

What is the Best Teaching Advice I Ever Received?

Presented by:

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After serving almost 30 years on active duty in the United States Army, Ken Alford retired as a Colonel in 2008. While on active military duty, Alford served in numerous assignments, including the Pentagon, eight years teaching computer science at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and four years as a department chair and professor teaching strategic leadership at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. He has published and presented on a wide variety of topics during his career. His current research efforts focus on student learning and military service during times of conflict.



Editor's Note:

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Welcome to this Magna 20-Minute Mentor. Today we're going to talk about what's the best teaching advice I've ever received. My name is Ken Alford. I'm a professor of church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University currently.

In the past, I've had the opportunity to teach at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I taught computer science and information systems engineering. And then the army sent me to the National Defense University in Washington D.C. where I was a department chair and taught organizational behavior and strategic leadership. And so, I've lived in both worlds, both in math, science, engineering as well as the humanities and social science world.

What we want to talk about today is things you can do to help become a better teacher. And so, as I share a few ideas, just take the things that seem to resonate with you and think about perhaps looking at how you might use them.

So, the question arises—I've said this is the best advice I've ever received—where do these suggestions come from? Well, I've been collecting them ever since I started teaching. I began teaching at the college level in the 1970s as a teaching assistant, and then through the '80s, '90s, and into this century, I've had an opportunity to teach at various places. And each time I've taught, I've tried to pick the brains especially of the senior professors, the folks getting ready to retire as well as those that are just more established and just ask them what's their best advice is.

And these are some of the things that I've collected along the way. This is certainly not the full list, but I've just picked some of the things that I thought might be most applicable. So, let's begin.

The first piece of advice I would give you I received very early at the Military Academy from a very seasoned professional instructor. He'd been teaching for many decades. And he just said it this way. He said, "Ken, be kind. Treat your students as you want to be treated."

He said there's never a reason to be disrespectful of students or to be anything other than kind. He said if given the opportunity, always choose kind. And that's just stuck with me. I just think that's really wonderful advice. And I share it with you.

The second piece of advice—I received this is a brand-new faculty member at the Military Academy. And this senior colonel said, well, Ken, let your students get to know you. Too often, he said, we are just there. He said we are just a uniform on the stand. In a regular university, we'd just be just business clothes on the stand. But he said let them see that you're a person.

You've got a family life. You've got a personal life. You've got a life outside of the classroom. Let them understand the struggles and the triumphs and the challenges you've had in your life and just make yourself a little bit real for them. And I think that's great advice, and so I begin every class and show them picture my family and explain a

little bit about our background and who we are and just try to learn the same kind of things from them.

Related to that is to help the students to get to know each other because too often students will sit side by side for an entire semester and never even talk to each other. I personally just think that's criminal. And so, what I do on the first day of class and periodically during the semester is all throw a slide up that says something like please meet your neighbors. And then before class begins, I just encourage students to meet the folks all around them. And I just seed it this way. I say if I had you stand up and introduce the people that you're sitting by during class, would you be able to do it?

Now truth be told I've never actually done that to put him on the spot, but it does encourage them to meet those folks. And it gives them study group partners and those kinds of things. So, it's just a good thing. I think it's great advice.

I would also pass on advice I've received a couple of times, and that is just simply lighten up. Too many professors think that they have to just be so dour and sad and just unhappy on the stage to look professional, and that's just not the case. Personally, I love it when a presenter will share a joke or say something funny or have a funny aside. And so, give yourself the freedom to do that. I think your students will just enjoy it if you will do that.

Let me share one with you. This is with permission of a friend of mine in my current department. At the end of the semester what had happened was he'd had just a lot of requests from students saying, hey, you gotta give me one point, and you need to bump me over from an A minus to an A. And this is the email he sent them.

And so, it says: Dear students, I don't know why, but I'm getting an abundance of emails from students explaining to me that they are one point short of an A and that if I don't give them that one point they will either, one, lose their scholarship, two, get kicked out of their apartment, three, forfeit their chances for medical school, four, get cut from the rugby team, five, not be able to get married this June or, six, have to work in a coal mine all summer.

And then he said, hey, it's OK. Just take a chill pill and relax. A hot shower and a full plate of pad Thai chicken will do you some good. Chase that down with a Slurpee. I don't even care what flavor it is. Just don't make it blue. Blue ones jack up your teeth.

Then he goes on and says, look, if you put \$100 in a savings account, you can't draw out 101. You'll be overdrawn. Likewise, if you have an A minus, I can't give an A just for kicks. I promise, life will go on. You'll graduate from college. You'll go into an honorable profession.

And best of all, you'll still drive your children to soccer practice in a really nice minivan. Life is going to be great. I have a hard time believing that this class is going to determine your future salary or potential for winning the Nobel Prize, much less who

you'll marry or whether you'll have a nice home. Cheer up. Eat some ice cream. Live a little. You can do this.

But don't lose any more sleep over it A or A minus. Get some perspective. You'll live to see another day. But, hey, that's just me he said. Sorry for the rant but, man, did that feel good. I love you all. Then he signed it with his name and sent it out. And he said students came back who had been complaining and they were now laughing, and that's what you want.

The next piece of advice I would give is—that I've received is to be straightforward with students. You just need to tell them the way it is. I've had professors that I've known that have led students to believe that if they do a certain quality of work, it will lead to an in the end when it's just not going to happen. And so, if you have standards, you need to let students know. Let them know what you expect. Let them know what they can expect from you as well.

Next is to capitalize on your strengths. Every department's got that professor that just has charisma that just drips off of them. And if you take the stage behind them, it's sticky because they left so much charisma on the stage. Well, that may not be you. There are other professors that are wonderful researchers and maybe the best in their field, and, again, that may not be you. But you are you, and so capitalize on your strengths. Don't try to be somebody else. Just be the best you that you can be, and life's just much easier.

Next I've received the advice to always be learning. I've had faculty colleagues that had the opinion that basically when they got their PhD that meant that they could close the door on learning anything new. Oh, how sad. We live in an age where everything is continuing to expand, and we need to be part of that.

On a related note, I've received advice several times and have just found it wonderful advice. And that is to admit when you don't know something. You'll get questions in class in which honestly you just don't know the answer. Never try to bluff.

Just simply tell the students that's a great question. I don't know the answer right now, but I'm going to do everything I can to find it. And then what you want to do is do just that. Find the answer.

And then teach the students once you find the answer what the process was that you went through to find the answer to the question you didn't know. That's some of the best teaching you can have because students can then see that there's something that you didn't know, that there was a process you followed to learn it, and then they can see how it worked. I've just found that to be just excellent advice.

I've learned basically that if there are no eureka moments for the teacher, there will be few such moments for the student. If the teacher's excited and learning new things, you

get to share those in class, and the students can feel your enthusiasm. And it's just catching.

The next piece of advice is to have standards. You need to have a certain standard, a minimum if you like, that students need to meet in order to be successful in this course. Now figuring out what that is may take you a couple of semesters, but the sooner you can do that and let students know what that standard is, the better off both of you will be.

You need to then help students meet those standards. This isn't something that you just announce once in your syllabus, but this is a process throughout the semester where you let students know, look, if you're looking for an A in this class, here's the kind of work I'm expecting. Here's the kinds of things you should be doing. And if you're doing something less than that, here's what the consequences will be of that choice that you've made.

You want to do something with current students that we didn't really have to do. When I first started teaching many years ago, we could teach a lesson and then at the very end of the lesson put all the pieces together and do a ta-da here it is. Here's the answer. Isn't that wonderful.

And that doesn't work so much with present students. You need to front load your relevance. You need to let students know where you're going to go and why this class matters, why the material we're talking about right now matters and how it fits into the larger scheme of things. If you provide students with that information, they'll have a better attention span during your class.

Let me give you an example. A few years ago when it was the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing the thesis on the door at the Wittenberg Cathedral, a teacher—this was not a college professor but it was a teacher of fourth graders in an inner city on the east coast—wanted to teach his students about Martin Luther. And so, he prepared about a 20-minute presentation for them, went into class, and gave what he thought was the most wonderful presentation on Martin Luther.

Then he had a little multiple-choice quiz at the end of class, gave it to the students, and every student failed every quiz. And he was just beside himself. He thought I've come—I'm a complete failure as a teacher. And then something dawned on him. He went back into those same students and said, how many of you know who Martin Luther King is? And every hand went up, and then he realized what he needed to do.

So, they had A-B kind of schedule, and when he got the next group of students, he began his class this way. How many of you know who Martin Luther King is, and every hand went up in the room. And then he said, did you ever wonder why his parents named him Martin Luther King? And all the students shook her head and said, yeah, we have no idea. And then he said let me teach you who Martin Luther was.

And then he gave that same 20-minute presentation to the students exactly as he had done in a day before to the other group of students and then gave them the quiz at the end of the 20 minutes, and every student passed. Because when they began, they had the front loaded relevance of why that information mattered and they had it in perspective. And so, if we'll take the time to just take that 30 seconds some time—sometimes a minute—to give students that relevance it'll just help us out.

Well, other advice that's great is to watch other teachers teach. Just take the best teachers in your college or your department and just ask if you can sit in on their class. Just sit in the back of the room and just watch what they do. More than the content that's being presented, watch how the lesson is organized, how they relate to the students, how they present the material, what their slides look like if they're using them, and how the students are feeling while the class is going on.

Along with that then, appropriately borrow or we might say appropriately appropriate from other teachers. Take the things you see that other good teachers do, and many times just ask them if you can borrow that and incorporate it into your class so that you can take advantage of that. You're not going to want to become them, but there are things you can learn from watching other effective teachers that will just be very helpful in your classroom.

One of the greatest skills that you can gain—and numerous teachers have mentioned this to me—is to—the ability to learn to ask good questions. Questioning can make a class, or it can break a class. If you're asking yes/no questions, you're wasting your time. It's the hows and the whos and the whys and the whats that help students to think and to synthesize and cause them to actually learn.

Spend some time looking at good questioning. There's a great deal of literature on this, and we get some excellent ideas. And it's a skill like any other. You'll have to practice it along the way.

Another piece of advice is to right size your course. Too often we try to do too much. We try to put too much in each lesson. We try to put too much in each exam. We try to put too much in each assignment. And we want students to learn everything ideally all at once, but it's just not going to happen.

One teacher put it this way to me. He said you can't cram two hours of instruction into a 50-minute class no matter how hard you try. You can push and shove, but there's still just 50 minutes at the end of the day. And that's all there's just going to be. It's just not going to work out any other way.

Another piece of advice is to mix things up. You've seen the studies where there are numerous studies suggesting that attention span wanes after 15 minutes. Well, you want to have things in your tool box that when you see the attention waning, do something, whether it's a pair and share or have them stand up or whether it's a one-

minute write or whatever it might be, have something that you've just got that you can draw on immediately to bring their attention back to you.

Next piece of advice I've received was you're going to have a bad day. Some days it's just not going to work. And just shake it off when that happens. When you have a bad day, just flat off shake it off.

I've had people tell me that they collect comments from students that are complimentary, and they read them when they're having a bad day or other things to do. But just recognize every day's not going to be a perfect day in the classroom.

There is another process that one of my current colleagues shared with me that I just think's wonderful. And he says there's a process we go through where first we show the students. It's 100 percent us, then we help the students. It's 50/50. It's half of them, they're trying, but were there. We're there to catch them. And then we watch them, it's now about 75 percent students and 25 percent us. We're still there, but we're now in the background.

And then he said comes the hard part, and that's when we let them do what they've just learned. And now it's 100 percent students. And we may do some kind of evaluation afterwards, but it's a process we go through where it's all us and eventually it's all of them.

Other advice I received that was just been very helpful is to consider next semester when you're preparing this semester because there's things you can do to make your handouts reusable, to make your syllabus reusable. I put all of the changes of dates and things in my syllabus in one little table, and then all the other information can transfer from semester to semester without having to be redone. Don't hide a lot of dates and deadlines and things in your handouts in your syllabus because you'll miss some the next semester.

I would also tell you that—this is advice that I've really, really treasured, and I just really hadn't thought of it to be honest, but once I heard it, it's just been wonderful—and that is to share more stories. Stories are the way we learn.

And regardless of your discipline, there are stories you can share, stories of how this discovery was made or how this discovery has been important or the way people have taken this discovery and used it in new ways or stories behind the history or whatever you're teaching. There are stories available. Learn those stories and share some of them with your students. Students just pay attention and just come alive during the story.

I would just remind you—and this advice I received; this is probably the first piece of advice I received. I ask our very senior faculty remember when I was brand new. I hadn't taught a day at West Point. And I said what would you tell me. And he said remember it's an honor to teach.

Not very many people get to do this, and fewer people get to do it for a living. And he said just remember it's an honor to be in front of those students. They're depending on you to help them get to where they need to be in this field.

But then he said at the same time, and he kind of put it—had a twinkle in his eye—he said but remember it should be fun. He said if you're not having fun, you're doing it wrong. It's just—this is just the most wonderful career in the world, and

You just gotta have fun. If you're not having fun, re-look at how you're approaching this. I have never felt like I've gone to work. I get to teach, I get to research, I get to have fun with students, and they pay me for it. It's the best of all worlds.

Well, the bottom line—I guess if we had to just take all this advice and put it down into one summary piece—the bottom line that I would just leave with you is that there's always room to improve as a teacher. I don't care if you've been teaching one week or 40 or 50 years. There's always room to improve as a teacher.

So, hopefully some of these suggestions will help you think of ways that each of us and you particularly might be able to improve in some areas. So, enjoy that journey. Enjoy the ride.

If you would, we've got a survey here at Survey Monkey. We welcome any thoughts, suggestions, or ideas you'd like to share, so please take a minute. And we hope to hear from you. Thanks.

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