

Teaching Tip  
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*What Makes a Good Teacher*

***Teaching Tips is written by Dan Madigan (The Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology. If you have a teaching tip to share or if you would like to comment on any of the teaching tips, please write to Dan Madigan at [dmadiga@bgsu.edu](mailto:dmadiga@bgsu.edu)***  
***Note: If you hit reply to this email message it will not go to Dan Madigan.***

Hello Everyone. Although “what makes a good teacher” is often a debatable topic among educators and the typical citizen, it is always refreshing to hear from an experienced person about this topic. As such, I’m sharing with you a teacher’s perspective about what makes a good teacher. The posting below looks at some qualities that make a good teacher. It is from a list of ten such qualities appearing in Chapter 1: *What Makes a Good Teacher?*, by Peter C. Beidler in *Inspiring Teaching*, Carnegie Professors of the Year Speak, John K. Roth General Editor. Anker Publishing Company, Inc., Bolton, MA. Copyright ) 1997 by Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

This is not a theoretical piece or even a well-researched piece. It is just one person’s view who just happens to make some good points and who celebrates qualities of good teaching.

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## WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEACHER?

In this essay I want to talk about ten of the qualities that make a good teacher. My method is absolutely unscientific. Readers who want to know what experts say about good teaching should stop reading right now and open to a different page of *Inspiring Teaching*. Readers who want to know what Pete has noticed about good teaching are welcome to read on. My evidence is personal, memorial, observational, and narrow. I have known teachers in Indiana, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Texas, England, and China. Like Henry David Thoreau, I refuse to apologize for writing so much about myself. There is, simply, no one else I know as well. My hope is that my readers will be inspired to think far less about what I have noticed makes a good teacher than about what they themselves have noticed.

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NOTE: Abbreviated list chosen by Rick Reis. If you would like an electronic copy of all ten qualities described by Beidler just send an email to [reis@stanford.edu](mailto:reis@stanford.edu)  
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### 1. Good Teachers Really Want to Be Good Teachers

Good teachers try and try and try, and let students know they try. Just as we respect students who really try, even if they do not succeed in everything they do, so they will respect us, even if we are not as good as we want to be. And just as we will do almost

anything to help a student who really wants to succeed, so they will help us to be good teachers if they sense that we are sincere in our efforts to succeed at teaching. Some things teachers can fake. Some things teachers must fake. We have, for example, to act our way into letting our students know that we can't think of any place we would rather be at 8:10 on a Friday morning than in a class with them talking about the difference between a comma splice and a run-on sentence. An acting course is a good preparation for a life in the classroom because it shows us how to pretend. Our students probably know on some level that we would rather be across the street sipping a cup of Starbucks coffee than caged up with 24 paste-faced first years who count on our joyous enthusiasm and enlivening wit to be the cup of Starbucks that will get them ready for their 9:10 class. But they will forgive our chicanery, even if they suspect that we are faking our joy. They will know it by the second day, however, if we don't really want to be good teachers, and they will have trouble forgiving us for that. Wanting-really, truly, honestly wanting-to be a good teacher is being already more than halfway home.

## 2. Good Teachers Take Risks

They set themselves impossible goals, and then scramble to achieve them. If what they want to do is not quite the way it is usually done, they will risk doing it anyhow. Students like it when we take risks. One of my own favorite courses was a first-year writing course in which I ordered no writing textbook for the course. On the first day I announced, instead, that my students and I were going to spend a semester writing a short textbook on writing. It was, I said, to be an entirely upside-down course in which the students would write lots of essays, decide as a group which ones were best, and then try to determine in discussion what qualities the good ones had in common. Whenever we hit upon a principle that the good essays seemed to embody and that the weak papers did not, we would write it down. Then we eventually worked our discovered principles into a little textbook that the students could take home with them. It was a risky course. It was built on a crazy notion that first-year college students in a required writing course could, first of all, tell good writing from less-good writing, and, second, that they could articulate the principles that made the good essays better. My students knew I was taking a risk in setting the course up that way, but because they knew that my risk was based on my own faith and trust in them, they wanted me-they wanted us-to succeed.

We teachers have something called academic freedom. Too many of us interpret that to mean the freedom from firing. I suggest that we should interpret it rather as the freedom to take chances in the classroom. I love taking risks. It keeps some excitement in what is, after all, a pretty placid profession. I like to try things that can fail. If there is no chance of failure, then success is meaningless. It is usually easy enough to get permission to take risks, because administrators usually like it when teachers organize interesting and unusual activities. For some risky activities it may be best not to ask permission, partly because the risks that good teachers take are not really all that risky, and partly because it is, after all, easier to get forgiveness than to get permission. Teachers who regularly take risks usually succeed, and the more they succeed the more they are permitted-even expected-to take risks the next time. Taking risks gives teachers a high that is healthy for them and their students. It makes good teaching, good learning.

### 3. Good Teachers Have a Positive Attitude

I don't much like being around people who are cynical about their work, who complain about students or student writing or student-athletes or fellow teachers or administrators or trustees or teaching loads or salaries. I occasionally succumb to cynicism myself, but I find that I don't much like myself when I am waxing cynical, and I try to unwax myself. I like humor, but not when it is directed against others. I distrust whiners who put themselves into the role of victims. "How can we do anything with the students the admissions office is sending us these days?" "My goodness, I've never had such a hopeless set of students." "Don't the high schools teach them anything anymore?" "How do they expect us to teach these kids at 8 a.m.? All they do is sleep after partying all night." "This profession surely isn't what it used to be. Why, I rememberS" Casting ourselves in victims' roles gets us off the hook, but we teachers ought to enjoy being on the hook. We ought to enjoy, not eternally complain about, the challenges students give us. Why do we think we deserve smart, self-motivated, hard-working, wide-awake students-students who do not really need to be taught? Why do we think we deserve not to be challenged? I do not always succeed in being positive about my students or my job, but when I feel the need to scratch my cynical itch, I remind myself that the teachers I admire the more are sometimes frustrated, usually underpaid, always overworked, but rarely cynical or negative, and then almost never about students.

### 4. Good Teachers Never Have Enough Time

Just about all of the good teachers I have known are eternally busy. They work 80-100 hour weeks, including both Saturdays and Sundays. Their spouses and families complain, with good reason, that they rarely see them. The reward for all this busy-ness is more busy-ness. The good teachers draw the most students, get the most requests for letters of recommendation, work most diligently at grading papers, give the most office hours and are most frequently visited during those office hours, are most in demand for committee work, work hardest at class preparations, work hardest at learning their students' names, take the time to give students counsel in areas that have nothing to do with specific courses, are most involved in professional activities off campus.

For good teachers the day is never done. While it does not follow that any teacher who keeps busy is a good teacher, the good teachers I know rarely have time to relax. The good teachers I know find that they are as busy teaching two courses as teaching three. They know that they do a much better job with the two courses than the three because they give more time to the individual students, but they also know that for a responsible teacher the work of good teaching expands to fill every moment they can give to it. They might well complain about how busy they are, but they rarely complain, partly because they don't want to take the time to, partly because they don't like whining. Actually, they seem rather to like being busy. To put it more accurately, they like helping students-singular and plural-and have not found many workable shortcuts to doing so.

### 5. Good Teachers Think of Teaching as a Form of Parenting

No one likes to think of college teaching as *in loco parentis*, but the best teachers I know seem to find that their best teaching feels a lot like parenting. By that they do not mean that as teachers they set curfews or lock the dorms up at 11 p.m. or take away television

privileges for students who get below a C or confiscate X-rated videos or Jack Daniels. It does not mean that they offer sex education (though they will, if a student trusts them enough to ask), and it does not mean that they offer spiritual instruction (unless a student asks them to). But good teachers seem to find that the caring that goes into their teaching feels a lot like the caring that goes into parenting. It means knowing when to stand firm on a deadline or a standard of excellence, and when to bend or apologize. It means knowing when to give students someone to talk with, when to be the rock that students can test themselves by trying to move out of the way, when to protect students from the ugly evils of the world, and when to let them face those evils in all of their ugliness. It means knowing the difference between soft caring and tough caring. It means recognizing that students are adults, sort of, but children, sort of.

Looking back, I know that as a student I found several father and mother figures among my teachers. And now, at a time in my life when all four of my own children are in graduate school, I know that they are finding replacement parents out there, teachers who are continuing and in some ways correcting the job my wife and I did as parents. But mostly I know that I feel especially comfortable with college students these days. Having just come away from years of parenting young people very much like the ones I see in my classrooms, I feel that I know them, their insecurities, their problems, their capacities. I feel that I have a reasonably sure instinct about when to stand firm and when to bend, when to be someone to talk with and when to say "Well, see you in class tomorrow" and when to say "Got time for a coffee?" Actually, it feels a lot like love.

#### 6. Good Teachers Try to Give Students Confidence

I have come to the conclusion that the specific subject matter I teach is less important for itself than for what students learn by learning it. My Chaucer students can for the most part get along in life just fine without knowing much about Chaucer's language or the Canterbury Tales or why the low-class Miller feels free enough to tell a raunchy tale in reply to the tale of the high-class Knight. My Chaucer students cannot get along, however, without the confidence they gain by mastering a new language, learning to understand what social classes were in Chaucer's time, and why a miller would, in the carnival atmosphere of pilgrimage, feel enough courage to joust verbally with a knight. When students write papers, it is far less important that they say something worth reading about the Wife of Bath's fifth husband than that they develop the confidence to know that, when they really do have something important to say, they will be able to say it clearly, forcefully, and with a proper marshaling of evidence.

Allen, one of my best students in 1995, did well on tests and papers, but refused to speak in class. In a conference I asked him why, since he was doing so well, he would not contribute to the classroom discussion. "I guess it kind of scares me," he replied, "with all of those really smart students in there saying intelligent things. I learn more if I just listen." I understood, of course, because I gave similar excuses when I was an undergraduate. Like Allen, I counted on hard work and good test and paper grades to pull me through, but I never talked in class. I told Allen he was as smart and as articulate as anyone in the class, and I hoped he would feel comfortable sharing his ideas with the rest of us. I told him that the most of those other students looked and sounded smart in

part because I tried always to find something in what they said to praise, because I had tried to develop a knack for creatively rephrasing what they said so they sounded smart, and that if necessary I would do the same for his comments. Shortly after that, he did, once, offer a comment in class, and I said something encouraging about it. But then he clammed up again for the rest of the semester.

About a week after the last class, Allen came in and asked if I would write letters of recommendation for him for his applications to law school. I said I would, of course, but when I found out about his desire to be a lawyer, I knew I should have pressed him even harder to be more aggressive in class. How much of a future is there, after all, for a smart lawyer who does well on tests but is afraid to speak his mind in front of others? Allen will do all right, of course, and he will gain the confidence he needs to succeed in his profession, but I wish I had pushed him harder while I had the chance to force him to feel the confidence he has every right to feel. I think I should have tried harder to knock him off balance.

#### 7. Good Teachers Try to Keep Students-And Themselves-Off Balance

I have learned that when I am comfortable, complacent, and sure of myself I am not learning anything. The only time I learn something is when my comfort, my complacency, and my self-assurance are threatened. Part of my own strategy for getting through life, then, has been to keep myself, as much as possible, off balance. I loved being a student, but being a student meant walking into jungles where I was not sure my compass worked and didn't know where the trails might lead or where the tigers lurked. I grew to like that temporary danger. I try to inject some danger into my own courses, if only to keep myself off balance. When I feel comfortable with a course and can predict how it will come out, I get bored; and when I get bored, I am boring. I try, then, to do all I can to keep myself learning more. I do that in part by putting myself in threatening situations.

A couple of decades ago, I developed a new teaching area-an area I had never had a course in when I was a student: Native American literature. It would have been more comfortable for me to continue with the old stuff I knew, but part of what I knew is that I detest stagnation. I rashly offered the department's curriculum committee a new course. When they rashly accepted it, I was off balance, challenged by a new task in a new area. I now teach and publish in Native American literature regularly.

In 1988 I began to feel that I was growing complacent teaching the privileged students I have always taught at Lehigh University-mostly the children of upper middle class white families. It was getting too comfortable, too predictable. I applied for a Fulbright grant to teach for a year in the People's Republic of China. When the appointment came through, I was scared, but I signed the papers and not long after went with my wife and four teenaged children to Chengdu in Sichuan Province to take up the teaching of writing and American literature to Chinese graduate students. I have never felt so unbalanced in my life-teaching students who could just barely understand me, even when I was not talking "too fast." It was a challenge to teach such students to read the literature of a nation most of them had been taught to hate and to write papers in a language that was

alien to them. And that was only part of the unbalance. The rest was riding my bicycle through streets the names of which I could not read, eating with chopsticks food that was almost always unrecognizable and often untranslatable because nothing quite like it grew in my native land. Never have I felt so unbalanced for so long a time, but never have I learned so much in so short a time.

I have noticed that good teachers try to keep their students off balance, forcing them to step into challenges that they are not at all sure they can handle. Good teachers push and challenge their students, jerking them into places where they feel uncomfortable, where they don't know enough, where they cannot slide by on past knowledge or techniques. Good teachers, as soon as their students have mastered something, push their best students well past the edge of their comfort zone, striving to make them uncomfortable, to challenge their confidence so they can earn a new confidence.

8. Good Teachers Try to Motivate Students by Working Within Their Incentive System  
Most undergraduate students of my generation—at least the ones at Earlham College, where I took my bachelor's degree—were eager to serve their fellow humans. Most of the undergraduates I encounter these days, on the other hand, are eager to make a lot of money. Some humanities teachers complain about the crassness of these students. Others try to figure out ways to use their students' desire for financial security to motivate them. They point out that many business executives were liberal arts majors in college, and that while a good liberal arts background does not always help college graduates get their first jobs in business and industry, once they have that first job they tend to advance more rapidly than graduates with more narrowly technical degrees. They point out that liberal arts graduates know how to synthesize things, how to explain things to others, how to persuade others to their point of view, how to understand the people who do many any business work. In English departments, I sometimes point out, we teach students all sorts of money-making skills, like reading and analysis, speaking and writing, picking up ideas quickly, critical thinking, psychology, pedagogy, pattern-finding, drawing conclusions from evidence, persuasion, and so on. We also encourage students to think about why they are on earth, about where they are going, about what some of the greatest thinkers and most creative writers in the past have said about the meaning of human existence, about what is most worth doing in life, and about how wealthy people might best spend their hard-earned money. Good teachers do not complain about how crass the students are these days. They try to understand what makes students tick these days, and then they build on that knowledge to make them tick.

#### 9. Good Teachers Do Not Trust Student Evaluations

Neither do bad teachers. But there is a difference in their reasons for distrusting them. I have noticed that good teachers, when they get really good evaluations, don't quite believe them. They focus instead on the one or two erratic evaluations that say something bad about them. The good teachers tend to trust only the negative evaluations: "I wonder what I did wrong. I suppose I went too fast, or perhaps I should have scheduled in another required conference after that second test. I wish I could apologize to them, or at least find out more about what I did wrong." The not-so-good teachers also do not trust student evaluations, but they distrust them for different

reasons. They tend to trust the positive evaluations but not the negative ones: "Those good evaluations are proof that I succeeded, that my methods and pace were just about right for these students. The others just fell behind because they were lazy, because they never bothered to read the book or study for the exams. Naturally they did not like my course because they put nothing into it. Besides, how can students judge good teaching, and anyhow, what do they know? Anyone can get good student evaluations by lowering their standards, being popular, and by pandering to the masses." Good teachers tend to discount the positive evaluations, however numerous they may be; less-good teachers tend to discount the negative evaluations, however numerous they may be.

#### 10. Good Teachers Listen to Their Students

Shortly after I read Professor Levi's statement that no one has ever defined what makes a good teacher, I asked the students in my undergraduate Chaucer course at Baylor University (where I was a visiting professor during 1995-96), to write a sentence or two about what, in their own experience, makes a good teacher. The responses ranged widely, but I sorted through the pieces of paper on which they wrote them and put them in different piles. Then I combined the piles into ones that seemed to be generically related. Then I combined the piles into ones that seemed to be generically related. Three quarters of their responses fell into two piles. The first of those I call the "A" pile, the second I call the "E" pile.

In the "A" pile I found words like "accessible," "available," and "approachable." Here are some of the sentences they wrote in response to my question, "What makes a good teacher?" I have edited them slightly, mostly to put them into more parallel constructions:

Good teachers:

- ∞ are available to assist students with questions on the subject, and they show concern.
- ∞ do not have a lofty, standoffish attitude.
- ∞ can interact with a student on an individual basis.
- ∞ want to know each individual student.
- ∞ give time, effort, and attention to their students.
- ∞ are personable, on your side.
- ∞ are willing to be a friend to students.
- ∞ are actually interested in the students.
- ∞ are actively involved with their students.
- ∞ are first friends, then educators. The friend encourages, supports, and understands;  
the educator teaches, challenges, and spurs the student on.

In the "E" pile I found words like "enthusiastic," "energetic," "excited":

Good teachers:

- ∞ love what they teach and convey that love to the class.
- ∞ have both an enthusiasm for and an encyclopedic knowledge of the subject.

- ∞ have such an obvious enthusiasm for what they do that it is contagious and their students pick up on it.
- ∞ have a desire to learn, and for others to learn, all of the exciting things they have learned.
- ∞ are obviously excited about teaching. When a teacher enjoys teaching, it is usually obvious, and that enjoyment is passed on to the students. The classes I've had with teachers who loved the subject they were teaching are the ones I've enjoyed the most, and the ones I've been the most eager to learn in. A teacher who isn't enthusiastic can ruin even the most fascinating of subjects.

These students are English majors at a Christian university in Texas. Their answers might well not ring as true for computer science majors at MIT in Massachusetts. The point is not that all good teachers must be available to their students and enthusiastic about what they teach-though that is surely not bad advice for anyone aspiring to be a good teacher. The point is that good teachers listen to what their students try to tell them about what makes a good teacher.

Hey, I've done it! Good teachers are those who want to be good teachers, who take risks, who have a positive attitude, who never have enough time, who think of teaching as a form of parenting, who try to give students confidence at the same time that they push them off balance, who motivate by working within the students' incentive systems, who do not trust student evaluations, and who listen to students. Who says no one has ever defined what makes a good teacher?

But wait. The trouble with good teachers is that, finally, they won't be contained in a corral labeled "good teachers." The trouble with exciting teachers is that they are almost always mavericks, trotting blithely off into some distant sunset where no one can brand them. The trouble with inspiring teachers is that they won't stay put long enough to be measured, perhaps because they know that if they did they would be expiring teachers.

Damn."

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