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What Makes an Excellent Teacher?

Steven M. Fettke

Abstract: Everyone who attends any place of education on any level wants an “excellent” teacher; however, is that word—“excellence”—ethereal, mystical, or just entirely subjective? In this essay I wish to propose a definition of what excellent teaching entails by referring to the spiritual and social formation of the teacher. Central to my thinking is how the work of the Holy Spirit affects “excellence.” Reflecting on my long years of experience teaching in a Pentecostal college/university and as someone in pursuit of “excellence” in my own teaching, I think I have something to say about it which involves teachers, students, and a whole community.

Keywords: excellence, faith integration, community, foundational signs, life-long learning

Introduction

When I was hired to teach at Southeastern in May, 1979, the Academic Dean at the time gave me only two pieces of advice: “Make your own way,” and “Kill your own snakes.” In other words, you’re on your own. Such was the new faculty orientation in those days. Thankfully, I had an undergraduate education degree and had taught in middle and high school. Otherwise, I would have been utterly lost.

It is true that we teach the way we were taught and the teacher is the curriculum, not the actual course. I taught the way I had been taught—almost entirely lecture format—and I covered the course content in terms of my preferences instead of what needed to be covered and covered well. My attitude was that I was the “king” of the classroom and everyone had to do what I said they had to do. I am not ashamed to admit that. It was not a good thing.

I could list my many accomplishments through the years, including those accomplishments I was proud of during the time I spent in public schools. However, I guess I am more cognizant of my failings and failures than I am of any accomplishments. Although many students through the years have praised my name, I am afraid just as many have taken my name in vain...and for good reason.

In my reflection in this paper, I am remembering more of my hubris, need for control, and droning on and on with the lecture style than I am of class discussions, collaborations, or student presentations. I confess I took too many years to come to those practices. I suppose I could blame very large classes during the early years—even junior and senior classes I taught might have as many as 100 students in them—and I could also blame the overloaded course schedule faculty were required to teach. But I don't want to make excuses. Sometimes I wish I could go back and apologize to those disappointed students I had my first decade of teaching.

One of my “accomplishments” of which I am proud during those early years was my total dedication to preparation, making clear lesson plans, and insisting on quality work from my students. I had graduated from a strong teaching program in a state university that emphasized those qualities and they served me well despite my failings. Another “accomplishment” of which I am proud during my time teaching in the public schools—a poor country school—and at Southeastern is my full dedication to my call to teach despite the Spartan facilities and years and years of very low pay. Somehow, the grind of that atmosphere and my own family stress of a severely mentally challenged son did not “do me in.” I was doggedly faithful, both to my call and to my own sense of excellence. Many of my colleagues became depressed about the facilities, low pay, and lack of support; they began to “mail it in,” neglecting their work and failing to improve. I could never do that. It would have weighed too heavily on my conscience and my deep desire to serve and honor God no matter what the environment or circumstances.

And so, after 30+ years, I am still doggedly determined to do my very best and be an example to students and colleagues alike. I am still learning how to be a good teacher. I refuse to look back on my awards for good teaching. I am still excited about what my colleagues and my students might teach me. Gone is my hubris and need for control. It is so much better now!

Excellence in Teaching

In my senior undergraduate class on Teaching Techniques for my BA in English Education at a state university, the professor began the first day of class by posing the question that is the title of this essay: “What makes an excellent teacher?” His response to his question was to hold his hand out and rub his thumb and forefinger finger together. “This is what makes a good teacher,” i.e. it is mysterious and indefinable, in his opinion. No doubt, there are mysteries associated with achieving excellence in teaching that defy explanation; however, undaunted by such mysteries, I offer this humble essay to chart some of the broad parameters of excellence in teaching.

Many seek to stress the *techniques* of good teaching. Somehow, just by using the right technique, faculty can reach effectively each generation of students. Sadly, the idea that technique alone leads to good teaching remains elusive. After all, in the past, faculty were “sold” on the use of power point only to be told lately that the use of power point is not effective at all. Faculty were told at one point that readings, lectures, and quizzes are not effective, only to be told later that *podcasts* of lectures, readings, and quizzes over the podcast lectures and readings *are* effective and necessary. It would seem that the *techniques* of teaching are far from settled and are still matters of experimentation. In addition, it would seem obvious that the best *techniques* would still require an excellent *teacher*.

Thus, back to the main question: what makes an excellent teacher? In this essay I wish to present a kind of strange alchemy of ingredients: formation of and participation in true community, life-long learning, a sense of call and faith integration, a healthy family life, and genuine collaboration. I must be careful not to reduce all of these into a set of moral principles, guidelines, or, worse, clichés. There are no “Seven Steps to Excellent Teaching” and no programs that guarantee success. Many would like everything in life to be settled for all time with no unanswered questions and nothing left to learn. The reality is that almost nothing in real life is ever completely settled. The “adventure” of life and the teaching profession is that so much remains in flux, in the process of creative (we hope!) change. Nevertheless, what I want to propose in this essay might be called *foundational signs* that can point to what might be described as a *journey* toward excellence in teaching.

Foundational Signs in the Journey Toward Excellence in Teaching

The first two of these *signs* presented here are *the formation of and participation in true community* and *a sense of call and faith integration*. I am committed to the notion that God gives gifts and calls people to true

service to others.¹ A sense of call implies an experience with God that has been integral to one's faith. However, because North American culture is obsessively individualistic and private, the tendency among the faithful is to imitate that private and individual attitude in one's private and public life, including church life. It is my contention that a call of God *requires* an affirming *community*.² Faith integration includes the importance of the work of the Spirit in providing believers a sense of call as well as helping them understand the importance of making connections with each other. Such "connections" are called "fellowship" in the church and such is a true work of the Spirit (Acts 2:42). In addition to the fellowship of faith, colleagues with similar callings also share a kind of "community of call."

I would hope that faculty at a Christian college or university can work toward *the formation of and participation in true community*. Such a community has to begin with a sense of welcome, of hospitality, creating for others "safe space."³ People need to feel welcomed and comfortable in each other's presence. In a sense, the offer of hospitality mirrors God's own hospitality, the welcome of God's Spirit to those who wish to respond to divine love. Let me hasten to say that, while the offer of hospitality is important, it is also important that people humble themselves and accept the role of recipient of hospitality. It is what Amos Yong calls "Free Space."⁴

Christians must discern the Spirit's presence and "perform" appropriate practices in concert with the hospitable God. They must embody Christ's incarnational vulnerability and open up theological and relational "free space" not only to serve as hosts for the gospel but also risk being guests of others.⁵

Such an atmosphere of hospitality and genuine concern for the participation of all in a faithful community is a tangible way called people can integrate their faith with their calling.

But what kind of community can be formed? I would suggest that—without condescension or sounding simplistic and in keeping with the faculty call to be teachers—the community might be known as a *learning* community. Parker Palmer has said that academic leaders "should be

¹ Steven M. Fettke. *God's Empowered People: A Pentecostal Theology of the Laity* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2010).

² Ibid. chp. 3, "Who are 'the Called'?: Mission, Commission, and Accountability," 18-44.

³ Letty M. Russell. *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* (Atlanta: Westminster/John Knox, 2009), 86f.

⁴ Amos Yong. *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (New York: Orbis, 2008).

⁵ Ibid., 132.

creating a space centered on the great thing called teaching and learning around which a community of truth can gather.”⁶ How such a community is “gathered” or created by the Spirit can be as different and creative as the eternal Spirit, who is working through those called to teach *and* called to learn. Simply put, people need each other; called people need others who are similarly called.

To illustrate, consider how Kathleen Norris speaks of the way of those who are artists, in her case a poet. Her description of the formation of her art speaks volumes to those called to teach.

Art is a lonely calling, and yet paradoxically communal. If artists invent themselves, it is in the service of others. The work of my life is given to others; in fact, the *reader completes it*. I say the words I need to say, knowing that most people will ignore me, some will say, “You have no right,” and a few will tell me that I’ve expressed the things they’ve long desired to articulate but lacked the words to do so.”⁷

It is the phrase, “the reader completes it,” that so fascinates me and resonates within me as well as convicts me.

In describing this “completion,” Norris uses the phrase, “necessary other,”⁸ by which she means the process that completes the “transaction” (my term) between poet and reader. As a teacher, I can become so enamored with my learning and research I can isolate myself and become entirely self-serving in both my research and teaching. In my selfishness I can say, “I am the only ‘necessary other’ and the ‘others’ in my sphere of influence will just have to adjust to me.” It is this attitude that poets—and teachers—have to resist. The Spirit who calls us to teach also calls us into a community in which others are necessary. Faculty resist the call to community to the detriment of the Spirit’s work and their call to teach. Here is how Norris describes it.

How dare the poet say “I” and not mean the self? How dare the prophet say “Thus says the Lord?” It is the authority of experience, but by this I do not mean experience used as an idol, as if an individual’s experience of the world were its true measure. I mean experience tested in isolation, as by the desert fathers and mothers, and also tried in the crucible of community. I mean “call” taken to

⁶ Parker Palmer. *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 166.

⁷ Kathleen Norris. *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 43, emphasis mine.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

heart, and over years of apprenticeship to an artistic discipline, *developed into something that speaks to others.*⁹

What faculty say or teach to others is developed within a learning community. This learning community involves lots of “necessary others”: ourselves, our students, experts in our fields, and our colleagues in our discipline as well as in all disciplines. It is in a learning *community* of peers and students that the “transaction” among all in the community occurs. Isolated individuals may create wonderful “art,” but they cannot complete their work without the necessary others, without whom the art would be lost.

Creating community, any kind of community, is fraught with pitfalls—human pride, human indifference, “busyness,” work and family overload. Any community-creating has to be intentional, arising from fervent prayer and trust that the Spirit will make possible for diverse people a community of truth, love, and learning despite our pride, selfishness, and personal agendas. Thus, any effort from us to create true community will have to include a focused intentionality and energy on the part of all of us. Otherwise, we are just meeting (for whatever reason we meet) to satisfy yet another requirement for our employment, going through the motions in the fiction that community exists just because we meet regularly. Such an atmosphere of indifference and fiction would not be worth my time or yours.

This leads naturally to the next *foundational sign* pointing to the journey toward excellence in teaching: *genuine collaboration*. Because some faculty at this university from across different disciplines have engaged in creating community among themselves, they have been able to collaborate on various projects: prayer services, writing projects, co-teaching classes. Each of those collaborative efforts enriches all involved and only enhances the depth and meaning of true community. Collaborative work is the fruit of true community and signals to students that a community of the Spirit is one that encourages people to work together creatively.

The next *foundational sign* on this journey toward excellence in teaching is *life-long learning*. In a Christian community the role of faith integration includes an emphasis on loving God with the mind (Mt. 22:37). A life of study can be an act of obedience to one’s calling as a professor. This means a university community promotes the best critical (analytical?) thinking skills for its students and provides opportunities and resources for faculty to attend continuing education events. One unique problem that

⁹ Ibid., 43 emphasis mine.

can arise at a Pentecostal university is the pressure to be “Spirit-driven” in the colloquial sense of always having to create something “new” or innovative or to neglect the disciplines of careful and “unexciting” study. Fred Craddock has eloquently addressed this.

“Obligation” remains in the vocabulary of those who know the profound satisfaction that follows tasks often begun with no appetite and much anxiety...Ecstasy is the self’s experience of delight; awe is the experience of that which is greater than the self and before which the self-recedes. The present point is simply that study and knowledge do not dull one’s capacity for the immediate or render one less appreciative of a full engagement of life. Of course, there are always the bad models, the caricatures of the thinker, equipped with impressive quotations, overloaded with information, and off to nowhere brilliantly. But the fact remains, study to the point of understanding sharpens rather than dulls one’s appetite for and capacity to engage life with all one’s faculties.¹⁰

What kinds of things should faculty study? Are studies limited to one’s discipline? How do faculty model the best kinds of study habits for their students who would seldom see faculty in the “act” of studying? It seems that the best well rounded faculty would be curious about lots of things and not be strictly limited to the works in their discipline. In fact, perhaps the best quality of faculty is that of curiosity. Faculty work best when they remain curious about many things, willing to examine journals, books, magazines, and articles from all disciplines. This is not to suggest that faculty become collectors of eclectic and random materials or that they should be unfocussed. Rather, it is to call for faculty to widen their studies to include all kinds of materials, all of which help them become persons of greater depth and insight. In so choosing various reading materials, faculty might discover new insights that can impact their disciplines and which also can be presented to students. The better students will notice that such a wide knowledge in the professor did not spring up magically; it must have involved the discipline of study and the wonder of a curious mind.

The final *foundational sign* on the journey to excellence in teaching concerns a healthy family life. This might seem an obvious strength and necessary quality, but perhaps healthy family lives are taken for granted. Some can get so caught up in their duties and responsibilities that they forget there are people at home who miss them and love them. And some can become so advanced in their studies that they forget to “take their spouses along with them” in the sense of making them full partners in

¹⁰ Fred Craddock. *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 75.

their intellectual lives. The old joke about the best spouse being the one with a happy mother-in-law does not take seriously the importance of the spouse with whom one is living. A happy home life makes for a happy person is not just a tired cliché sewn into a frame and collecting dust on the wall.

Conclusion

I feel I can say these things out of the integrity of 30+ years of experience at Southeastern in all kinds of social and political environments which have existed here at one time or another. If I can still summon up the energy and intentionality to offer and receive hospitality to work toward true community despite my political battle scars and vivid memories of deep disappointment of failed attempts at creating community, then I would hope that others with less experience and who are much less jaded than I may be inspired or motivated to do the same. Yes, I still believe in the possibility of a hospitable community of truth and love where both teaching and learning can take place. Here is why I can still believe that.

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (I John 4:7-8 NIV).

Community...cannot grow out of loneliness, but comes when the person who begins to recognize his or her belovedness greets the belovedness of the other. The God alive in me greets the God resident in you. When people can cease having to be for us everything, we can accept the fact they may still have a gift for us. They are partial reflections of the great love of God, but reflections nevertheless. We see that gift precisely and only once we give up requiring that person to be everything, to be God. We see him or her as a limited expression of an unlimited love. To live and serve and worship with others thereby brings us to a place where we come together and remind each other by our mutual interdependence that we are not God, that we cannot meet our own needs, and that we cannot completely fulfill each other's needs. There is something wonderfully humbling and freeing about this. For we find a place where people give one another grace. That we are not God does not mean that we cannot mediate (if in a limited way) the unlimited love of God. Community is the place of joy and celebration where we are willing to say, "Yes, we have begun to overcome in Christ." Such is the victory of the Cross. Gratitude springs from an insight, a recognition that something good has come from another person, that it is freely given to me, and meant

as a favor. And at the moment this recognition dawns on me, gratitude spontaneously arises in my heart.¹¹

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¹¹ Henri Nouwen. *Turn My Mourning into Dancing: Finding Hope in Hard Times* (Nashville: W. Publishing, 2001), 83-84.