In Unitarian Christianity William Ellery Channing comments that: “A wise teacher discovers his wisdom in adapting himself to the capacities of his pupil.” This is, of course, the ideal. A one to one student to teacher ratio in which the professor was allowed to determine the proper edification techniques for each of his pupils on a case-by-case basis. Unfortunately, a utopian proportion that would allow such interaction does not yet exist. In our world of 40 student classrooms professors are forced to forego personal attention and interaction in favor of either a dictatorial lecture style or ineffective student driven discussions that in most cases, run the risk of alienation. So then how is the dilemma between Channing’s perfect fit and the reality of over crowded classrooms to be resolved?

In my experiences of the academic world I have been exposed to quite possibly the most eclectic range of teaching styles and techniques from a traditional conservative raise your hand before commenting all the way to very liberal classes in which I was allowed to argue for my own grade. These vastly different styles should intuitively yield different results, but in each circumstance the atmosphere was vibrant and the material was provocative. With this in mind, it would seem that Channing’s thesis no longer stands, professor’s who were limited by the size of their sections
found a way to engage their students in ways indicative to their understanding of the material being presented. In my preparation for today’s program I was forced to attempt to equate these discriminating teaching styles and try to determine how professors were able to elicit the same response of active contribution from a room full of 18 – 20 year olds who no doubt had a myriad of different learning stratagems. The similarity I was able to distill from such diverse exposure was that in each instance, students were made completely aware of the expectations of the course; both in terms of what was expected of them and what they could expect from the professor. Outlines and rules were clearly defined and never were their any questions of how points were calculated or results tallied and the logic behind all assignments was thoroughly discussed.

When students are presented with defined goals in this manner, the atmosphere becomes more relaxed and the format for the course develops into something that the students submit to and labor with rather than something they strive against and labor under. Set goals and pre-determined methods of achievement help to make students and teachers allies rather than combatants; and when a relationship such as this is forged the class work and assignments can be as challenging and confrontational as the professors imagination will allow because students are prepared to meet the challenge
head on already knowing what needs to be done and where and when they can ask for assistance.

Depending on the structure of the course and the varying styles according to professor, this clarity in expectation can take different forms. In more traditional classroom approaches it manifests itself as a detailed syllabus that outlines the readings and test or paper due dates throughout the length of the semester and any deviation from the set schedule is announced accordingly. After every meeting students are informed of the material due for the next period and are warned of approaching assignments. Lectures are tight and well planned out, students (though not directly questioned perhaps) are always aware of the invitation to ask questions on any point being presented. Professors who lean more toward a seminar interaction have to maintain course objectives as well, always keeping them clear and on target. Student discussions have a tendency to veer off the beaten path quite easily unless the professor is actively engaged in the conversations while still remaining a spectator. But, as long as there is someone to hold the proverbial hand of the class as they free-associate about the material discussions will stay on course and cover the intended facts.

In this manner, teaching styles on the opposite side of the spectrum and at every point in between can make use of the same principle. With light
at the end of the tunnel and check-in points along the way students will follow the professor where ever he or she leads and no matter what method is chosen to do the leading. In the absence of Channing’s perfect ratio it is impossible to fit any one teaching style to a room of forty plus, but the one constant that can remain the same is how prepared and informed the students are in terms of the style of teaching that they are being exposed to. Once the fashion of instruction is understood students can anticipate what is needed on their end working with the professor towards mutual goals. Now that I’ve rambled on, have I given you the key to the city? Will every student who passes through your class now be as captivated by the material as you once were? No. Does this mean that all your students will get a passing grade? No. Does it even mean that no student will argue with you about the grade that they get? No. What it does mean is that you can absolutely expect the best from each and every person in your class, and it will increase the likelihood that you are going to get it. Which, even if you’re Channing, is the only objective you can strive for anyway. Once you as the professor have come half of the way, it is up to us, the students, to come the rest.