

What Makes A Good Teacher?

By Marie F. Hassett, Ph.D.

(Note: This article has been modified for this assignment.)

I have been teaching for the last ten years. During that time, I have worked in public schools, universities, extracurricular programs for K-12, adult basic literacy, and adult enrichment classes. My youngest student was a 6 year-old budding actress in a town-sponsored arts enrichment program for elementary students; my oldest, a Jamaican immigrant, a grandmother beginning at the age of 63 to learn how to read. I've taught honors students in a college humanities program, and severely handicapped youth in a public high school.

The breadth of my experience has enriched my teaching life, but left me without a luxury some of my colleagues enjoy -- the sense, as I walk into a new class, for a new term, that I know what my students will need, and how best to share it with them. This is not to say that I've been tossed blind into the classroom. In most cases, I've had enough prep time to gather what seem like appropriate materials, and find out something about the students I'll be working with. What I have not had is the critical mass of sameness that accrues to the teacher who stays in the same setting, at the same level, for many years in a row. I cannot assume that what worked last semester will work this time.

As a result of my ever-changing context, I've spent a lot of time thinking about the craft and practice of teaching, as separate from course content, age of students, size of class, or institutional setting. Everywhere I go, I meet exemplary teachers, and I've been interested in figuring out what makes them so good. What I've discovered is the inherent sameness of good teachers, regardless of the substantial differences between them in terms of style, personality, goals, and pattern of interaction with students. I would go so far as to say that good teachers, in all settings and at all levels, have more in common with each other than any of them may have with their colleagues in comparable positions.

In order to understand the bold statement above, try the following exercise. Sit back, close your eyes, and bring to mind the three best teachers you ever had. Try to remember what they were like -- how they looked, talked and acted, what their classrooms and/or offices were like, how they made you feel as their student. When you're satisfied that you've gotten a good picture of who these people were, open your eyes, and consider the words of educator and philosopher Parker Palmer:

Good teaching isn't about technique. I've asked students around the country to describe their good teachers to me. Some of them describe people who lecture all the time, some of them describe people who do little other than facilitate group process, and others describe everything in between. But all of them describe people who have some sort of connective capacity, who connect themselves to their students, their students to each other, and everyone to the subject being studied. (Palmer, p. 27)

Do you recognize your best teachers in this description? When we talk about the quality of someone's teaching, we address issues of technique, content, and presentation. But we all know people who have tremendous knowledge but fail to communicate it: people who have, on paper, a great lesson, but whose students are bored or frustrated. When we're being honest, we admit that good teaching often has less to do with our knowledge and skills than with our attitude towards our students, our subject, and our work.

The rest of this article will address some of the characteristics that good teachers exhibit. It is not meant to be all encompassing or definitive; many excellent teachers may possess only some of these traits, and consider others not mentioned to be just as valuable. The characteristics detailed here may be viewed simply as a selection of tools that allow teachers to create and sustain connectivity in their classrooms.

1. Good teachers have a sense of purpose.

You can't be good in a generic sense; you have to be good for something. As a teacher, this means that you know what your students expect, and you make plans to meet those expectations. You, too, have expectations about what happens in your classroom, based on the goals you're trying to achieve. If you want to prepare your students for employment, you expect punctuality and good attendance. If you teach a GED class, you spend time explaining the format of the test and helping students to improve their test-taking skills. And if you want your students to become better, more involved readers, you allow time for reading and provide access to books.

2. Good teachers have expectations of success for all students.

This is the great paradox of teaching. If we base our self-evaluation purely on the success of our students, we'll be disappointed. At all levels there are simply too many factors in students' lives for a teacher to be able to guarantee success to all. At the same time, if we give up on our students, adopting a fatalistic, "it's out of my hands" attitude, students will sense our lack of commitment and tune out. The happy medium can be achieved with a simple question: Did I do everything that I could in this class, this time, to meet the needs of all my students, assuming that

complete success was possible? As long as you can answer in the affirmative, you're creating a climate for success.

3. Good teachers know how to live with ambiguity.

One of the greatest challenges of teaching stems from the lack of immediate, accurate feedback. The student who walks out of your classroom shaking his head and muttering under his breath about algebra may burst into class tomorrow proclaiming his triumph over math, and thanking you for the previous lesson. There is no way to predict precisely what the long-term results of our work will be. But if we have a sense of purpose informing our choice of strategies and materials, and we try to cultivate expectations of success for all our students, we will be less likely to dwell on that unpredictability, choosing instead to focus on what we can control, and trusting that thoughtful preparation makes good outcomes more likely than bad ones.

4. Good teachers adapt and change to meet student needs.

Can we really claim to have taught a class in geography if no one learned any of the concepts in the lesson from our presentation? If none of our students ever pick up a book outside of the classroom, have we really taught them to be better readers? We don't always think about these issues, but they are at the heart of effective teaching. A great lesson plan and a great lesson are two entirely different things; it's nice when one follows the other, but we all know that it doesn't always work out that way. We teach so that students will learn, and when learning doesn't happen, we need to be willing to devise new strategies, think in new ways, and generally do anything possible to revive the learning process. It's wonderful to have a good methodology, but it's better to have students engaged in good learning.

5. Good teachers are reflective.

This may be the only infallible, absolute characteristic of all good teachers, because without it, none of the other traits we've discussed can fully mature. Good teachers routinely think about and reflect on their classes, their students, their methods, and their materials. They compare and contrast, draw parallels and distinctions, review, remove and restore. Failing to observe what happens in our classes on a daily basis disconnects us from the teaching and learning process, because it's impossible to create connectivity if you've disconnected yourself.

6. Good teachers are comfortable with not knowing.

If we reflect honestly and thoughtfully on what happens in our classes, we will often find dilemmas we cannot immediately resolve, questions we cannot answer. Our teaching benefits if we can live for a little while with a question, think and observe, and let an answer develop in response to the specific situation we face.

7. Good teachers had good role models.

Think back again to your three best teachers. How has your own teaching been shaped by their practices, consciously or unconsciously? Think also of the worst teacher you ever had. Are there things you absolutely will not do because you remember how devastating they were to you or your classmates? We learn to teach gradually, and absorb ideas and practices from a variety of sources. How many movies have you seen that include a teacher as a character, and how might those films have contributed to your practice? We are not always aware of the influences on our teaching, good and bad; reflecting on the different models of teaching we've acquired, and looking at how we acquired them, makes us better able to adapt and change to suit new challenges.

8. Good teachers enjoy their work and their students.

This may seem obvious, but it's easy to lose sight of its importance. Teachers who enjoy their work and their students are motivated, energized, and creative. The opposite of enjoyment is burnout—the state where no one and nothing can spark any interest. Notice, too, that enjoying your work and enjoying your students may be two different things. Focusing too much on content may make students feel extraneous, misunderstood, or left out. Focusing exclusively on students, without an eye to content, may make students feel understood and appreciated, but may not help them to achieve their educational goals as quickly as they'd like. Achieving a balance between the two extremes takes time and attention; it demands that we observe closely, evaluate carefully, and act on our findings.

* Palmer, Parker. (1999). "The Grace of Great Things: Reclaiming the Sacred in Knowing, Teaching, and Learning." In *The Heart of Knowing: Spirituality in Education*. Ed. Stephen Glazer. NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.