

Excellence in Teaching – My Definition

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I have no trouble recalling the two teachers who made the greatest impact on me during my years as a student in the classroom. Both were mathematics professors at the University of Oklahoma. Mr. Patton was the first mathematics professor I encountered as an 18-year-old freshman in Calculus I. Dr. Hill was the instructor in my final mathematics course during my senior year – a course in Mathematics Classroom Methodology. It is remarkable how vivid my memories are from those classes so long ago. Both of these instructors provided experiences in class that remain with me today and they were instrumental in guiding me as a young teacher of mathematics. They both personified excellence in teaching.

During the past few years, I have made hundreds of classroom visits in the Upper School and witnessed the same excellence in teaching I experienced as an undergraduate student. I became intrigued about what defines excellence in teaching. Are there skills or qualities or characteristics that all great teachers have in common? And if so, what are they? After observing so many fine teachers over the years, I believe that excellence in teaching can be defined and I will attempt to do just that. My definition has three parts.

First, excellent teachers must possess EXPERTISE. Let me be clear about what I believe expertise means. Excellent teachers most assuredly need a high level of experience and competence in their chosen field. Their true expertise, however, need not be in their own excellence in their chosen field, but in their ability to guide others toward that excellence. If I want to take flying lessons, I certainly want my instructor to be a competent pilot, one who is knowledgeable about every aspect of flying. More important than my instructor's ability as a pilot, however, is his/her ability to provide the skills and competencies necessary for me to become a competent pilot. Ted Williams, arguably the greatest left-handed hitter of all time, was not very successful in passing those skills along to others. Charlie Lau, however, who was not much of a hitter himself, is widely regarded as one of the finest hitting instructors ever. If I possess any expertise as an instructor of mathematics, it is due only partly to my own ability as a mathematician. More important is my ability to ask the proper question, provide the enlightening explanation when there is difficulty, and guide students toward achieving excellence on their own.

Second, excellent teachers must be able to make CONNECTIONS with their students. This characteristic of excellence in teaching is the most elusive to grasp because connections can be established in so many different ways. Mr. Patton made a connection with me because I had never experienced a teacher who possessed such wild enthusiasm for mathematics. I couldn't believe anyone could be so excited about the concept of limits in calculus. Dr. Hill connected with me because he was the most creative teacher of mathematics I had ever seen. I couldn't wait to see his next classroom presentation. Mr. McGill made a connection with my son in seventh grade Language Arts because he was a stern taskmaster who inspired a healthy dose of respect and just enough fear that

my son would do anything to please him. Mr. Wilson made a connection with my daughter as her high school flute teacher because of his kindness, gentle approach and consistent encouragement to improve her skills.

Third and finally, excellent teachers are able to INSPIRE STUDENTS TO WORK. I believe that teaching is not complete until whatever is being taught is put to work. Simply having been taught is not enough. After receiving my flying lessons, it matters little that my instructor had the necessary expertise and made a strong connection with me if I am unwilling to pilot an airplane. The fact that I possess expertise in my subject matters and I am able to make connections with students matters little if they are not willing to do their homework assignments. For an English teacher, the real proof that excellent teaching has taken place is the student's ability and willingness to write the paper. Mr. Patton and Dr. Hill would have been wasting their time on me if I had not taken their lessons to heart and incorporated into my own classrooms what I had been taught by them.

The students in the Upper School are fortunate to be taught by so many gifted instructors. In addition to possessing my characteristics of excellence in teaching, what also impresses me about our faculty members is how many different paths they provide for our students as learners. There is not one exclusive set of skills that demonstrate a teacher's expertise and there are countless ways to connect with students and inspire them to work. Every teacher provides classroom experiences that are unique to his/her subject matter and personality but all of them aspire to the same end – excellence in teaching.