
The Teacher Defined

What It Means to Be a Teacher

Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.

—James Madison (1822)

Discussion Questions

- What does it mean to say that someone is an effective teacher?
- If you had to contribute to a list of descriptors of an effective teacher, what words/phrases would you want to include?

Since I entered kindergarten at age 4 until the present, I don't think there's been more than a year of time in which I was not either enrolled as a student or teaching in a school or university. This doesn't make me an expert on schools, but it does constitute a ton of experience from which I have developed my own thoughts regarding what is and is not effective teaching. I've attended very good schools and seen very bad schools. I remember teachers whom I liked and disliked and remember at different times in my own schooling feelings of fear, confidence, comfort, incompetence, joy, and despair. As I begin this book, I have thought back on some of my own most memorable teachers.

Mr. J was my ninth-grade social studies teacher. Each day, Mr. J came in the room, handed out thick reading packets that had been copied for the entire class, and ordered us all to begin reading while he sat silently at his desk. Still today, it's hard for me to imagine anything less interesting than those mimeographed readings on the Bolshevik Revolution. Moreover, I can't recall anything about the Bolshevik Revolution—not one fact. As I recall, Mr. J was a generally quiet man, and no one of

us really knew him because he never spoke to anyone in any type of personal manner. But if someone in class was caught doing anything other than reading from the packet, Mr. J would jump out of his chair and yell in a loud and intimidating tone. This didn't make me read, but it did make me always look like I was reading.

Quite often he'd leave the room with a stern reminder to everyone to keep reading. We could hear his shoes clicking down the hall, and when we felt he was safely out of earshot, everyone relaxed. This was a great opportunity for the more daring students in class to entertain us with various imitations of Mr. J. Whoever sat closest to the door acted as the lookout, and when his shoes were heard clicking back toward the room, everyone immediately fell back into line. I'm sure when he returned, it looked as if we were totally entranced by the plight of the Bolsheviks. Mr. J would walk back in and sit at his desk with a bottle of soda pop. He'd kick his feet up on the desk and lean back in his chair. I'm sure he must have actually taught us on some occasion, walked us through the point of the reading, or even asked questions. But I don't remember any of that. I remember hating that class, and it makes me think about what it means for teachers to engage (or not engage) students.

Ms. E was my sophomore English teacher. Ms. E made a point of getting to know each student personally. Every day at the start of class, she'd have us write in a journal. We could write anything at all, just as long as we were writing. At the end of each week, we'd submit the journal, and then she'd give it back on Monday. When I got my journal back, it always had comments written by each entry—not critical comments or even feedback on the writing, but encouraging thoughts and interest in whatever menial thing I'd written. Ms. E made me feel like she cared, and she was like this with everyone. One day in the spring, she asked the class who was going to the prom, and several students raised their hands. She immediately implored the other students, "Why aren't you going?" and then began setting people up. "Sara and John, you know each other, go to prom. Bill and Carla, you two go together." It was awkward but also funny because she so genuinely wanted everyone to be happy. As with many of my school memories, I can't really say what I learned academically, but I remember loving that class, and it makes me think about what it means for teachers to have genuine relationships with students.

Mr. L was my junior high algebra teacher. While I admit to having very little interest in algebra in the eighth grade, I look back on this particular class as a turning point in my math experiences—but not in a good way. Mr. L was a jovial man who smiled often and seemed to really care about his subject matter. In my class was a group of advanced seventh-grade students. Mr. L loved these students. They were very math-smart, and he obviously enjoyed interacting with them. Each day's lesson seemed to be focused directly to these students. Mr. L looked at them, asked them questions, and shared inside jokes with them. I don't recall him explaining how or why to do anything—it just seemed like he assumed everyone got it.

I did not do well in algebra with Mr. L, and I take responsibility for that. Because I struggled, my dad arranged for me to be tutored one evening by a neighbor who was a math teacher. Both my dad and the neighbor asked me if I was asking questions in class and making sure I was involved. I kind of mumbled vague answers and excuses but didn't let on my real feeling that Mr. L addressed only the smart kids. Somehow Mr. L must have learned that I was not asking enough questions. The next day in class, Mr. L did his usual lesson on the board, talking directly to the smart

group on the left side of the room. But this time when he finished the lesson he said, “Now, there is someone in the room who doesn’t ask any questions even when he doesn’t understand.” He turned and looked at me for what seemed like the first time ever, and I felt a shockwave of horror flush through my face. He continued, “Terry Scott, do you have any questions?” I couldn’t speak, I just shook my head, to which he responded, “Fine.” I did learn algebra that year, probably because of my neighbor’s tutoring. But I hated that class, and it left me with a very bad taste for math and a belief that I was not good at it. These memories make me think about the importance of explicit and engaging instruction.

Dr. G was my statistics professor in my doctoral program. By the time I’d reached graduate school, I had somewhat kicked my disdain for math, but statistics was still intimidating. Dr. G was a friendly man who had funny stories and was incredibly patient with students, some of whom would ask repeated questions about the most basic points. In reality, statistics involves only basic mathematical operations: multiplying, dividing, finding averages, and so on. What makes statistics challenging is not the math, but it is the understanding of the concepts involved with a normal curve and a logic for considering whether phenomena are unique and important or simple random variations (things that I attempt to describe in a simple way in Chapter 3).

During each of our class meetings, Dr. G told stories that served as analogies to an important concept. He then broke the concept down into small pieces and taught each piece as part of the whole, always with a sense of humor and some real examples. The way he presented the content in pieces and with such clarity not only made me understand statistics, but it made me understand its importance and feel like I could apply it. I loved going to this class and listening to Dr. G. This memory also makes me think about the importance of breaking things down into teachable steps and the use of relevant examples as part of being an effective teacher.

WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER?

I’ve often opened the first session of a course in classroom management by asking the students to provide a list of all the things they think of when I ask them to consider the qualities of an effective teacher. I stand at the board and record their descriptors while they yell out their thoughts. Having done this dozens of times, the resulting list of responses can be generally summarized in three categories: (1) personality, (2) knowledge, and (3) skills. Table 1.1 provides a summary of typical responses within these categories.

Table 1.1 Qualities of an Effective Teacher—Typical Responses From My Students

<i>Personality</i>	<i>Knowledge of</i>	<i>Skilled at</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient • Kind • Understanding • Organized • Caring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic content • Individual differences • Cultural differences • Effects of trauma • Learning styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handling diversity • Differentiating • Multitasking • Managing • Motivating

What I find interesting about these typical descriptors is that they consist mainly of general dispositions, intuitions, beliefs, and capacities as opposed to specific teacher behaviors. Even those responses that do fall under what might be termed skills are broad and ambiguous. To say that effective teachers are skilled at motivating or multitasking is vague and provides no real information about what a teacher does on a daily basis. Still, at face value, it's hard to argue with any of these descriptors, or at least most would agree that these are qualities that would benefit a teacher. In some ways everyone is an expert on teaching. After all, we all went to school, have had many different teachers, and know which teachers we liked and disliked. However, as my students demonstrate in their responses, the general public has a superficial understanding of what it takes to be an effective teacher.

Perhaps if I asked the question differently, I could prompt different responses. What if I were to provide them with a scenario in which they had to predict student outcomes based on teacher behavior?

The Teaching Wager

A teacher is getting ready to enter a classroom filled with middle school students. We plan to monitor this classroom with hidden cameras over the next week to assess student success. If the students can be said to be engaged and exhibiting success with the curricular and behavioral expectations 85 percent of the time, you will earn \$10,000. What behaviors would you want to see that teacher use?

You probably will not feel comfortable simply saying that you want to be sure that the teacher needs to be understanding, knowledgeable with cultural differences, and a multitasker. While all of these qualities would be useful, none describes exactly what it is that effective teachers do.

Effective teaching involves teacher-facilitated actions that maximize the probability of student success, which in this scenario also maximizes the probability of your winning the wager. When conceived of as a set of actions or behaviors, effective teaching can be summarized in three categories: (1) pedagogical behavior, (2) environmental arrangement, and (3) relationships. Table 1.2 provides a summary of the behaviors in which effective teachers engage. These behaviors are objective, can be trained and practiced, and have been empirically demonstrated to increase the probability of student success (see Hattie, 2009, and discussion in Chapter 2).

Table 1.2 Behaviors of Effective Teachers—A Foundational Structure for This Book

<i>Pedagogical Behavior</i>	<i>Environment Arrangement</i>	<i>Relationships</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher facilitated • Direct and explicit • Authentic examples • Multiple opportunities • Engages students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arranges physical space • Develops routines • Develops procedures • Consistent across time and students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates often • Conveys genuine interest in students • Maintains role of encouraging teacher

So, is effective teaching an art or a science? I think it's both, but I think the artistic part can be acquired largely as a product of experience with effective instruction. That is, I believe that teachers can acquire patience and an ability to multitask through practice with effective instructional practices. In contrast, I think it's highly unlikely that simply having patience or an ability to multitask will lead to mastery of effective teaching behaviors. Effective teaching must be taught, practiced, and mastered—with an ability to adapt to individuals as necessary. Together, the three categories of teacher behavior provide a framework for considering effective teaching that will be referred to throughout the remainder of the book. Chapter 2 provides more precise descriptions of these general categories and behaviors.

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