

Teaching: A Difficult and Ever Evolving Process

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Asking teachers how to teach is like asking caterpillars how they walk—thinking about it too much could cause them to trip over their own feet” (Secor, 1995, p. 83).

I found the task of writing this manuscript very difficult. I didn't know what to write. I have never had formal teacher training nor have I read much on pedagogy. Hence, I spent numerous hours in front of my computer staring at the screen wondering what I could say to individuals like yourself who are as good or better teachers than myself. I do not profess to know what it takes to become a great teacher. I can, however, tell you what works for me.

I've Got A Few Ideas

Over the years I've developed six fundamental principles of teaching. The first of these is communication. To me communication is being able to clearly articulate the importance of a concept, provide examples and show through visual presentation what it is you are trying to communicate. Communication is also non-verbal. It includes smiling at a student who is struggling or giving a thumbs-up to the student who participates from the back corner of the classroom. Non-verbal communication also may be arriving early to class and staying late, demonstrating that the course and the students matter.

The second fundamental principle is having clarity of purpose. To do this I have to ask what I want my students to learn. As a teacher I am an instrument of empowerment. I am not trying to indoctrinate students with ideas and thoughts. Rather, I am trying to educate them. The word educate comes from the Latin *educō*, meaning to lead out of. As a teacher it is my job to get students to know themselves, including their strengths and weaknesses, and to develop the skills they will need to pursue their dreams.

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the interdependence of heart, body and mind in learning. According to Lee (1999, p.2), “Critical thinking... comprises habits of mind such as an interest in the sources of one's attitudes, beliefs, and values; a positive attitude toward novelty; and a healthy attitude toward argumentation, as well as intellectual skills.” This complex interaction was proposed by Belenky (1986) who argued that students attach personal meaning to the knowledge and skills they develop in college—meaning that contributes to the evolution of self. I understand that my purpose as a teacher is to help them evolve.

What works for one individual may not work for another is my third fundamental principle. Many of us began our teaching careers as teaching assistants or instructors. In that capacity we sat in classes, listened to our mentors, and attempted to copy what worked for those who we believed to be good teachers. In my case, I watched and was impressed by Vicki Wilkins. At that time Vicki was an instructor at Penn State and was the most effective teacher I had ever seen. I have no doubt that the same is true today. I wanted to be just like her. I tried and failed miserably. It took years of failures and triumphs and it was always difficult. But, I found my own style, one that works for me. As Palmer (1997) suggested, understanding who we are is the first and crucial step in identifying new ways to teach.

Further, what works for one student may not work for another. Researchers (for example, Marton & Saljo, 1976; Witkin & Goodenough, 1981) have recognized that students have different styles of learning. We need to take account of these differences in teaching. Methods of teaching, ways of representing information and personality characteristics of teachers affect learning and affect learners differently (McKeachie, 1997). Thus, I incorporate different techniques in all my courses to facilitate learning among all my students.

My fourth fundamental principle is that no class, no lecture, no assignment is ever perfect. I continuously challenge myself to do better, for this is what makes teaching fun. This principle also guides me when I mentor doctoral students in to a class. I want them to tell me when I “blow” a lecture. And, I want them to tell me how to make it better. I want them to contribute to the design of lectures and class assignments. If we fail in our attempt, we try again the next semester. According to Palmer (1997), one of the true paradoxes of teaching is the same person who teaches brilliantly one day is a flop the next. He is right!

Having a sense of humor is fifth in my list of principles. The verdict isn't in, but there is growing evidence that humor may enhance learning on a cognitive level (Border, 1999). As Rhem (1998) suggested, “humor and problem solving concern themselves with resolving disorder and experiencing a kind of relief” (p. 6). There is no greater sound to me than laughter. If I can use humor to develop a sense of group cohesion in class and to challenge my students, I will.

My final principle is to enjoy and respect students. Teaching, according to Eble (1988), would be less satisfying and demanding “were it not for the fact that every committed teacher works within the possibility that a student will say, ‘You changed my life.’” To teach without some awareness of that possibility is to minimize teaching's great mysteries. I believe part of the essence of teaching is showing students how much you enjoy and care for them. The joy I experience in hearing from a student I taught a decade ago is immeasurable as is the enjoyment I receive when a student comes in to my office smiling ear to ear because she has just been offered her first job.

I've Got A Long Way To Go, But I've Made A Good Start

“... Who you become as a teacher will gradually emerge as a complex product of who you are, who your students are, and how much thought you are willing to devote to the task of teaching” (Enerson & Plank, 1995, p. 5). I could not agree more. Who I am is in large part a result of the opportunities afforded me by my parents. Both of my parents were educators. My mother was an elementary school teacher and my father rose through the ranks to become a superintendent of schools. My parents took risks. In 1960 they moved us to Micronesia to the island of Ponape (now referred to as Pohnpei). They spent the next decade overseas. They taught us to be independent. They challenged us to be open-minded and accepting of other people and cultures. They developed within us an ability to adapt to new circumstances and to maintain a sense of humor while doing so. I think these traits have come in handy.

In terms of who I am as a teacher is the result of interactions I've had with people, far too many to name. A few, however, deserve recognition. Mr. Moser, my ninth grade math teacher taught me the value of patience and caring. Mr. Bush and Drs. O'Connor and Niepoth at the California State University at Chico also were influential. Mr. Bush taught me that it is acceptable to be yourself with your students. While some may not have liked his style, I loved his emotion and his willingness to share it with students. Dr. O'Connor, my advisor, made it clear that I was not living up to my potential. I will never forget that. Dr. Niepoth's interest in me and my dreams never faltered. A decade after I graduated he still expressed interest in me. This speaks highly of his commitment to students. While a graduate student at Penn State two faculty, Dr. David Chase and Dr. Dan Toy, two polar opposites, profoundly influenced me. Dr. Chase didn't know what time it was and didn't care. He wasn't prepared with outlines and class notes. He was ready to challenge his students and was effective in doing so. He taught his students the value of thinking beyond the box. He supported students questioning what they were reading and never felt uncomfortable indicating when he didn't know something. Dr. Toy, on the other hand, had so much energy students couldn't help but become involved in the course. He loved what he was doing and it showed.

My students also have helped me to become a better teacher. I love my students. They make me laugh and they make me cry. They challenge and frustrate me. They keep me human. I would not have this relationship with my students, however, if I were limited to class contact. I have always had a lot of advisees, both undergraduate and graduate. While trying at times, I feel that academic advising is an integral part of the teaching process. Often, my best teaching is done during my office hours, in the hall outside my office, or along a sidewalk on campus. Increasingly, it seems to be done via e-mail as well. I don't like this, but it is a sign of the times. I know there are faculty who feel that we should use professional advisors and limit our contact with students to the issues that “really count.” What does this mean? Don't conversations about a difficult course matter? Isn't it important to gain insight to the dreams and aspirations of our students? Lee (1999) proposed seven steps we as educators can take to encourage the

process of self-discovery our students go through. One of these steps is increasing expectations for advising. She argues that advising should be an interactive process that leads students toward identifying their genuine preferences and interests and making concomitant academic decisions. Earlier I indicated that a fundamental principle of mine is clarity of purpose. Teachers must help students to know themselves, including their strengths and weaknesses. The advisor/advisee relationship does this.

Being A Teacher 'Ain't Easy

"In communities of scholars who teach, ... it is often argued that teaching is an art and thus should not—and perhaps cannot—be distilled into a set of rules or prescriptions for behavior..." (Enerson & Plank, 1995, p. 5). I do subscribe to the tenet that there is art in teaching. I believe that great teachers have passion, which is shared through educating others. What I don't know are the rules or guidelines for being a great teacher.

I do have many examples of failures, triumphs, crises and delightful surprises associated with my teaching. These have come about through the teaching of numerous courses, shared teaching assignments with fabulous faculty, the mentoring of doctoral students into classes, and the advisement of hundreds of students.

As Enerson and Plank (1995) suggest, "... what is particularly crucial in this evolving process [of becoming a teacher] is that you remain open to the ideas of others, risk trying new things, and never suffer silently" (p. 5). I've been blessed with the guidance and support of a number of individuals who've been there throughout my ups and downs. Herberta Lundegren, my academic advisor during my doctoral program; three very special women, Drs. Kelly Bricker, Laura Payne and Lori Pennington-Gray; a good teacher in her own right, Dr. Linda Caldwell; and Dr. Richard Gitelson all deserve credit for supporting and suffering (with or because of?) me. The one individual who deserves the most credit, however, is my husband, Dr. Frank Guadagnolo. If I could grant one wish to all who choose to teach in higher education it would be that they find a soul mate who will nurture, listen, support and occasionally throw them a congratulatory "high five." Teaching is a difficult and ever-evolving process. Finding someone who is willing to go along for the ride makes it a hell of a lot more fun.

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