



EDUCATION & SEMINARS

## From Practitioner to Professor

### BECOMING A TEACHER OF ACUPUNCTURE AND HERBAL MEDICINE

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#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Are you thinking it is the time in your career development to branch out and “give back” to the profession that sustains and feeds you?
- The most critical change in becoming a modern professor is moving away from the educational approach we typically experienced in which professors delivered lectures and students took notes and learned the material outside the classroom.
- Promoting active student engagement is an exciting area of growth for current faculty. It can be equally exhilarating for those of you who are considering contributing to the profession through teaching.

As acupuncturists, you focus on providing high-quality care for patients in private practices and integrative or hospital settings. Are you thinking it is the time in your career development to branch out and “give back” to the profession that sustains and feeds you?

There are many ways of doing so including being involved in professional organizations and societies, advocating for the profession in the greater community, conducting research, mentoring new practitioners, and many others. Being an educator is also an excellent option for meeting this need. If you have already made the leap into education, congratulations and thank you!

Say the idea of teaching is appealing, but you are wondering if you have an appropriate mindset for education. Realize many of the qualities needed for maintaining a successful practice mirror those needed for teaching including empathy, patience, adaptable thinking, clear communication of unfamiliar content, organization, conscientious. To frame these qualities and skills in an educational context, ask yourself:

- Are you curious with a personal passion for learning and self-improvement?
- Have you enjoyed educating your patients and creating materials for them?
- Have others commented on how well you communicate concepts in a comprehensible fashion?
- Do you have patience for learners and responding to their barrage of questions?
- Can you provide constructive feedback in a respectful and motivating manner?
- Are you secure in your subject matter expertise?
- Do you embrace collaboration?

If you can respond “yes” to most or all of these questions, then you have potential to serve the next generation of practitioners. As a consultant focusing only on schools of acupuncture and herbal medicine, coupled with 35 years of educational experience, I would also like to share some ideas that will serve you well in transitioning from practitioner to professor perspective.

### Adopting a Student-Learning Rather than a Teacher-Focused Paradigm

The most critical change in becoming a modern professor is moving away from the educational approach we typically experienced in which professors delivered lectures and students took notes and learned the material outside the classroom. This paradigm is termed *teacher focused*. The modern approach is [more learner focused](#). It considers not just what the teacher is presenting, but also what students are expected to learn (will know or be able to do).

How does this translate into practice? Over the past few decades, educators have incorporated knowledge from the science of learning in developing more effective teaching practices. For instance, we know students master more content and develop greater critical thinking skills if they are provided opportunities to interact with content through discussion, collaborate with classmates, see demonstrations, and apply their knowledge as it develops. This learner-focused approach enhances student motivation and supports the development of cognitive tools needed for independent learning.

Another learner-focused approach taps into our species’ inherent capacity to connect with narrative (stories). Effective teachers can use their lectures to weave in “stories” related to their topic (e.g., needling techniques, herbal formulas, etc.). Students will more easily recall information presented in this manner. Your experience as a practitioner is also invaluable fodder for narrative. Sharing clinical cases and your own learning related to these cases models critical thinking skills students will require to become excellent diagnosticians.

At the program and course level, learner-focused education improves student persistence and retention. This approach is a win for you, your students and your institution.

### Promoting Active Engagement in all Learning Environments (In-Person and Online)

As we discussed in relation to learner-focused education, student engagement is key to deep learning. Early in my educational career, I would focus on content and how to create the best presentations possible. Over the years, this has changed dramatically! Of course, I must still have a firm grasp of content and present it well. However, now I spend an equal amount of time planning how to engage my students in the learning process and build the explicit methods into lesson planning. I bet that you are already familiar with some of these examples:

- Interactive discussions
- Case study analyses
- [Think-pair-share](#)
- [Jigsaw](#)

- Role playing
- Debates
- Peer teaching

Student engagement is not just critical for in-person education; it is also essential in the world of online learning. The same principles of building active student learning into lessons apply in both environments. However, active engagement of students in an online environment is a bit trickier since it is much more difficult for the teacher to “read the room” and make sure each student is tuned into a lesson.

We ourselves know how easy it is to check email, social media or texts while we are online and out of sight! However, if students are asked to participate and interact with their classmates, these diversions are less likely to occur and focus to be maintained. Fortunately, there are a whole range of activities you can use in online teaching to ensure students are engaged and they are fun to use. Some examples include:

- Polling and surveys
- Discussion forums
- Interactive quizzes
- Virtual case studies
- Chat room check-ins
- Incorporation of multimedia

Promoting active student engagement is an exciting area of growth for current faculty. It can be equally exhilarating for those of you who are considering contributing to the profession through teaching.

### Assessing Student Learning

Many of us get a sense of whether or not students are learning by their responses to questions, nods, body language and general demeanor. To be an effective teacher, you must embrace more formal methods of determining if students did indeed learn what was expected of them. I think practitioners have a leg up in becoming good at assessment. Your clinical diagnostic skills are transferable to the educational environment.

Sometimes in practice, yes/no responses or multiple-choice-style questions yield a general understanding of a patient’s condition and lead you to a basic understanding of their condition. To get the details, you must dig deeper! It is the same with assessment in the world of teaching and learning.

As you know from your AHM education, multiple-choice questions provide a quick method of determining general student understanding of essential content. Other assessment tools lead to a more in-depth view of students’ comprehension including research projects and papers, clinical scenarios and clinical practica. There is so much room for teacher creativity in assessment. Examining assessment results is equally interesting as it provides a lens into how students are constructing knowledge of the medicine.

A question I would be asking myself after reading these key ideas is, *It sounds like a lot. Do I have to figure this all out on my own?* The response is an unequivocal “No.” Schools of AHM have systems in place to onboard new faculty and familiarize them with the teaching approaches and expectations at their specific institution. Most schools have syllabus outlines for each course so the new teacher does not have to start from scratch.

Schools provide ongoing faculty development focused on these key areas, plus others, based on institutional needs. They are well-aware most of the faculty in the world of AHM are practicing professionals who are providing a service to the profession. Thus, there are support personnel. For teaching online, there are typically staff members to ensure faculty learn the use of educational technology. And remember, your greatest teachers are those who are currently work at the institution you are considering joining!

It is also incumbent upon each of us to engage in self-growth as an educator, as you do as a practitioner. Fortunately, platforms such as Udemy and Coursera provide short, inexpensive online courses that address the basics of teaching.

For those of you who are called to or considering becoming professors at AHM schools, consider the review of your personal qualities and examining key ideas for supporting student learning as the initial step of your journey. May your path to teaching be joyous and rewarding! Future generations of practitioners will be grateful for your hard work and inspiration.

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