a class of forty-five) and one question from an administrator, she decided on a number of ways she would assert more control. When I asked her if she thought lack of control was a problem for other students, she said no. When I asked if she felt control was an issue in the class, she said no. When I asked if she thought more control would help students learn more, she said no. When I asked her why she hadn’t asked herself these questions, she said that she didn’t know.

Why don’t faculty take advantage of the fact they are in charge of their development as teachers? Perhaps, like many of their students, they aren’t empowered, confident learners when it comes to their own teaching. Motivation also seems to be a problem. Braxton, Eimers, and Bayer (1996) identified six recommendations for improving undergraduate education. They then surveyed a diverse population of faculty to see whether normative endorsement existed for those recommendations. It did for three of the six recommendations:—systematic advising for students, feedback on student performance and fostering egalitarianism and tolerance in
the classroom—but not for the other three—faculty-student interaction, learning about students, and improvement of teaching. They repeated the study (Eimers, Braxton, and Bayer, 2001) at teaching-oriented colleges and still found no support for the improvement of teaching.

Do faculty really think they’re that good, or is the need to grow and develop as teachers seen as a kind of weakness? Is it back to principle 1 and the problems that result when efforts to improve are based on premises of remediation and deficiency? Would motivation increase if faculty assumed responsibility for their professional development equipped with resources and convinced that the process will benefit them and their students? Perhaps we’ll have an answer here shortly, because this book is about faculty being in charge of their professional development. It outlines an approach, points out a bounty of the resources, and shows exactly why and how faculty and students benefit when teachers grow and change.

Despite the fact faculty don’t always act like they have the power to control their growth, most do want to be effective instructors. Many aspire to excellence. Do any want to teach badly? Some days we do, and those days are a special kind of hell—not the days we want to characterize our careers. Most teachers I know do care about teaching. They love their content and want students to gain mastery and appreciation of it as well. They would like to make a difference in at least some of their students’ lives. Most know that their development as teachers is up to them—that others can’t do it to or for them. But they would like some encouragement, are interested in resources, and need specific ideas—all of which this book provides.

**Principle 6: Student Feedback Can Improve Teaching and Learning**

Most faculty admit that there is much to be learned from student feedback. Unfortunately, many (most?) teachers have been burned
by the way institutions collect, disseminate, and use student feedback. End-of-course, machine-scorable forms that include a hodgepodge of politically selected items may help administrators make personnel decisions, but that feedback does not improve teaching or foster the growth and development of teachers. You'll find elaboration of and support for this point in Chapter Three. True enough, evaluation processes are not equally bad everywhere, and generally faculty don't melt down over the results. Most of us have even gained some important insights from the feedback. But overall, there are still way more liabilities than assets, way more missed than realized opportunities in the way institutions evaluate instruction.

The distinction between formative and summative evaluation is critical. Summative assessments offer overall evaluations; they are not very specific and are almost always judgmental: “Compare this instructor with others who teach at the college,” for example. Formative evaluations aim to offer feedback, diagnostic, descriptive details that help teachers improve: “Does this instructor give lectures that facilitate note taking?," for example. Frequently institutions use instruments and practices that comingle these two kinds of feedback, compromising the effectiveness of both in the process. Individual faculty should be charged with collecting formative feedback—those diagnostic, descriptive details that inform decisions about what and how to change. But because summative assessments have been used against faculty, have produced results so at odds with their perceptions of what happened in class, or included such hurtful comments, many faculty have become reluctant to solicit feedback from students, or even worse, they doubt the benefits of doing so.

Chapter Four contains a variety of examples that illustrate beneficial ways of obtaining feedback from students. Many focus the feedback on the learning experiences of students. Obviously teaching presentations affect learning experiences, but so do assignment designs, in-class activities, and those study strategies student opt to use. Feedback that explores student learning experi-
ences provides faculty with information that can be used to increase instructional effectiveness, but unlike end-of-course ratings, this feedback can also enlighten and enlarge students’ understandings of learning.

To make soliciting and using feedback from students a positive and productive experience, faculty need to start over. They need to leave behind all the negative evaluative experiences and begin with this premise: feedback from students can be used to improve teaching and learning. The kind of feedback that promotes teacher growth is diagnostic, detailed, and descriptive. That's exactly the same kind of feedback students need if they are to understand how their actions influence their success as learners. That doesn't mean the feedback is always positive. Not everything teachers and students do expedites learning, but feedback should always be exchanged constructively. When it is, feedback from students grows and develops teachers and students.

Principle 7: Colleagues Can Be Valuable Collaborators in the Growth Process

Faculty are in charge of their growth and development as teachers. On their own, they can engage in activities that will improve their teaching and student learning—whether that's the reflection called for in Chapter Two or the use of feedback as described in Chapter Eight. But with the help of colleagues, they can accomplish more and will likely find greater enjoyment in the process. The spirit of exchange that characterizes faculty talk about teaching often represents the best aspects of collegiality. Intellectual property is not a concern when it comes to good instructional ideas. They pass freely among colleagues within and across disciplines and institutions. How many of your really good instructional ideas have you acquired from colleagues?

Despite the fact there is much to learn about teaching from and with colleagues, much of that potential remains unrealized. Most faculty do not select pedagogical colleagues carefully—more often
it’s a matter of convenience (the person in the office next door, the colleague who previously taught the class, somebody hired at the same time, even a research collaborator). Despite the importance given credentials when determining who’s qualified to teach the content or when seeking a colleague to help with a grant proposal or paper review, pedagogical advice is freely exchanged with few concerns about quality. Unfortunately, not all pedagogical opinions are equal. Sometimes faculty get bad instructional advice from colleagues. More often they just don’t get very good advice.

Moreover, it’s not just who faculty select as teaching confidants; it’s often the caliber of those exchanges. Faculty express dismay when students come to class not having done the reading, unprepared to share anything beyond their own opinions. But conversations about teaching are never so critiqued. Classroom experience empowers faculty to speak with authority, even though experience may be limited, understood superficially, or interpreted inaccurately. If collaboration with a colleague is to have significant impact on teaching, if those collaborations are to sustain and enrich across the years, then those conversations need to be exchanges not only informed by individual ideas and experience but also by the research and wisdom of experts.

To improve the quality of interactions about teaching, colleagues need to explore different roles and activities. Chapter Six provides examples. Most important, they need to move away from the role of summative evaluator of classroom teaching. Typically colleagues are not trained and may not have much experience doing classroom observations. Often they arrive without any agreed-upon assessment criteria, leaving them to offer judgments that depend entirely on their individual views of teaching. Not only do these kinds of observations produce data of questionable value, they create an atmosphere of distrust—one that mitigates against the collaborative involvement of colleagues so helpful to sustaining inspired teaching across the years.
Principle 8: Teaching Vitality Depends on Instructional Health

Many faculty do not teach in climates conducive to instructional health and well-being, and they tend to underestimate the influence of these unhealthy environments, even though most have experienced their enervating affects. Among the aspects of academic life that make teachers tired and lead to burnout is the pressure on faculty to do it all. Institutions expect them to teach well; at some kinds of institutions this means teach a lot. They are expected to be productive scholars; at many institutions those expectations have increased. And finally they are expected to provide service to the institution, their professions, and the community. This may include advising students, serving on committees, reviewing for journals, helping organize professional meetings, and sharing expertise in the community. Although the variety adds interest to the academic life, its demands pull faculty in many different directions and make exhaustion an almost expected part of the profession.

Other environmental influences on instructional vitality are more subtle. Teaching continues to be devalued; Chapter Eight reports on some large and small ways this happens. But when teaching doesn’t count, when the effort it takes to do it well course after course, semester after semester, year after year is not recognized, it becomes very hard for teachers not to cut corners. When they give less than their best, teaching is less rewarding and students are more demanding. So starts a downward spiral that can end in a place no teacher wants to be—burned out.

Despite the unhealthy aspects of academic environments, few faculty acknowledge that professional growth is a necessary part of maintaining instructional health. The norms that govern the professional expectations for college teachers do not include any related to career-long growth and development. I find their absence astounding. In what other profession is it possible to begin without
training and then get by without involvement in professional development activities (be it reading or study, attending workshops or seminars, engaging substantively with colleagues, or regularly revising instructional methods)? In what other profession are there few consequences when a lack of instructional health compromises performance? Ramsden (1992) calls teaching in higher education an “essentially an amateur affair,” unlike what occurs in other professions. “A distinctive characteristic of professionals is that they retain theoretical knowledge on which to base their activities. Their body of knowledge is more than a series of techniques and rules. It is an ordered pattern of ideas and evidence that a professional teacher uses in order to decide on an appropriate course of action from many possible choices” (pp. 8–9).

Even with the unhealthy conditions and little recognition of the need to take care of the instructional self, some teachers still manage to thrive. I have a wonderful colleague—I swear he powers his teaching with a nuclear reactor. He makes all the rest of us look like pot-bellied stoves (barely glowing and regularly needing more wood). His energy for teaching is boundless and unfazed by division dysfunction, old and tired colleagues, students who hate science, and a university that prizes research way more than teaching.

Many of us find our passion waning—we aren’t quite so in love with teaching as we once were. Or the passion comes and goes—new classes, the start of the academic year, graduation, or a successful student rekindles the flames, just as poor end-of-course ratings, the able student with no motivation, dirty classrooms, or a deserving colleague who doesn’t get tenure dampen the fire to a few dark embers.

Burnout doesn’t happen over night. The process is slow and insidious; teachers often deny the symptoms, ignore their presence, or blame them on external factors. It’s a bit scary because the presence of burnout is so obvious to students and colleagues. Even more sinister is the difficulty of recovery. Once burned out, a lot
of faculty never recover, and those who do find their way back slowly.

However, the news is not all bad. Actions can be taken that make burnout highly unlikely, and teachers can be taught to recognize the early signs. Remaining instructionally vital across the career begins with teachers understanding that, like good health, instructional vitality is something they must cultivate. They must learn how to take care of themselves. This book aspires to help. Part of what motivated me to write it was my belief that college teachers can benefit from a guide to good instructional health.

**Principle 9: Set Realistic Expectations for Success**

Too often teachers make perfection the standard. In order to be “good,” a classroom activity has to thoroughly engage and involve every student. It has to work every time it’s used—doesn’t matter if the students are first year or senior, if it’s the beginning of the semester or the end, if the content is theoretical or applied, challenging or easily mastered. Anything less than complete success means the activity is flawed or the teacher failed.

Besides setting these very high standards, faculty also have the propensity to make snap judgments about activities as they unfold. Interpreting the feedback is natural and appropriate so long as those first judgments aren’t the final assessments. Unfortunately, too often they are, and they’re global assessments as well. “It worked” or “It didn’t work.” Faculty can reach these conclusions without ever consulting students, learning from the experiences of others, or knowing if research sides with their conclusion. Once, in a workshop, a faculty participant announced with conviction, “Group work doesn’t work.” “How do you know?” I asked. “I tried it once,” he replied, totally straight-faced.

Efforts to grow and develop as teachers are thwarted when faculty do not set realistic expectations for success. The standards can still be high, maybe even a bit too high. Then it’s a matter of
how the teacher responds when the goal has not been achieved. I very much like how Farber (2008) describes himself as being “unwilling to settle for less.” He holds every single class up to the standard of his best-ever class session. “This isn’t a masochistic exercise; I don’t get despondent when a session has seemed a little off.” He develops plans to fix whatever went wrong. “What I don’t do is, as people say these days, ‘give myself permission’ to teach less effectively” (p. 219).

Becoming realistic about perfection involves knowing that any learning experience crafted for students will have variable affects. Some days, some classes and some content are executed better than others. Even when well executed, what happens will be a great experience for some students, okay for others, and not effective for some. The number of students in each category will vary with the class. Only once in a while will it be great for everyone; in equally rare cases will it be awful for everyone.

Realistic expectations for success also rest on sanguine insights about the connections between teaching and learning. A teacher can do all the right things, and for reasons beyond her control, learning still may not result. Some students come to college not yet ready to learn, or they come with so much else happening in their personal lives there’s no time left for classroom learning. Part of what makes teachers good is regularly asking why—why is this student not learning? Part of what keeps them fresh and still trying is the realization that with learning, even good teaching is no guarantee.

**Principle 10: Teaching Excellence Is a Quest; It’s About the Journey, Not the Destination**

Teachers should not expect to finally get it right, to achieve that ultimate level of excellence. What motivates, inspires, and satisfies is not the teaching excellence but the quest for it. And the good news is that quest can be as long as any career.
Not so long ago I received an e-mail questioning whether faculty going up for promotion need do more if a level of excellence has already been achieved. “If student ratings, their comments, and peer review suggest someone is already an excellent teacher, is it necessary for this person to attend teaching workshops? Does it matter if a teacher doesn’t try new pedagogies? Does it indicate, perhaps, that a vast repertoire of pedagogies isn’t always necessary?” The case involved someone who had an established record as an excellent lecturer.

The questions address a not uncommon assumption—the idea that teaching excellence can be achieved much like a traveler arrives at a destination. Once there, the effort to get there is no longer needed. But with teaching, a level of excellence achieved does not ensure a level of excellence sustained. You don’t stay excellent without continuing effort. It’s like exercise; what was done last year does little to contribute to fitness this year.

While writing this book I taught myself to knit socks. I’ve been a knitter for a long time, but I’d never tackled socks. They’re knit in the round on four or five very small needles. I was so pleased with my first sock I didn’t see all the mistakes until I made the second one. Now, multiple pairs of socks down the road, I laugh at my modest beginnings and marvel at how much I’ve learned. Basic sock patterns aren’t much fun any more. In fact I’ve knit socks with such fancy yarn and complicated patterns they’re much too nice to wear. I love making socks even more than wearing them. It’s the learning that makes knitting and teaching so rewarding. At some point socks do more than keep toes warm, just as teaching does more than transfer knowledge and showcase techniques. Both become works of art, highly personal expressions of passion, creativity, and expertise.

The career-long growth explored in the rest of the book starts very simply. It begins with a teacher trying to figure out how her students learn content given the way she teaches it. Ramsden (1992) explains what makes that a challenging, rewarding and
career-long quest. “Effective teaching refuses to take its effect on students for granted. It sees the relation between teaching and learning as problematic, uncertain, and relative. Good teaching is open to change; it involves constantly trying to find out what the effects of instruction are on learning, and modifying the instruction in the light of the evidence collected” (p. 102).

Trite truisms appears on mugs and wall plaques: “Teachers touch the future” and “A teacher affects eternity.” They explain why a career-long quest for teaching excellence matters—what makes it such important work. However, I’m not sure truisms provide the needed motivation and support when teachers stand before students who sprawl across their desks, don’t bother to stifle yawns, and pack up well before the period ends. But most faculty have glimpsed the power of teaching in the lives of individual students. Early in my teaching career, at the end of a long semester, a student left a rose in a bud vase outside my office door. The unsigned card said simply, “You have helped me become a better person.” For years that card stayed on the bulletin board above my desk. It still reminds me that teaching matters. What can be accomplished in the classroom should inspire the pursuit of teaching excellence from the beginning of teaching days until the end.