

Bonni: [00:00:00] I know so many of us have read the book What the Best College Teachers Do and cherished Ken Bain's guidance. On today's show, Ken Bain is here to talk about the book and his work.

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Bonni: [00:00:24] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space where we explore the art can science be more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:50] I'm absolutely thrilled to be welcoming today Ken Bain who is the President of the Best Teachers Institute. He is internationally recognized for his insights into teaching and learning and for a 15 year study of what the best educators do.

Bonni: [00:01:08] His now classic book, What the Best College Teachers Do won the 2004 Virginia and Warren Stone Prize for an outstanding book on education and society.

Bonni: [00:01:18] And it's been one of the top selling books on higher education. It's been translated into 12 languages and was the subject of an award winning television documentary series in 2007.

Bonni: [00:01:30] Welcome, Ken Bain.

Ken: [00:01:33] Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity.

Bonni: [00:01:37] Well it's such an honor to have you here. We're going to spend just a little bit of time talking about your background.

Bonni: [00:01:43] I know you spent much of your academic career at Vanderbilt in Northwestern and NYU before you became the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of History in Urban Education.

Bonni: [00:01:59] But that's not what you do today. Tell us a little bit about what life is like for you today, Ken.

Ken: [00:02:03] Well for the last year and a half two years now I have worked full time with the Best Teachers Institute which is an educational and research institute exploring the activities and thinking and insights and so forth of people who are extraordinarily good at fostering very deep learning on the part of their students.

Ken: [00:02:29] The Institute is an outgrowth of the book you just mentioned. But the book and the research just continues within the institutes

Ken: [00:02:38] And we're working with a number of different universities and colleges around the world and helping them to think about the importance of teaching and learning issues. And a couple of cases setting up new teaching centers and so forth.

Bonni: [00:02:55] You were also the founding director of four major teaching and learning centers. What has it been like for you to see this real shift on much more of a focus on teaching and learning at all different kinds of institutions?

Ken: [00:03:09] Well when I first founded the first center back at Vanderbilt University back in the 1980s there wasn't a great deal of interest and teaching in higher education and getting faculty members involved in that conversation was a little bit scary to say the least.

Bonni: [00:03:34] And now I know that when we think about people that are going to be listening to this podcast I can say that with confidence that most of the people listening are going to be familiar with What the Best College Teachers do and have treasured it just as I have.

Bonni: [00:03:48] So I'm going to just start by saying if anyone listening has not read it you need to stop recording right now. Get your hands on it because it's just a really important thing to have on our bookshelves to be really a company in us in our teaching journey.

Bonni: [00:04:01] What I'd love to know from you is what is still the same after all these years since the book was published ten plus years ago?

Ken: [00:04:09] Well I'm not sure. That that's a really good question. It reminds me of a question that I got. Oh I don't know. Maybe close to 10 years ago.

Ken: [00:04:22] I was visiting a college campus and I found myself on the elevator with the President of university and he said to me as we descended down the elevator "I won't be able to come to your talk summarize what you're going to say before we hit the first floor".

Ken: [00:04:47] I didn't have an answer for him at all. But it sparked a lot of thought on my part. If I was in that elevator conversation again and it would be the same answer today as it would have been at that time or the next day when I actually thought of this answer is if I had one thing to say...

Ken: [00:05:11] In 30 seconds on what the best college teachers do is that they ask engaging questions- fascinating questions that spark people's curiosity and fascination and that people find important and intriguing.

Ken: [00:05:30] But at the same time they are questions that will lead people into areas that were not explored previously.

Bonni: [00:05:41] Now the next question you're going to love even more because if there are I mean I think about what what has stayed the same is just so much of the core of it.

Bonni: [00:05:50] I mean that the best teachers really get that real world practice you sort of talked about that with your with your when one sentence idea- your elevator pitch- that's what they call it. Helping students to engage in real world practice.

Bonni: [00:06:05] And getting that perspective that what they're learning actually matters and matters in the world, matters as citizens, matters in potentially that their pursuits. What has changed in the 10 plus years?

Ken: [00:06:19] In the 10 years I've been able to really expand upon this idea of a natural critical learning environment.

Ken: [00:06:30] When I first talked about that concept in the book I defined it in terms of I think four or five basic elements.

Ken: [00:06:39] And since then, we've been able to tease out really 15 different elements of that natural critical learning environment.

Ken: [00:06:49] Now I should explain to your listeners very quickly that what that concept attempts to do is to capture it to summarize the ingredients of a learning environment that is likely to foster a very deep approach to learning and a very deep achievement in learning.

Ken: [00:07:11] I think over the years we've understood that concept much more fully than I did when I first wrote the book.

Bonni: [00:07:20] What are some of that changes that you've seen from going from the four to five to 15? Where were some of the more nuanced areas you were able to add more breath to?

Ken: [00:07:30] That environment begins with the notion that people are most likely to take a deeper approach to their learning and thereby achieve a deep result when they are trying to answer questions or solve problems that they the learners find intriguing and beautiful.

Ken: [00:07:55] That idea I think was always there in our thinking but perhaps what was not there was the recognition that I think the difficulty that arises in a formal educational environment - Is that the learner is often not in charge of the questions.

Ken: [00:08:23] Now that's both good and bad. It's good in the sense that more advanced learners- that the teacher- is able to raise questions that the learner the student will never invent on their own. And move students to new areas and new considerations.

Ken: [00:08:46] But it still creates a gap between those conditions which the research and our own experience tell us are most likely to foster that deep approach to learning and the conditions that are most likely to spark that very deep approach to learning on the part of students.

Ken: [00:09:06] I think an important second ingredient that was a part of the thinking from the beginning but I guess I didn't really fully realize how important it is in the whole process until years later and that is that you need to give the learners as I put it now- the same kind of learning condition and environment that we expect as advanced learners.

Ken: [00:09:37] And what I mean by that is that if I as a professor I'm working on a project or any teacher is working on a project they're trying to learn something.

Ken: [00:09:49] Let's say they're trying to write a paper do some research. That's faculty learning.

Ken: [00:09:54] Well if I'm working on that and I take it down the hall to a colleague and say "Will you give me some feedback on my efforts?"

Ken: [00:10:04] I'd be terribly insulted if they just looked me in the face and said "You're making a C thus far."

Ken: [00:10:12] I would expect some substantive feedback so that I could take it back to my office or my laboratory or wherever to the library and rethink and rework it.

Ken: [00:10:27] And perhaps produce something quite different from what I originally started with. I would expect an environment in which I could try, fail, receive feedback, try again. Fail, receive feedback, and be able to do all of that in advance of and separate from anybody's judgment or anybody's grading of my work.

Ken: [00:10:59] We don't provide that kind of environment for students. Instead we usually- the traditional formal educational environment is one in which we instruct, then test, record the results, instruct and test and record the results, add up all the results. Divide by some magic number of feed it into some formula and pronounce a grade.

Ken: [00:11:22] That's not an environment that is highly conducive to fostering very deep approaches to learning and it certainly is not the kind of environment that we expect as advanced learners in our own fields.

Bonni: [00:11:37] That's really powerful. I'm thinking about my introduction to business students right now. They have to write a business plan for their assignment and this time around I'm having them listen to a podcast that's called Startup and this guy essentially is just recording the story of starting his business.

Bonni: [00:11:55] And essentially it helps them fill in some of the gaps because they can figure out how much capital he needs to start his business because he

records that going out and talking to venture capitalists etc. and they know that who is on his management team so that part of it is an issue of recording what they hear.

Bonni: [00:12:12] But part of it is they're also going to have to fill in some holes and decide if they were the consultant being hired- Would they build an app or would they stay away from that because it's going to be too expensive and there are so many apps like that- so they have to take some critical thinking too.

Bonni: [00:12:27] So yesterday, I had them in class listening to the guy's podcast and building what's called a pitch deck.

Bonni: [00:12:33] It's the story- it's the what's the problem? What's the solution? And how are we going to make money at it?

Bonni: [00:12:38] It was so wonderful because it was the first time this is I think the fifth week in the semester something like that where every student in that class was completely engaged but in very different ways.

Bonni: [00:12:50] There's one guy that sits in the back and his arms crossed. I keep trying to reach him in different ways. He actually walked up to the front of the room while the podcast is playing and started asking me questions.

Bonni: [00:13:01] I thought yes I got him he is finally there but they they all walked out of the room that day confused and frustrated because they didn't have the answers.

Bonni: [00:13:13] And I said "Have you been listening to this guy? He does have the answers either. Remember when he talked to his wife?" And his wife was even telling him you're wearing those white tennis shoes to go to your pitch for your for the investor.

Bonni: [00:13:26] And so I said we don't have the answers yet but as you said having an environment where they can explore areas that don't have right or wrong answers and the pitch deck by the way is having them build- doesn't have a grade associated with it.

Bonni: [00:13:41] I didn't bring that up in the class. It's kind of like this is just on the way toward eventually building their business plan. This was just an opportunity that for them to play.

Bonni: [00:13:50] But I loved to use some of our past guests have really encouraged me to say - if your students are confused and a little frustrated that's actually not such a bad sign.

Ken: [00:14:00] No. No. Exactly. Exactly. And I think it's the opportunity to really to embrace failure that is so extraordinarily important.

Bonni: [00:14:11] What are some ways that the greatest teachers that you are meeting today are helping students to embrace failure especially when it's not something done very often?

Ken: [00:14:23] I think it's by creating those situations where students do have that opportunity of trying failing receiving feedback and being able to repeat that process or as one person put it they have lots of do overs.

Ken: [00:14:39] Now that logistically is challenging often but with a large class they can be conquered thing this happen in increasing numbers and in recent years by getting students involved in giving each other feedback or creating kinds of environments where the students are collectively struggling with ways of thinking through a problem and then getting feedback on that process.

Ken: [00:15:11] Using such old fashioned techniques as a master class approach where you teach one student in front of many students that is giving one student lots of feedback in front of many other students and everybody learns in that process.

Ken: [00:15:29] It's important to create a situation where people feel comfortable with failure. Part of it is perhaps the tone that you set in the classroom.

Ken: [00:15:39] If you set a tone that that in essence says there are right answers and we hand out those right answers to you, better get these down in your notebook.

Ken: [00:15:50] Then that's one thing but it's on the other hand you set up an environment where the class is organized around from big questions and everybody is exploring those questions and exploring them collaboratively and you're sharing ideas with each other and you're getting feedback from each other.

Ken: [00:16:11] And from the advanced learner in the room, the professor then that creates a different kind of environment to recognize that there is always a struggle.

Ken: [00:16:22] Years ago and I quoted this in the book, Craig Nelson had this wonderful line. Craig was a terrific biology professor at Indiana.

Ken: [00:16:32] A lot of work on the improvement of teaching. He said, "We often teach as if we are God."

Ken: [00:16:41] Now that line always struck me as enormously powerful because we think about it that's often what happens.

Ken: [00:16:49] So if we teach as if we are God - we're handing down truths to students to be memorized.

Ken: [00:16:56] But if on the other hand we step back from that and recognize the contingency of our own knowledge and to raise big important questions - maybe questions that are even bigger than the class itself.

Ken: [00:17:13] And to invite students into an investigation of those questions would create a completely different kind of learning environment.

Bonni: [00:17:24] That does require something on our part to be vulnerable. If we're not going to play God how can we embrace the vulnerability that's required to do that well?

Ken: [00:17:36] I think we can. I think we must embrace that kind of vulnerability and not really be afraid to recognize as Craig puts it the contingency of our own knowledge and to invite students into a conversation where we are exploring ideas and exploring important concepts rather than just simply handing down answers.

Ken: [00:18:00] I think some of the best classes that I've encountered since the book came out have been those classes that have formulated some big questions.

Ken: [00:18:12] It's a question that would be intriguing and fascinating to the students. Sometimes it's a question that hands are kind of a game like Proposition to it.

Ken: [00:18:25] You know that it feels like we're playing a game. But in other times it's just really profoundly interesting provocative question.

Ken: [00:18:36] And the students become engaged in that question and in the process of doing so they learn they learn whatever it is they're supposed to be learning whether it's history, chemistry, business, you name it.

Ken: [00:18:53] So it's the kind of question that has to be carefully formulated and carefully chosen to speak to the particular students at hand.

Ken: [00:19:04] And I think some of the failures come in that vulnerability by sometimes choosing questions that might be very interesting to the professor or are not particularly fascinating to the students.

Ken: [00:19:19] I think we have to recognize that as advanced learners in our respective fields we are interested in certain questions because we were once interested in another question. And we were interested in that question because we were once interested in another question and so on and so forth you know back up the line.

Ken: [00:19:42] And so while we are deep underground digging what we know to be extraordinarily valuable intellectual or professional [pursuits] our students maybe standing on the surface wondering why anybody in their right mind would be so far underground.

Ken: [00:20:00] And part part of the trick, part of the process that I've seen among highly successful teachers is just that ability to to retrace their own intellectual journey to go up to the top find those big questions that are going to capture the students fascination and interest and begin there.

Bonni: [00:20:33] One of the things that I have found most challenging for new professors is calibrating their expectations. I talked to a lot of new colleagues about that just this wrestling. It often happens the first year or two to settle down - especially for those who still want to maintain very high expectations. But how do we do that? What do the best teachers expect of their students?

Ken: [00:20:59] Well they do set high standards but they also give them that opportunity to try, fail, and receive feedback. Try again, fail again, receive feedback and so forth. They don't just set the bar high and say jump over it and if you if you succeed you get an A and if you fail then you fail.

Ken: [00:21:22] But instead you know that there's that constant working with students of helping them to learn by doing and trying and failing and receiving feedback and grappling with questions and that recognition that they're not going to meet the standards all at once.

Ken: [00:21:46] So you can have very high standards that process you set up of helping students to achieve those standards has to be I think enormously flexible.

Ken: [00:21:59] And in all honesty I've had people who reacted to this notion by saying that I don't want to lower standards like giving students too many opportunities to do homework that slows learning standards.

Ken: [00:22:15] Then why is it? We're interested in what they're able to do by the end of their time with us what they go forth with.

Ken: [00:22:24] So why is it lowering standards to give them that opportunity to try fail receive feedback and so forth?

Ken: [00:22:34] In fact the year that I started my study of best teachers there was another important study that Richard Light at Harvard got underway.

Ken: [00:22:48] And he was operating under a charge from the then President of Harvard Derek Bok who asked him - He said "I want you to find out what are the qualities of those courses at Harvard that students find most rewarding intellectually personally rewarding."

Ken: [00:23:14] So what he did is he interviewed. I think eventually literally thousands of students and former students his team went out I think quite a number of years in the past interviewing students and when he published his initial results he had two elements.

Ken: [00:23:34] One is that the course is set very high but very meaningful standards. They were standards that were important to the students beyond the scope of the class. Now some courses will set standards that are important only within the scope of the class right.

Ken: [00:23:54] You've got to get your paper in on time. Okay that may or may not be important but if it is important it's important within the scope of that particular class.

Ken: [00:24:04] These are standards that are going to be important forever. Now the ability to get something in on time may be important forever especially if you're going to become a journalist or meeting deadlines. Other kinds of ways.

Ken: [00:24:18] But there are other more substitute abilities to think in particular ways to create the problem solver that are important.

Ken: [00:24:29] So they set very high standards. But secondly, as Dick put it, they had plenty of opportunity to try, fail, receive feedback, try again, fail again, receive feedback and so forth all in advance and separate from any rating of their work in the traditional sense of what we mean by grading.

Bonni: [00:24:57] I suspect that one potential pushback you may get as you introduce this idea to faculty is the idea of how do we fight then against the potential for apathy with so many of our students- especially as school teaches them a lot and then also conditions them perhaps for not being fertile soil to embrace this kind of environment.

Ken: [00:25:22] Well I don't think it does and certainly the observations that I've made among these highly successful teachers would suggest that the opposite emerges that you challenge students would with important questions that they regard as as important, intriguing, beautiful.

Ken: [00:25:42] You engage them in that process of exploring things and then giving them that opportunity of getting feedback on their work and feedback from each other feedback from you of struggling with what the the standards are going to be.

Ken: [00:26:04] I think one of the most effective things that I learned out of the study and I must add here rather quickly is that one of the reasons why I undertook the study beginning back in about 1987 was that I wanted to become a better teacher.

Ken: [00:26:24] I wanted to find out what highly effective teachers were doing and try to understand it more deeply because for me good teachers made a big difference.

Ken: [00:26:37] I flourished under the best of them and often languished on to the worst of them. So it made a big difference and I wanted to become that better teacher.

Ken: [00:26:47] One of the things that has proved to be so successful for me in changing my own teaching was to incorporate into what goes on in the classroom.

Ken: [00:27:04] Several opportunities to get students engaged in struggling with what the standards are. So in my own field as a historian. For example. That could begin with a very simple but very profound question and that question mounts very simply.

Ken: [00:27:23] "What do you think it means to think like a good Historian?"

Ken: [00:27:30] And I would use a think, pair, square, share to involve students in that conversation that is giving them a few minutes to think on their own. And often this would this question would hit them like a two by four between their eyes. No it's rather stunned.

Ken: [00:27:53] "What do you mean? Think like a good historian? That isn't learning of history just memorizing good stories or individual facts."

Ken: [00:28:04] What does it mean to think like a good historian? So they have to begin to struggle with that. And the first struggle's would be rather immature. I would next ask them to begin to share with each other by pairing up around the room and I would use this technique and classes of 30 classes of 300 room burst into conversation.

Ken: [00:28:28] Yes that the pairs find the other pair. And it will continue in that fashion. Then during the groups of four back together began to get reports from them and begin to interact with those four.

Ken: [00:28:46] I often would then have prepared something or have on hand an article that someone else had written on that very idea of thinking like a good historian. After they had developed their own thoughts I would ask them to look at that article or what I had prepared to compare their own thinking with. With that thinking.

Ken: [00:29:14] Kenneth Bruffee in his really excellent book, Collaborative Learning, had a great way of putting that. He said that what people are doing when they learn something is that they are joining a new community of knowledgeable peers, a community that the professor supposedly represents

Ken: [00:29:42] And when I engage them in that kind of exploration of where they are struggling with the question and then I'll share with them my approach to that question or someone else's approach. What they are doing is they're first negotiating with each other about what the boundaries are between their own community and the community that they're attempting to enjoy.

Ken: [00:30:09] And then as we began to engage in a conversation when I bring the groups back together they are negotiating with me. In the sense that they are trying to figure out what those boundaries are and how they began to cross those boundaries and move into a new community of knowledgeable peers and that's extraordinarily important.

Ken: [00:30:32] Now what's essential to this whole process is engagement- and if students are not engaged they are not going to take what I call a deep approach to their learning. They're going to take a surface approach or a strategic approach to learning meaning that their goal will be simply to pass the course to get out of the course. Or to make a good grade.

Ken: [00:31:01] But even if its their goal is to make a good grade that's not the same as intending to understand deeply and to be able to apply them understanding the consequential problem.

Ken: [00:31:14] So I'm first and foremost trying to get them to take a deep approach to their learning to have deep intentions and only after I have cultivated those deep intentions can that deep learning begin.

Ken: [00:31:32] Everything depends upon first and foremost cultivating those deep intentions. And that's where the question comes in if I can raise a question that will be fascinating to this day is important to the students, intriguing to the students, beautiful to the students that have engaged them in a deep learning process.

Ken: [00:31:55] And they are likely to take it seriously enough to begin to struggle with the issues. And destroy of what it means to think well in reference to those issues.

Bonni: [00:32:13] Talk to me a bit about the Manure [she misspeaks] Prize for Excellence in College Teaching. And one of the winners who made an impact on you.

Ken: [00:32:21] Well the winner the first winner of the award. It's only been given one so far to Harvard professor Eric Mazure, a physicist at Harvard and the approach that he has developed with what he calls peer instruction captures many of the elements are probably all of the elements of what I've been calling a natural critical learning environment.

Ken: [00:32:48] And he does so in a way that is really quite powerful and really quite transformative. It is centered around questions and coming up with questions that are going to be intriguing to the students but are conceptually rich questions but giving them that opportunity of trying failing receiving feedback.

Ken: [00:33:11] But in this case, that feedback comes from him and also comes from other students. I would urge your listeners simply to have to look at Eric Mazure's work and maybe Google Mazure and peer instruction and see what it's all about because it's just really quite fascinating and quite transformative.

Bonni: [00:33:33] That's wonderful. I'll post links to what I can find about his work and the "Manure" [she misspeaks, again] prize as well under teachinginhighered.com/36.

Ken: [00:33:42] It's the Minerva Prize. M-I-N-E-R-V-A

Bonni: [00:33:50] [laughing] Oh this is one of those classic where the computer auto corrected. Yes I must have typed what I thought I heard you say it and then the computer auto-corrected it and when I looked at that I thought, "Well that's an interesting name for a prize."

Bonni: [00:34:07] Is that one of those big piles of manure and you know somewhere in there. Well I'm going to look that up and I'm not going to rely on my keyboard which sometimes changes our words around to try to help us out but in this case it didn't. Well thank you for sharing about his work.

Bonni: [00:34:24] This is the time in the show when we do recommendations and I'm going to have my recommendation be that if you're listening to this podcast- think about one of the big questions in your class and try this think, pair, square, share exercise and watch the room come alive.

Bonni: [00:34:42] And if it doesn't come alive - try again - because that's your own opportunity for trying something, failing, and pick up Ken's book if you haven't already read it. That's my second recommendation but I know I made

that up front. Ken what recommendation or recommendations do you have for us today?

Ken: [00:35:00] I think you made some excellent recommendations. I'll tell you about a book I just picked up recently and started. My wife and I are both reading it and finding it quite fascinating. I'm just into the second or third page she's a little bit further along but she tells me that it's well worth reading.

Ken: [00:35:21] So I'm continuing with it. It's a fascinating novel by Jonas Jonason entitled The Girl Who Saved The King of Sweden. so that's my recommendation.

Bonni: [00:35:36] Well thank you so much. And Ken, I just appreciate I know you have been on the road doing so much traveling and you've got a little bit of a cold just as I'm getting over mine so I appreciate you carving out the time.

Bonni: [00:35:49] And before I close us off I'd love it if you would let people know how they could get in touch with you. Kind of stay in touch if they have any interest in your work or your company's workshops and especially you got on Twitter which was so fun to see so if you would let us know how we could connect with you on Twitter.

Bonni: [00:36:08] Oh sure I'm on Twitter @kenbain1. And our web page is just simply bestteachersinstitute.org and if anyone wants to send me an email I would welcome receiving and I receive often hundreds of emails a week and I don't always get around to responding to all of them but I try to respond to as many as possible that simply KenBain@USA.com.

Ken: [00:36:45] So if you can remember my name and the country you got it KenBain@USA.com.

Bonni: [00:36:53] You made it so easy for us and thank you again for all that you have done throughout your career and continue to do to help us be the best teachers.

Ken: [00:37:03] You're very kind thank you very much.

Bonni: [00:37:08] Thanks once again to Ken Bain for being on today's show. If you'd like to comment on the episode please go to teachinginhighered.com/36 if you'd like to subscribe to the weekly update. That's at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe.

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