



# CRLA Learning & Study Strategies SIG

COLLEGE READING AND  
LEARNING ASSOCIATION  
WWW.CRLA.NET

MAY, 2007

*I long to  
accomplish a  
great and noble  
task, but it is  
my chief duty to  
accomplish  
humble tasks as  
though they  
were great and  
noble. The world  
is moved along  
not only by the  
mighty shoves  
of its heroes,  
but also by the  
aggregate of the  
tiny pushes of  
each honest  
worker.  
-- Helen Keller,*

## Are You on the List?

You can be proud of your colleagues who served as reviewers of the proposals submitted for the 2007 conference. The team who read those for the Learning and Study Strategies Strand responded for over 35 proposals. Please take the time to thank Lucy MacDonald, Karen Agee, Kathy Stein, Kathy Bartel Angus, and Rock Stein.



## Hero Project

Are you looking for a hero-inspired project or activity that could capitalize on the popularity of the TV show, *Heroes*? Take a look at the wide range of creative ideas on <http://www.myhero.com/myhero/go/about/index.asp>.

MY HERO is a not for profit educational web project that celebrates the best of humanity. Our mission is to enlighten and inspire people of all ages with an ever-growing internet archive of hero stories from around the world. MY HERO uses current web technologies to provide a unique educational experience that promotes literacy and cross cultural communication.

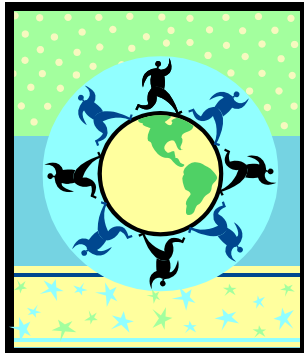
Now more than ever, children, teachers, and parents yearn for messages of hope and courage to face the challenges that lie ahead. The MY HERO web site hosts thousands of stories of remarkable individuals written by children and adults alike. These stories serve to remind us that we all have the potential to overcome great obstacles and achieve our dreams by following in the footsteps of our heroes.

MY HERO invites you, your family, school or organization to take part in this interactive web project. By publicly honoring your hero on this award-winning site, you reward those who have made a difference and bring a new hope to this global online community.

*I have never been especially impressed by the heroics of the people convinced that they are about to change the world. I am more awed by the heroism of those who are willing to struggle to make one small difference after another.*

*-Ellen Goodman*

## Save the SIG, save the World!



A call went out to the SIG asking for volunteers to contribute time to the SIG. In addition to those listed above who evaluated proposals, one brave member agreed to review a book for us. Kudos to **Dr. Kathleen Ward from Thiel College in Greenville, PA**, who read and reviewed a book for this SIG.

Kathy is to be admired for her work and service.

**Book Review:** *What the Best College Teachers Do* by Ken Bain (Harvard University Press, 2004), 207 pp.

The title of Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do* runs the risk of misleading his readers. As Bain himself explains, the purpose of his book is not simply to record what the best teachers do but also to reveal "how they think, and most of all, to begin to conceptualize their practices." Therefore, rather than promising more than it offers, as some books do, Bain's book provides value-added reading since the title really could use an additional verb—*What the Best College Teachers Do and How They Think!* Another surprise to be found in Bain's study relates to the nature of that thinking. Through his research on two dozen institutions of higher learning in terms of "the thinking and practices of between sixty and seventy teachers," Bain discovers that the best teachers think backwards!

The heart of Bain's conclusions and the pathway into understanding both the practices and thinking of the best teachers reside in what comes to be the book's refrain. In numerous contexts throughout his text, Bain reiterates this important finding: that the best teaching he discovered was not based on pedagogical techniques (praxis) but on results, on achieving "remarkable success in helping . . . students learn in ways that made a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how those student think, act, and feel." The best teachers achieve these results by thinking about ends first and then developing the means that will best foster the learning they want their students to achieve. In one example, a professor begins with the "largest question that the course would address" and then considers other questions which would need to be examined to address that larger issue. Obviously, this book is as much about thinking (both the teacher's and the student's) as it is about doing.

Sustained influence on students and deep learning were the hallmarks that helped Bain and his colleagues to identify excellent teachers. In this regard, there were what Bain calls "two acid tests": 1) that students learned not just the discipline but critical thinking, creativity, and ethical issues related to the discipline, and 2) that students were inspired to continue learning. An Appendix at the end of the book explains the methodology of the study. Professors from all types of institutions from selective to open admissions and representing a variety of disciplines were studied. Video tapes of interviews and presentations, observations, conversations with students and colleagues, lists of teaching award winners, student ratings on global or outcome questions, syllabi, methods of evaluation, examples of student work, student performance in other classes, stated learning objectives for courses, and understanding of how students learn were among the resources used for arriving at an answer as to what the best teachers do—and think.

For those readers who are looking for practical suggestions for improving their teaching and thus promoting student learning, the central hope of this book, the motivation behind its creation, is that good teaching can be learned. As a result of this study, Bain maintains that the best teachers are learners themselves and are engaged in a constant effort to improve their teaching to foster student development. This involves helping students to construct knowledge, to ask their own questions, and to grapple with issues, problems, and questions in a given

field of study. Therefore, the best teachers don't ask students to discuss readings, according to Bain, but guide them through the process of discussing ideas, problems, and issues raised by the reading to engage students in intellectual struggle. Teachers who locate the points of their own struggles to understand and share those struggles with students contribute to a "learning journey" which creates a focus on the nature and process of learning rather than the performance of the instructor. The author asserts that one of the most important lessons of the study is that teaching must be judged using a "learning perspective."

Some very specific techniques are to be found in the book. One involves providing "task praise" as opposed to "person praise." Telling students that they did something well, as the author explains, encourages hard work and avoids judgmental feedback that alludes to a person's intelligence. In another example, understanding that learning is a developmental process, one that encompasses both intellectual and personal development, leads professors to use comprehensive, cumulative exams to stretch students' abilities. Yet another strategy employs the use of self-assessments which allow students to provide evidence of their own learning. Bain asserts that helping students to recognize their capacity to learn, not the transmission of information, motivates students as does keeping larger questions in the forefront during classes to maintain interest.

Excellent as it is, the book leaves itself open to potential criticism on the part of some readers. It is sometimes repetitious, reiterating points, albeit important ones, a little too frequently. As suggested earlier, the title can be misleading in light of the degree to which the book de-emphasizes praxis. Finally, for those interested in data, it does not include much in the way of quantitative analysis. These are minor criticisms, however, since the book's merits exceed its flaws.

*What the Best College Teachers Do* belongs on the bookshelf of any educator concerned about helping students to develop discernment of the significance, approaches, and vitality of learning itself. In an age when information is both impossible to contain within one mind and is constantly undergoing change, Bain's is an important message. Acknowledging that his study provides only a starting point, he concludes with a call to action, that we need to increase the amount of research on human learning.

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[Maggi\\_Miller@hmco.com](mailto:Maggi_Miller@hmco.com)

*With "unsubscribe" in the subject line.*

*Maggi Miller*

*4711 Fieldstone Dr.*

*Austin, TX 78735*

*512-358-8520*