Artists of the Human Mind and Spirit

Goal One Essay: Philosophy, Research and Practice

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When I was a senior in high school, my English Teacher gave us an essay assignment entitled “Who Have I Become?” It was a personal reflection recounting milestones in our lives that have shaped us into who we were at the time. “This is your last chance in high school to write something that you’re really proud of,” she said. At the end of senior year, I was at a sort of turning point in my life, maybe my first real one. I had absolutely no idea what to do after I graduated. I had questions like “What kind of person am I going to be? What am I going to do with the rest of my life? What are the things that actually matter to me?” So I wrote the paper all in one sitting and the very next day Mrs. Heimer greeted me at the door. She shocked me with her greeting: “Stephen! Your paper was sooo good!” Never once had a teacher said anything like that to me.

John Steinbeck (1955) said, “I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit” (p.142). While I have never been able to put this into words as elegantly and as truthfully as Steinbeck, I have always felt a similar reverence for the profession in my heart. As a student, I had three great teachers, and I still think back on what they taught me to this day. One was a sixth grade teacher, one was a Pre-Calculus teacher, and one, the aforementioned Mrs. Heimer, taught English. Though they were all so different, they shared these four traits: they all believed in their students’ ability to succeed, they all were passionate about their subject matter, they all held us to high expectations, and they all brought their personalities into their teaching styles. These similarities are what made them as effective as they were.

As I am starting my teaching career, I believe that I must always bring these four characteristics along with me. During the experience that I have had in the classroom thus far, I have strived to put this into practice, and even in my limited experience I have what good it can do. If a teacher is able to demonstrate these four characteristics in his or her teaching practice, then that teacher is truly a great artist, molding and shaping the human mind and spirit.

First, a teacher must believe in his or her students’ ability to succeed. My 12th grade English teacher constantly asserted in various ways that she believed in us. By framing our writing assignment as something that truly mattered, as a chance to create something that is meaningful, she had me convinced that she believed in me. As a result, I did my best work. Judith Langer, Director of the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, conducted a study on student achievement over 25 schools. She wanted to figure out what creates an environment where students are successful and have higher achievement. She writes that “in the most successful schools, there was always a belief in students' abilities to be able and enthusiastic learners; they believed all students can learn and that they, as teachers, could make a difference” (Langer, 2001, p. 876).

Admittedly, this is a hard one. As a student teacher, I had a very disruptive student who would verbally refuse to do any work in my class. I did not have high hopes for Travis. But one day during mandatory study hall after much encouragement, he completed one homework question. Once he completed it I enthusiastically congratulated him. “You did it Travis! You got one problem done. See? I knew you could do it. Do another one.” By the end of study hall he had three problems done and as he was leaving I shouted after him. “Hey Travis. Now I know you can do it, so I expect it.” He has been turning in his assignments on time ever since.

Secondly, a teacher must be passionate about his or her subject matter. I remember a particular Easter service I attended. The pastor was giving an exposition of Matthew 26 and when he got to verse 8 I jumped in my seat a little. He shouted at the top of his voice “He is risen!” and proceeded to bounce around the pulpit and stutter with excitement about the implications of Christ’s resurrection. Everyone walked out of that sermon excited about Easter. If the teacher gets excited, the students get excited. All three of my great teachers were like this pastor. Whether it was a fun Friday activity, factoring polynomials, or Grendel’s mother, their passion was contagious. Students couldn’t help but be engaged.

Thirdly, teachers must hold students to high expectations. Psychology Professor Carol Dweck (2010) asserts that “Meaningful learning tasks need to challenge every student in some way. It is crucial that no student be able to coast to success time after time” (p. 19). Of all the teachers I had growing up, these three are the only ones that held me to high expectations. As a result, I rose to meet the challenge. When teachers would lower their expectations I would become lazy. For long periods of time I subconsciously believed that success was something that people just either had or didn’t have. I forgot about the virtue of hard work. If success is to be obtained in the real world, hard work is paramount, and these three teachers stood out among the crowd as rarities for reminding me of that fact.

Finally, I believe that a good teacher must know himself, and bring himself into the classroom. Teaching is a hard job. As a teacher, I am constantly putting myself in a vulnerable position. I am in front of a group of twenty or so teenagers all day and in many ways it is like performing in front of twenty judges. Will they understand this concept? Will they refuse to participate? Will they laugh at my jokes? Will they disrupt the class? All of these questions go through my head constantly as I am performing for these judges, hoping that they won’t boo me off stage.  So out of a defensive instinct I find myself tempted to wear authoritative masks, or at least distance my true self from my subject matter. But all the teachers that I had who did that made no impression on my mind or spirit. I forgot their lessons. They weren’t those artists that Steinbeck speaks of. This is because there is no soul in their teaching, no personality. Parker Palmer (1997) says that “Good teachers join self, subject, and students in the fabric of life because they teach from an integral and undivided self” (p. 15). These are the teachers that make a difference. By offering their identities in their teaching style they encourage students to receive the subject matter in a similar way; a way that turns head knowledge into heart knowledge. Teachers must know who they are as individuals, and teach out of that knowledge—from the core of their identity.

To become a good teacher, it takes a belief that students can succeed, a passion for one’s subject matter, high expectations, and a self-knowledge and willingness to teach from it. My three teachers taught me this, and that is what I will strive to do as I become a teacher myself.

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