Good, Bad and Ambiguous Characteristics of Teaching

Good Characteristics

1. Keep track of questions asked in lab or office hours.
2. Encourage students to participate in discussion.
3. General enthusiasm (cheerleader role)
4. Don’t intimidate students
5. Self-sufficient slides
6. Empower students to learn for themselves (show them how to figure out things).
7. Speak with confidence
8. Have easily accessible notes
9. Solicit feedback/input so as to know what a student knows.
10. Convey expectations.
11. Keep promises
12. Have students explain to other students when you have the same question.
13. Know students’ names
14. Give feedback
15. Being available
16. A good explanation may start with getting at what a student is trying to do.

Bad Characteristics

1. Errors in slides
2. Errors in general
3. Talking only to the board
4. Mumbling
5. Not responsive, inflexible
6. Not speaking loud enough for everyone to hear (poor communication)
7. Poor examples.

Ambiguous Characteristics

1. Attire: Sloppy attire may indicate attitude; may wish to dress up a bit depending on age difference between TA and students.
2. Humor/sarcasm/slang
3. Political remarks
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Fan Li’s Axioms

1. All good characteristics are similar but bad characteristics go in all directions.
2. Every opposite of a good characteristic is a bad characteristic.

Good Characteristics

17. Clarity and logic of explanations.
18. Gives good examples, not just theory; makes good connections (associations) between results and conclusion, not just provides information. Examples should be easy to understand, level-appropriate, enlightening and motivating (e.g. 2 headed coin), different for different students’ backgrounds.
19. Be patient always
20. Keeps promises: shows up, is on time, is prepared, follows up
21. Respect
22. Timely or quick responses or feedback
23. Constructive feedback (tells what is wrong and what is right)
24. Organized, prepared, caring (may show this through providing materials such as sample exams, website, etc.)
25. Use questions (interim prompts) to assess student’s comprehension; asks probing questions to find out what a student is actually asking.
26. Share your own experience with students of how you understand a topic or solution (your approach)
27. Empathy and caring (may show this through remembering names, etc.)
28. Supportive and encouraging
29. Avoid tricky language or slang
30. Pay attention to minor points that might result in confusion
31. Show enthusiasm
32. Help students learn for themselves
33. Inject some humor and light-heartedness
34. Do not speak in a monotone voice
35. Encourage questions
36. Provide positive reinforcement, instill confidence
37. Summarize or wrap up at end of explanation
38. Have humility and admit making a mistake
39. Be in control; know when to take control over discussion; keep on track, be aware of time
Bad Characteristics

8. Favoritism or bias
9. Unprepared
10. Giving out materials just before class (not enough time)
11. Being too apologetic unnecessarily
12. Using apologies for bad teaching habits
13. Speaking to oneself (e.g., too softly, into the board, into the overhead projector, in a different language, in too technical or mathematical language).
14. Having no eye contact
15. Being impatient with a struggling student (instead of realizing that knowledge, retention, understanding of study habits may change over time)

Ambiguous Characteristics

4. Physical appearance

List Compiled on August 27, 2004

Characteristics of Good Teaching

- Allowing questions “within reason” (containing the questions and answering appropriately)
- Ability to answer questions efficiently (striking the appropriate balance between a quick question and long explanation)
- Making sure that questions ARE answered; insuring follow-up
- Not interrupting students – giving them time to say the question.
- Admitting when one doesn’t know the answer and getting back with the answer (follow-up)
- Acknowledging that, in general, biostatistics material is difficult and recognizing potential pitfalls in learning
- Having a teaching style that indicates interest, enthusiasm, energy, and eye contact.
- Being on time
- Being prepared
- Dressing appropriately, professionally
- Having a firm yet lighthearted management style
- Not being too dogmatic in grading
- Considering one’s self as neutral with respect to social issues in students (e.g. gender, culture, ethnicity, language)
- Setting clear expectations with respect to homework and exams
- Providing clear instructions
- Embracing rather than rejecting suggestions from students - helps keep students motivated and involved.
- Using motivational aids such as providing encouraging written comments, prizes, competitions
- Having a clear and engaging presentation style
- Using clear diction and appropriate volume of voice
- Providing an explanation when student faces seem puzzled
- Not using slang or jargon that may not be understood by all students
- Acknowledging that re-iteration, repetition may be needed.
- Not blaming the student for not understanding the material
- Providing solutions to homework and exams and allow discussion of solutions
- Asking questions of the students (e.g. “Does this sound reasonable? Are you all still with me?”)
- Using the Socratic method (e.g. ask questions of the students which will help them answer their own questions).
- Possibly encouraging social activities at the end of the course to provide a personal relationship – allows students to know that instructors are human
- Encouraging questions (“No question is stupid”)
- Having patience
- Knowing when to stop before students are overwhelmed
- Not letting a particular student dominate discussion
- Knowing one’s audience and teaching at the appropriate level
• Recognizing that students may be at different levels and accommodating for this by providing reference books, FYI pages
• Provide quick reference sheets or study guides
• Providing motivating examples beyond the grade (e.g. why material is useful)
• Cognizant of the difference between challenging versus motivating students with material
• Recognizing that students have different backgrounds, abilities and learning styles

Bad Characteristics

• Speaking in a language other than English in a group of students
• Spending too much time on review of previously covered material
• Being counter-motivational (e.g. indicating that a method is not the best but teaching it anyway)
• Having a bad attitude (e.g. showing contempt for the students or subject material)
• Taking a “we versus them” attitude
• Being a math snob
• Using terms such as “Clearly”, “Obviously”, “This is really trivial”
• Using a condescending or demeaning tone or attitude

Ambiguous Characteristics

• The correct balance between handouts and note-taking. Strategies include audiotapes, posting notes later, etc.