

Book Review / Compte rendu

Schwartz, M.H., Hess, G.F., & Sparrow, S. M. (2013). *What the Best Law Teachers Do*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. Pages: 355. Price: 29.95 USD (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-674049-14-7

Reviewed by Kim Brooks, Associate Professor and 3M Fellow, Dalhousie University.

After almost 15 years of teaching, I am still flummoxed by the earnest, engaged student who takes the class off kilter. You know the scene. You pose a question for the class to consider, a question rooted in the materials students were asked to prepare in advance. EES (our earnest, engaged student) throws up her hand. She says she does not want to weigh in on that question, but has a different point she would like to make.¹ Where does that moment go? On the one hand, you do not want to quash EES's enthusiasm; on the other hand, you want to keep the class focused at a particular point because it's an important building block.

Enter Sophie Sparrow. She doesn't look like a rock star. #ThinkSparrow is not trending (in contrast to #ThinkTink). But Sophie has been recognized as one of the 25 most influential leaders in legal education in 2012, 2013, and 2014, and she was an inaugural recipient of the National Award for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching Professionalism.

In 2014 and 2015, I had the pleasure of working with Sophie Sparrow and Gerry Hess at a progressive teaching workshop at our faculty. They were the most graceful teachers I have seen in action: subtle, funny, focused, organized, thoughtful, and other-oriented.

So, when one of my colleagues, let's call that person EES, volunteered a reply to a query Sophie and Gerry had put to our group that took us in another direction, I was rapt: How would this moment unfold? Sophie looked at EES and said in a calm voice, "That is not the question we are asking." She then turned to another colleague with her hand up and asked her to respond. It was so simple. I don't think EES felt suppressed, rebuked, or embarrassed because EES continued to engage actively through the workshop. As a member of the class, I wasn't distracted by the exchange, which was brief and unapologetic. Nor did not take us, and the discussion, off course. It was elegant.

That is what it is like to be in the room with great teachers. You'll get a taste of this experience when you read *What the Best Law Teachers Do*. The book borrows from the genius of Ken Bain's classic, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Bain, 2004). While re-

searching the book, Michael Schwartz, Gerry Hess, and Sophie Sparrow toured the United States to meet and learn about the talents of 26 excellent law teachers. As the authors succinctly state, the project had three goals: to identify outstanding law teachers, to synthesize the principles that guide their teaching, and to document those principles in a way that is useful to others (Schwartz, Hess, and Sparrow, 2013, p. 4).

What the Best Law Teachers Do has 10 chapters. Seven chapters focus on documenting how exceptional law teachers engage in the learning process. These chapters include evidence of how they relate to their students, set expectations, prepare to teach, engage students, provide feedback and assessment, and develop strategies for ensuring students learn lasting lessons. These chapters and another on the personal qualities of excellent teachers form the core of the book. Flanking the focus on the teachers' practices is an opening chapter that develops a working definition of exceptional learning and a closing chapter that offers some suggestions for how the book might be used.

It cannot have been easy to narrow the field of professors to 26. The authors gathered nominations from law students, professors, deans, and alumni. They had a website with a call for nominations and reached out on listservs. They asked each of the over 250 people who were nominated to provide evidence of their sustained, salutary effect on students, a statement of their teaching philosophy, and two years' of student evaluations. That request narrowed the pool to about 110 teachers. The authors then engaged in the hard, time-consuming work of reviewing each of the files and narrowing the pool further. With 26 teachers identified, the authors took to the field—visiting each of the exceptional teachers in their own environment.

At that stage, the authors could have put together a compendium of stories: the story of each of the teachers they went to visit. That would have been a marvellous read. I am curious, for example, about the way Ruthann Robson prepares for classes. (Does she cram in advance? Build from last year's notes?) Or how Bridget Crawford engages students in the classroom. (Does she use tax blogs? Humour?). But that is a different book.

What the Best Law Teachers Do takes on the more complex work of collating the insights from the 26 teachers' portfolios (including perceptions and experiences shared by students and colleagues) and the in-person visits by the authors under the familiar categories of how the best learning environments are created. This structure loses some of the texture of the approaches to learning embraced by the 26 teachers as individuals, but we gain some broader, generalized lessons about the conditions created by outstanding teachers supporting student learning.

Schwartz, Hess, and Sparrow provide a useful executive summary of their findings in the Introduction (pp. 16–22). But you must not stop there. Chapters 3 through 9 open a doorway into the classrooms of these 26 teachers. The authors have tried to respect the voices of the individual teacher—subjects, so the chapters are thick with quotes and examples.

Here's one thing I loved about the book and one thing I'd like to know more about. What I admire is its wonderful organization and writing (with outstanding sign-post headings) and the way it offers specific insights about aspects of good teaching and learning alongside helpful generalizations. It is the first systematic study of outstanding law teaching in the United States. Less obvious is that the book has been thought out by excellent teachers and they have structured it in a way that anticipates you (the reader) are a learner. The book itself models what they have learned about great teaching. The goals

of the book are clear at the outset; it is logically organized, methodically and carefully prepared. The key lessons are made explicit at the outset; the materials support nuanced observations and lessons; and readers are given room to draw their own conclusions. The book concludes with a call for the reader–learner to take their insights forward.

What I'd like to know more about is what these 26 teachers sacrifice to achieve their success in the classroom. However, the book isn't a study of the teachers—it's a study of how they create great learning, so this topic was clearly beyond the scope of inquiry. Nevertheless, if great teachers are thoughtful, responsible, expert, passionate, enthusiastic, positive, energetic, authentic, expressive, creative, inspiring, and humble; have good listening skills, exude empathy, and work toward improvement constantly; develop personal relationships with students, set high expectations, prepare relentlessly, vary their teaching styles; and offer formative and distributed assessment, for example, as this study finds they are and do, then how do they make their lives, as a whole, work? The book acknowledges the challenge of maintaining a balance between life and work, and I'd love to know more about how that really happens. But I suspect that means that another book is in order. ✨

Note

1. This is an idealized scenario. In my experience, EES does not begin by identifying that her (or his) observation is off topic. Either EES does not realize that the point does not respond to the question posed or, more likely, has not actually focused on the question posed for long enough to figure out what the question is.

References

Bain, Ken. (2004) *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

#ThinkTink. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23ThinkTink&src=typd&lang=en>