10 Best Books for College Teachers in 2025

By Catherine Stover

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I'm a skeptic – especially when it comes to advice for teachers at colleges and universities. I've seen scores of "best practices" rise and fall since I taught my first writing courses in the 1980s. There have been some exceptions, of course, where the authors have convinced me to reconsider my assumptions. From my 68 blog posts about books for teachers, here are the ten books that I have found to be the most useful:

Contents:

1. Before reading this book, I didn't think that research on the role of emotion in the learning process was relevant to college classrooms. This book changed my mind – and it changed my methods of teaching: *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion* by Sarah Rose Cavanagh. West Virginia University Press, 2016. ***See page 4.***

2. If you are a new faculty member, or are mentoring someone new, you probably have time for only one book. If so, this book covers a good range of the most important principles, and the author coaches instead of lectures: *The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You about College Teaching* by David Gooblar. Harvard University Press, 2019. ***See page 5.***

3. Many faculty members do not want to believe this statement by James Lang: "We will not succeed in teaching today's students unless we make a fundamental shift in our thinking: away from preventing distraction and toward cultivating attention." In our post-pandemic world, we have to face this reality. *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It* by James Lang. Basic Books, 2020. ***See page 6.***

4. You might think that the students who are smart enough to be in your class are also smart enough to know how to do the work. This is wishful thinking. After reading Saundra Yancy McGuire's book, I began to use her slides to include a 30-minute discussion in my classes, with convincing results. *Teach Students How to Learn: Strategies You Can Incorporate into Any Course to Improve Student Metacognition, Study Skills, and Motivation* by Saundra Yancy McGuire with Stephanie McGuire. Stylus, 2015. ***See page 7.***

5. What should you do if a student makes a racist statement in your class? Nobody wants to make a mistake when walking through this minefield. The best advice I've seen helps me understand how to respond compassionately and effectively. *Teaching About Race and Racism in the College Classroom* by Cyndi Kernahan. West Virginia University Press, 2019. ***See page 8.***

6. I can identify the single biggest reorientation in my teaching career: it was when I read the book *Mindset*. It's become a classic because it helps us understand why some students sabotage themselves while others succeed. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol Dweck. Random House, 2006. ***See page 9.***

7. After reading *Mindset,* I decided to rethink how I gave feedback and graded student work. I looked for advice that aligned with Carol Dweck's work, and I found it in a book by an assessment expert, Linda Nilson. Her research led me to use "specifications grading" with strong results. Making a major change like this can take years to fully implement. I can say this: After seeing the results, I'm all in. *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* by Linda Nilson. Stylus, 2015. ***See page 10.***

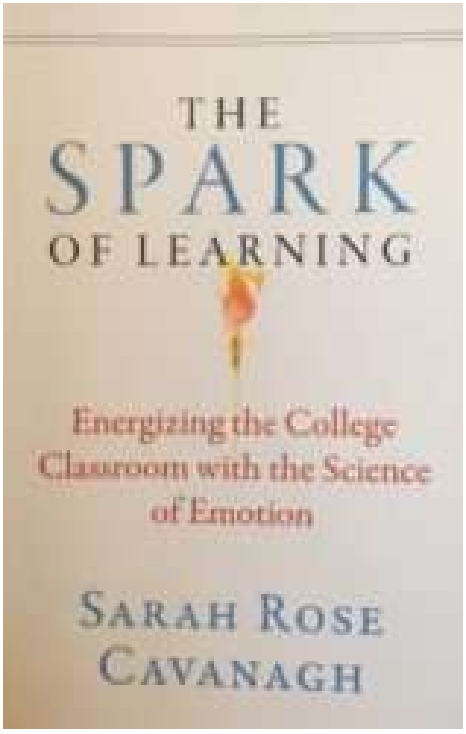
8. I'd bet that the most misunderstood phrase in college teaching is "learner centered." When it's said with an eyeroll, you know that there is a lack of information. Having worked with the author, Maryellen Weimer, I'm biased, of course. However, I am convinced that that second edition of her ground-breaking work is the best way to understand this movement. *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice, 2nd edition* by Maryellen Weimer. Jossey-Bass, 2013. ***See page 11.***

9. All college teachers owe a debt of gratitude to Malcolm Knowles. He challenged traditional methods of teaching adults, and his research led to a better understanding of self-directed learners. His work guided my teaching practice and influenced how I wrote my book. *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development, 6th edition,* by Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, Richard A. Swanson, Elsevier, 2005. *Note: newer editions are available.* ***See page 12.***

10. Many of us first heard about "Universal Design for Learning" when we created online classes. However, these principles can be applied just as well in face-to-face classrooms. The basic idea is to focus on your learning goals, and then to provide more than one path to reach them. This book is a good introduction to a rapidly evolving area of study. *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* by Thomas J. Tobin and Kirsten T. Behling. West Virginia University Press, 2018. ***See page 13.***

1. "Some people hold the view that if you are a learned scholar in a field, that should be enough to make you a good teacher."

Posted on March 22, 2022



We all know this isn't true. Is there a person alive who hasn't suffered through a class taught by an expert who was boring? And yet, it seems to me that we are reluctant to acknowledge that "emotion" can support or suppress learning. We focus on covering the material instead of creating the atmosphere that is most conducive to learning. Cavanagh argues that we should deliberately attempt to reduce levels of frustration, anxiety, and boredom while increasing our students' curiosity, interest, and motivation. If we do, student performance will increase, as decades of research in psychology and neuroscience have shown.

Work cited:

Cavanagh, Sarah Rose. *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion*. West Virginia University Press, 2016, p. 214.

2. "How do I help these students transform themselves?"

Posted on December 20, 2019

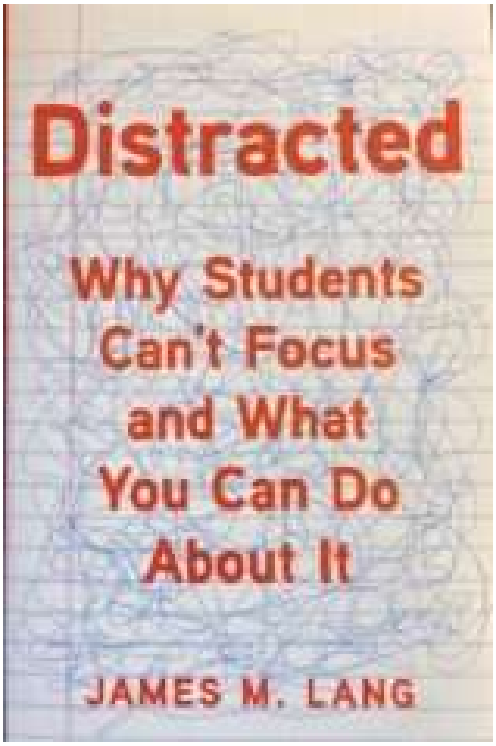
David Gooblar – who teaches at the University of Iowa and writes a column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* – has written the book that I wish existed when I started teaching. He tells us what he has learned about college-level teaching, as one who started with the goal of presenting brilliant lectures to one who now believes that your success or failure depends "on the extent to which you help other people learn." He embeds his discussion of pedagogical research in the story of his own transformation. This is a wonderful, thoughtful, and warm introduction to the science of teaching.

Work cited:

Gooblar, David. *The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You about College Teaching*. Harvard University Press, 2019, p. 13.

3. "We will not succeed in teaching today's students unless we make a fundamental shift in our thinking: away from preventing distraction and toward cultivating attention."

Posted on December 3, 2020



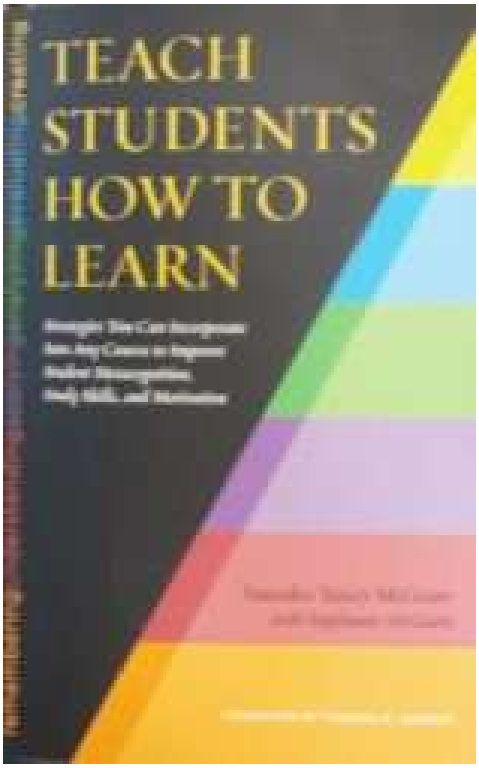
While reading James Lang's newest guidebook for college teachers, I shared one of the ideas with my English 1 students: "Attention is a gift that students and professors give to each other." I asked them how their teachers cultivate and sustain their attention. I got an earful – and their observations align perfectly with the strategies in this book. For example, the students said that they like interactive classes, when teachers demonstrate interest in what students say instead of "monologuing" too long. Lang recommends strategies that address all of these, which, as it turns out, often result in better learning outcomes.

Work cited:

Lang, James M. *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It*. Basic Books, 2020, p. 15.

4. "I used to think that if faculty teaching improved, student learning had to follow suit."

Posted on August 5, 2017



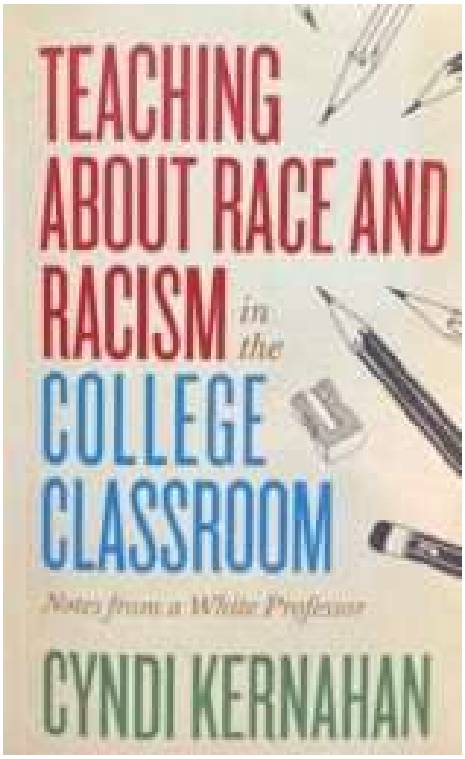
Now, however, Saundra Yancy McGuire believes that even the best teachers will not see the kinds of learning gains that are possible "as long as students do not come to our classrooms prepared to learn efficiently and independently." This book shows faculty members how to teach students how to learn by focusing on metacognition, mindset and motivation strategies. Because this book is packed with suggestions and excellent summaries of research, I agree with the reviewer who predicted that this book is one that "will become dogeared with use." I've already started making changes in the courses I teach this Fall.

Work cited:

McGuire, Saundra Yancy with Stephanie McGuire *Teach Students How to Learn: Strategies You can Incorporate Into Any Course to Improve Student Metacognition, Study Skills, and Motivation*. Stylus, 2015, p. 10.

5. "Accept your students with compassion while also holding to the evidence-based truth about race and racism."

Posted on August 21, 2020



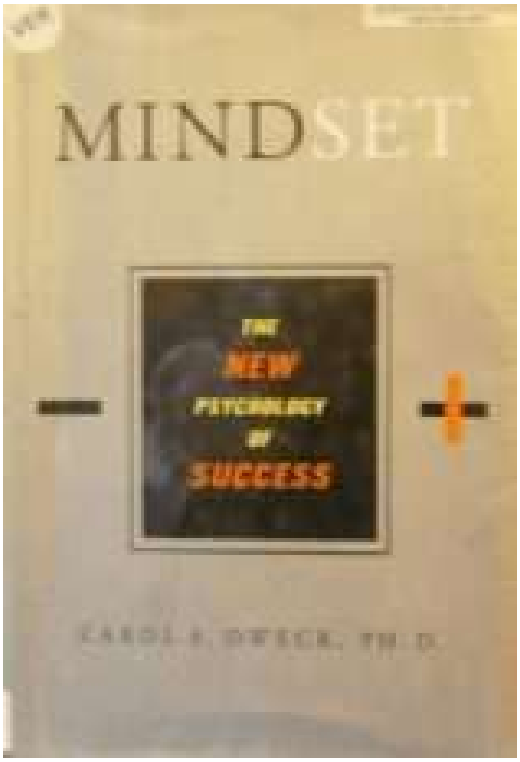
Controlling the tone of difficult conversations is never easy. And yet, it's especially critical when helping students gain new perspectives on race. Cyndi Kernahan cites research that shows that making students feel blamed or guilty only leads to backlash, not learning or attitude change (5). Rather than being confrontational, it's better to ignore misinformation while repeatedly emphasizing a new narrative that is grounded in the evidence you are providing. By being both patient and persistent in the face of student misconceptions, instructors are more likely to achieve their goal of helping students see and understand institutional and systemic racial bias.

Work cited:

Kernahan, Cyndi. *Teaching About Race and Racism in the College Classroom*. West Virginia University Press, 2019, p. 33.

6. “The growth mindset is based on the belief in change.”

Posted on April 28, 2016



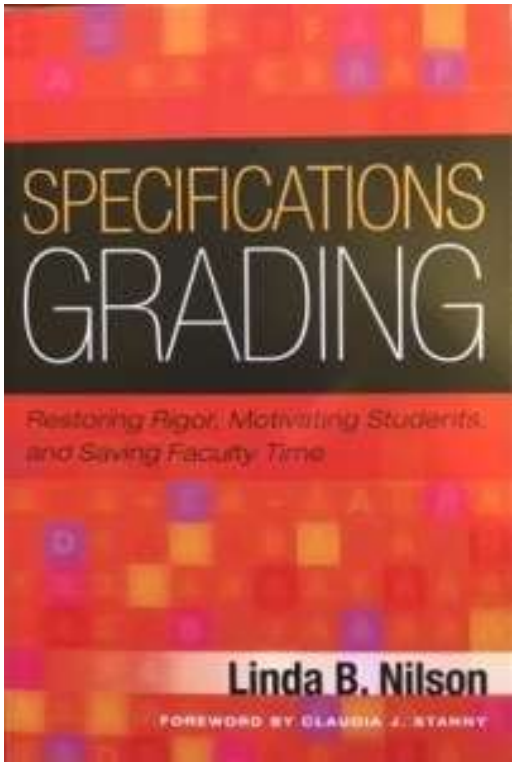
I’m coming to the realization that it’s not a lack of ability that holds most students back: their beliefs about their abilities hold them back. Carol Dweck calls their beliefs “mindsets.” She says that students have either a “fixed” mindset, which says they can’t get any better because they are who they are, or a “growth” mindset, which says they can learn and develop through effort. A fixed mindset response to a low score is: “This means I’m a loser.” A growth mindset response is: “I should work harder.” My goal now: show students a new way to see themselves.

Work cited:

Dweck, Carol S. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House, 2006, p. 207.

7. "A better grading system would build in incentives for students to aim high, work hard, and do their best."

Posted on April 27, 2020



Ever since I read Carol Dweck's book *Mindset* five years ago, I have been looking for a new approach to grading. I wanted to find a way to give grades that supported a growth mindset. I was looking for a method of giving feedback that led directly to improvement in student work. Does such an approach exist? I think I have found it. Linda Nilson's new book reinvents a philosophy known as "Contract Grading" and infuses it with cutting-edge empirical research. Her book is called *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time,* and I just love it.

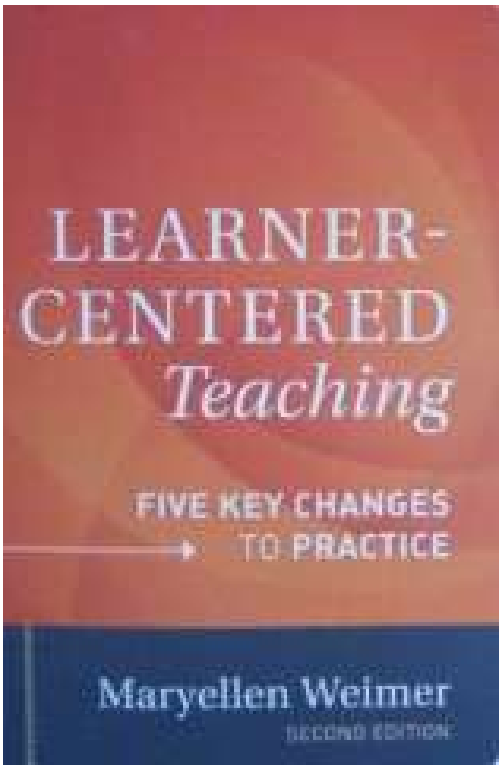
Work cited:

Nilson, Linda B. *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Stylus, 2015, p. 10.

8. "Let them discover."

Posted on May 21, 2015

When I started teaching years ago, my job was to give information to students, and their job was to pay attention. I don't see it this way anymore. Instead, I embrace an approach called learner-centered teaching. Maryellen Weimer, arguably the most respected leader of this movement, says in this book that the teacher's job is to *support* learning, rather than to *direct* it; to promote the development of critical thinking skills, rather than the capacity for memorization. This approach encourages reflection and responsibility. Weimer writes, "The goal of learner-centered teaching is the development of autonomous, self-directed, and self-regulated learners." (10)

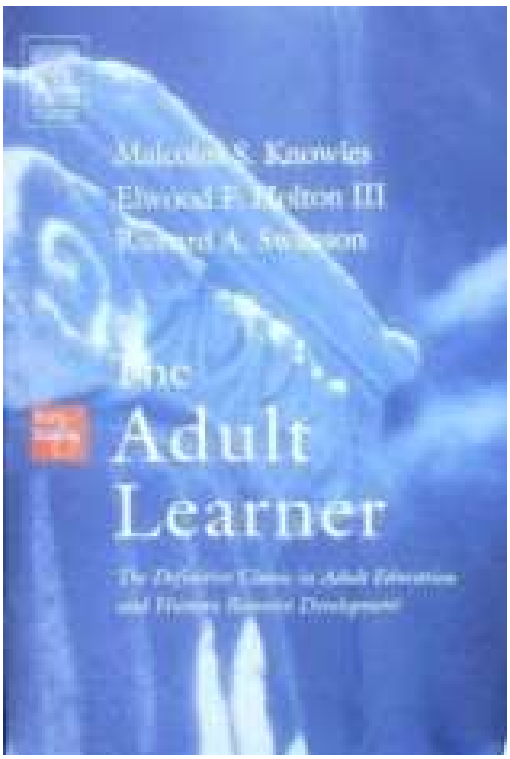


Work cited:

Weimer, Maryellen. *Learner-Centered Teaching,* 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2013, p. 76.

9. "I began to think about what it means to be a facilitator of learning rather than a teacher."

Posted on March 12, 2015



What is the difference between "educating people" and "helping people learn"? This classic book by Malcolm Knowles — the central figure in US adult education during the last century — explores the different sets of assumptions behind these approaches. Educators who lecture, for example, assume that their job is to transmit information to their students. Facilitators who help people learn, on the other hand, are more apt to run a workshop, using a problem-centered approach where students learn by working together to find an answer. Knowles' research suggests that adults are self-motivated, independent learners who have a high capacity for solving problems.

Work cited:

Knowles, Malcolm S., Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner,* 6th ed., Elsevier, 2005, p. 252.

10. "Is there just one more way that you can help keep learners on task, just one more way that you could give them information, just one more way that they could demonstrate their skills?"

Posted on February 16, 2019

It's easy to think of "accessibility issues" from a deficiency-based perspective. For example, sometimes faculty members are asked to do extra things for students with audio-processing limitations. This new book by Thomas Tobin and Kirsten Behling takes a much different approach. They encourage us to think of creating "just one more" way for students to reach the learning goals. When we do this, we help all students. Providing extra tools, more options for assignments, and more types of engagement helps everyone. In addition, these actions reduce the likelihood that anyone will need to request special accommodations.

Work cited:

Tobin, Thomas J. and Kirsten T. Behling. *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education*. West Virginia University Press, 2018, p.134.