

Novice but Great

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OSU Ph.D. in Sociology, 2009

It's hard to write about teaching without getting carried away into axioms, mantras, or numerated lists. Perhaps the reason essays on teaching like this one are both ubiquitous and, frankly, a little fluffy, is that there appears to be no singular steadfast rule of effective teaching. Now, it is probably always true that being student-centered, prepared, adaptive, innovative, etc. are all traits of "highly effective" teachers. But these lists and ideas typically end up stored in the brain next to dieting secrets and tips for financial success. As a fairly new teacher writing an essay on teaching, I offer my view with this unfortunate but probable result in mind.

When I survey the research on teaching, I find that it is in one way helpful for me, the novice teacher, but that in another way it is . . . frustrating. Often this research rests on the tacit assumption that teaching effectiveness is something that accumulates over time—at a glacial pace—far out of reach from someone just entering the teaching field. Although I know there is much to learn and master, I also believe that teaching effectiveness does not completely correspond with time served in the classroom. In some cases, teaching effectiveness may stagnate or diminish over time. Consequently, I contend that there needs to be more consideration—in the literature, in training programs, in hallway discussions—for how new teachers might excel based on where they are with the skills and traits they already possess. Without some acknowledgement that new teachers offer unique, interesting, beneficial skills as novices, I think many new teachers can lose some of their professional self-esteem. Without such acknowledgment they might gaze too long at the gap between their current skill level and their idealized self. Before I describe what exactly I think are the important skills of novice teachers, let me review the challenges they face.

In effective classrooms, students know or eventually figure out that “we are in this together.” And when a class becomes a small intellectual community, student—and teacher—learning flourishes.

The Uphill Climb

New teachers have a lot of problems. They lack the experiential knowledge that implicitly informs the veteran teacher’s approach to such tasks as creating a syllabus, selecting appropriate course materials, grading, mentoring, and above all managing the classroom. Being a capable classroom manager entails a wide variety of skills. One must be able to master classroom technologies,

handle conflicts, deal with diverse student populations, establish sensible teacher-student boundaries, vary classroom activities, and use appropriate humor, among other things. Many of these skills are hard-won, often accompanied by sheer fright and public and private embarrassment.

All these problems are exacerbated by the beginning teacher’s relatively incomplete knowledge of the discipline, not to mention low pay, low confidence, limited support, graduate school and job market stress, and in some cases the messy world of dating and courtship. Ironically, the very thing that can help these new teachers is probably the least likely to occur—young teachers often resist the kinds of student and peer criticism that would help overcome these challenges.

Despite this long, seemingly insurmountable list of obstacles to success, many novice teachers get high student evaluations and garner department and university praise. How do these new teachers do it? How, despite all of these obstacles, do these beginners manage to excite and engage their students? Now it is entirely possible that early career praise may not be capturing the kinds of teaching desired in the classroom. Thus it is critical for the purpose of understanding true teaching success to untangle counterfeit from genuine teaching effectiveness.

Counterfeit Success

It may be that novice teachers who earn high praise really aren’t that great. They just have the advantage of youth. They are energetic, ridiculously passionate, blindly ambitious, and idealistic, actually believing that what they teach will change lives and the world.

Conversely, experienced teachers know the limitations of their discipline's cumulative knowledge and have long ago traded idealism for realism, passion for pragmatism. As a result, they are well-equipped to show students the difference between viable, testable ideas, on the one hand, and blind advocacy and unprofessional propagandizing, on the other. Anyone skeptical about the genuine effectiveness of young teachers knows that the young teacher will soon be confronted with the limitations of his or her unfettered optimism, a confrontation that will lead to disillusionment, burn out, eventual realism, or for a few, some dogged resistance to change.

From this perspective, the young teacher only temporarily inspires or engages students. In the end, these gains are short-lived and will do more harm than good. Those once inspired students will eventually learn that the world isn't as simple, and its problems not as easily solved, as that 101 class made it seem.

A second argument is that young teachers and their students have low expectations of each other. Insecure with the course material, novice teachers blame themselves when students are failing and so they pad grades to reflect the possibility that perhaps they got it wrong, taught it wrong, or tested it wrong. Grade inflation minimizes uncomfortable confrontation, especially when a teacher is insecure about grading and is unprepared for dealing with agitated students. Teachers expect less of students because they are not yet able to defend every point or successfully navigate the nuances of fair grading, especially on essays and group projects. In this skeptical view, students expect less of new teachers. Students tolerate an unpolished and (all too often) “fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants” approach from young teachers that they would not accept from experienced teachers—and as a result, students give new teachers higher evaluations than their veteran counterparts, especially when new teachers are more generous in grading.

A third argument is that young teachers are merely reaping the rewards of being plugged into youth culture. Their high evaluations are less related to their effectiveness in achieving the course objectives than to their being conversant with such students' interests as Facebook, Uggs, iPods, or Brangelina (and how quickly these lists change!). Being “cool” never hurts, and young teachers, arguably, are closer to cool than their seasoned

counterparts. A quick perusal of the correlation between younger teachers and the incidence of “chili peppers” on www.ratemyprofessors.com only confirms this stereotype.

Taken together, do these criticisms explain all of the new teacher’s successes? While I agree that many of the aforementioned explanations can be valid, I believe much is lost about how we understand and promote effective teaching when the linear assumption of teaching-effectiveness-equals-experience-in-classroom dominates our thinking. I believe that the novice but truly great teachers already have relevant experience for effective teaching before they even step into the classroom. And perhaps this form of experience is overlooked because it does not look like standard teaching experience.

Genuine Effectiveness

Here are three teaching qualities I think characterize genuine teaching effectiveness among novice teachers. Novice but great teachers excel because they 1. model exemplary student learning, 2. are highly adaptive in the classroom, and 3. are skilled discussion leaders. There are many more characteristics shared by both novice and experienced teachers, but these three represent a skill set common among new teachers and, one that can lead to dynamic, exciting, and thought-provoking classrooms.

Exemplary Students

Novice but great teachers exemplify ideal student learning. New teachers still in graduate school are participant-observers in the truest sense, doing homework at 6 am, attending class at 9, prepping for class at 11 and teaching at 1. The line between student and teacher is thin, and, for the effective new teacher, this is an advantage. Who better to critique and revise a syllabus, a grading policy, a reading assignment than a teacher who is also a student? For those new teachers no longer in graduate school, the student experience is more easily assessable than teachers long into their careers. Empathy for the student experience enables the new teacher to create a course with effective, realistic, and motivating assignments, readings, and in-class activities. It’s not that novice but great teachers go easy on their students but that they have recent, grounded experience in what does and does not work in the classroom.

Effective young teachers also do something else in the classroom that is crucial to their success: they model ideal student learning. Even when dressing the part of the seasoned professor and adopting an authoritative

tone, the novice but great teacher remains aware that he or she is not much different from the student. Again, this awareness can be an advantage. Many of the ideas we teach are worthy of rigorous debate and discussion, and the new teacher finds it easy to demonstrate how the ideal student should treat multiple viewpoints, conflicting findings, or unknown answers to some given problem.

I know this point seems fluffy, but consider the not uncommon situation of a student asking a question that the teacher doesn't know the answer to. The learning moment for the student is not the answer, but the process of discovering the answer. The "admitting I don't know" strategy is ineffective unless the teacher then engages the class in the effort to find the answer. In some cases, students will not retain the details of the material they learn in the course, but they will retain the more important lesson—how to discover the answers to difficult questions. New teachers, by nature of their inexperience, are often in the best position to show students just how that is done.

Highly Innovative

There is something about building your syllabus from the ground up that leads to innovation. The new teacher has no commitments to established forms of teaching a course. The new teacher is willing to do anything he or she thinks will make the classroom experience work well. This willingness is another advantage. New technologies (e.g. clickers in the classroom), new styles of teaching (e.g. non-lecture approaches), innovative assignments (e.g. photo essays, on-line discussions), and guest lecturing are all somewhat easier to take on when the new teacher starts from scratch.

This approach, of course, is high risk. There is a lot of room for failure, but the effective teacher remains adaptable, making subtle course corrections along the way, and seeks out and responds to feedback about how the class is working. In return, students respond positively to the spontaneity associated with innovation. They appreciate classes that don't appear "canned," and they value the variety of approaches to the material, a variety that enables the teacher to reach students with different styles of learning. In addition, when students offer feedback and see changes in the course, they feel that they have had a hand in making the class experience better. In the end, students appreciate and reward thoughtful innovation, even as it develops within the quarter or semester.

Discussion-Centered

The best new teachers don't have the luxury of creating a teacher-centered classroom, and, they know it, because they, like their students, are grappling with the material (albeit on a slightly different level). Again this situation gives new teachers an advantage. The pitfalls of lecturing-as-expert, pontificating on abstract points, or mystifying rather than clarifying concepts students question are byproducts of a teacher-centered classroom. But new teachers typically aren't knowledgeable enough to have to worry about these pitfalls. Most new teachers know there is too much to lose if the spotlight is on the teacher-as-expert; consequently, they rely heavily on the students to think through the material with them, to collaborate on developing new arguments and viewpoints.

Novice but great teachers exude enough humility to invite collegial debate. Their authority is less about what they know as the teacher, and more about their ability to moderate and facilitate healthy, thought-provoking discussions. I admit this can be a tough skill to apply in practice, but in truth, the teacher never has it "figured out." The material is always changing, society is always changing, and of course, so are the students. The most effective and experienced teachers know that the only constant is change, and the humility that results is critical for students to observe and to model in the classroom. In effective classrooms, students know or eventually figure out that "we are in this together." And when a class becomes a small intellectual community, student—and teacher—learning flourishes.

Conclusion

As President Gordon Gee stated in a previous edition of *Talking About Teaching*, "Far from being infallible vessels of irrefutable wisdom, the best teachers never stop being students, even students of our students." Rather than focusing on the linear assumption that teaching effectiveness is the refinement from the "gross to fine motor skills of teaching," novice but great teachers demonstrate that not all aspects of good teaching are cumulative. The best novice teachers showcase what an exemplary student should be, are constantly innovative, gravitate towards group discussion, and demonstrate the greatest of qualities in teaching, humility.

I think what makes novice but great teachers truly great is not the ability to mirror the accomplishments of veteran teachers (although this only

helps), but the willingness to build on the natural advantages they already possess. As new teachers develop, the benefits of experience—the refinement of the fine motor skills of teaching—will inevitably follow, but perhaps much of what makes any teacher great is the ability to hang on to the lessons learned as a novice.