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One Teacher's Thoughts About What is Good Teaching

Date: Monday, September 16 @ 11:09:15 EDT

Topic: The Brain & Learning

By Robert Freeman

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart once commented, "I can't define obscenity but I know it when I see it." To many people, it's the same with good teaching: hard to define but obvious when it occurs.

Actually, however, good teaching is more straightforward than we're first inclined to believe. This doesn't make it any easier but it does make it fairly simple to describe and easy to distinguish from mere lecturing or showmanship, two frequently misunderstood counterfeits.

As a public school teacher, I've come to believe that good teaching comes down to five activities. I call them Inducement, Conveyance, Meta-Learning, Empowerment, and Modeling. As when all eight amino acids must be present for a protein to form, all five of these activities must be present for good teaching to occur.

Let's look at what each of these tasks entails and how they add up to Good Teaching.

The Inducement is the teacher's solicitation to the student, the seduction to come and learn. It can take a thousand forms, from asking the student what she's interested in to showing her what you're interested in. The first art of teaching lies in knowing the student well enough to know which form of Inducement will entice her to want to learn. For, until this occurs, there is simply talking and resistance.

And Inducement doesn't end once the student shows interest and begins to learn. Far from it. Inducement is needed for even the

highest performing students—to push them to still greater heights, to stretch themselves to do things they had never believed they might be able to do. And it is needed for every new lesson and for every new assignment until the student becomes self-starting.

After Inducement comes Conveyance. An impoverished version of Conveyance is what passes for most teaching today. Seven times five equals thirty-five. Sentences must begin with a capital letter. In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Artful Conveyance is in fact much more challenging than this admitted caricature might suggest.

Few people learn by simply listening or reading and reciting. The Chinese adage tells it all: “Knowledge that comes from the book stays in the book.” Good Conveyance means devising a hundred different ways for the students to engage the material. They need multi-sensory stimuli—pictures, songs, poems, riddles, models, posters, dances, skits, lectures and more. They need emotional connections with the materials, connections to past learning, associations with other knowledge they’re developing. And they need all of this for all of their subjects!

By engaging the whole student, good Conveyance not only develops solid understanding of individual subjects, it brings out the deep connections between subjects. How proportion in math is related to harmony in music. How science, by reducing dependence on authority, gave rise to individualism. How cadence and rhyme and symbols serve not only poetry but demagoguery. Good conveyance makes learning come alive by helping the student make new connections—find relevance—as he encounters his learning.

After Conveyance comes Meta-Learning. This means teaching the student to be aware of how he is learning and to develop specific learning strategies for different learning situations. This sounds abstract but all of us do this as adults whether we know it or not. When I encounter a difficult passage in reading I say, “OK, let’s take this one step at a time. What is the subject of this sentence?”

What is the verb? Ok, now what's the object?" And eventually, I decipher the complex (or more likely, poorly written) passage. This is Meta-Learning—using explicit strategies to learn how to learn. It is indispensable if life-long learning is to develop. Teaching Meta-Learning requires not only a deep understanding of the subject itself, but of the learning process as well and how the student can apply one to master the other. Once started, the meta-enabled student can begin bootstrapping himself to higher and higher levels of knowledge and mastery. The best readers are skilled meta-readers. The best math students are skilled meta-mathematicians. Those students who enjoy learning the most, who stay with it longest and go with it farthest are good Meta-Learners. After Meta-Learning comes Empowerment. Empowerment means constructing the environment where the student can successfully affirm to herself her competence with and mastery of what she's learned. This is only really achieved by the student demonstrating meaningful applications of the learning.

A first grader might paint recognizable human figures and then clean up the finger paints afterwards. An eighth grader might write a book review analyzing plot, character, and theme while using the proper form of an essay, grammar, spelling, etc. A twelfth grader might describe the reversal between America's role in its Revolutionary War and the Vietnam War and use this to explain our enduring perplexity and angst about the latter.

By providing the venue for demonstrating mastery, Empowerment allows for the coming of maturity as a learner and, ultimately, as a person. Such maturity flows from "ownership" in the outcome of one's efforts, responsibility for one's fruits. Done well, Empowerment is the mid-wifeing into autonomy for each stage of accomplishment that the student has mastered.

Finally, there is Modeling. Through all of the prior stages, the teacher acts as a model of the desired outcome. She is the incarnation of the curiosity, composure, persistence, intelligence, integrity and patience and all the other deep character virtues

which are the true ends—and the true evidence—of a good education.

Of all of the behaviors, Modeling is perhaps the most important. Certainly it is the most demanding of the teacher. Every minute the student senses in the teacher whether she is authentic to her words, whether she walks her talk or whether she is simply mouthing facts and containing the chaos. The students cannot articulate what they are sensing in this process but, as with the Judge and obscenity, they know it when they see it. And when it's there, more than anything else, they want to be like it.

They want to be like it. The attraction to authenticity is inescapable, surely one of the most powerful compulsions in all of human development. Authenticity comes when we, as teachers, are true to our own natures and embody our own highest standards—both as teachers and as human beings. It comes when we treat with profound respect the uniqueness and the dignity of every student. For surely, each of them are as unique and worthy of respect as we are.

When students see that their teachers are like this, no matter what the grade or subject, they will perform heroically for them (which calls back Inducement). For they want to be acknowledged, they want to be esteemed by that which they know as true. It is the first step to becoming true once again themselves.

The genius of Good Teaching is when all five activities—Inducement, Conveyance, Meta-Learning, Empowerment, and Modeling—all occur at precisely the right time, over and over again throughout the lesson, throughout the day, throughout the year, throughout the student's educational career. Every student is addressed with exactly the right touch they need at exactly the right moment in time—and all at the same time!

It is this right-touch, right-timing, and inclusion-for-all challenge that makes Good Teaching the incomparable art form that it really is. This is what makes Good Teaching so difficult to master but such an ennobling act (for both the student and the teacher) when it actually does occur.

To be sure, every good teacher will have a different name for these acts. Each will perform them differently, with different emphases at different times. But as with Shakespeare's rose, by any other name they are just as sweet.

It is through such Good Teaching that students develop not just potent academic or vocational competencies but unshakable conviction of their fundamental worthiness for whatever great challenges they ultimately choose to take up in life. That is the true objective, the true proof, and the true reward of Good Teaching.

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This article comes from All About Emotional Intelligence from Six Seconds

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