

Tomorrows-Professor

FINDING MY TEACHING VOICE

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Prologue: Teaching from Scratch

When I began teaching during my first term in graduate school, all I knew about teaching came from watching my own teachers over the 16 years I'd spent in school. Unsure where else to start, I began with the most basic question: How do I teach? I was not sure how loud to talk, how long to talk, or what to say. I was told "good research makes you a good teacher." I pondered this repeatedly as I taught my first 72 students in three lab sections of Human Anatomy and Physiology (a course I'd never taken as an undergraduate) and began my research (involving clams). The connection seemed tenuous to me.

I was given little guidance about teaching during graduate school. I got the sense that it didn't matter much; it was how you paid your bills while you were conducting research. I arrived at graduate school from a small, liberal arts college where teaching was given a strong emphasis, and I was unable to let go of the idea that my teaching mattered. I ended up reading what I could find about teaching and collecting hints from anyone who would share them. I learned a lot about techniques and strategies for effective teaching. I used the ones that made sense to me and became a competent teacher. I communicated information about biology to my students reasonably well, and they learned more biology than they would have alone.

Questioning

As I gained experience and improved my teaching, I realized that I was still not very comfortable in the classroom. I was nervous about teaching and had a lot of doubt about whether or not I was doing the best job I could. I was in charge in my classroom but wasn't certain I belonged there. I started asking more sophisticated questions revolving around my direct interactions with students. The articles I was reading didn't seem to cover the less tangible aspects of teaching, like: What tone should I take with my students? And: How do I convince my students to really buy into all these creative classroom activities I'm using? Having students stand up and act out the process of DNA replication is all very well and good but somehow less effective if they're rolling their eyes and acting bored.

I had to go back and look at my experience in college: How did the good professors interact with students? Some of the well-liked profs were comedians; class was lively and amusing. My notes from class were full of anecdotal marginalia-funny quotes I couldn't resist writing down. (Once when our labs were going particularly poorly, a professor quipped "Well, dying cells don't divide, and dead cells divide damn slowly." That was high humor in a biology lecture.) Some popular professors were young, laid-back, and easy to relate to. They could be found at the student union and were often still on campus during student-active hours (11 p.m. - 2a.m.). Because the students liked these charismatic professors, they were attentive and eager to be engaged in their classes.

So, it seemed like a good goal to be a popular professor. But this brought up a less comfortable question: How do I create a professional relationship with my students? Can I maintain authority and treat students fairly while striving for them to like me? Where should the boundaries be? If I become my students' buddy, how can I assess them properly (i.e., give them low grades when appropriate) without compromising our relationship?

Also, most of the popular professors I knew were men; I was a little concerned, as a young woman, about becoming too familiar with my students and losing authority in the classroom. Treating students fairly was a key component of this professional relationship I wanted to cultivate and stemmed from some of my experience in college. I hadn't liked it when professors gave last-minute extensions to the whole class, particularly if I had already spent time on the assignment and pushed back my other coursework to finish. It seemed to reward students who were less prepared. I made it a goal to treat all my students the same, so no one had an unfair advantage in the course. But I wasn't sure how to do this and maintain the easy-going attitude I was imagining for myself.

Formulating Answers

I struggled with these questions and goals for several years; I still revisit some of them. For a long time, I tried to emulate the popular professors, but I was eventually forced to acknowledge that I am neither a comic nor laid-back. My attempts at humor garnered me blank looks or an avoidance of eye contact. I couldn't even use canned jokes; the timing was all wrong. People who know me can tell you I have even less of a chance at coming across relaxed. I am also not a man; I will never have a deep, booming lecture voice I admire. In truth, who I am is rather earnest, intense, and detail-oriented, with just a faint hint of dry humor that goes unacknowledged by my students. When I perceived this chasm between popular teachers and myself, I signed deeply and resigned myself to it.

That brought me back around to the question of how to engage my students: How could I get them past their reticence and embarrassment so they could learn, especially if I was not charming them into it?

I muddled about until I attended a campus seminar at Carleton given by Carol Rutz (1999). She had interviewed teachers of writing about how they responded to students' assignments. The teachers had very different styles of response; the person sitting next to me during the seminar actually snorted in disgust and shook her head as Rutz described how one of the teachers had a set of formulaic responses for certain errors, even referring students to specific pages of a grammar handbook. I winced slightly at her snort, since I had been thinking that this seemed quite a reasonable option to me. (I have often longed for a rubber stamp which reads "The word 'data' is always plural.") Different writing teachers focused on different aspects of their students' writing (grammar, structure, flow, or content), made different types of comments, and had different priorities generally.

I remember being interested to find out which evaluation techniques were the most effective-and being amazed to find that no such judgment was forthcoming. Rutz's assessment showed that the

different response strategies were equally effective. The commonality she noted among all these teachers was this: They explained their strategies to their students. The context of the particular classroom was very important; since the students in each class understood their teacher's philosophy and evaluation style, they were able to learn from the teacher's responses to their writing.

I took two important lessons from this seminar. First, at a practical level, I finally had some help with the question: How do I get students to buy into my classroom activities? In most cases, giving them a brief pedagogical explanation seems to be sufficient. If I can justify to my students that getting up and acting out a process will help students with different learning styles, they seem to be more amenable to exploring these activities. I'll often admit to them that what they will be doing is a little silly, so they're prepared for it. They seem more willing to let go of their embarrassment if I remind them that the whole point is to help their understanding of the material.

Second, at a more abstract level, I embraced the idea that there are many ways to be an effective teacher. This realization has been a key turning point in how I see other teachers and how I see myself as a teacher. I'm not sure why it wasn't self-evident to me. Certainly it wasn't something I was learning from reading articles about teaching. It seems like most authors were so intent on supporting their particular theses that they didn't remind readers that there are other, equally effective ways to teach. In fact, for a long time, I didn't read anything about the relationship of individual teachers to their craft or even think of teaching as a craft. This changed when Parker Palmer visited Carleton in 2000 and gave several seminars. In preparation for his visit, I read one of his books (Palmer, 1998). Here I found guidance I needed and a different way to think about teaching. One of Palmer's major theses is the idea that the more you bring yourself to your teaching, the better teacher you will be. I realized finally that becoming a good teacher was more than just adopting a set of techniques and strategies. I should not have been surprised. Although I was using good techniques and strategies, I wasn't as comfortable in the classroom as I wanted to be. I had tried adopting the teaching styles of the good teachers I remembered, and it had not been an improvement, for me or the students.

I hadn't considered that certain qualities described me (like my earnestness or attention to detail) could be a legitimate part of my teaching voice. Moreover, I could not construct my teaching voice from other people's qualities, no matter how much I admired them. My encounter with Parker's ideas freed me to try to become a teacher true to my own qualities of self.

Teaching as Myself

I have been fascinated by this process of figuring out who I am as a teacher. Currently, I would use the terms "approachable," "detail-oriented," "earnest," "enthusiastic," and "uncool" to describe myself as a teacher. That is a rather uncool characterization, but I think it suits me. Being approachable is very important to me because of the subject matter I teach. Although many of my introductory biology students arrive in class feeling confident and well-prepared, I also have students who feel completely daunted by being in a science course. I would like to think at least I am accessible to students, even if the subject matter is not, initially. Being detail-oriented makes it imperative for me to be well-prepared for my classes; I'm not comfortable

otherwise. All my advance preparations have a real benefit for my relationship with my students: Because I am relaxed and comfortable answering their questions, the students get the sense that I know what I'm talking about, and this increases their level of respect for me. Being earnest and enthusiastic helps me to engage the students; if I am not embarrassed by getting genuinely excited about the biology, maybe they will be less inclined to back away from it. I enjoy the freedom that acknowledging my uncool qualities carries with it; I don't spend time or energy trying to be someone I'm not.

As I express more of my individuality in the classroom, I am finding it somehow easier to see my students as individuals. This has helped me reconsider my definition of "fairness." The more I understand of my students, the less important it is to me that I treat them identically. They don't enter my classroom with identical backgrounds, and they won't leave it with identical understanding, no matter what I do. In my individual interactions with students, I focus more on improving their understanding (from whatever their starting point is), and I spend less time worrying if I've made the same particular statement to all the students in the class.

This change in my idea of what is fair was a surprise to me. I was teaching a lab course with a first-year teacher, and we were planning oral final exams for the course. Oral exams are challenging to assess completely equally, but they are an easy way to find out how much a student knows. The professor I was working with was very concerned about assigning points and giving consistent marks for similar responses. As we discussed the exam, I was surprised to find myself relatively unconcerned about the minutiae of the points involved for a particular type of response. This was a definite shift for me from previous courses, and I was briefly concerned that I was becoming apathetic. I think, however, that I had gained confidence in my ability to know when a student was demonstrating understanding. I also was less afraid of letting my knowledge of a student affect how I assessed that student.

Instead of assessing students equally, in some circumstances I have shifted toward assessing students individually. I think this is related to the goals I have for my students. Some goals are easily stated and assessable. Can you dispense 0.1 ml of water using this mechanical pipettor? Can you explain how proteins are made from a gene? I still assess my students equally in these arenas.

It is the more abstract goals I have for my students that I assess more individually. These abstract goals are common in the context of a liberal arts education. Can you use critical thinking skills and creativity to solve this problem? Can you design an experiment or study to get at this issue? Different students are going to express their answers to these types of questions in a very personal manner, and assessing them equally by a common rubric is very difficult. It suddenly becomes relevant to me who that person answering the question really is.

In considering my students as individuals, I am again faced with the issue of maintaining boundaries. I have found that the boundary lines I draw now have a firm footing in mutual respect between the students and me. I think because I share my true self with them in class, they believe that I am genuinely trying to help them learn and respect me for that, even if some of my teaching methods seem odd to them. I am no longer tempted to blur the boundaries between us, because I appreciate the embracing that sort of popularity is not the right way to be a

good teacher. In fact, I am having to reevaluate my definition of "popular" as I remember other good teachers in college. These were the professors spoken of with respect in the library rather than those praised effusively at the bar. Given the variety of learning styles among students learning at any college, it seems only fitting that professors with a variety of teaching styles are teaching.

On From Here

In forgoing connections between my personality and my teaching style, I have become comfortable in the classroom and comfortable dealing with students. Because I am more relaxed about interacting with students, my communication with them seems to go more smoothly. I have more energy to figure out how to teach the peculiarities of my subject; I can develop a larger repertoire of techniques and activities to use in class. I will always be thinking about how to be a better teacher, but this acceptance of my teaching voice as an extension of myself is freeing.

It is encouraging to me that this way of looking at teaching is flexible, and not static. As I grow and change, my teaching voice will change, too. I will not spend my teaching life striving to be the one perfect teacher; I know that there are many ways to be a good teacher, and I will enjoy the freedom to explore them as I choose.

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