

Philosophy of Teaching

Chuck Allison

Since 1969 my teaching experiences have been guided by a small number of fundamental principles:

1. **Have something to say.** While teaching is itself a noble profession, it is empty indeed without content to teach. I believe a teacher is best prepared when he is excited about his professed subject – excited enough to keep current and to share that excitement with others. Students are attracted to a teacher who “knows his stuff” and likes it too. As Einstein said, “Never lose a holy curiosity.” Such a posture naturally begets scholarship, service, and inspired teaching.
2. **Say it.** A direct approach is usually the best for teaching. While it is important to provide motivational context, over the years techniques promoted in the pedagogical literature have sometimes encouraged ancillary activities that provide more clutter than enlightenment. Both teacher and student benefit when content and presentation are as simple as possible (but of course, no simpler!).
3. **People learn best by “doing.”** The saying, “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I learn,” is more than a pithy platitude for me. Although recent research substantiates the importance of putting new teachings into practice, it is not news. This is one reason why my decades of software engineering experience have been so satisfying – I have seen the fruits of my labors benefit others. Only when students apply what they’re taught do they gain the intended understanding; only then do they glimpse their potential for making meaningful contributions with their latent talent; only with sustained practice do they discover how to learn. I have found that most students appreciate challenging assignments (even if they do grumble along the way!). I believe such a practical posture makes for better teaching and learning for all.
4. **Teachers and students are peers.** Teachers just happen to be further along the learning curve. This attitude leads to honesty, openness, and availability. An honest teacher does not pretend to knowledge he does not possess, and he accepts input from students. This puts students at ease and encourages them to participate, and even to voice and test thoughts as they formulate them. If the teacher is also available outside of the classroom, students have no doubt that he is there for *them*.

Over 20 years ago I interviewed for a tenure-track position at a community college in California, wherein one of the panel members asked a quintessential “thought question” for educators: “What, in your view, is more important: mastery of the subject matter, or being an effective teacher?” My answer was and is that the most important preparation for good teaching is to be a good learner. An effective teacher continually learns about his discipline. He also is wise if he sharpens his ability to communicate, including getting to know each student individually. Both endeavors are rewarding and never boring, especially in our industry sector. This principle is universal. Those who continue to learn make the greatest contributions, and have the most fun! To effectively imbue subsequent generations with these principles is why I teach.

Today a professor, in garden relaxing
Like Plato of old in the Academe shade,
Spoke out in a manner I never had heard him
And this is one of the things that he said:

Suppose that we state as a tenet of wisdom
That knowledge is not for delight of the mind.
Nor an end in itself, but a packet of treasure
To hold and employ for the good of mankind.

A torch or a candle is barren of meaning
Except it give light to men as they climb.
And theses and tomes are but impotent jumble
Unless they are tools in the building of time.

We scholars toil on with the zeal of a miner
For nuggets and nuggets and one nugget more
But scholars are needed to study the uses
Of all the great mass of data and lore.

And truly our tireless and endless researches
Need yoking with man's daily problems and strife
For truth and beauty and virtue have value
Confirmed by their uses in practical life.

-- Anonymous