

TEACHERS' CORNER



Even though teaching is one of the most fundamental activities in society, the "how" of it still seems mysterious to us. We all have known great teachers, the ones with effortless eloquence and verve, the ones who turn us on to the highs of inquiry and addict us to the "why's."

Most of us have also had the misfortune of studying under a poor teacher. We have occasionally noticed, as well, that some of those bad teachers knew what they were talking about, knew it as well as Abdul-Jabbar knew how to

make a hook shot. But somehow they were ineffective at communicating their deep and comprehensive grasp of the subject. The experience of bad teaching methods is a bit like the Supreme Court's experience of pornography: you know it when you see it. How do they get that way? Are teachers born, or made?

Most universities have departments of education - and, because there is a steady demand for new state-certified public school teachers, there is a brisk trade in the educational curriculum. Unfortunately, though, if teachers as a group don't get enough respect (and they don't), the teachers of teachers come in for the most extreme disparagement. A misanthropic motto circulated the department back when I studied education: "Those who can't do, teach - and those who can't teach, teach education." It may not be as bad as all that - but, like any cliché, that statement has a grain of truth stuck in its craw. Teacher trainees recognize a basic conflict that leads them not to take their pedagogical studies too seriously: although education departments must perform studies and compile statistics to justify their place on the funding chain, the work of teaching is art, not science.

Indeed it would have to be. In their admirably practical textbook on teaching technique, *Looking In Classrooms*, Thomas L. Good and Jere E. Brophy point out that classroom teaching is an exceedingly complex activity. In an hour of classroom work, a teacher is faced with hundreds of separate interactions with students, all unpredictable, and all relevant to the teacher's mission as a communicator of ideas and values. Every young teacher in the first hellish week of student-teaching knows the feeling that nothing, not one sentence in all those pedagogical texts, has prepared him or her to face a roomful of students and - not just getting them to sit quietly - not just getting them to like you - but getting something across to them. It's like someone has just turned up the volume on all your senses, and you find yourself lecturing a riot.

As if the inherent challenges of the classroom weren't enough, most teachers face personal and professional demands that leave them very little time for planning or feedback about the craft of teaching. This is particularly true at the Henry George School, where most of the teachers are volunteers. Teachers seldom receive any meaningful evaluation of their effectiveness as teachers. Students might ask questions about the material, but they are understandably reluctant to criticize their teacher's methods (however constructively). Tests may evaluate the students'

progress, but teachers need more immediate feedback; they cannot wait til the students flunk to see whether their strategies have worked! And in any case, the HGS doesn't normally test students.

All of these factors add up to a tough problem for us as teachers. Our task is to communicate with students who may have a wide range of skill levels, learning styles, attention spans, and motivation levels. The complexity of the task makes it difficult for us to get effective feedback on our progress. Without good feedback, we may make quite a few inadvertent mistakes - and that is what the research shows. Good and Brophy cite study after study showing that we teachers are far less aware of our behavior in front of students than we perceive ourselves to be. Teachers' observed behaviors are often radically different from their self-assessment on classroom actions such as:

- What is the ratio of teacher-talk to student-talk?
- How long do I stay with students who fail to answer correctly?
- How many different students do I call on?
- Do I notice students who want to respond?
- Do I notice students who are having difficulty understanding the material?
- Do I concentrate attention on certain areas in the room, or on certain individuals, or on one sex?
- Do I make contradictory statements? Do I follow up on stated intentions?

Sometimes our inadvertent behavior in the classroom can be embarrassing. At the end of one *Understanding Economics* course, one of my students, a professional woman, complimented the course and the instructor, but said she wanted to acquaint me with something I might want to think about. It seems that throughout the class I had been addressing men by titles (Mr., etc.) - but women by first names! Had I been asked, I'd have said there was no pattern, that I used first names with students as a function of their age, or how they had first been introduced to me. But there was a clear pattern, and I thanked her for pointing it out.

The central thesis of *Looking In Classrooms* is that in the demanding environment in which we have to function as teachers, we simply will not be provided enough good feedback to optimally manage our classroom. Nobody is going to do it for us, so we have to start doing it ourselves. There are two basic methods we can use: self-study, and providing feedback for each other.

Self-study might begin with a list of questions like the one above. Merely becoming aware of the probability of inadvertent behavior can be a powerful motivator to watch carefully. But, for obvious reasons, self-study can only go so far. There is no substitute for observation.

One way to make sure the observer is as impartial as possible would be to have them simply jot down **everything**, however insignificant, that happens for a certain period. The ultimate extension of that strategy, of course, is videotape - but the mere presence of a camera might make a teacher act different than normal. Probably the most effective technique is to ask a fellow teacher, an experienced colleague, just to sit in on the class and make whatever comments they wish. There shouldn't, after all, be any "trade secrets" or "patented techniques" in teaching!

Or, if regular observations aren't practical, teachers ought to at least get together for regular "shop-talk" sessions. We owe ourselves that. If golfers, anglers and bowlers can do it, if football fans can go on for hours about the intricacies of establishing the running game, we teachers shouldn't be shy about getting together to discuss our craft.

- *Lindy Davies*
Brophy, Jere & Good, Thomas, *Looking In Classrooms*, Fourth Edition, 1987, New York, Harper & Row

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