

Teaching Twelve Years In: How to Inspire Students

By Glenn E. Sanders

I recently started my 13th year of teaching history at a small liberal arts college. As usually happens at the start of an academic year, I felt disoriented in my new classes as I tried to adjust to the new names and faces, to the balancing act between course work and other responsibilities, and to the hard job of communicating ideas and facts to students.

Twelve years ago, entering the same classroom for the first time, I suffered from even worse disorientation, for I lacked a clear sense of what the job even entailed. I had studied history in college because I loved the subject, and I continued those studies in graduate school for the same reason.

In graduate school, I gained a love and appreciation for scholarship as well, but received mixed messages about teaching. On the positive side, while I expected to see teaching regularly sacrificed to research, the opposite held: regular good teaching by prolific scholars was common.

My graduate professors could teach well while maintaining a research program because they taught only two or three courses, had graduate assistants, and received regular institutional support. I did not realize that most college teachers teach more classes and receive less institutional support.

I began teaching with a strong love of history and a respectful ignorance for the academic profession. As is normal, experience has confirmed the former and relieved some of the latter. But, as I look back, what really would have benefited me was some sense of what I now consider the chief requirement for success as a college teacher: a desire to be with people and to share your understanding.

With some positive reinforcement from colleagues and students, my own desire in these areas began to grow until it became as important as my love of the subject. I adjusted my expectations to the realities of marking papers and attending committee meetings.

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In a sense, my career has mirrored the first days of this semester's class: both have brought an initial disorientation that seems gradually to clear once I've been in the classroom a while.

Such a sense of clarity brought on by experience and maturity is nothing unusual. Parker Palmer labeled it "generativity," the idea that a teacher's growth includes the desire to engage the next generation creatively and to help students become creative themselves.¹

But the question remains: How can I act upon my desire for creative engagement so that I improve what goes on in my teaching? Or, in simpler language: How can I *inspire* my students?

Even when the word *inspiration* only signifies creative engagement, the question of how to inspire seems presumptuous in its hope, given the limitations of daily living. And the word suggests even more—a heightening of awareness, a motivating to act, a transcending toward some comprehensive vision of good ends and the means to attain them.

Nonetheless, every profession has its ideals, and, despite my trepidations, I *do* assume that the teacher's goal is indeed so to influence students. But my trepidations are real, and a gradual approach to

the problem recommends itself.

At least in most instances, one must simply teach *well* before one can hope to inspire. As anyone who has taught can affirm, "good teaching" itself is hard to figure out. Definitions of both the task and its best performances differ. But definitions aside, good teaching is problematic for two essential reasons. One is inherent in the character of the task, the other is an aspect of human psychology.

First, a few good teachers frequently gain recognition through their "product," while most others gain it through their ability to create a "moment," an evanescent experience of great importance, remembered even after students have long forgotten specific ideas or facts.

Good teachers of the arts show themselves by their product. Art represents a concentration of experience, a distillation of what's important. A good music teacher, for example, can help a student learn the subtle physical and aural skills necessary to depict this distillation of emotion and thought in sound. Success appears in the student's performance.

But, for most teachers, good teaching shows itself only partially in a student's work. A well-ordered classroom, dynamic lecturing, well-thought-out assignments are signs

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of good teaching, even when students fail to take advantage of them.

The problem lies in the many places where the direct connection between instruction and performance may be weak or nonexistent. Even if my classroom work in history regularly receives praise on evaluations from students and peers, I’ve no direct evidence that I’m affecting my students as the music teacher does. The one exception might be in the rare instances when they become historians, and even then the significance of my influence is unclear, since many other teachers and the regular process of maturation probably had as much effect.

Standardized exams don’t suffice; they signal the knowledge of particular facts and the mastery of particular skills, not the holistic experience that my teaching is to convey and that would show itself naturally in my student’s cumulative artistic performance if I were teaching music.

It bothers me that my reputation as a teacher depends on the “moments” that I create, for I can only control a few of the factors that create “moments.”

A corollary to this problem is that most good teaching is always a secondary activity, the primary work being scholarship, mastery of

a subject, discovery of something new, the creation of beauty—whatever we know the teacher *for*.

The physicist Richard Feynman was by all accounts a truly great teacher, but his initial reputation—and thus his chance to teach at Cal Tech—came with his theoretical work on quantum theory.

In western culture this fact arises in part from the hold-over idea of the “Renaissance man,” whose virtue arises from his mastery of writing, singing, painting, and wooing. Credit goes first for *doing* something, then for *telling* or *showing* someone how to do it.

Even more significant is an emphasis on specialized competence that has held in the west since industrialization and scientific inquiry first encouraged an intellectual division of labor. *Doing one thing very well* is the modern human ideal.

Of course, good knowledge must precede good teaching. But it is this fact that makes the secondary character of teaching a conundrum, since teaching does not exist by itself but is always teaching *something*. People know me as a *history* teacher, not simply as a *teacher*. It is hard to isolate and improve a secondary activity.

Thus good teaching is problematic because it involves a bundle of intangible talents and abilities that always hide behind the primary

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accomplishment or skill or knowledge. The second problem of good teaching follows from the first and concerns my self-conscious perceptions of the task.

I always work from my *perceptions* of good teaching, and, unfortunately, my perceptions seem often wrong, or at least incomplete. In the classroom each day, I usually see this concern as a simple one of communication—that I’m just not clear enough.

But the reality is more complex. Sometimes a statement can be crystal clear and significant and students won’t understand. It is a rare teacher who can judge a student’s ability to discern the significance of a statement before the statement has been made. And so what I perceive to be good teaching may not actually be so.

I come to this conclusion by signs both subtle and not so subtle: my students’ weak performance on tests, dullness during class discussions, failure to read assignments. But the situation would hold, even with strong performances and lively discussions. I can *perceive* myself as doing well, and I gain self-confidence when I hear good reports from students and colleagues. But I may not *really* be teaching as well as I think.

Self-assurance is useful in the classroom, yet in the end it can easily degenerate into bravado, espe-

cially when it covers the deep-down feeling of what a generation ago we called “existential doubt.” This gnawing uncertainty comes from failed communication with someone you desperately want to reach. Most good teachers manage to swallow this doubt, at least when class starts.

To notice these limitations on good teaching is nothing profound; they’re only a part of the “human condition.” But they are important, for good teaching is to nurture the self-perceptions, ideas, and actions of another. It is to reach beyond mere instruction to stretch toward inspiration. How to nurture, then inspire? The question seems almost obscene in its presumption.

But if it were truly obscene, one would hope that thinking men and women would not so readily point to such high ideals for the teacher’s profession. Perhaps in good faith we adopt the goal of inspiration but simply don’t give much thought to the problems behind the goal, including the two just mentioned.

One step forward might be to consider those teachers in one’s own experience who seemed to move beyond the limits of the activity and of self-perception to touch their students deeply.

I credit my love of history to teachers who likewise loved it, who

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showed such compelling and earnest seriousness about the subject's importance that I could not deny its place in my thinking and living. They also revealed the other side of such seriousness—a sense of whimsy, irony, or cynicism at how things have turned out in the human story.

But after teaching for 12 years, I hesitate to call these lessons “inspirational,” since they’re simply the expected outcome of plain *good* teaching. The lessons have helped me as I’ve taught my own classes, but today I line up these examples alongside good conversations with colleagues and students about how to teach.

My middle age will show, but I think the word *inspirational* more appropriate for those teachers who subordinate every lesson to some broad vision and can convince their listeners that the vision is worth following or believing.

I saw two examples of such teaching this summer on a trip to Syria. Happily, for sake of comparison and contrast, they occurred on the same Sunday. That morning my tour group attended services at the Syrian Orthodox cathedral in Aleppo. We arrived late, and except for some cordoned pews at the front we would have had to stand.

The most impressive part of the

mass was the congregational chanting in ancient Syriac, as this community gave witness to its solidarity. At the appropriate place in the mass the archbishop began his homily in Arabic. Perhaps because our group had met with him during the previous week, the archbishop interrupted his remarks to address us directly in English. He welcomed us and told us how important the service was for his people. And then he returned to the homily.

This archbishop obviously taught all the time about doctrines and the character of the Christian life, among other things. Most noticeable, even to a non-Arabic speaker, was the way his teaching cohered to shore up the solidarity of his people and to encourage their faithfulness.

That evening a small group of us met a sufi sheik, the leader of a group of Muslim mystics. The setting was the open-air courtyard of his home, isolated down dark streets near the old Aleppo citadel.

Through our translator, we talked with the sheik, who sat on the ground surrounded by his disciples. Then we enjoyed the ecstatic twirling and chanting of the *dhikr*, the sufi exercise to gain divine inspiration. A companion from Alabama compared the tone of the *dhikr* to that of an Appalachian pentecostal prayer meeting where believers handle snakes. The *dhikr*

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contained no extreme writhing or yelling, however, and remained noticeably under the sheik's control.

In conversation later, he voiced serious concern that some of his followers came only for the *dhikr* and not the moral and spiritual instruction that he could give them.

The sheik's dark, earnest, piercing brown eyes made it clear that he saw this instruction as much more important than the *dhikr*. He had led the exercise well, but this teacher showed a frustration familiar to any competent college instructor—that his students had only seen trees while he worked to show them a forest.

Both the archbishop and the sheik had compelling visions, one of communal identity and the other of individual morality. Compulsion overtook all anxiety about the correctness of the vision. It replaced the natural fear of self-exposure with a confidence, and arguably a humility, born from each man's intimate appreciation of his subject and his understanding of the ways the details fit together to support a significant general point.

And, despite the sheik's frustration, the compulsion overtook any concern about proper communication and subordinated—even buried—all worries about the hearer's ability to join in the broad vision.

But what does this mean for me as a teacher? How do I get such understanding? How do I let compulsion have its way? Given the drudgery of a semester and the continuing influence of a general positivism in modern academic life, should I even consider *inspiration* a proper or achievable goal?

After all, the essential feature of recent attacks on the academy is the opinion that a behemoth "democratic education industry" has a stranglehold on learning and too frequently hems in the perennial human desire for understanding and meaning with a fence of quasi-scientific or bureaucratic jargon.² The fence posts are inhumanely large institutions that gain needed financial and political support by encouraging other interests than simple learning and teaching. Does "inspiration in the classroom" really have a place in such a world?

The problem of self-perception and self-doubt at the moments of contact with students raises itself again, but this time with positive implications. I can't really tell how effectively I teach, but while I am in the classroom I can remind myself that no one else is there but my students and me, and that a good teacher is simply the person who does a good job helping the ignorant and inept to learn and do new things, even when their learning is incomplete and they remain inept.

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While feedback about effective communication and techniques is helpful, it doesn't in the end matter too much that the good teacher can't see specific outcomes.

And while all students at one time or another avoid learning—given human nature—a teacher under compulsion to do good should at the very least assume the students' good faith. To do otherwise—to assume stupidity or intransigence—will likely *produce* stupidity and intransigence on the students' part and, much worse, feed the problems inherent in teaching. Such malevolence insults the student at the moment of contact and jaundices the teacher's self-perception.

Thus, some of the teacher's first steps toward learning how to inspire include a good will toward students, a trust in the significance of the momentary encounter, and a confidence in the significance of the subject and a passionate—thus compulsive—attachment to its truths as these truths form a whole. An essential corollary to this last is a measured and cultivated nonchalance about the success of any particular way of communicating and about the direct effects of teaching.

Of course, the limits of teaching reappear when one imagines a teacher with all the above qualities who still fails to inspire. The

“moment” may fail for nothing bigger than the distraction of my appearance or my student's. My good will, confidence, and passion may all come across as a cloying hubris, given turns of phrase or expressions that I think innocent but my hearers do not.

“Cultivated nonchalance” can easily mask a disregard for seriously weak thinking and teaching. Those first steps really are just that—a realization of how long the trip may be, and that one may never arrive, but also that the journey is worth the try, even for only a short while, given the small riches visible so early on.

My limited experience suggests another essential realization for good teaching: Different people find different things inspiring. This truism is much more complex than it initially appears, for, given diverse audiences, a teacher cannot realistically adopt “inspirational teaching” as a goal.

For one thing, the problems of communication and self-perception will rise again with bloody vengeance if one claims the ability to inspire with such naiveté. Instead there must always be some other immediate goal through which inspiration might come, one within the teacher's control: to understand certain concepts or

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memorize certain facts; to frame a presentation of these concepts and facts appropriate to an audience; to demonstrate some skill; to relate the minutiae of a subject to some “big question,” or at least to some theoretical model. Such goals fit with real classroom needs while remaining manageable even if they require hard work. Teaching has enough frustrations without imposing new ones.

These concrete goals fit with another significant realization: No matter how much teamwork may develop between a teacher and his students or colleagues, teaching is a solitary profession. The teacher alone finally makes the decisions about how to encounter students.

Other objectives depend for their success on the singular experience of the momentary exchange: the creation of a non-threatening, encouraging environment; the respectful encounter with the student as a real human being; good listening.

Nonetheless, these remain solitary actions on the teacher’s part. Even if these actions affect others, and even if feedback can help their development, they depend upon an impetus from within the teacher, coming from the same place that creates good will, trust, confidence, and passion.

Reflection is an essential—if

not always positive—part of a solitary’s life, and reflection provides one of the easiest and most readily available ways to find this inner place and to nurture such goals. Only in reflection can a teacher gain a sense of good will toward others, prepare for the ambiguities of a particular moment, comprehend something big outside himself, gather confidence and passion for that thing, and gauge success or failure realistically.

Reflection on teaching can include several things: meditation; prayer; the internalization of certain “teaching virtues”³; in-depth conversation with fellow teachers; self-observation, either through audio- or videotape or through peer review.

Reflection promises relief for the self-deceived teacher who fails to inspire while nonetheless valuing the moment and cultivating good will, confidence, passion, and nonchalance. But such emphasis on the teacher as reflective agent suggests that good and finally *inspiring* teaching is a moral problem, involving deliberation, decision, and perseverance in the face of opposition or sloth. Such reflection itself becomes a moral imperative, the sine qua non before the inspiration of others is even possible.

This third realization is again simple but complex, for it arises from the relationship between

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teacher and student, the moments of being together. Good teaching seeks moral depth as a response to the quiet joy of birth, the ecstasy of loving, the silent boundedness of death, and every loud and muffled cry in between.

The great privilege of teaching is the teacher's chance to be with others as they encounter these realities, sometimes for the first time, mostly vicariously but sometimes directly; to share from one's own depths those things that have proved most helpful; to struggle with explanations of why some things help and others don't; to challenge with novel alternatives; and to suggest forces that will keep the encounter with these realities enlivened, even after years apart from the teacher.

This last job seems the one most prone to neglect or forgetfulness but the one that most tells whether someone's teaching is *inspirational*. Indeed, the ability to keep vital the encounter with reality summarizes the definition of *inspiration* as creative engagement, heightened awareness, motivation, and comprehensive vision.

There are three primary enlivening forces: love of the subject, a sense of the subject's necessity in the world, and fear of the consequences that would follow the subject's elimination from regular study. Most competent college

teachers can instill the first of these, but many have given little serious thought to the other two.

I think that the archbishop and the sheik gained the sense of "compelling vision" by reflecting on both the necessity of their messages and the consequences that would flow from silence. Both men worried about the survival of a small community's message in a bruising secular world that gives little elbow room for concerns other than money or power.

Both men engaged their realities with "compelling visions" that, again, may or may not be *inspirational*. Even the best teacher cannot tell. But to make *inspiration* even possible, a good teacher must ignore the limitations of the job—both those inherent in the activity and those of self-perception—and affirm the worthiness of good will, human encounter, the truths of the subject, and passion.

Matching this affirmation is an acceptance of limitation—that *inspiration* may prove impossible. And so the good teacher, using his best lights as a solitary worker, grounds sensible classroom goals in reflection and the messy but *for that reason intimate and engaging* realities of everyday life.

And—most importantly, given the moral character of the task—he

acts on these goals and communicates the subject because to do otherwise would be an extreme violation of conscience—his own and, finally, his students’.

For without his example, the students will have only an inkling of their worth and ability, their possible achievements, the joys and intentional sufferings that will flow from integrity, self-respect, and sincere engagement with the world around them.

As I go back to my classroom for the 13th year, I feel at least some sense of what good teaching entails. And I think that good teaching can inspire, in particular when it deals with moral realities, no matter the subject matter.

What to do to inspire my students? I don’t know, other than to teach as well as I can and to hope my own times of study and reflection create insights that force their way into all the things that I say and do in a day. These insights will need to show the vital significance of the subject and how the subject fits in our common reality. They will have to be as tentative and evanescent as the moment of contact between teacher and student, but hardy and worthy enough to withstand the years and distances that separate the generations. ■

Endnotes

¹ Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 48-50.

² Marion Montgomery, *The Truth of Things: Liberal Arts and the Recovery of Reality* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1999).

³ James M. Banner, Jr., and Harold C. Cannon, *The Elements of Teaching* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).

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