

*Cómo dar una buena clase.**Estrategias, experiencias didácticas y desafíos emocionales*

Salvador Gómez & José Cabeza

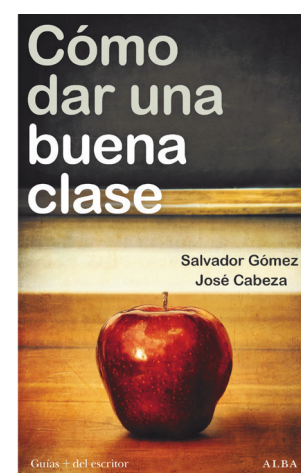
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Contributing to teaching

Knowledge is power and, among many other things, this Baconian dictum forms the basis for the authority of teachers who share their expertise in subjects with students who are craving stimulation. In the past, university students revered professors who distinguished themselves by meticulously preparing their lectures, not confusing the desire to encourage with a desire to entertain, irony with mockery, or assertiveness with authoritarianism. However, in today's society, these boundaries seem to be blurred and teachers are often more afraid of being labelled as arrogant than as buffoons under the harsh lens of surveys. Without question, there is a large grey area between these extreme styles, but nevertheless, it never hurts to have a helpful guide to broaden your knowledge and to reassert the kind of teacher you are (or want to be). And if such a guide just so happens to also be an enjoyable read, encouraging you to reflect - without feeling sorry for yourself or beating yourself up - with anecdotes and advice on how to keep sight of the things that matter, then it is an essential resource.

The book entitled *Cómo dar una buena clase* (How to teach a good class), written by professors Salvador Gómez and José Cabeza, rescues the *castaway* teachers and brings them back onto dry land with apt words and chapters headed by passages from the novel *Robinson Crusoe*. It does not provide any recipes for successfully educating the graduates of tomorrow, but it does guide the reader in engaging in much needed and, at times, solitary reflection. "That is no small thing" (p.19), the authors remark on this point, steering clear of the stilted tone widely found in many such publications. Thus, this offering by Gómez and Cabeza transcends the strictly academic, uniting colleagues from all disciplines by that most human of instincts: doubt; continuously questioning oneself. Against this backdrop,

it is understandable that right from the off, in the introduction to the book, fundamental questions are posed like "what are classes for?", "how do you teach a good class?", and, above all, "what do you need to teach a good class?". Needless to say, answers are not immediately apparent, but you begin to grasp them as you realise the importance of humility, planning, well-focused leadership and resisting the temptation to turn every opportunity to be heard into a "black hole of concepts" (p. 60).

One thing made clear in this essay published by Alba is that, even if we abandon the traditional lecture format, it is difficult to hold the attention of students in a sea of screens. Not even the storytelling techniques painstakingly studied by people who attend all manner of courses on innovation in teaching are an infallible formula or a guarantee of success (if this can be measured without paying attention to the misleading number of passes in a subject), regardless of the fact that shining the spotlight on storytelling helps to highlight the resources that we teachers have to connect with our audiences. "Are you going to contribute something to us?", the authors tell us a student asked during a class presentation. And although the protagonist of this story would soon discover that the question was only motivated by a selfish desire to have the subject notes in advance, the young woman stirred the professor's emotions briefly, prompting him to remind the golden rule that you should strive to ensure that "students are better going out than they were coming in (...) And, of course, you must improve too" (p. 40).

Two authors wrote the book that is the subject of this review, but they show a unity of style, purpose and perspectives on the most important aspects of the fundamental task of teaching. This is not to say that Gómez and Cabeza feel the same way about the various topics that they discuss, and this is perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of the book. For example, the authors disagree on how permissive to be with students who

try to enter the classroom when the lesson has already begun, and although they do not settle the issue of who is right in their reasoning or who puts forward the best arguments (this is not the aim), this dilemma is a perfect illustration of how preparing a lesson involves making certain individual decisions, being consistent with oneself and learning from experience as we learn the value of prolonged silences to hush any murmurings while delivering an explanation. We simply have to be aware of what works for us at any given moment and try to change the things that do not work, because justified reaffirmation of some of the traditional methods we follow is not the same as chalk-stained conformism.

The 150-plus pages cover a wide range of topics, from the use of irony as a resource to recounting anecdotes that provide a glimpse of - and help to downplay - occasional moments of weariness or despair. At no point, however, does it appear that this writing process is the product of two voices venting their feelings, but rather of long, fruitful and relaxed conversations between two professional colleagues. Thus, this book has little or nothing in common with a self-help guide, despite the fact that many of the headings serve to motivate and inspire, even including emotional reflections that provide the reader with a reassuring dose of understanding. Far from being seeking to strengthen and boost self-esteem, this book, which is highly recommended, encourages self-analysis when it decries, among other practices, the irresponsibility of prioritising the audience's entertainment over their education, due to "the supposed uselessness of lectures and burnout they cause" (p.99). Is there a need for innovation? Of course, but it must be meaningful.

Finally, in the section entitled "After many classes...", the book celebrates the much-maligned ability to be caring in teaching. Through 20 tips to avoid "upset" in the classroom, a healing approach is suggested with insights that remind us that, although the teacher's authority is diminished outside the physical boundaries of the classroom, his or her responsibility exceeds those boundaries. This, fortunately, "is also nice" (p. 155), and thanks to Gómez y Cabeza's frank approach, words that should become a mantra for teachers have now been committed to paper. Go ahead and read it.