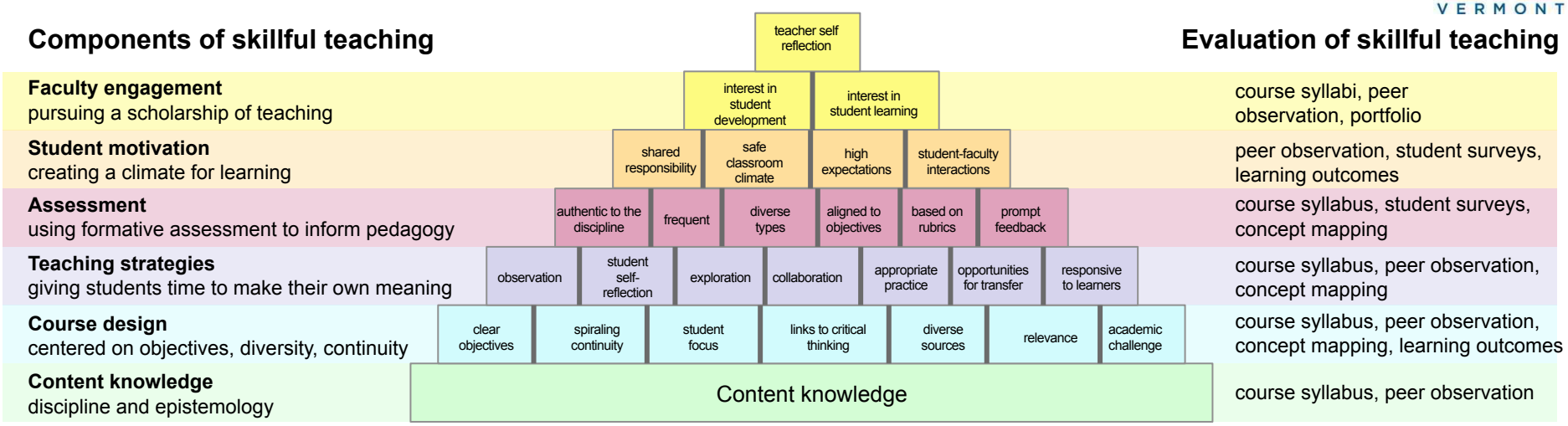
Excellence in college teaching: A synthesis of theory and evidence

Linden Higgins, Ph. D., M. Ed..
University of Vermont Department of Biology; Johnson State College, Department of Environmental and Health Sciences

Components of skillful teaching

Evaluation of skillful teaching



Introduction: There has long been an interest in excellence in the college classroom, and recent research both qualitative (e.g. Bain, 2004; Hansen, 2011; Light, 2001; Lueddeke, 2003) and quantitative (e.g. Arum & Roksa 2011; Kuh et al., 2005) has produced many lists of the characteristics of skillful instructors. However, despite a common focus on learner outcomes, the lists share few characteristics. I therefore undertook a synthesis of this literature (Figure 1), interpreting the empirical research in light of the theories of cognitive development (Figure 2) and student learning behaviors (Figure 3).

Motivation for the study

Recent literature describing forces impacting learning in the college classroom:

- Demographic changes in the student population (e.g. Ginsberg & Wlodkowsky, 2009)
- Decreasing engagement of students in academics (e.g. Selingo, 2012).
- Learning outcomes failing to meet expectations (e.g. Arum & Roksa, 2011)

Tying these together is strong evidence that faculty need to modify their classroom learning environment (e.g. Lueddeke, 2003).

Theory of student development

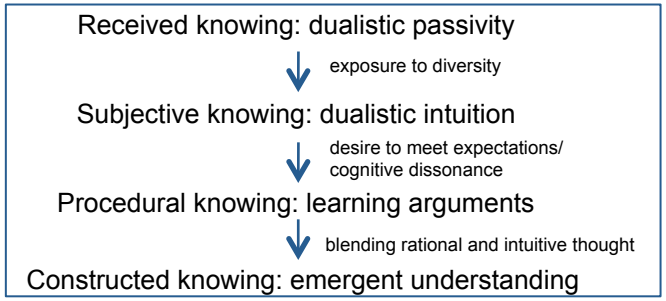


Figure 2: Stages of adult cognitive development

Theory of learning behavior

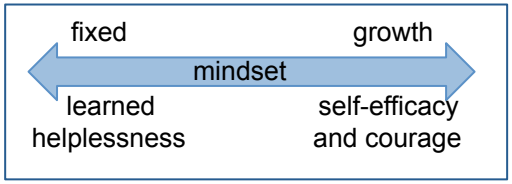


Figure 3: Behaviors of students exposed to challenge

Learner-centered instruction must be supported by an understanding of adult cognitive development (Belenky et al., 1986/1997; Perry, 1968/1970) and the behaviors underlying effective learning, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995) and growth mindset (Dweck, 1999), giving students the courage to work through challenges (Perry, 1968/1970).

Literature cited:
Arum, R. & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses.*; Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*; Bandura, A. (1995). Exercise of personal and collective efficacy in changing societies. In: *Self-efficacy in changing societies*; Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986/1997). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind;* Dweck, C. S. (1999). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development;* Ginsberg, M. B & Wlodkowski, R. J. (2009). *Diversity and motivation: Culturally responsive teaching in college* ; ; Hansen, E. J. (2011). *Idea-Based Learning: A Course Design Process to Promote Conceptual Understanding;* Light, R. J. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds.* ; Lueddeke, G. R. (2003). Professionalising teaching practice in higher education: A study of disciplinary variation and teaching-scholarship. *Studies in Higher Education, 28,* 213-228 ; Perry, W. G., Jr. (1968/1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme* ; Selingo, J. J. (2013). *College (un)bound: The future of higher education and what it means for students*