

Eight Lessons: Becoming the Great Teacher You Already Are

by Mary A. Armstrong

It's a form of magic. It's a result of practice. It's a natural talent. It's a learned skill. There is nothing more baffling than the art (or science?) of teaching. Day in and day out, we move through classrooms and courses, lectures and discussion groups. We work in hallways, offices, labs, and online. We shine brightly in our public performances; we dazzle. And we work utterly unseen, sitting up late into the night grading quizzes, writing comments on papers, inventing new exams, reviewing projects, rewriting lecture notes.

Even those of us for whom teaching is a life-long devotion hardly have a minute to think about it in its higher forms or consider it as a practice. So caught up are we in the needs of our students and the demands of the next class—and, all too often, explaining the value of our work to clueless politicians and bureaucrats—we seldom have a moment to step back to take a long look at the vocation that has moved in and taken residence within us.

Over the past decade, I have won every teaching award available to me at my former institution, culminating with the University Distinguished Teaching Award. I hope, of course, that my arrogance in mentioning this will fade when I make the larger and far more important point that teaching awards have the amazing effect of forcing a teacher to stop and think—really think—about what she is doing when she teaches. This is because, along with joy, considerable embarrassment, and an almost overwhelming sense of humility, I have discovered that winning teaching awards feels a lot like what I imagine getting arrested must feel like:

Mary A. Armstrong is chair of the women's and gender studies program and associate professor of English/women's and gender studies at Lafayette College. Until spring 2009, she was chair of the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. Her research focuses on representations of sexuality in the Victorian novel, feminist and queer theory and pedagogy, and the role of women's and gender studies in addressing STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) equity issues in higher education. She welcomes correspondence at armstrom@lafayette.edu.

there is a sudden, surprisingly deep interest in your activities coupled with a powerful demand that you explain just exactly what it is you think you are doing.

What have students seen us do that has made a difference for them? What pedagogical behaviors, values, and attributes earn us praise from the population we work so hard to serve? Taking time to ponder the matter feels like an indulgence, but thinking about one's teaching, and the principles that undergird it, is not a luxury. It is a necessity. When we make an effort to examine the craft of teaching, our guiding ideas, dearly held principles, and core beliefs emerge with clarity from the blurred rush and confusion of our everyday practice. Pondering my own teaching

Considering and keeping track of our core teaching beliefs is a practice that each of us should engage in from time to time.

principles has empowered me as I have struggled to answer the core questions about effective pedagogy: What is it? How does one do it? What makes it work? Here are eight lessons I've learned during my teaching career.

LESSON 1: IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU. AND IT'S NOT ABOUT ME, EITHER. IT'S ABOUT THEM.

In remembering all the wonderful, inspiring teachers I have ever had, it seems that they had almost nothing in common: they were hilariously funny and dead serious, laid-back and strict, boisterous and mild-mannered, wildly energetic and practically motionless. In thinking long and hard about them, though, I finally figured out that they did in fact have one thing in common: me. Their teaching was all about their students. Whether they cajoled us with jokes or wowed us with quiet brilliance, whether they kept us awake with smoke and mirrors, or simply whispered words of wisdom that we strained to hear, their unmistakable focus was always on us: our learning, our growth, our achievement.

The best teachers I ever had—in short—cared if I understood what they were talking about. They were willing to give me loads of feedback on papers, painstakingly correct my math quizzes, comb through my lab log. They kept their office hours and then some, explained things repeatedly and tirelessly, and taught their introductory classes as if they hadn't taught them numerous times before. They wouldn't stop until they were absolutely certain that we were leaving the class knowing a lot more than we did when we walked in.

After my graduation ceremony, I found Dr. Reilly, my undergraduate advisor and one of the finest teachers I have ever known. "How can I ever thank you?" I blurted out. He smiled and said simply, "Your success is my reward."

LESSON 2: LIFE ISN'T FAIR, BUT YOUR CLASSROOM HAD BETTER BE.

It seems trite to say that standards for behavior and criteria for achievement matter. A classroom without rules and standards is no classroom at all. But rules and rubrics can easily become . . . rules and rubrics. Lists of regulations of “how to get an A” may be necessary, but they are the lowest form of classroom fairness. But practicing classroom equity has profound consequence because it highlights something critically important within the pedagogical endeavor: We are teaching more than the subject we teach. In our interactions, in our decisions, in our adherence

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to ethical standards, we are teaching our “second subject”: setting an example of open-minded fairness, demonstrating honest critical inquiry, modeling the best form of authority, and exercising power that recognizes justice and practices respect for others and their rights.

Classroom equity promotes ideals that underlie the foundations of productive civic life and good global citizenship: equal treatment, non-bias, respect for facts, decisions driven by logic and reason, transparency of process, meaningful conventions, standards that make sense and that apply to everyone. The carefully consistent practice of fairness with our students increases the chances they will model that behavior in their interactions with others, perpetuating the best habits of honest self-conduct. Scrupulous attentiveness to equity is not the work of a moment. It echoes across time.

LESSON 3: IT'S NOT THE DIVE THAT GETS YOU, IT'S THE DIVING BOARD.

Years ago, I was watching the Olympic high diving finals. One diver launched himself into the air and twisted, turned, and somersaulted in an incredible series of mid-air gyrations before settling into the water like it was butter. Not a ripple. Afterward, in an interview, he was asked to comment on what he thought was the hardest element in his long, complex, dangerous dive. Without hesitation he said, “Oh, the hardest part is jumping off the board.”

Students notice when you dare to jump off the board. They know the difference between “live” teaching and teaching that feels distinctly like it was “recorded at an earlier time.” Students know when you are present and engaged, willing to take on the unexpected; they also know when you have checked out and when you are playing it safe. What makes great teaching scary is leaping off into space

and not being sure that things will fall (or you will fall) quite the way you hoped.

I believe that is why there is an element of courage in the finest teaching, a required particle of risk, an earnest hope that you will be able to execute everything you need to do to reach the end of class effectively, arrive at your goals successfully, and exit the classroom in one pedagogical piece. An instinctive awareness of this risk-taking is reflected in the tiny flicker of apprehension that often accompanies the most experienced (and, often, the best) teachers on the first day of a new class. This nervousness is a gut recognition that if we want to do well we will probably have to take a chance and that we will have to make the running leap we have made so often before. Of course, this sense of risk is accompanied and heightened by our memories of the belly flops and unintentional cannonballs in the past. But once we are in the air, if we know what we are doing and luck is on our side, for a minute or two we fly—and it is our courage that enables our flight.

LESSON 4: EVERYTHING WAS GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN UNTIL SOMEONE STARTED THINKING.

My love-hate relationship with the “lesson plan” is grounded in the fact that effective teaching depends on respecting the plan and brazenly ignoring it, by turns. Without planning, we lose our way; we forget to read that key paragraph, define that central term. But with too much planning, the spontaneity and unpredictability of discovery that characterize the learning process get obscured and overgrown. We slap up a Powerpoint slide and watch the students copy down “The Five Main Points” or “The Three Basic Rules.” They stop thinking. We stop teaching.



What professor hasn't sometimes ignored a student's amazing and unexpected insight because she knew that if she embraced it fully, it would be the teaching equivalent of putting the class into a rocket and launching everyone off into space, perhaps never to see earth or the point of her lecture again? But, while taking our hands off the steering wheel is a bad idea in a car, it isn't always bad pedagogy. But letting students take the lead requires practice in facilitating what seem like random comments and herding them somewhere near the pasture you intended. It's much more work for us as teachers, but our students learn better when it is they themselves who discover knowledge. This not to say we should let students wan-

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der away from facts or from concepts they must learn, but that effective teaching often means guiding students toward discovering knowledge through their own engagement rather than dragging them to it. It is as much the experience of the learning process as "the facts" that students will take with them. Indeed, in the long run, students may forget much of the materials we teach them—but we can ensure that they will never forget the excitement of learning.

LESSON 5: CREATE A "PRE-CRISIS" CLASSROOM.

Our classrooms are more than places where information is shared and new knowledge created. They are also cultural sites of great significance. They are living societies, Petri dishes of meaningful and formative social interactions. Classrooms generate and sustain atmospheres; they exist as cultural experiences in a particular place and time—no matter the subject at hand. We may pretend, of course, that our classrooms are simply a collection of desks and chairs and that every occupant of those chairs is a visitor. And this limited and limiting understanding of our classes can be tempting. If we don't see our classes as communities, then we are free to ignore the dynamics present there.

But every professor who has had a student report that he felt marginalized, or seen a student fall silent because her point of view was not respected, knows better. There is no way to realistically deny that students bring themselves—their whole selves—to every classroom. But what to do? We are busy teaching the second law of thermodynamics, the history of Asian art, the chemistry of DNA, the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Do we have time for the social community of the classroom, for the whole student?

Yes, we do. Indeed, we ignore the whole student and classroom community at our—and their—peril. This is true if only because, in the simplest sense, someday

something miserable will happen unnecessarily. Someone will feel angry, isolated, erased. In response to this possibility, I propose creating a pre-crisis classroom. A pre-crisis classroom does not wait until someone is disrespected, marginalized, afraid; it doesn't wait until the "awkward" moment catches everyone off guard, until the bigoted word has been said or until a stupid joke has silenced half the class. The pre-crisis classroom actively insists on respect by setting up rules for engagement as part of the classroom experience itself.

In the pre-crisis classroom, the syllabus might read, "All conversation will take place courteously." The instructions for group work might be, "Every person will be

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similarly respected within the group." The outlines for designing an experiment might state that, "Every individual will have an equal opportunity to contribute." The guidelines for online postings could suggest, "Every person who posts will demonstrate a respect for all people regardless of their race, sexual orientation, political affiliations, gender, or class." When we name the behaviors we wish to see, students see our classrooms as places where they are safe and teachers see that this makes our classroom communities better and improves student learning.

LESSON 6: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM IS WAITING FOR YOU TO CALL ON HIM.

When I teach women's and gender studies classes, students come with all kinds of assumptions and anxieties. They worry that there will be a "party line," that they will have to share my opinions, or that they will have to see the world a certain way. And, of course, it is delightful for me to watch how relieved they are when they come to understand that intellectual freedom is as actively encouraged in my classes as it is anywhere else. But the fact of intellectual differences raises certain questions: what do we do when students disagree—when their worldviews, cultures, identities, politics, and values clash?

It is tempting to solve the problem by stopping debate. But I believe we do our students a disservice when we force them to participate in a masquerade of false consensus. In my years of teaching topics that can feel personally challenging and politically provocative to many students, I have learned that civil disagreement is more valuable (and difficult to achieve) than dishonest, polite silence.

Often, we erroneously think that there must always be unity and general concurrence among our students or, at least, we must prevent public differences of opinion. We too quickly see disagreement as inherently negative, a perspective that

bell hooks has cogently identified as the widespread teacherly desire to steer clear of conflict. This is especially tempting when we lead high-stakes classes almost certain to be filled with differing viewpoints. As hooks notes, "... teachers, especially in the diverse classroom, tend to see the presence of conflict as threatening to the continuance of critical exchange and as an indication that community is not possible when there is difference."¹

Yet, as hooks points out, enabling students to respectfully articulate their opinion within differing points of view is necessary. To imagine that the ideal classroom is a perpetually peaceable kingdom is to forget that debate and disagreement

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are critical parts of the learning process and central ingredients for civility itself. Disagreement is part of human communication; variation of opinion is endemic to—indeed, healthy for—human experience. Hence, attending carefully to what “debate and disagreement” look like, the forms they take, and the effects they have, is one of our responsibilities as educators. It is not our job to get everyone to agree; it is our job to create a forum for respectful exchange, a space where ideas are shared and where it is safe to share them.

LESSON 7: BOOMERANG: THROW IT OUT ... AND WATCH IT COME RIGHT BACK.

It seems obvious to note this, but it is such a simple point that I sometimes forget it: your actions as a teacher are likely to be reflected back in the actions of your students—not only in your classroom but also in the other classrooms in which your students appear. In short, what you throw out is likely to come flying right back to you, or another teacher, in one form or another.

The classroom led by the engaged, diligent teacher tends to be strangely full of engaged, diligent students; the classroom where the professor treats students with full respect for their intellectual efforts is the classroom where most students treat their peers with the same kind of intellectual respect. The best teachers understand that the behaviors in which they themselves are engaged set the tone for the learning experience of their students.


It is worthwhile to remember that the teacher who comes five minutes late to every class he teaches is, along with teaching his subject, perhaps also teaching students that strolling in late is fine, at least whenever you are in charge (and he is, of course, cheating his students out of a class or two over the course of the semester).

The teacher who loses her temper, is sarcastic or condescending, teases or embarrasses her students, or refuses to praise real effort and reward hard work is teaching some very bitter lessons. And the teacher who comes in looking like he slept in his clothes and combed his hair with a pencil? Well, his respect for the activities of teaching and learning may be profound, but that respect might not be as manifestly clear to his students as it is to him.

Our civil (or uncivil) behaviors reverberate outside the classroom, too. Department offices are full of students, so are hallways, so are dining halls, so are quads. Students cannot fail to notice how we treat the office staff, or how we speak to our teaching assistants, or the way we engage with our colleagues. And our style of doing so may be picked up, and repeated, in ways we cannot even imagine.

LESSON 8: THE KEYS YOU ALREADY HAVE ARE THE ONES THAT OPEN THE DOOR.

There is no set path to being an effective teacher. This is good news because, while this means that we inevitably struggle to articulate what makes a great teacher great, it also means that those of us who try, and try again, can surely do it. It all comes down to the same key elements: caring for and about our students as both human beings and learners, having the necessary expertise, demonstrating our commitment to fairness, emphasizing the process of active learning, showing generosity with our knowledge and our time, and practicing respectful behavior. These elements come in an infinite number of forms, they can be delivered in countless ways, and there is no particular combination or version of any of them that supersedes the others.

It should be encouraging that every one of us can be student-centered, fair, courageous, generous, challenging, respectful. There is nothing to stop anyone from becoming an effective teacher. Indeed, there is every reason each of us can be one. It is our particularities and eccentricities, our individuality, the unique and distinctive humanity of each of us that ultimately enables us to reach out to others—and to connect, empower, and inspire. If you are a teacher, the power to change lives for the better and forever isn't within your grasp. It is already yours. 

ENDNOTES

1. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 135.