Kalamaazoo College has more than 100 professors. All of them are extraordinarily learned in their fields. But can they teach? Can they engage students in ways that help them truly learn?

To ensure that the answer is an emphatic “yes!” K provides training and education for its faculty in pedagogy (the art and science of teaching). That effort is led by the school’s Teaching Commons. Its mission: keep teaching and learning at the heart of the College’s collective thinking.

“We require a different type of teaching at K,” says Patrik Hultberg, associate professor of economics, and the school’s coordinator of educational effectiveness.

The first step in ensuring that K instructors are skilled educators takes place during the hiring process. When the three finalists for a position are determined, they are required to come to K—for an interview, of course, and to actually teach a sample class.

“We want people who are excited about teaching and who want to engage students,” Hultberg notes. “If their focus is solely on research, K isn’t the place for them.”

“The expectation of scholarly output, in terms of quality, is the same at K as anywhere else, although we’re satisfied with a little less quantity,” explains Jan Solberg, professor of Romance languages and literature. “That’s because we’re expected to devote so much time and energy to what happens in the classroom.”

Before new hires (and visiting instructors) ever step in front of a classroom of students they are required to participate in a four-day Teaching and Learning Workshop. Hultberg, who was born and raised in Sweden, is in charge of the annual activity.

“I’ve been involved in the workshop for several years; 2016 was the first time I’d coordinated the event,” says Hultberg. “I replaced Paul Sotherland [professor emeritus of biology], who replaced Gail Griffin [professor emerita of English] and Jan Solberg. The workshop provides an opportunity for us to convey to our new people just how seriously we take teaching and learning here at K.”

“We can’t just assume new faculty have had any pedagogical training,” says Charlene Boyer Lewis, professor of history. “So we use the workshop to discuss teaching techniques. All schools have some sort of orientation for their new people; often they’re just a day or half-day. And most of that is about administrative details. They’re not about teaching and learning, which is where our focus is.”

The first of the workshop’s four days is mostly social, giving the new people a chance to get to know veteran faculty, including those who serve as facilitators.
On the second day small groups are formed, comprising first-year and more experienced faculty. The facilitators discuss their preferred pedagogical approaches, offer teaching tips and are asked to recall a recent classroom mistake.

These discussions are intended to invite the new instructors into what Boyer describes as the “culture of teaching at K.”

The small groups then engage in the workshop’s most valuable activity—microteaching sessions. With the rest of the group acting as students, all instructors, both new and experienced, teach a topic of their choosing for about ten minutes. Props and hands-on activities are encouraged. One chemistry instructor, for example, had the others make ice cream to illustrate a type of chemical reaction.

“We want our new colleagues to practice teaching in a safe, supportive environment,” Boyer Lewis observes. “We try to be welcoming and offer structured critiques. If an approach isn’t going to work, it’s better that happens in a microteaching session rather than in front of 25 students.”

Christina Carroll, a first-year history instructor, says, “The microteaching was really valuable to me. I’d taught a year at another school before I came here, but I’d never had any faculty observe me. The sessions gave us a chance to talk about techniques, such as how to get shy students engaged, how to get them talking.”

A key function of the workshop is to pair each new instructor with a veteran faculty member, who then serves as a mentor for the rest of the academic year. Twice per quarter the mentor observes the new instructor, says Solberg. “College students should be engaged, not simply talked at. Lectures can be a very good part of the learning process, but they work best when they are combined with opportunities for students to implement the concepts they’ve learned.”

Hultberg adds: “Cognitive sciences tell us that what’s being said isn’t always what’s being heard and understood. We encourage teaching strategies that promote long-term learning. We call it deep knowledge.”

Another limiting factor for first-year teaching success is insufficient teaching experience. “I’d taught for a number of years before I came to K,” Hultberg recalls, “but that’s not the norm. Most of our people are coming from graduate school where they may only have had some limited experience as teaching assistants, or none at all.”

Even new instructors with teaching experience may arrive at K with a need for some additional training. For example, teaching at a large university, with classes where students number in the hundreds, is very different from what they encounter at K. “K is a unique place,” Boyer Lewis notes. “We have small classes with smart, demanding students. One complaint we’ll occasionally hear from them is that they’re not being challenged, that they’re bored.”

As a result, one of the topics of discussion during the workshop is the appropriate level of challenge, or, as Boyer Lewis says, “How high should we pitch things?”

K’s 10-week quarter system is another topic that’s addressed during the workshop because most instructors have previously experienced 13-week semesters; reducing the duration of a class by a third can create challenges. “It can be difficult to make the adjustment,” Boyer Lewis offers. “So pacing is something we talk about. For one thing, you’re grading almost all the time. There’s almost no downtime.”

Carroll’s prior year of teaching occurred in a semester system. “The 10 weeks we have here go by so much faster. I needed help determining how much reading to assign.”

The pacing of a class relates to two teaching and learning concepts presented at the workshop: spacing and retrieval. Spacing relates to the notion that an idea is better learned when presented over a period of time. Retrieval is a technique that requires students to periodically recall something they’ve learned in the past. One teaching technique the Workshop encourages is having students present material to others. “We’ve asked students,” says Hultberg, “when would they study harder: to get an A on a test or if they had to teach a topic to a class? Everyone always answers that it would be if they had to teach a class. Having to teach something is a great motivator.”

The workshop also stresses the importance and use of office hours. “Our new people might have been a T.A. for a class of 300,” Boyer Lewis says. “Just knowing someone’s name might have been enough in that setting. Our students want more than that. They want to get to know us, and they want us to get to know them. They want time to talk about things.”

K’s efforts to improve teaching quality aren’t limited to just first-year faculty. To help experienced faculty improve, K offers them the chance to participate in the Course Visit Cohort program. “It’s voluntary,” Hultberg says, “but about a third of our instructors are involved.”

Colleagues pair off for classroom visits. “After the visit the two sit down over coffee and talk about what happened in the class. Both benefit from that discussion.”

Such a visit sometimes results in the observing instructor seeing something that he or she decides to use in his or her classroom. Solberg says, “It’s very satisfying for the observed faculty member to hear the observer colleague say, ‘I love how you did that; I’m going to use it myself’.”

“Teaching can sometimes be a lonely activity,” Hultberg continues. “You go to your own classroom and do your own thing. We want a sense of community and access to settings where we talk about teaching and learning. The Cohort program does that.”

Creating a setting for that sense of community explains the existence of the Teaching Commons, a large room in Dewing Hall, where K’s faculty are encouraged to gather to talk about how they teach and about which of their methods have, or have not, met with success.

The Teaching Commons provides the “Teaching Commons Blog,” a home for faculty submissions about teaching effectiveness. Hultberg also plans the annual “Fall Colloquium,” a one-day series of presentations, all of which focus on improving instructor performance.

A long-standing tool to improve teaching is student evaluations, routinely done at the end of each quarter. Solberg thinks there’s merit to receiving student input sooner than that. “What I do for most of my classes, after just three weeks, is have my students write suggestions for how I could do things differently in class. If they’re good ideas I’ll implement them. If they suggest something I don’t think I can do, I’ll tell them why not. If nothing else, they understand that they’ve been heard, that their opinions matter.”