

The Importance of Good Teaching

by

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I am first and foremost a mother. It seems that I have always been one - being, as I am, the mother of young boys. Over the past 6 years, my career as a mother has paralleled my career as a teacher. Certainly mothering has helped my teaching though I am not sure that the reverse is true. Yet the two experiences have unfolded with startling similarities. I was untrained for mothering and untrained for teaching and gave my heart and soul to both. I am now trying to moderate between the two as so many mothers must do when they are engaged in careers they love.

Yes, mothering has had an enormous impact on my teaching. I see every student as someone's precious child. Like my own, they don't always please; and like at home, I am not always responsive to their particular needs. But by and large they are as much mine as my own. And every day that my sons go off to school, I pray that they are met with compassionate discipline and guided by able hands.

For me, therefore, teaching is as much mentoring as facilitating. The subjects that we teach are the focal points for mentoring. The lessons themselves far greater and more significant than the subject themes. Good teaching to me is, in this way, the building of wholesome, productive societies from the ground up.

I teach engineering. I teach it as a noble profession (as I would art or literature or music, had I been blessed with natural talent in these departments.) I teach of the many universal theoretical principles which underpin engineering and show how these permeate our lives in practical ways. I have devoted myself to the development of the Communication Systems Group and to articulating a vision for weaving it into our national tapestry. To our country, a small, developing island state, this process is crucial to achieving national development goals. Active relationships between the university, industry and local policy groups are crucial to the development and enrichment of the academic program which in turn feeds ready graduates into a needy workforce.

So teaching has as much to do with communication and community as it does with content and campus.

Teachers are not unlike alchemists who mix acids and gases to concoct potent, deadly blends or sweet perfumes. And what a challenge it is for us to keep the mix in balance: the breadth with the depth, the quality with the quantity, the elegant with the mundane, the gravity with the levity. Yet mix we must and balance we might.

There are great personal rewards, to student and teacher, of a winning teaching cocktail. But far outstripping the personal rewards are the rewards to society. The responsibility placed on us as teachers is profound. In the same way that healthy communities are built on healthy family values, so are they built on healthy work attitudes. And students learn as much from what we do as from what we say. As teachers then, like mothers and fathers, we are role models, for better or for worse, till death do us part, and I have hardly got off the block.

Let me say that receiving the AAU's 2001 Distinguished Teacher Award is a great honour. The development of my teaching portfolio, reluctantly at first, has been a tremendous opportunity to pause for breath and replay the past 15 years of trying to find my way.

Thanks also to the AAU for inviting me to PEI to experience its utter tranquillity and exquisite beauty.

Back at home I am deeply indebted to Betty Rohlehr of our Instructional Development Unit for her diligence, warmth and genuine interest in the development of teaching on our campus. Special thanks to my students for helping me on my way, to my husband and sons for their inspiration, to Brigette Brereton, Ken Julien and Brian Copeland for their warmth and support. Thanks to the Almighty Father for His many Graces.

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I have been asked to speak briefly—ten minutes—on the subject of “The Importance of Good Teaching.” I must admit that my first reaction was a question: who is it in this room who does not know what the importance of good teaching is? I found it hard to believe that I could tell this audience anything new or striking or insightful about such a topic. The risk of being platitudinous seemed high.

Thus, I devised a plan, which was to undertake a little bit of primary research on the subject. I decided to ask my students, who, I surmised, ought to have some valuable thoughts on the subject—not that students are not capable of being platitudinous themselves. Notwithstanding, I explained the context of my talk to a class of twenty-five Professional Writing students. They come from a variety of disciplines, and most, but not all, are in their second year. What, I asked them, should I say to a room full of university presidents about “The Importance of Good Teaching”? I realize that my research falls short of being statistically reliable, but anecdotal evidence, as you know, is sometimes the most interesting.

Some of the responses were predictable, but it is worth reminding ourselves about them:

5 Most of the students mentioned something about careers or work. Whatever larger educational goals we may have in mind—especially those of us in the traditional liberal arts and sciences faculties—our students are still thinking of their futures in terms of livelihood and financial security. Nor should we be exasperated by this. Have you forgotten? I haven’t. I remember the fears and anxieties of becoming an adult and of having to make the transition from school to work—you will smile at that, since, arguably, I never *have* left school. Indeed, my grandfather smiled as well; he thought I must be rather stupid since it was taking me so long to get my education. For teachers in the professional schools, the focus on career is a no-brainer. If we do not teach well and effectively, we compromise both the professional and the public which the professional serves. “**Good teaching,**” said one student, “**helps form the new generation of good professionals.**”

5 Many students, however, went far beyond the practical and efficiency quotient of good teaching. Listen to this one: “**good teachers must responsibly and correctly educate [students], enlighten and raise [them] to a higher level of critical thinking.... In essence, the teacher is expected to help contribute to the learner’s life and help guide the learner along their path.**” Apparently, our students are quite aware of the mentoring and fosterage role which is inherent in good teaching. But I don’t hear a lot about this topic, even in professional development circles these days. This is an awesome responsibility when you think about it. In fact, I’m inclined to think that, in the day-to-day progress of curricular details, we often lose sight of the fact that we are fostering and mentoring young lives. Maybe it’s just as well: if we were too self-conscious of the heavy responsibility, it might frighten us. It might paralyze us. If you think I exaggerate this responsibility, this student doesn’t: “**To a certain degree, what we learn and essentially, our futures are in their hands.**” Argue with that if you like—by insisting, for example, that students must take responsibility for their own learning, a principle that I hold dearly—yet, it will do little good merely to exhort the principle; our words are not so easily made flesh. It remains, then, our responsibility to teach them to take away from us that responsibility. Good teaching is partly about giving up power. The student who said “**to be a good learner we must have in turn good teachers,**” is tossing off a neat challenge to anyone who would abdicate this responsibility by throwing it all upon the students.

5 According to my students there is more—lots more: good teaching produces “**well-rounded and balanced students.**” Go ahead—the next time you meet a faculty member at your university, ask him or her this question: did you produce any “well-rounded and balanced students” today? Do we know what that is? Would we dare define it? And most important of all, do we know our students well enough even to make an assessment?

5 “**Good teachers,**” says another, “**make you want to learn, keep you up-to-date, act as role models, and are available when needed.**” Am I a role

model? What role am I modeling? The question makes me uncomfortable.

5 Others claim that good teaching is important **“for a positive and effective learning environment,”** and indeed most of the responses mentioned some aspect of making the classroom experience interesting and enjoyable. We really ought not to bore our students. And true, boredom, like beauty, is in the mind of the beholder, but there is much that we can do to make learning rewarding and interesting—and for heaven’s sake, even fun. However, we ought not to underestimate the work of learning—it takes discipline and concentration and will. Have you forgotten? We can expect it and demand it, and it comes more easily to some students than to others, but it is important that we help students learn how to be learners.

5 **“Good teaching,”** after all, says another, **“leaves a student with a sense of fulfilment and a positive attitude.”** Maybe, we ought to make this an exit question to students just as they are about to have their degrees conferred on the convocation platforms of our universities: “Are you fulfilled?” the Chancellor could ask. “Do you have a positive attitude?”

My little research project was a rather humbling experience. It reminded me that students expect a lot of us and that these expectations rarely appear as objectives on our course outlines. Good teaching is important, I would suppose, because it is aware of those expectations and accommodates them. I wouldn’t for a moment claim that it is always successful in delivering on those expectations, but at a minimum, we ought to know where our students are; otherwise, we will be working at cross-purposes.

I have not even touched on “the importance of good teaching” as it relates to the balancing act of teaching and research. To a certain extent that is well-tramped ground, and this is probably not the time nor the place—except to say that I cannot imagine inviting thousands of students to our campuses every day to accomplish something as teachers, and then to abdicate that responsibility in favour of some other activity. As long as we bring students to our campuses, teaching has to be of the highest importance. It must also have the highest profile, and certainly, it should never become like housework—necessary but invisible.

I would hope that AAU will continue to find ways to ensure that good teaching never becomes invisible or taken for granted, and that just as we can have well-endowed, well-funded research chairs, maybe one day,

we will have well-funded, well-endowed pedagogy chairs. That’s not a flip remark. The research alone in post-secondary teaching tells us that teaching our students well and effectively is a complex field that needs our best minds and practices. So I look forward to the announcement of the Canada Pedagogy Chairs.

II

It’s been a very difficult time, recently. We have all been effected by international events and the enormous losses in the United States. Closer to home, I have had my own personal loss, having attended my mother’s funeral just this morning. My mother kept a diary of the day’s events, virtually, until her dying day. This was not a literary diary but a simple record of the weather, the daily activities of the rural community where she lived, the times of sunrise and sunset, of high tide and low tide. And you know, she was the recipient of some of the best results of the best scientific and medical research that our society has been able to muster. It is good research with a good purpose: the alleviation of human suffering. But that is not what my mother wrote about in her diary. Among her last entries is this one: “nurses and staff at Queen Elizabeth Hospital very kind, patient, and helpful.” She noted that her GP took the time to visit and give her a back rub. And her very last entry is about neighbours who came to see her. After they left she wrote: “had a good visit.”

These events—both personal and international—cry out for the human touch. The importance of good teaching, I would argue—and I think that’s what my students were also saying—is that it brings the human touch to students’ lives. My students were asking that teaching be effective, to be sure, but they were also asking that it be ethical. They understood that the human touch is essential so that, as much as possible, their lives will not suffer catastrophe. They ask of us only that we give them opportunities, graced with a human touch, so that they too will have—“a good visit.”

Thank you heartily. I am deeply honoured.