

What Teachers Love about Teaching

BY STEPHEN H. WEBB

Teaching is such a personal art, so context-dependent and unpredictable, that it cannot be reduced to a method or set of skills. So what do teachers really love when they talk about how much they love teaching?

I have never loved teaching so much as when I have been a participant in a teaching workshop. Sharing stories, strategies, successes, and failures can be liberating and transformative. I have been teaching college for twenty years, but a workshop gives me the energy and excitement of a novice. Teaching can feel like digging a long, dark tunnel with no clear end in sight. Once you are done with one hole you abandon it, with hardly enough time to clean up the mess you have made, and start all over again. A workshop feels like you have popped into a bright and airy grotto where all the tunnels meet. You discover that others have been digging right alongside you, even when you thought you were all alone. You swap stories about the hardness of the rock, trade tips about the best kinds of shovels, and complain about the backbreaking labor. Most of all, however, you share the joy of the emeralds and rubies you have found and helped to free from the stubborn clumping of the earth. Teaching, at such moments, seems both dangerous and exhilarating! Then, all of a sudden, the workshop is over, and you have to start digging your hole again.

BOUNDARIES AND TRUST

Teaching is a lonely business. That probably sounds paradoxical, because teaching plays such an important role in national debates about public policy, and anyway, teaching is something you cannot do alone. Nonetheless, the actual labor of teaching takes place in private. Sure, there are students there, but they are not an audience, watching what the teacher

does. They are supposed to be participating as much as the teacher. Outside of the teacher and the students...well, when teaching works, there is nothing outside of the classroom. That space and time becomes all there is—until the bell rings and everyone heads to the door.

When someone is visiting my classroom, it usually means one of two things. Either a colleague is evaluating me for a peer review assessment (which usually comes to an abrupt end after tenure) or a high school student is sampling my institution's wares. Either way, it often feels like the delicate climate I have struggled for weeks to create has been hit by a threatening weather pattern. Students who had sunny dispositions just a couple of days ago now act like a fog has descended into our room. This is such a small sample of my work, I want to cry out, a snapshot of a long and interesting drama that would need to be filmed to do it justice! Silences get heavier, I get chattier, and my jokes fall flatter when visitors enter my class. The result is a twist on that parody of a philosophical question about whether a tree falling in a forest makes any noise if nobody is there to hear it. In my classroom, the tree is perfectly quiet when someone comes to watch me chop it down.

Can a visitor ever see or hear what a teacher sees and hears in the classroom? Visitors see a silent kid in the corner, but they do not see the eye contact with the teacher or the conversations after class. Visitors hear a stilted comment while the teacher hears the end product of weeks of coaxing and cajoling. When people visit my classroom, I get defensive, as if someone were crashing the annual Webb family reunion. I want to pull them aside and explain that Uncle Paul is not always like that, while Aunt Mary is actually paying more attention than you might think.

Teaching is a private activity because the classroom has to be separated from the outside world if the teacher wants any chance of success. Boundaries make trust possible, and trust opens the door to a real intimacy of minds. The teacher and the students huddle together to share stories, information, questions, and ideas in confidence, without worrying what other people might say. Students play roles by trying on new ideas, and teachers play roles by prodding and provoking. Distraction is the enemy, and focus is the goal. Sometimes students talk only to the teacher, as if nobody else was in the room. This is like preschool children on a playground doing what psychologists call parallel play. The children are engrossed in a specific activity, but not with each other. When the learning gets going, however, the students begin talking to each other, and parallel play turns into a free for all, with the teacher trying to orchestrate the chaos. There is a sweet spot in every class where a question, text, or problem will take off and find a life of its own, both absorbing and replenishing everyone's energy.

All of this is possible only within the protective enclosure of a certain space and a specific time. Take space: we meet here, in this room, with a cluster of chairs and a chalkboard (I do not do PowerPoint yet!). Something as important as education, just like something as important as worship,

needs its own space. Even Winnie the Pooh needed his thinking spot. Take time: our lives are so busy that we rarely have time just to think. Thinking, in fact, demands a slowing of time. The fleeting nature of time (it is always running out) is the pressure that forces us to act, but thinking suspends time by postponing the need for a decision. Ordinarily, our lives are divided between the productivity of work and the luxury of relaxation. We either

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use time to get things done or we waste time to enjoy ourselves. Thinking is another kind of time altogether. A great classroom discussion does not produce a marketable commodity, but neither is it a wasteful expenditure of energy. Instead, it is that transformative experience when work feels like play and play takes on the gravity

of work. In this sense, education is truly the luxury of time.

To see these points, by the way, just try teaching your students while having lunch with them. You can have great conversations outside of the classroom, and teaching moments, though rare, can happen anywhere, but to teach a group of students on a regular basis, you need a particular time and space to teach. On sunny days, my students sometimes want to meet outside, and once in awhile I relent. We wander around until we find just the right tree to sit under, settle ourselves on the grass and immediately begin to lose our focus. Either they are young and idealistic about the possibilities of serious human discourse or they know exactly what they are getting us into!

A PERSONAL ART

Teaching is to talking as a symphony is to humming. Indeed, the intensity of the teaching experience can make it hard to describe in the abstract. There is so much going on in a single class that if you start trying to read every student's mind you could lose your own. "Assessment" is a big buzzword these days, flitting about every education discussion, often to the annoyance of most teachers, but how do you assess something as internal as thought? What makes it so difficult is that teachers have to keep track of the thoughts of their students while they are trying to formulate their own. It is like cooking food, feeding your guests, eating with them, and writing a restaurant review all at the same time.

All of this just points to the importance of workshops for teachers. Finally, you have time to spend with colleagues who are more eager to hear about your daily toil than even your spouse! Of course, not all teaching workshops

are successful. Some can be too heavy on the ‘tips of the trade’ side, while others can be squelched by too many experts or too much steam being let off. When teaching workshops hit that sweet spot, however, they can make teaching seem like the best job in the world.

Teaching is so personal and unpredictable that just as there is no model classroom, there is no model workshop. What makes one workshop work will ruin another, especially among teachers. Like a regular class, workshops need time to build momentum and satisfy expectations. I have been in two that met regularly during a two-year period, and the timing was perfect. The first met during my early years of teaching, when I needed some help to make sure I was on the right track. The second met during mid-career, when I needed to know that the track was still going somewhere. I also led a lengthy workshop that was...well, it was harder to be the teacher than the student. That one helped me realize just how many tracks there are – and just how hard it is to create a space (remember the grotto?) where all the tracks can connect.

A workshop for teachers is always going to be challenging to lead, because getting teachers together in the same room to talk about teaching is like getting a bunch of baseball coaches together to play a game. Coaches are used to telling other people how to play, not playing themselves. Teachers want to teach, but if you have a room full of teachers, who is going to play the role of the student? Teachers are great at seeing through lesson plans and second-guessing the goals of workshop sessions. I have been to several workshops where the exercise planned for us never happened because so many of my fellow participants kept asking about its purpose and design. Perhaps it is a professional hazard of teaching that we teachers are inoculated to good teaching, just as a baseball coach cannot just sit back and enjoy the game. As much as I love teaching workshops, I have learned the most about my vocation when I have observed classrooms where I had to keep my thoughts about teaching to myself.

What worries me about workshops is just how much teachers, me included, love to hear our own voices. A lot of teachers go into their profession because they were so good at being students that they did not want to stop, but good students like impressing their teachers, and when a bunch of teachers try to impress each other, watch out! In fact, I suspect that some teachers love to talk about teaching more than they love teaching itself. That is not such a surprising or perverse claim when you stop to think about it. If you get a bunch of baseball coaches together, are they really going to want to swing a bat and run the bases? Most likely they will enjoy talking about the game more than playing it.

ABSTRACT BUZZWORDS

Just as almost anything can be said about teaching, almost anything can be said *during* a teaching workshop. Workshops construct a discourse about

teaching that can be far removed from the practice itself. Take four of the buzzwords that I have heard developed and espoused in teaching workshops and pedagogical journals: formation, service, tolerance, and transparency.

Formation comes in various guises, from citizenship to morality and even spirituality. Learning, according to this buzzword, is about character development. The classroom, I have heard repeated over and over again, is a laboratory for democracy. Students need to practice the skills that will make them good citizens (or good parents, good Christians, or just plain good). The problem with this language is that most teachers do not know their students well enough, nor do they have sufficient moral authority, to aim at such lofty goals. Teaching a book, any book, is hard enough without worrying whether one's students will volunteer for the school board down the road.

Service is linked to formation because getting students out into the community is increasingly important for school administrators under pressure to make the economic rewards of education more apparent. Chipping away at the walls that separate the classroom from the real world is supposed to enhance education's practical value and social relevance. Teaching workshops are often geared to helping teachers figure out ways to add a service component to their courses. The problem is that learning is all about asking questions, while improving the world is all about implementing a specific agenda of change. There is a time to act, but there is also a time to think, and learning to think well takes a lot of time. Nothing is a substitute for holding students accountable to the most rigorous and consistent modes of thought.

A classroom dedicated to forming students in the tradition of social justice determines all the right answers from the start and thus limits the kinds of questions that students can ask. The result turns tolerance into an absolute virtue, an end in itself, rather than a means toward more open inquiry. Tolerance should be a byproduct of learning, because the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. Instead, today it has become the whole point of learning. Tolerance as the goal of education actually undermines moral formation, because it treats all moral judgments as mere opinions and treats all opinions as equally plausible.

Perhaps because higher education has become so politicized in recent years, there have been demands for transparency in teaching, but what the general public means by transparency and what teachers mean by it are quite separate things. The general public wants teachers to be more neutral, or at least balanced, when it comes to moral, political, and religious issues. What transparency means in the world of workshops is that teachers should let students know what they are doing by divulging the secrets of the trade. Teachers should be like magicians who pull the rabbit slowly out of the hat, deconstructing the magic with a lesson in mechanics. Thus, workshops give teachers tips about how to enlist students in constructing the syllabus and how to turn the classroom over to the students to do the teaching.

What these buzzwords have in common is just how process-oriented the classroom has become. A process-oriented classroom focuses on how students learn rather than what they should learn. Process-oriented teachers spend a lot of time talking about student experience, student learning habits, and student expectations. Teachers are supposed to be aware of how their students are aware of them, so that they can monitor student responses to the material and adjust course goals to meet diverse learning habits. This sounds dangerously circular: we study them in order to learn how they respond to us so that we can better assess the ways in which we fail to reach them—or something like that! While studying how students learn is important, there is no substitute for the old-fashioned goals of education. Teaching has to be grounded in great and enduring questions, and inviting the student to join in those questions is to some extent asking the student to leave behind their old patterns and habits of learning. I am not sure, in other words, how much I want to ponder the way my students do (and do not!) learn.

LIMITS OF PEDAGOGICAL THEORY

Perhaps the hardest thing about teaching workshops is that, like every class, they must end, and end rather abruptly at that. Anyone who has been to a teaching workshop knows the experience of the let down when it is all over. After all the exhilaration, you piece together your notes and prod your memory for all of those stimulating suggestions and inspiring moments that seemed, at the time, like they would change your life forever. You have been reborn, but now you have to go back to work. Workshops, like revivals, are hard to sustain.

The transition from workshop to classroom is hard because teaching is an art that cannot be reduced to a method or set of skills. Teaching is such a personal art, so context-dependent and unpredictable, that what works can change from minute to minute, let alone day to day. Every teacher knows those days when carefully wrought plans go nowhere while exhaustion and despair unintentionally encourage the students to perk up and take over. In the right context or with the right circumstances, any personal style can be effective in the classroom, just as any pedagogical theory (whether student, text, or skill based) can illuminate classroom dynamics. Pedagogical methods (the tips and strategies) are important because teachers need a stock of tactics and skills to fall back on when

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nothing else seems to work. Theories of teaching, however, will never quench our desire to know why one class went beautifully and another was so dull. Pedagogical theory emerges from the inevitable failures all teachers have in connecting students with the course material, but theory works best when it leaves open the wounds to the natural healing of time and experience rather than closing them with rules and maxims.

Perhaps teaching, in the end, is just too integral to human nature to ever be amenable to careful delineation. We teach what we know, and thus, to a significant extent, we teach who we are, and so a good theory of teaching, to cover the field, would have to describe human nature in all of its subtle complexity. Maybe that is why teaching workshops so often stick to sharing stories.

As much as I love talking about teaching, I love teaching even more, although I cannot explain why. For me, teaching is a combination of communication that is honestly spontaneous with a deep passion for the questions and texts at hand. You have to be in the moment and in the book at the same time. That is hard, and it is certainly a relief to find out from other people that they too think it is hard, but talking about it only gets you so far in trying to become good at doing it.

Teaching, in a way, is simply a more condensed form of the need all of us have to pass something valuable down to the next generation. Teachers are just people who are on more intimate terms with the limits and frailties of communication than most people, and that is why they occasionally need to get together and swap stories with each other, no matter how hard that can be.



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