

What Makes a Good Teacher?

by Rob Jenkins

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Roughly a year ago, I wrote a column on "The 4 Properties of Powerful Teachers," and named "personality" as one of those qualities. While recognizing that everyone is different, and that personality isn't necessarily something we can control, I was attempting to identify key characteristics that most of my best teachers, from kindergarten through graduate school, had in common.

When I say "best teachers," I'm not just talking about the ones I liked best. I mean the teachers who had the greatest influence on me — the ones whose names I still remember to this day, even though in some cases it's been more than 40 years since I sat in their classrooms. They are people I've tried to emulate in my own teaching.

What made them good teachers? I can't offer any empirical answers to that question, but I do know that personality was a key factor in all of them. Perhaps we can measure effectiveness in the classroom, to some extent, but how do we really determine quality? It seems to me that we've been trying for years, through various evaluation metrics, without a whole lot of success. I've known some bad teachers who were able to manipulate the metrics, and some good ones whose excellence wasn't immediately apparent on paper.

We may never be as funny, approachable, or creative as our favorite teachers. But simply by recognizing those traits as desirable, we can become more approachable, creative, and, yes, funnier than we would be otherwise.

In any case, the following observations are based entirely on my own experiences as a student, professor, and former midlevel administrator who has seen many good teachers (and a few bad ones) practice their craft. My hope is that, even if this list is somewhat subjective — not to mention incomplete — it won't seem entirely unfamiliar.

They are good-natured. The best teachers tend to be approachable, as opposed to sour and forbidding. Grouchy, short-tempered, misanthropic curmudgeons can sometimes make effective teachers, too, if for no other reason than that they prepare us for grouchy, short-tempered, misanthropic bosses. I had some grouchy teachers myself, especially in graduate school, and learning to cope with them was a valuable experience I would not wish to deny anyone. But most of my very best teachers were pretty easy to get along with — as long as I paid attention in class and did my work.

They are professional without being aloof. Most academics tend to keep students at arm's length — the obvious message being, "I'm your teacher, not your friend." Clearly, professionalism requires a certain amount of boundary-setting, which can be difficult, especially when dealing with older students, where the age gap is often not all that wide and, under different circumstances, they might actually be your friends. My best teachers always seemed to effortlessly walk that very fine line between being an authority figure and being someone I felt I could talk to. I didn't even understand what they were doing — or how difficult it was — until I had to do it myself years later.

They have a good sense of humor. They may or may not be ready for the Improv, but they don't take themselves or their subject matter too seriously. Few things are more off-putting than faculty members who think they're much smarter than anyone else in the room (or any room) — unless it's those who think their subject is the most important of all and expect students to feel the same way, other classes be damned. My best teachers not only understood that their course was just one of several we were taking, but also had a great, self-deprecating wit, often making jokes at their own expense and even sometimes making light of their subject. Funny how an ounce of humor can sometimes help students grasp the material better than a pound of gravitas.

They seem to enjoy what they do. Some faculty members don't really like students. They are the academics who constantly whine about their workload and complain about how rude or unprepared their students are. I've often wondered: Why are such people even in this profession? What did they expect? The teachers I remember as the very best were those who clearly loved teaching and got a kick out of associating with students every day. After all, no one wants to feel like a nuisance, which is exactly how some teachers make their students feel.

They are demanding without being unkind. Some academics take great pride in being disliked, wearing their unpopularity like a badge of honor. They naturally assume it's because they're so "tough" and "rigorous," reasoning that lazy students dislike rigor and transfer their dislike to the people who demand it. In my experience, however, most students want to be challenged; they don't mind if a lot is expected of them. They just don't want their professors to be jerks or insufferable know-it-alls. My best teachers were demanding without being mean-spirited.

They seem comfortable in their own skin. Perhaps one reason students tend to like these faculty is that they like themselves, without being in love with the sound of their own voices. This is related to not taking themselves too seriously, but it goes beyond that. The root cause of bad teaching is a fundamental lack of self-confidence, leading teachers to overcompensate by being unreasonably demanding, aloof, or condescending to students. Paradoxically, professors who appear arrogant and narcissistic are often trying to cover up what they perceive as profound deficiencies in their own personalities and abilities. The best teachers are confident without being arrogant, authoritative without being condescending.

They are tremendously creative. They are always willing to entertain new ideas or try new things — sometimes even on the fly. "Innovation" is a buzzword nowadays, but the term seems applied almost exclusively to the use of technology. My best teachers, though, were truly innovative, coming up with creative ways — sometimes on the spur of the moment — to help us understand, internalize, and remember what they were trying to teach.

What made those teachers innovative was not tools or technology but their minds.

They make teaching look easy. We all know it isn't. Ultimately, great teachers are like great athletes, dancers, or musicians. We may know, cognitively, that what they do isn't easy, but they seem to do it so effortlessly that we're lulled into thinking it's no big deal — until we try it ourselves. Then we learn quickly just how difficult it is to play a sport or an instrument — or teach — at a very high level. I didn't fully appreciate that until I became a teacher myself and discovered how easy it is to fall short in the classroom.

Most of these things I've mentioned here are personality facets. We can't control whether or not we have them or to what degree. No doubt, there is some truth to the idea that certain people are just born teachers because they happen to be blessed with these traits in abundance.

At the same time, even if we are not "born teachers," we can work to develop the qualities of those teachers in ourselves. We may never be as funny, approachable, or creative as our favorite teachers. But simply by recognizing those traits as desirable, by acknowledging that we don't possess them to the degree we would like, and by committing ourselves to working on those areas, we can become more approachable, creative, and, yes, funnier than we would be otherwise. It's the journey of self-improvement that makes the difference.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English at Perimeter College of Georgia State University and author of Building a Career in America's Community Colleges. He writes monthly for our community-college column and blogs for Vitae. The opinions expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of his employer. You can follow Rob on Twitter @HigherEdSpeak.