

What makes a great teacher?

Miro Martin



The good

I have worked with some amazing teachers throughout my career and, even though they have shared many traits, I can't come up with a concise all-embracing definition of what is a great teacher. However, what I can do is synthesise some of the qualities that I believe make a teacher great.

You wanna do what!!!?

I met a visiting professor from the USA many years ago and he mentioned that in his country teaching had the same status as leprosy. Parents were ashamed to mention in public that their child had decided to become a teacher and they would make excuses such as, "he's only doing it to fill in time until he gets a real job." I might be stating the bleeding obvious, but surely one of the most important qualities is a passion or desire to do the job. I have met too many teachers who are teaching because they can't do anything else or, in the case of some older teachers, are just marking time until retirement. Great teachers want to teach.

Having more degrees than a thermometer doesn't necessarily make someone more learned or knowledgeable

Know-it-all

If my memory serves me, the motto of the NSW Teachers Federation is *Qui Docet Discit – He who teaches learns*. A great teacher is never confident or complacent with the knowledge that he or she knows it all. Great teachers are self-reflective practitioners. They constantly analyse the way they do things and look for ways to improve. Whenever I confront a teacher who stubbornly refuses to look at a new idea or who says, "This has always worked. Why should I change?" a thought bubble appears above my head in which I am choking the life out of this person with my bare hands.

Credibility and competence

Having more degrees than a thermometer doesn't necessarily make someone more learned or knowledgeable. Academic qualifications, at the very least, give you credibility. I have done a fair bit of tertiary study including postgraduate work. I don't think it improved my talent as a teacher. Experience did that. What my study did was give me an attitude towards teaching and learning and opened my mind to different ways of thinking.

Unfortunately, tertiary study doesn't necessarily guarantee that someone with a degree is literate. I have come across an alarming number of teachers in recent times who cannot spell and who have atrocious grammatical skills.

I had a graduate whose written work I accidentally confused with one of his students. It was that bad! To make matters worse, he asked the Year 7s in a coeducational school to hold hands while they walked to the library. He had never done a practicum in upper primary and was clueless.

The parents set up a vigil outside my office with a steady stream of complaints. How can you be taken seriously when you can barely read and write and are attempting to teach children English? This is not an isolated instance. As I have mentioned in previous articles, it's not the graduates' fault. The system has failed them – schools for not making them literate and universities for letting them graduate. Great teachers have formal academic qualifications and a good working knowledge of the language and each subject area they are teaching.

It's not all about me

I have noticed a shift in attitude by a substantial number of teachers over the last 30 years. When I started out we didn't think twice about doing our planning or marking in our own time. We didn't expect extra pay for putting in extra hours. We accepted that there were many after hours commitments requiring our presence. Dare I say it? We had a work ethic. This still exists, but in my experience, it is waning. Teachers expect more release time for planning and reporting. Some whinge like stuck pigs when asked to attend after school meetings or functions. Everyone is entitled to good working conditions and a fair salary. I have never complained about any of my

pay rises. However, great teachers regard their profession as a calling or mission, not just a job that brings in an income. They put in the extra hours without being asked and without any expectation of praise or acknowledgement.

They don't have to like me

Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Great teachers have great rapport and people skills, not just with the children, but also with their parents. The old adage, "You can always tell a teacher, but you can't always tell a teacher anything" holds true for many teachers. Parents often feel threatened by the teachers and vice versa. Instead of forming a good alliance or working partnership, teachers often regard parents as the enemy. There are difficult parents just as there are difficult teachers. Great teachers know how to handle and get on with difficult parents and their children.

Great teachers engage with their students and get to know them and their families. Whenever I hear teachers complain about too many students and not enough time I see that thought bubble again. Great teachers make time to get to know the children.

My predecessor at my last school knew the names of all of the 700 students and knew most of their parents as well. It is my experience that it is much easier to work with people who like you than those who don't.

For most of us it's all about our personality. I absolutely love every moment spent with the children and have always focused on making the learning experience interesting and engaging. I always had fun in the classroom and didn't find it difficult motivating the children. I realise that this is difficult for some teachers. It's not their persona. The worst teacher I ever encountered was when I was in high school. He was a history teacher and his lessons began with him walking into the classroom and writing page numbers on the



The lesson was over when a bell rang. There was no conversation or interaction

board. We then had to read these pages in silence. The lesson was over when a bell rang. There was no conversation or interaction. I remember the great speeches and accolades he was given when he retired. What a waste of teacher space he was! We may not all be entertainers, but surely, we need to have a filtering system to weed out the boring, immovable and non-engaging teachers in our schools.

Thinking outside the square

Above all other traits, I value this one the most. It best describes me. Great teachers are creative. They have a sense of humour. They aren't intimidated by their superiors or constrained by political correctness or its academic and bureaucratic spawning ground. For these teachers the curriculum documents are seen as training wheels for the masses or beginners. They are convenient bits of paper for propping

up a desk with uneven legs of for starting your slow combustion heater (the electronic versions make this last task difficult). Unfortunately, these free thinkers I value so highly are very rare. The system usually weeds them out and stomps them like a bug.

I'd like to end with a quote from the first text book I ever bought at teacher's college. I have used it many times to describe to people what I think of teaching.

"...The school system that hires you (and that can also fire you) will almost inevitably operate within a relatively well-defined set of regulations governing the conduct of teachers in classrooms, prescribed curricula, reporting and testing procedures, disciplinary actions, and so on. Yet, in the final analysis, your approach to teaching will be determined by no one but yourself. No person need be bound to do something that he does not believe in. If you firmly believe in the importance – even the sanctity – of the right of every student in your care to be treated as a human being and to be allowed to develop in such a way as to enhance his human qualities, it might happen that you will be frustrated by the system and that you will look for alternatives..." p50 *Psychology for Teaching* by Guy Lefrancois

I stuck with teaching for over 33 years. I did look for alternatives but instead found a way to work within the boundaries of the system. I pushed these boundaries to the limit and apologise to all my superiors who must have pulled out a lot of their hair whenever my name was mentioned. **ET**



Miro Martin retired at the end of 2011. His plans for 2012 include continuing to write for *Education Today*.

Learn how to control your paper and email war the easy way



Does your office look anything like Sheri's used to look?



After just 3 hours with Robyn Pearce via webinar, hers looks like this, and so could yours

Robyn Pearce (the Time Queen) will guide you through each step in just 3 hours over 3 weeks via her easy-to-access webinar series. No travel, no time away from work, and it doesn't matter where you live (broadband connection, computer and headset are all you need).

Register now at <http://gettingagrip.com/etoffer/> and you'll get a whopping 50% reduction as *Education Today* readers.

Numbers limited on each course so book quickly to secure your spot.

For more information email jill@gettingagrip.com or phone (NZ) 0011 64 3 351 2140

