



TEACH LIKE A CHAMPION: 49 TECHNIQUES THAT PUT STUDENTS ON THE PATH TO COLLEGE, DOUG LEMOV

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Doug Lemov collected and compiled approximately ten years of field notes on the teaching techniques of effective teachers in *Teach Like A Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students On The Path To College*. Effective teachers were classified as those whose students excelled on state standardised tests. Lemov's text addresses the topics of high student academic expectations, teacher planning, lesson organisation and delivery, student engagement, classroom culture, student behavioural expectations, the building of character and trust, teacher pacing, and critical thinking. In addition to the forty-nine techniques, Lemov argues in the latter half of the textbook that all teachers need to be "Reading" teachers. This textbook could be considered a proficiency-based educational model resource; examples of teachers who plan their objectives, formative assessments, and individualised learning opportunities in a way that achieves high student standardised test scores is a focus of the text. *Teach Like A Champion* is written for mass audiences and its content is applicable for teachers, preservice teachers, and those who hire and/or provide professional development for educators.

Key Words: teacher education, professional development, proficiency-based education

BOOK REVIEW

Doug Lemov collected and compiled approximately ten years of classroom research on the teaching techniques of exceptionally effective teachers in *Teach Like A Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students On The Path To College*. He argues, quite convincingly, that the art of teaching well is a replicable process. If teaching well is replicable, the publication of Lemov's research is especially significant not only for the end users of his data—teachers—but also for the colleges and universities who prepare them, the private or public leaders who assess them, and the taxpayers who pay them to educate the next generation of society.

Most of the teachers that Lemov studied were identified as part of a network of public charter schools in New York and New Jersey called Uncommon Schools. This network of schools serve primarily minority students of low socio-economic status (SES). The most exceptional teachers consistently produced a high ratio (sometimes even 100%) of students whose standardised test scores not only passed state requirements but also met or exceeded the scores of students from more affluent backgrounds. The techniques described in Lemov's study convey the replicable behaviours, mannerisms, classroom management techniques, time-management skills, lesson delivery styles, and preparation methods of teachers whose students excel on state benchmark assessments. Some of the most exceptional teachers are highlighted in a DVD included with the textbook and it is apparent that these teachers are serious about the educational environment they lead. The twenty-five clips show an aggregate of teachers who meticulously plan their lessons, student-questioning techniques, classroom systems, and every minute of their class time. While there was a noticeable lack of teachers who smiled in a majority of the clips, in general their classrooms ran like finely tuned machines.

The trend toward proficiency-based educational models in the United States makes the publication of Lemov's textbook especially relevant. In general, the key indicators of proficiency-based education (PBE)—sometimes called performance-based or standards-based education—include set student performance objectives, formative assessments, individualised learning opportunities, and summative assessments to formally gage proficiency of the set objectives. The past five presidential administrations (Reagan, Bush, Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama) have all gradually but steadily advanced PBE from the national pulpit. Lemov does not pretend to be re-inventing the wheel regarding PBE in his textbook; in fact, I do not believe he even mentioned the term. Nonetheless, *Teach Like A Champion* is a proficiency-based educational resource that advocates in both written and visual formats the positive aspects of PBE in a non-political manner.

Through *Race to the Top*, the federal government has provided one of the most recent incentives for states to implement PBE standards. Under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, *Race to the Top* was designed to give financial support to education reform and innovation across the entire United States. A major commonality of *Race to the Top* winners is a commitment to apply the PBE standards to their students AND teachers through using summative assessment student data in their teacher evaluation processes. Using student test results to evaluate teacher effectiveness has been met with resistance from educators as there are a multitude of factors, unrelated to the teacher, that effect student learning in the classroom. The unrelated factors generally cited include,

but are not limited to, a challenging economic life outside of school, negative social influences, and/or poor teacher(s) in earlier grades. Lemov spent ten years recording the techniques of teachers whose students excel during school hours despite having one or more of the factors often blamed for low school performance. The list of acceptable excuses for teachers who do not or cannot produce academic results in the classroom is diminishing.

Summative assessments and the companion student performance objectives needed to create those assessments are important in the PBE movement. Formative assessments, though, can be used to inform teachers daily regarding the academic progress of their students. On my reading, approximately one-third of Lemov's forty-nine techniques directly relate to formative assessments and the individualized learning opportunities they provide in the classroom. Even the technique that he declares as the most influential of them all—the Cold Call—is a form of formative assessment where the teacher decides who answers a question without regard to their hand being raised (or not). This sounds like a simple technique which all teachers will affirm that they use in their classroom. But after reading the fourteen pages specifically dedicated to Cold Calling in the textbook I could only remember one teacher in my over twenty years of formal education (a Business Law professor) who used this technique as described in Lemov's textbook.

Teach Like A Champion is not written in academic format; therefore, it is difficult to say exactly how Lemov formally organised his research and calibrated his data. His textbook was designed to be accessible to mass audiences. It is clear that he identified teachers who consistently produced students with high academic results and then observed those teachers in the classroom. I attempted to make contact with Lemov through his online address (provided in the textbook) to request additional information on/about his research methods information. Ultimately, I was automatically redirected to the "HR team" for Uncommon Schools. After a number of introductory niceties with a few members of the HR team, Lemov himself wrote and questioned my wanting of research information from people who were not paid to support his textbook. In addition, he reminded me how busy he was running schools and training teachers and, therefore, would not have time to prepare the information requested. I found the whole exchange that I finally had with the author to be simply absurd; the few sentences he did write could have easily been replaced with a few sentences that expanded on his research methods.

It should also be noted that Lemov's research was collected in a somewhat controlled environment. Most of the teachers studied were part of the same charter-school network where school philosophies, in-house teacher training programs, and student expectations were similar from classroom to classroom.

For example, the acronym SLANT, spoken by numerous teachers on the video clips, elicited an immediate classroom-wide student response of improved posture, attention, responsiveness, and eye contact. Numerous teachers also used the word “track” in various configurations to remind the students to make eye contact with whoever was speaking in the classroom.

Lemov has contributed to a better understanding of the field by offering clear, replicable, and research-based information on how great teachers manage and instruct their students. It should be noted, though, that his research is not quite so clear about what should be done to help the teachers who have current substandard pedagogical skills. There is no mention in the text of offering remediation to a teacher whose students continually earned bad standardised academic results with the forty-nine techniques. This could be an area for future research because without successful teacher remediation data, Lemov’s claim of replicability is in jeopardy. In addition, I felt there were contextual gaps in explaining the behind-the-scenes steps that teachers would have to use to set up classroom systems that relied so heavily on Skinner-style behaviourism models. For example, the text did not explain how the exceptional teachers set up their classrooms at the beginning of the school year, save for one example of a teacher having his students practice passing papers. It did not show the context these children and/or their guardians were given before being allowed to attend one of the Uncommon Schools charter schools, as these schools are in very high demand (admission is through a lottery and the students wear uniforms). So, while the teaching techniques discussed in this text are replicable, there are still confidence, knowledge, and leadership ability factors that teachers must have—and students must feel—before any learning environment can be maximised.

Teach Like a Champion is targeted to K-12 classroom educators, but teachers of any age group in traditional or non-traditional classrooms would benefit from studying this text. While Lemov does not presume to be reinventing the teaching process, his research does present tangible insights as to what the “it” factors are that define a teacher with exceptional skills. The information in this text is valuable, as well, for those who are responsible for admitting preservice teachers to academic institutions or hiring teachers for employment. Educators with diverse personalities, preferred teaching methods, and levels of experience, as well as plentiful technological resources, or lack thereof, can use this text for formal or informal professional development. In gratitude of those who work in education, this book receives my recommendation as a useful and practical personal teaching resource.