

What Do Great Teachers Do? The Techniques that Separate Great Teachers from Average Teachers

A summary of Doug Lemov's
Teach Like a Champion

By Jeffrey Puryear



Recent research suggests that teachers are the most important factor in improving student learning. Great teachers increase student learning much more than do poor teachers, and the effects appear to be cumulative over time. A child with a highly effective teacher can learn up to three times as much in a school year as the same child with an ineffective teacher. Great teachers make a huge difference in the success of their students.

At the same time, most research suggests that many factors traditionally thought to improve teacher performance in fact do little to predict success. These include years of education, a graduate degree, superior intelligence, an extroverted personality, enthusiasm, experience, professional certification, in-service training, and class size. Although these factors have often been used to recruit, remunerate, and promote teachers, there is very little evidence that they do a good job of distinguishing between

effective and ineffective teachers.

A key question, then, is what makes a great teacher? What do great teachers do? Is great teaching purely instinctive, or can it be taught? What can we do to make sure that students have the best teachers possible?

In his book, *Teach Like a Champion*, Doug Lemov attempts to answer these questions. He argues that great teaching is an art. Like all art, it relies on a set of skills or techniques that, once mastered and applied, transform raw material into highly valued results.

Using demographic information and test score results from across the United States, he identified a small group of teachers who managed to significantly increase the test scores of the poorest students. He then spent years observing these outstanding teachers, recording their work and cataloging their classroom practices. This book is the result. It is about “the tools of the teaching craft,” and more specifically about the tools

PREAL Policy Briefs provide non-technical overviews of key education policy topics. In this issue, Inter-American Dialogue Senior Fellow and former PREAL Co-director Jeffrey Puryear summarizes the findings of Doug Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion*. Based on years of observation of high-performing teachers, the book offers 49 classroom techniques that can help significantly increase the test scores of the poorest students.

Teach Like a Champion is available here: [English](#), [Spanish](#), [Portuguese](#). Also keep an eye out for a revised version of the book planned for late 2014, followed by a new book on reading. For updates from Lemov and videos of techniques described in his book, visit “[Doug Lemov's Field Notes](#).”

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necessary to succeed in teaching public school students who are poor and least likely to do well in school. It focuses on the difference between teachers who are great and those who are merely good. It includes techniques as simple and mundane as how great teachers greet students, pass out papers, and decide whom to call on to answer questions. The book shows what outstanding teachers routinely do to “close the achievement gap between rich and poor, transform students at risk of failure into achievers and believers, and rewrite the equation of opportunity.”

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Lemov’s emphasis is on specific techniques rather than on broad philosophies or strategies. He has identified 49 techniques that great teachers use. Each has been chosen because it works, rather than because it fits with any particular education theory. Many are simple and unremarkable, rather than complex or glamorous. But all are effective. Adopting and improving these techniques will, according to Lemov, increase student learning more, and more rapidly, than

relying on a particular education philosophy or strategy.

Each technique is specific, concrete, and actionable. Each is something teachers say or do in a particular way. Because the techniques are actions, the more teachers practice them the better they get at doing them. Not every great teacher uses every one of the techniques. Together, however, they constitute the basic tools necessary to transform teaching into an art.

Perhaps most importantly, Lemov argues that great teaching is about techniques that can be

taught. Teachers who are already teaching can significantly improve their effectiveness by mastering the techniques he has identified. Many of these techniques, like time management, establishing efficient classroom

routines, and controlling student behavior, are essential to student success, but are not taught in most schools of education. They have been overlooked by conventional theories and theorists of education. As a result, most novice teachers enter the profession unprepared to address problems that are certain to appear. Lemov argues that teaching teachers to control classroom behavior is an urgent policy goal. His emphasis on

technique and practice rather than on philosophy and strategy fundamentally challenges traditional approaches to teacher training.

At the core of the book are seven chapters that present the 49 techniques that great teachers use to increase their students’ academic success. For each, Lemov provides not only enough detail so that teachers can implement the technique, but an explanation of the rationale behind it. The digital version of the book includes videos that show the techniques being applied. This brief concentrates only on the 49 techniques, which take up a majority of the book and have generated the most discussion among policy-makers. The book also includes a discussion of two important issues, pacing and questioning, that did not break down cleanly into separate techniques. It concludes with a section that focuses on the key skills and techniques necessary to teach reading. Neither of these sections is included in this brief.

What follows is a brief summary of the seven chapters, along with a few examples of the techniques.

Overview: The Essential Techniques of Great Teachers

SETTING HIGH ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

Research consistently finds that high expectations are the most reliable tool for producing high

student achievement. Students respond surprisingly well to expectations. Even students without a history of high achievement improve their performance when faced with high expectations. The question is what techniques do great teachers use to establish high academic expectations? Lemov identifies five concrete and actionable techniques. Here are two:

Technique 1: No Opt Out. All students must try, and no students are permitted to simply say “I don’t know.” Any student who is unwilling or unable to answer a question must eventually provide the right answer as often as possible, even if only to repeat the correct answer.

Technique 2: Right is Right. Students must meet high standards for correctness: 100 percent. Answers that are almost correct are not acceptable. By insisting on right answers, teachers communicate that their questions and their answers truly matter. They send a powerful message to students that will guide them long after they have left the classroom.

Technique 4: Format Matters. How students express their knowledge is extremely important. Require that students use complete sentences and proper grammar at all times, and that they speak in a clearly audible voice.

PLANNING THAT ENSURES ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Great teachers employ planning techniques that are implemented before students enter the classroom, and set the stage for student success. These techniques embody five types of planning that are crucial to effective teaching. They include:

Technique 6: Begin with the End. Plan a sequence of objectives that depend on each other and are designed to be achieved over several weeks. Then plan a series of daily lessons that include activities designed to achieve those objectives, and an assessment of whether the objective was mastered. Each day begins by reviewing anything the class may not have mastered the day before.

Technique 8: Post It. Post objectives in a visible location so that students can identify the purpose of that day’s lesson.

Technique 10: Double Plan. Lesson plans should include not only what the teacher will be doing, but also what the students will be doing each step of the way. This approach helps the teacher see the lesson through the students’ eyes, and keep them productively engaged.

Technique 11: Draw the Map. Establish a classroom layout that facilitates achieving the primary lesson objective. Make space planning part of lesson planning.

STRUCTURING AND DELIVERING LESSONS

Great teachers use a consistent progression in their lessons. They begin with ‘direct instruction’ by delivering key information or processes. Then they move to ‘guided practice’ by helping students work through examples or applications. Finally, they move to ‘independent practice’ that gives students opportunities to practice on their own. Particularly important is not moving to independent practice before students are ready to do so. Among the ten specific techniques are:

Technique 12: The Hook. When necessary, use a short, engaging introduction to excite students about learning.

Technique 15: Circulate. Move around the classroom to engage and hold students accountable.

Technique 16: Break it down. Respond to a lack of clear student understanding by breaking a problem down into its parts.

Technique 19: At Bats. Make students practice—and practice and practice—the material presented.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN YOUR LESSONS

Great teachers engage students so that they feel like part of the lesson. They involve them not only in discussion, but in discussion on the lesson. They draw students into the work of the class and keep them focused on learning. The techniques include:

Technique 22: Cold Call. Call on students regardless of whether they have raised their hands. Make it clear that all students will be expected to answer questions, whether they volunteer or not.

Technique 23: Call and Response. Ask a question and have the entire class call out the answer in unison. Build a culture of energetic, positive engagement.

Technique 26: Everybody Writes. Give students the opportunity to reflect in writing before discussing a problem.

Technique 28: Entry Routine. Establish an efficient, productive and scholarly routine for how students enter the classroom, turn in homework, take their seats and are informed about the day's lesson.

Technique 29: Do Now. Outline on the blackboard or at students' desks a short activity that they should do as soon as they enter class. The activity should preview the day's lesson, require no explanation by the teacher or discussion with fellow students, and involve writing.

Technique 30: Tight Transitions. Establishing quick and routine transitions that students can execute without extensive explanation by the teacher is a critical aspect of highly effective classrooms.

Moving from place to place or from activity to

activity needs to be efficient, so as to preserve as much time as possible for learning. Cutting one minute apiece from ten transitions a day over two hundred school days creates nearly 35 additional hours of instructional time over the school year.

Technique 35: Props. Provide clear, public praise for students who demonstrate excellence or exemplify virtues. Teach students

to provide praise to their peers at your signal.

SETTING AND MAINTAINING HIGH BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS

Proper student behavior is crucial to learning. Students need to realize that high behavioral expectations go along with high academic expectations. Great teachers establish the levels of order and respect necessary to protect all students' right to learn in their classroom.

Technique 36: 100 Percent. All students are required to meet the highest behavioral expectations. Noncompliance is not an option. Three principles are key to ensuring compliance: 1) use the least invasive form of intervention; 2) rely on firm, calm finesse; and 3) emphasize compliance you can see.

Technique 37: What to Do. Directions regarding proper behavior should be specific, concrete, sequential and observable.

Technique 38: Strong Voice. Teachers signal their authority by following five principles in their interactions with students: Economy of language—fewer words are stronger than more; Do not talk over students—wait until no one else is talking; Do not engage—avoid engaging in other topics until you have resolved the topic you initiated; Square Up/Stand Still—face the class squarely and do not move while speaking; and Quiet Power—speak more slowly and more quietly when you want control.

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CREATING A STRONG CLASSROOM CULTURE

Here the goal is to make the class a place where students work hard, behave, model strong character, and do their best. Five principles are fundamental: discipline, management, control, influence, and engagement. Each is important, and reinforces the others. Among the techniques:

BUILDING CHARACTER AND TRUST

Part of good education is establishing trusting relationships with students and building their character. Great teachers realize that what they say to students, and how they say it, may affect their actions in the future, and may even change their lives. Great teachers apply the following techniques.

Technique 43: Positive Framing. Make corrections consistently and positively, and connect them to a broader view of the world you want the students to see. Concentrate on what students can do now, assume the best, and narrate the positive. Connect student behavior to their aspirations.

Technique 44: Precise Praise. Praise should be reserved for extraordinary behavior rather than for just doing what is expected. It should focus on behaviors a student can control rather than traits a student was born with. It should be loud (as criticisms should be soft) and genuine.

Technique 49: Normalize Error. Make it clear to students that incorrect answers are just as fundamental to education as correct answers, and are completely normal.

Conclusions

Throughout, the book makes an important distinction between strategies and techniques. Strategies are decisions, while

techniques are something you practice, hone, and adapt throughout your life. Artists, athletes, musicians, surgeons, and all types of performers achieve greatness by perfecting their technique. Approaching teaching as an art—that is difficult and requires finesse and discretion in the application, craftsmanship, and careful and attentive development of technique to master—is the path to success. The path is different for each teacher. But the techniques developed by champion teachers and described in this book can belong to any teacher, and can close the achievement gap in education systems.

Lemov's findings have a number of implications for policy. First, they suggest that great teaching is not purely instinctive, but can be taught. If so, and if technique is crucial to becoming an effective teacher, then classes in education philosophy and psychology, and in subject-matter knowledge (such as language, mathematics or science) may not be enough. More time dedicated to classroom practice may be necessary. Perhaps teacher training should include a much stronger emphasis on learning, practicing, and mastering techniques. Even after completing training and beginning work, new teachers might benefit from several years of practice under the supervision of accomplished professionals, so as to make sure they have mastered and consistently apply the proper techniques. This approach to pre-service training is already common for doctors, musicians

and athletes. It may be appropriate for teachers as well.

Moreover, since Lemov's techniques can be taught, practiced and mastered, they may have particular potential for improving the effectiveness of teachers already in service. If good teaching depends more on proper technique than on innate skill, then perhaps in-service training programs should stress mastering the proper techniques.

Beyond training, managers of education systems might consider incorporating Lemov's techniques into the expectations they set for teachers—making it clear that good technique is a core aspect of professional practice, and specifying the techniques that teachers are expected to apply. Managers could also require that principals master core teaching techniques, and can help teachers develop them. Finally, they may decide to make the mastery of technique a core part of assessing teachers' performance.



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