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Criticism: Individualizing Teaching Methods

Serena Williams’ long-time coach, Patrick Mouratoglou commented on a coach’s role, “a good coach can never be afraid to get fired” (The Playbook, Netflix). Soon after they first met, Mouratoglou coherently and openly told Williams that she is an “underachiever”, that she has “gone to tournaments unprepared several times” and that she “never has a plan B when things go wrong” (The Playbook, Netflix). At the time, Williams was in the top 5, with 13 grand slams already under her belt (Serena Williams, WTA Tour). Mouratoglou started coaching Williams in June of 2012, and with his help, she acquired two more grand slams that year: Wimbledon (July) and the U.S. Open (September) (Serena Williams, WTA Tour). Derived from Mouratoglou’s brutal honesty are humility, flexibility, and a deep passion for Williams’ improvement.  Mouratoglou comments, “I learn the person and I learn my player. A lot of coaches start with their method. There is one method per player and I need to find it” (Serena Williams Is Not at the U.S. Open, The New York Times).

The best teachers that I have had all to some extent, follow Mouratoglou’s rule: “a good coach can never be afraid to get fired” (The Playbook, Netflix). At my K-8 private school, parents were heavily involved in classroom dynamics. Frequently, parents would reiterate their children’s complaints to the school’s administration, particularly those that were targeted towards teachers. Throughout my nine years at the K-8 school, these complaints led to five different amendments of faculty. Despite this seemingly daunting statistic, my seventh and eighth-grade Mandarin teacher never withheld any criticism directed towards us. If my pronunciation was off, she would make me re-read the sentence, no matter how many times it took me. If I asked her a question in English that I could say in Mandarin, then she would wait for me to figure out how to ask the question in Mandarin, and then critique my response. If she thought I had the potential to write more clearly, then she would make me re-do the assignment, which in some cases, required at least thirty extra minutes of writing. Her incessant desire to push me has always struck me as an example of great teaching, but just like Mouratoglou, she had balance. At the beginning of the year, she taught all students with the same method. However, as she began to understand the degree to which each student was academically inclined, she started tailoring her teaching approach to match the student. She started to criticize the unmotivated students less and the more motivated students more. As a result, she would grade certain tests harder than others. The concept sounds unethical but in retrospect, I was grateful for how tedious she was because it helped me evolve.

There are numerous ways to implement individualized instruction in a classroom. Some examples are: providing different textbooks/online resources and letting students choose which they would like to learn from, allowing time for students to choose and explore topics of their own interest, providing notes for students in a variety of ways (typed notes, lectures in class, assigned videos), etc. (Individualized Instruction, Duane 31). University of Utah professor, James E. Duane believes that “individualizing instruction really is nothing more than applying logic to the learning act, and then, by careful planning and organization, providing an efficient method whereby learners have the opportunity to acquire behaviors in their own way at their own rate” (Duane 31). However, applied to an extreme degree, individualized instruction can become unreasonable, impersonal, and unengaging, making in-person classes feel more like on-demand learning.

Great teaching can’t be developed by following a step-by-step rulebook, nor can it really be learned through experience. The best teachers always have the most genuine desire to help their students grow. My perception of what makes the best teachers has stemmed from the apparent time and effort they invest into helping me—as an individual student—comprehend and apply material.

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