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“Great Teaching”

Teaching is one of the most important actions that we, as humans, partake in. This is because teaching leads to learning, and learning is how we live and thrive. As many know, the famous George Santayana quote goes like this: “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. This means that we have to learn in order to be productive and successful in any way. One can either learn from their own past mistakes, continuously trying and failing until they eventually become smart enough to fail less, or they can be taught about mistakes by someone else.

This is where the teacher comes into play. Teachers are able to prevent those with less knowledge from having to fail in order to learn because teachers have either failed in a similar way themselves, or seen someone else fail in this way. Teachers use their past and their experiences as a teaching device so that those they teach are not condemned to repeat this past. One doesn't need a diploma and graduate school to be a “teacher”; rather, they actually appear in many forms. Our parents are our first teachers, as we learn how to eat solid food and walk and maintain hygiene and eventually take care of ourselves. Coaches teach us sports; their syllabi are their clipboards and their classroom is the arena. Friends and mentors aid us in our lives in a way that is often more relatable than if it came from a parent. Scholastic teachers, notably, are often scrutinously observed under a microscope when it comes to methodology in teaching and learning. Since the role of the educator is to educate, of course, it is important to examine what it means to be educated.

I believe that being educated means growing in knowledge, but ultimately growing in maturity by learning information and developing skills and making observations that allow one

to better conquer the real world. I have observed that students learn best when they want to learn, whether about a science concept, a point in history, a play in a sport, or a new trade. If the heart of the “student” is engaged, then the mind will follow. One does not even have to enjoy the subject being taught or have any proficiency in it to have their hearts engaged. All that it takes is any combination of a great educator, a productive learning environment, a receptive mindset, and sheer will of the student to learn. I have seen students who struggle to factor still succeed on math tests because they are mindfully determined to learn. I see this trend in my own life too. I am not the most naturally gifted athlete or basketball player, but I still find ways to surpass my peers and competitors because I care and enjoy the sport and am willing to learn something new every day to better myself. My enjoyment of the game and my coachability have taken me further in basketball than my talent or athleticism ever could.

What is important to take away from this is that teachers are very capable of bringing out this determination of those that they teach. It is reasonable to conclude that the success of a teacher is weighed by the success of the teacher’s students. So, shouldn’t all teachers aim to bring the best out of their students? Or, rather, *how* should teachers go about bringing the best out of their students? As previously mentioned, it has come to my understanding through the scholastic experiences in my life that students learn best when they want to learn. While a portion of this goal is out of the control of the educator, it is still true that enthusiasm is contagious. When the teacher is excited about the class and the subject and the lesson, that often rubs off on the students, who in turn raise their level of interest and reception. If teachers don’t give students a reason to be interested or excited in the classroom, then very little will be taught. Oftentimes, only the most dedicated students are able to truly learn without having any interest.

Now, the question of exactly how teachers are supposed to interest their students is a challenging one. This is the most important skill of a “great teacher”, and sadly, many do not have it. Many believe that their students are obligated to be interested in school and/or their course. Many become too wrapped up in lesson plans and grading and powerpoints to be able to pay any attention to the students--the actual humans--in the desks in front of them. Many are even less happy to be at school than their students. These are boring, ineffective, copy-and-paste teachers. Effective teaching is done at a personal and semi-emotional level (not to the point where the teacher could get fired or otherwise in trouble, of course), rather than walking through the motions with no regard to the unique individuals’ needs.

From what I have seen and experienced in my own life, the better that the teacher treats a student, the better the student will treat the teacher. This mutual respect is beneficial because the student will be happier and more interested and therefore more receptive to the teacher. A teacher that comes to mind when I think about this trait is my Junior year U.S. History teacher Mrs. Meyer. We were all (of course) on zoom for most of that year, but Wilson did not let that stop her from being the great teacher that she is. Everyday when we logged on, she would check on each and every one of us as well as ask us a random icebreaker question about our lives or our interests as she took attendance. As a student, this made me feel like my teacher saw me as a unique person, that she valued what I had to say, and that she appreciated that I showed up to learn. So, even though I am not anywhere close to being a “fan” of U.S. History, I still was always engaged in class, because I, like many students and many people as a whole, value the words of a person who values mine.

Students also need to feel that the teachers are on their side. If a student believes that a teacher will be unforgiving after they make a mistake, that the teacher doesn’t care if they

succeed, or that the teacher won't support them through the challenges they may face in school, then this teacher won't be able to achieve a higher level of learning from the student. Again, mutual trust, kindness, and respect go a long way in the classroom and in any relationship involving an authority figure. A student who doesn't feel supported is going to be afraid of failure, and those who are afraid of failure won't take risks or go the extra mile to succeed. This is especially problematic when assessing teaching: a profession whose success is based on the results of others.

In its entirety, teaching is difficult. Trying to achieve even a semi-personal relationship with each student is challenging, and nearly impossible for those with many, many students. However, it is O.K. that teaching is challenging, because if the correct methodology of teaching wasn't so subjective, if it was easy to be a teacher, then a great teacher wouldn't be so special. But they are, in fact, special. Almost everyone has a story about a teacher who believed in them, or challenged their perspective, or interested them in a subject that they never would have considered liking. Many students see their teachers more than they see some of their own parents and family members, and so teachers are left with molding the minds, and also hearts, of each kid who walks through their door. The secret of great teaching can't be found in a textbook, because there is no secret at all. Great teachers are just kind people with a passion that they want to share with the world.