

Teach Like a Champion by Doug Lemov

This past July, my state, New York, hired a crack team of analysts to determine whether our state math and English exams in grades 3–8 were aligned to both national exams and our high school exams.

The result: a radical and depressing raising of state exam cut scores. As the 7th grade English teacher of a class that included high-needs students with individualized education plans,

English language learners, and one-third kids in poverty, I had been satisfied with my students' scores. Now, with my students' passing rate sunk to 62 percent, I was looking for answers.

Cue Doug Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College*. After five years of observing and videotaping classrooms serving students living in poverty, Doug Lemov has compiled a "taxonomy" of specific techniques that distinguish great teachers from those who are merely good.

In *Teach Like a Champion*, Lemov discusses each of these techniques in detail (and includes a DVD showing the techniques in action).

Elizabeth Green's 2010 *New York Times Magazine* article "Building a Better Teacher," which profiles Lemov, is essential reading. My own reading of the book's assertions, though, has been ambivalent. Let's begin with the problems.

"Philosophy" —Not a Dirty Word

Lemov writes that many of these tools "remain essentially beneath the notice of our theories and theorists of education" (p. 7). In fact, he frequently speaks disparagingly of theory and "philosophy." To those who might feel that the techniques run contrary to the education theories they have been taught, he responds that he didn't write the book "to engage in a philosophical debate" (p. 9).

Characterizing philosophy like this is misleading, however. All educators, even Lemov, subscribe to *some* kind of philosophy—a set of beliefs about learning. To imply that the techniques are philosophy-free conveys a sense of objectivity that the techniques do not earn. It also hides the fact that Lemov actually subscribes to an extremely well-defined education philosophy: speed in all things, constant monitoring, absolute compliance, college as the pinnacle of education, and teacher as ultimate authority. This "not-a-philosophy" permeates the entire book.

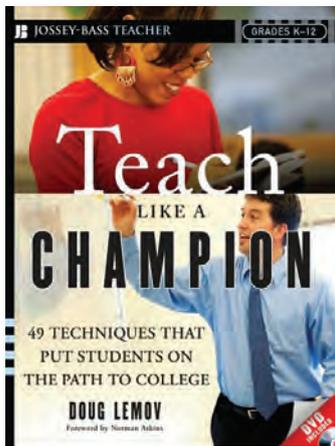
Lemov dismisses the school contexts in which his observations take place.

I don't have space to discuss ways in which neuroscience, psychology, and other schooling models suggest that this philosophy is limited. My point is that without such a discussion by thoughtful practitioners, no informed application or evaluation of these techniques is possible.

The Limits of "Data"

Lemov uses the scientific gravitas of the word *data* multiple times. However, the book is not science and shouldn't be treated that way.

The most important flaw in how Lemov presents information is that he dismisses the school contexts in which his observations take place. Lemov didn't target successful individual teachers across diverse schooling situations; instead, he first identified "successful" schools through looking at test scores. Many of these are within his own charter school organization, Uncommon Schools. Why is this important? Because in such schools, the culture is likely maintained not just by lone-wolf teachers, but also by administrators and families. This is undoubtedly the case in Uncommon Schools.



(Check out North Star Preparatory School's "Parent-School Covenant" online for a stark example: www.uncommonschools.org/nsa/ourSchools/parents.html#03.)

There's nothing wrong with this kind of anecdotal observation; Lemov conducts it admirably. However, it is wrong to neglect rigorous analysis of the social, cultural, and political variables in play while still implicitly laying claim to the scientific notion of "data." It violates one of the first rules of social science: When dealing with human beings, context is everything.

The techniques as Lemov presents them are mechanical, existing in a vacuum and supposedly replicable in all situations. Yet given the rule about the importance of context, how can I assume that these practices are objectively repeatable? How can I assume that I could transfer them successfully

to my classroom, independent of the school culture, district requirements, or crucial differences in the populations of our kids? I can't. Yet Lemov says I must. He writes,

No matter what the circumstances you face on the job [emphasis mine] and no matter what strategic decisions are mandated to you, you can succeed. And this, in turn means that you must succeed. (p. 6)

Yet education research scientists have known for decades that replicating academic results without considering their context is nearly impossible. Thus, Lemov's remarks impose on practitioners an intimidating—and unsupported—moral imperative.

However . . .

Here's the kicker, though. Since receiving this book, I have implemented some of the techniques. They are wonderfully helpful. For example,

Time. Lemov is correct that time management is neglected in our practice. I speak from experience, having transferred from small-group English as a second language instruction to mainstream English three years ago. The ways in which this book has helped me manage time would be of major benefit to any teacher.

For example, Technique 28, Entry Routine, calls on the teacher to establish efficient, productive habits as class begins. Its time-saving recommendations include having students pick up packets of needed materials, turn in homework in the same way every day without prompting, and know exactly where to find information about the lesson objectives, homework, and independent opening activities. Other techniques (such as Technique 31, Binder Control, and Technique 33, On Your Mark) are equally useful.

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Teacher talk. I was delighted to find some of my homegrown talk techniques in the book: responding to student behavior in a constructive and positive way (Technique 43); insisting that students answer questions thoroughly (Technique 1); and pushing for student talk that requires students to listen to one another and think critically (Technique 3). We don't recognize enough the power of register, tone, and discourse in the classroom, particularly when questioning students. And yet this may be the essential teacher skill. Lemov's microscopic attention to detail pays off here.

Respectful discipline. One might be concerned that the top-down classroom style Lemov endorses is demeaning, but this is not inherently the case. Kids are treated with strong doses of caring and consistency. Much of what Lemov suggests, such as

explaining everything (Technique 48); using precise praise (Technique 44); and normalizing error (Technique 49) is backed up by the research of Carol Dweck (2007) and Ed Deci (1996), two of my heroes. These psychologists emphasize effort, positive mind-set, and the importance of building students' sense of competence.

Ultimately, it appears that *Teach Like a Champion's* techniques may indeed be helpful to the reflective practitioner. But they must be applied with questioning and care. The very cut score changes which first drove me to read the book, for example, also significantly change the proficiency rates for schools across New York State, including Lemov's Uncommon Schools. It makes me quite skeptical about his assumption, shared by many education reformers, that standardized test scores are the best indicator of student success—and of the

success of the 49 techniques.

It is interesting to consider how Lemov will wrestle with the implications of these developments—just like the rest of us. **EL**

Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College by Doug Lemov was published by John Wiley and Sons in 2010. Paperback, \$27.95.

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