

How to Prepare for the Classroom Experience? Many Right Ways

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We have been discussing the reality that there is no one right way to prepare a person to be a teacher. We have recognized that there is no one right set of courses, no one right number of field experiences, and no one right approach that trumps all others. Instead, there are as many different ways of supporting well-prepared teachers as there are people who wish to teach.

As we noted in the first installment of this series, preparing successful teachers is a complex task--the success of which is extremely difficult to measure. But perhaps the difficulty of measuring success has more to do with the way we conceptualize teaching than it does the complexity of the task, itself.

RMW Travers, a leading researcher in learning and the processes that lead to learning, wrote books about what a good teacher does and how to educate teachers to best be able to do those things. But after years of trying to find the answer through his research, he finally came to the conclusion that the actions and experiences that create a good teacher were so varied, that reducing them to a universal, practical predictor was actually impossible. Each person seeking to be a teacher is a unique individual, bringing his or her own experiences, goals, skills and personality. Teaching a particular set of actions associated with being a teacher to unique individuals or giving a particular set of in-school experiences to unique individuals will result in very different kinds of learning.

The conclusion he drew from this was that the only way to help a person to become a good teacher was to treat the task much as you treat the task of training an actor. That is, using method acting concepts, you determine the key elements of the role the person is going to play and you help that person discover his/her personal attributes and how to use those to fit the role.

There are some who would suggest that there is a "method" to teaching, as well. But it is not a prescribed method in which all teachers do one thing the same way. The "method" of good teaching is as variable as the number of teachers. Teachers have certain roles they fill during the course of their day and through the school year. How they "act" to fill those roles and their success at doing it depends a great deal on how well they understand the role, not just as rote actions but as complex interactive and changing sets of actions and how they bring their own personal skills and attributes to the role.

The authors of this essay are two very different people. If you were to observe us as we interact with our students you would see us do some very different things but you would still recognize it as the act of teaching. Our sense of humor is different, our manner of helping students feel comfortable is different, our organization of the concepts we will explore with our students is different, etc. But we are both engaging in the role of teacher and we both seek to achieve the same thing; learning on the part of our students. Try telling one of us to act like the other because the things that person does is good and you will have one of us becoming less effective.

We both arrived at the role of teacher in very different ways and we are both considered to be successful teachers. But we are clearly different in the way we approach the role and very different in the things we do in that role.

To our knowledge, however, no teacher education institution is actually putting this research to practice. And few school systems, we suspect, are helping their teachers discover how their personal attributes can make them more effective facilitators of learning. Still, we share this story to illustrate the challenge of preparing teachers. There is no magical path or set of standard behaviors which, if we can get all teachers to do them, will make all teachers good. Being good in the teaching role is as variable among individuals as are our physical characteristics.

There is a growing movement in this country to “raise standards,” to make explicit a set of stringent requirements that must be met in order to be deemed worthy or successful. The belief is that, by identifying ways of thinking or behaving that are common, visible and measurable, we can ensure that no questions exist when describing what is "good" or "effective" practice. The base assumption of this movement is that there are very discrete and measurable ways to prepare a teacher or to educate a child and that the more an institution conforms to those standards it will be guaranteed to be producing good teachers or educated students. But just because something is "common," does not make it inherently worthwhile as a performance goal.

Many feel standards serve a useful purpose -- namely, they clarify a common set of expectations about what is to be taught and what is to be learned. In fact, one of the chief architects of the American educational standards movement once compared the importance of educational standards to those we use to oversee building production, food preparation, and air quality.

But is that true? Can we compare the much more concrete activities of building a school building or preparing food safely or reducing the level of pollutants in the air, all physical processes, with the much more complex and dynamic endeavor of helping a unique individual to learn to fulfill the role of teacher?

To make the point, let us switch to a type of standard most of us are familiar with: reading levels. Those of you working with special needs students, in particular, know that there is no real correlation between the age/grade of a child and how well that child reads. Each child needs to be addressed as a unique individual who is reading at his/her own level. Yet teachers and students are constantly reminded that there is an expected level of performance for all students at each grade level. Fourth grade reading, for instance, may or may not be a goal for all nine year olds. But it seems that discussions about reading now treat reading levels as a standard that is absolute. All children who have completed the fourth grade are expected to be at that absolute level.

To us, that is roughly the same as saying that all nine year olds need to be the same height. We can see that children are very different physically. They don't grow at the

same rate, they look different, etc. But when it comes to learning we seem to assume that they are all the same...there is the standard. Meet it!

And, we suspect, that even if we were successful at making all fourth graders be at the same reading level (as measured by a standardized test) we would find very different "ways" of reading, very different motivations for reading and very different attitudes about reading that will ultimately determine whether this child matures into adulthood as a good reader.

Many are drawn by the lure of ease that constructs such as standards and aggregate scores provide. The current move in education at all levels is toward increasingly explicit standards, rather than broad categories of behaviors. Many educators believe that explicit standards are essential, as they define what success "looks like." But is it possible to write standards that give an honest picture of success for everyone, or that reveal a realistic way to assess the effectiveness of the task by anyone ... anywhere?

The real problem is this: Standards aren't real. That is a Standard Behavior does not exist -- there is no such thing as a right way to do a particular thing in any context all of the time. Some may suggest that the answer is to create more standards -- covering more scenarios. However, others note that at some point, an increasingly diverse and explicit collection of Standards are no longer Standards at all. Instead, they morph into a narrative of collective, individual experiences that constitute more of a case study than a series of standardized scores.

If we want to be able to recognize good teaching and learning when we see it, then we must allow ourselves to look beyond the standards to find it. Teaching can't be reduced to a common set of standards because it isn't a set of behaviors -- it's a choice. And standards do not account for the willingness of people to go outside of their own bounds to help others learn and grow. And, in fact, Non-standard approaches to common problems serve as important catalysts for making better decisions in novel situations, something that good teachers do all the time.

What makes a teacher "good" is not how closely he or she matches the list of standard behaviors and attributes. Good teachers are those who connect with their students and see the world through their students' eyes. Many do this by recalling their own experiences, and by using these experiences to help them view the issues at-hand from the learners' perspectives. To do this effectively requires a willingness to do things differently -- to view things differently, perhaps -- than you have in the past, and to consider how one's own beliefs influence what each believes to be "good" or "effective." Our individual differences signify our unique contributions as teachers -- and as people.

We must accept that both teachers and learners are guided by their individual differences to take novel approaches to solving common problems, and that the variance in their method is not a weakness, but a strength.

Rather than anointing one way as “best,” and measuring all other ways against it, we should focus more on sharing the ways good teachers make novel choices to overcome environmental challenges while helping learners accomplish meaningful growth.

And there are as many good ways to do that as there are teachers willing to do it.