

# Ronda Beaman On the Art and Craft of Teaching

Ronda Beaman is the winner of the first NEA Excellence in the Academy award for an article on the Art of Teaching. An associate professor in the College of Education at Northern Arizona University, she writes and presents regularly on quality in teaching. Her award-winning article, *Luther Tillman and a Walk Through Teaching*, begins on page 23.

**Thought & Action:** Why did you become a college professor?

**Dr. Beaman:** Totally by accident. I had gone back to college for my MBA because I owned my own advertising company and wanted some business education to help me run my company a little better.

I became a teaching assistant in graduate school and enjoyed so much working with students at that level and that point in young people's lives where they're trying to decide what to do and what to be that I got really excited about teaching and changed my whole career plan.

**Thought & Action:** Were you ever a K-12 teacher?

**Dr. Beaman:** I'd been a substitute K-12 teacher ever since my BA because I did enjoy young people

and felt teaching was an important thing to do, but I never considered doing it full-time. By the way, I still substitute teach whenever I can just to keep in touch with what's going on, because I work with public school teachers all the time, doing workshops and consulting and things like that.

**Thought & Action:** How were you taught? What inspired you as a student to become the teacher and the person that you are now?

**Dr. Beaman:** When I'm asked about role models or inspirational teachers, I feel as if I was actually robbed. Because I can't tell you that I ever had a teacher who inspired me or helped me aspire to something greater than I thought I could be, or who made a classroom a place of limitless possibility.

I never had any of that, and the more I talked to other people, the more I realized they didn't have very much of that either. One thing everybody in this country has in common is that we get the opportunity to go through school. Yet, for most of us, the memories of it are pretty dismal.

I began to wonder why this might be: Why does such an important job, such an honorable pro-

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fession, end up being so often dishonored?

I started studying teaching and pedagogy and watching other teachers and reading books about people who were master teachers.

Thought & Action: Isn't there a big difference between those who plan on teaching children in elementary school and those teaching students in college?

Dr. Beaman: My initial reaction to that is, no, there's not. Some would say there's a whole different set of skills and a whole different set of dispositions, but I really think effective teaching—and I don't want to call it “great teaching,” because I don't think that's the right term—comes down to some pretty universal precepts. It doesn't matter if the student is 16 or 60, there are ways to connect with a student's desire to learn.

We are a species that desires to learn, most of us, in one way or the other. And I think there are universal ways to help us learn.

Thought & Action: You said once that you are a teacher of students, not subjects. What do you mean by this?

Dr. Beaman: I think of what Ashley Montague once said, that education should be a process of drawing out rather than putting in. If you come into a classroom with the idea that you're teaching chemistry, then you automatically set

yourself up for the approach of putting in information.

It's like the Charlie Brown cartoon that I love, where he's working with Snoopy, and Lucy walks by and says, “What are you doing?” Charlie Brown says, “I'm teaching Snoopy to whistle.”

Lucy disgustingly says, “Well, I've never heard him whistle.”

“I said I was teaching him,” says Charlie Brown. “I didn't say he was learning it.”

I think we make that mistake a lot of times. We're putting that subject matter out there, but we're not setting up the kind of atmosphere where we're drawing out their interest in chemistry, or their questions about English, or their interest in education, or whatever the subject matter may be.

You first have to realize you're working with a lot of different kind of human beings, with all sorts of different learning styles and needs and schedules. You've got to understand all this first, before you can find the common ground on which to present your subject matter.

Thought & Action: Most professors choose their fields because they love the subject, whether it's literature or biology or whatever. Are these colleagues at a disadvantage in becoming the kind of teacher who wants to teach students, not subjects?

Dr. Beaman: Absolutely not,

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because think of the word you just used: love. I love, and I'm passionate about, math, physics, art, whatever that might be.

The test comes—and this is the trick in any profession—the magic is transferring that love. If you're enthusiastic about it, if you love it, then the natural propensity would want to be to get others to feel that way.

If you really do love your subject matter, and you really do understand that you're working with students, then you take that enthusiasm, and that love, and you find creative ways to get your students interested in what you love.

Maybe, they're not ever going to love it. Maybe you have the unfortunate task, as I do, of teaching a mandatory course, one of those "Oh, this is something I have to take."

But you love it, so the art of the teaching, the craft of it, is to present this material in a way that other people would catch a little part of your flame.

I think too many of us go in saying, "I love it, so here it is. Here's why I love it, goodbye." We forget everybody's favorite radio station—WIIFM—What's In It For Me?

Good professors create in their classrooms an understanding for students of what's in it for them, to learn chemistry, to learn biology, to learn English.

Thought & Action: What do

you like best about teaching?"

Dr. Beaman: There's something important happening every day. If you are working the customer service desk at Penny's, and people are complaining all day about their refrigerator not working, you have to create importance in your life in other ways..

For somebody who gets to work with young people every day and help them make small steps toward being an educated person, it's easy to see the importance of the work. Important things happen every day if you look.

I think a lot of us get burned out and get tired and forget to look, but important things are there every day.

Thought & Action: And then the other side of the coin. What do you like least about teaching?

Dr. Beaman: I don't like the scarcity mentality in higher education. I don't like faculty politics. I don't like the lack of creative risk taking. I don't like our tendency to criticize one another

There are people who find it very easy to criticize other people's risk taking, to criticize other people's teaching techniques—criticize, criticize, criticize, in front of each other, in front of students.

Thought & Action: In your article, you talk about the classroom as a place for making mistakes. How do students feel

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about this? How do you get them to embrace this attitude? Haven't they been taught all along not to make mistakes?

Dr. Beaman: Yes. What I have found is that it takes students a long time to understand that you really mean they are allowed to make mistakes. But when it happens there's a lot more freedom for intellectual curiosity, to wander where the mind takes you. That won't happen if people are so afraid of having to have the right answer.

If what you're really trying to do is activate discussion and get people to question and unleash their curiosity, you have to give them that kind of freedom.

Then the students tell me, "You don't understand. I'm going to go to another class where I still have to raise my hand, or I still have to study what the dates were, and I still"—well, of course.

And there's a time and a place for that, too, but at least here, with what we're doing, you can let that down for a little while.

All of this must be understood in the framework of "effective instruction." It has to fit who you are. It has to fit your students, and it has to fit your institution.

I'm able to do some of the things I do because of who I am and who my students are, and what my institution is.

Somebody teaching chemical

engineering in a community college with 40-year-old people might have to do things differently, tweak a few things.

But I still would admonish people to consider that you're working with people, people are going to make mistakes, and you've got to find a way to connect through your subject matter to who these people really are.

Thought & Action: Have you made a major mistake in a classroom by reaching too far, by being too creative? And if you did, what was the mistake, and how did you explain it to your students?

Dr. Beaman: I might be in the middle of that right now with this 24-hour teach-in my students are putting together to raise money to build a school in sub-Saharan Africa.

I told my students the other day, don't think you're the only ones whose energy is depleted and who's worn out with this.

It would have been so much easier for me this semester to give lectures, to give you a midterm, give you a final. You know. I wouldn't be getting calls 24 hours a day about, "We don't have lights or we can't find this, and on and on.

I don't know how this 24-hour teach-in is going to work, and I don't know if we're going to raise the amount we need, and I don't know that the students are learning

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the things that, had I kept the class normal, they might have learned.

Every semester I try something different, and, more often than not, there's a failure involved, because my vision usually is big and my dreams are big, and they never quite turn out exactly the way I want them.

If you are motivated out of concern for your students, out of love for your subject matter when you make mistakes, this shows that you're serious about learning being a mistake-making process. Students believe they can make mistakes also.

Nobody says a teacher has to be perfect. Nobody says a teacher has to know all the answers.

So, yes, I've reached too far on many occasions. One of my favorite Lso Tse sayings is, "I tried again, I failed better." It's always about failing, and evolving, and developing.

Thought & Action: What happens in your classroom? Do you lecture? Use discussion groups? Do you use general discussion?

Dr. Beaman: It's really a choreography of everything you learn as a teacher as you go along. It's a mix-and-match kind of thing. There's nothing to beat a good lecture when you've got a lot of information that you need to get out.

We use discussion groups, cooperative learning, service learning, all that kind of stuff. It's really

what the lesson dictates, what the needs of the students are. So I try not to limit myself.

I usually plan classes the day before, so they're always different, and they're always evolving, and I'm always getting different ideas. So I'm not stuck to one mode. It really depends on what needs to be learned that day.

Thought & Action: Many of our readers face classrooms of underprepared or unmotivated students who aren't really sure why they're in college. What do you do when you're involved with students who seem unmotivated and confused and not really prepared?

Dr. Beaman: I think that, even at a prestigious institution like Stanford or Princeton, most 18- and 19-year-olds are pretty apprehensive, pretty unclear, and not all that motivated.

More today than 10 or 15 years ago, kids are confused, less motivated, working far more hours outside of school to pay for school. All these things are a real challenge to us.

I heard a professor from City College in New York speak recently. He described the college as a place where the phones don't work, the windows are broken from rocks, and the place hasn't been cleaned in years.

He said—and I think that this is true—that an effective teacher

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can capture the imagination and the hearts of young people. There's so much hope in a classroom along with that fear. You've got to give voice to the fear and the anxiety.

The reason so many young people are unmotivated is because of what school has done to them to this point. Now they find out they need four more years just so they can get a decent job.

But I think if you're really working at it, and if your heart is really in it, and you don't just come in with the same yellow notes for the past ten years, that there are ways to capture the hope, ways to work.

I want to be really clear. You're not ever going to get everybody. One of the things teachers do—every teacher I've ever talked to or worked with—they get most bothered by the places where it's not working. The students they're not reaching, the people who aren't being motivated.

These teachers are heartsick about the failure and forget about the successes. And I think we need to build on our successes.

I'm not saying just cut bait, but there are going to be some people who don't want to learn, who don't want to be there, who you will not reach, while the other people who are hungry for learning, you just kind of take for granted.

I really believe if one student gets what you're trying to do and

raises the bar and does better work, all of them are capable of doing that. I think where we fall short is letting our own fear of how students judge us stand in the way of our taking risks. We shouldn't let that unmotivated student dictate what happens in the classroom.

Thought & Action: What about students whose lives are so chaotic that they can't get their work done?

Dr. Beaman: There's probably 50 people like that in my class of 350. They've always got a story, and they've always got something horrible going on in their lives. But there's only so much a teacher can do.

For students whose lives are out of control, it's important they feel they've got someone someplace they can come and at least talk.

But you can't lower your standards, or lower your training bar so these students can do those 40 hours at 7-11 and pledge their sorority and break up with their boyfriend or girlfriend and do all the messy, messy things that make up a young life.

If you establish in your classroom a high level of expectation right away and make clear the importance of learning, the unmotivated students will eventually drop the class.

There are things you can do. You can help students understand

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they've got to decide what's more important, their education or the money to pay for a jeep.

But, again, you can only go so far. Sometimes there are people who are just too young to be in school, who clearly have never been counseled to understand why they're there, and you can try, but you certainly can't spend all your time at it.

Thought & Action: Is there a difference in teaching traditional college-age students and nontraditional students. Is there a difference, say, between the 18-year-old you just described and a 32-year-old single mother with three kids?

Dr. Beaman: In my experience, the nontraditional students get everything that we've been talking about. The freedom, the responsibility. They appreciate it. They want to help you with it. They're thankful to be at a place where you expect a lot and give a lot. They're really motivated when they finally get into a classroom like that. And you can use their enthusiasm to motivate your other students.

These older students know why they're in college, and they work hard at it. If you can harness the maturity of the nontraditional students and use it for their benefit and the benefit of the younger people in the class, I think that's always exciting.

Thought & Action: Because

there are students at different levels of learning, do you plan different approaches?

Dr. Beaman: You can't be all things to all people at all times. Nor should you try to be, because the you water down what's probably best about you and your discipline and your students.

But what I think professors should try to do is offer enough varied assignments and assessment opportunities. One time or another, somebody who's really good at public speaking gets a chance to do really well, while somebody who's really good at memorizing and taking a comprehensive midterm gets a chance to succeed.

You try to give almost a smorgasbord of what I call learning opportunities. I never call them assignments, because as soon as you call it an assignment, people groan. If you call it a "learning opportunity," they know what you're up to, but at least they laugh about it.

You try to put enough different kinds in there so that everybody has an opportunity to succeed. This, too, demands more work from the professor, but you reap more rewards, because if somebody has a success in one area, that feels so good to them they're likely to work harder to get another success in an area that they're not that good at. And that's the whole dynamic that

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you're trying to create.

Thought & Action: What do you think students want from your class? Do you think your students are intellectually curious and that they're willing to really engage the material that comes up in class?

Dr. Beaman: Not right off the bat. The convention—the deal, the unspoken deal—is, “You're going to lecture, I'm going to take notes. I'm going to take a test, you're going to give me a grade on that test, and then I can go home with my three credits and I hope have an A or B.”

So you have to approach trying anything different little by little until the whole game has changed—without the students fully realizing that it has—and they're free to start working for themselves and try new things and do all the other things we've been talking about.

I read the other day in the Chronicle of Higher Education that: Today's students are bored, restless, they've seen it all, they've done it all, and—this writer was saying—and I like them. I like them because our generation didn't give them much to believe in, or much to hope for, but they're still coming to school, and they're still trying for something better.

That bodes well. Here they are. They're not going to DeVry Institutes, they're not taking the easy way out, they're trying to make it

in college. For whatever misguided reason they think they're there in the first place, the fact that they're there, and that they still believe in education, and they still believe that there's something they can do to make their lives better is a really good starting place.

And I agree with that.

Thought & Action: Are you giving into students who are looking for a less rigorous approach to education by your open classroom and your putting students first approach?

Dr. Beaman: I would hope that that is not true. And I think that if you ask students—we just had a local television station come in and ask—about the class, one of the things that meant the most to me were the students saying, right into the camera:

“She doesn't give us answers, and she doesn't tell us how we're supposed to do our work, and we're not used to that. This class makes us be the ones responsible for our learning, and it makes us proud of what we're able to do, and I've never been in a class like that.”

I think that that's what I'm trying to do.

I wouldn't even begin to presume to tell you whose class is rigorous and whose isn't. In one professor's class, three-fourths of the people got a D on the exam. I don't think that's a rigorous course. I

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think that's a course where nobody's learning anything, or the exam is certainly not assessing what the teaching is trying to get across. Something is wrong in a class like that.

When the critics are out to get you, the first word they use is "rigor." "Does this course have rigor?" And I would argue that too many courses have rigor mortis.

The fact that students aren't getting good grades certainly doesn't mean that your class is rigorous. I believe that if challenged enough, and turned on enough, and excited about their learning, a normal C/D student is capable of B and A work.

Teaching is about igniting that flame, that desire of students to learn for themselves, not you. To do this work of learning because it means something in their life, not yours.

Lso Tse says a bad teacher is he who the students hate, a good teacher is he who the students like. But a great teacher is he who the students say, "We did this ourselves." When the students are so empowered that they don't even realize what the teacher did to make it possible.

Thought & Action: Someone like you who's outgoing and cheerful can create a dynamic classroom fairly easily. What about a professor who's reserved, quiet, even shy? Can a professor with that type of person-

ality create a dynamic classroom?

Dr. Beaman: Research from the 1930s on consistently shows that the same five characteristics are important in respected teaching: number one, enthusiasm; number two, preparation and organization; number three, the ability to stimulate thought and interest; number four, clarity; and number five, knowledge and love of subject matter.

If you look at these five characteristics, none of them are things that people who are trying to be better teachers can't accomplish. The research doesn't say you have to be cheerful, or you have to be outgoing.

It says enthusiasm. What does that mean? Well, we all have our own ways to show enthusiasm. Some instructors are very quietly, so steely determined and excited about their subject matter that they get their enthusiasm across that way.

Thought & Action What are some of the ways a less outgoing professor can create this enthusiasm?

Dr. Beaman There are millions of ways people can be enthusiastic and demonstrate that enthusiasm that have nothing to do with being outgoing or cheerful.

Preparation and organization and the other characteristics I mentioned are things that you can

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continually work on to be a more effective instructor. What's important is taking the best of who you are, knowing what your strengths are, then maximizing those, and having the courage to go where they lead.

As far as preparation goes, most faculty don't get much help. Most faculty don't talk about their teaching in the hallways. They'll talk about their research, but not their teaching. We don't go around swapping syllabi and helping each other out. Teaching at the college level is iconoclastic. It can be very isolating kind of profession.

We're not in the kind of atmosphere where our deans, or our presidents, come into office and go, "You're doing a really good job." Most of the time, people from the administration don't talk to us about what we're doing until we do something wrong.

If you're not careful, the negativity that you sometimes get, and the bad evaluations that you're bound to get, all the things students say to hurt your feelings eat away at your own personal credibility.

The thing that's really important is to continually build on who you are, and do the kind of things that you love as far as hobbies and travel and reading, because all that stuff you care about manifests itself in your teaching. You become enthusiastic because you have

things in your life that you can embrace. You're working all the time on your preparation, your organization. You're collecting stories and metaphors and things to help your clarity.

Thought & Action: Since professors have different personalities and different teaching styles, what is the common ground that defines good teaching?

Dr. Beaman: One part of the common ground is characteristic number five: These teachers are continually and never-endingly improving their knowledge, and the love of the thing that they're teaching continues to grow.

Some of my students talk about their other professors, and they're all so very different, but the commonality, it seems to me, when I hear all these stories about different teachers is the human qualities that they bring to the classroom.

The students see these inspiring professors as human beings, not their teacher, not their professor. They see the humanness of what they bring to the classroom. And that can be low-key. That can be very dry, not so cheerful.

But if there is a commitment to learning and a commitment to the students, it takes a student about 10 minutes to understand that, and no matter what your personal dispositions might be, the students can connect to you as a human being.

And I think that that's the key.

Thought & Action: How would you sum up your approach to teaching?

Dr. Beaman: I would say that my approach to teaching is the same as my approach to life. I'm going to be here once. I want it to matter. I want it to be interesting and fun for me, and I want to be interesting and enlightening to my students.

I was thinking about this the other day when I was watching the Oscars. Afterwards, I was telling

my students that in teaching you're never going to get an Oscar, and you're never going to get the Nobel Peace Prize for teaching.

You're not going to get your face on a Wheaties box, or win any of these external rewards that a lot of times the world tells you are so important.

But when you're investing in the lives of other people, and putting a little piece of yourself there where people learn, it really is the best job. ■