

Teachers Who Shaped Our Lives

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This past spring, a panel of 17 adults at Hofstra University was invited to speak on the topic of “The Teacher Who Shaped My Life.”¹ The panelists (professors, teachers, administrators, and undergraduate and graduate students) spoke of teachers who had stretched their students’ minds, spoken to their hearts, appreciated them as creative individuals, and encouraged them to have high expectations of themselves. The audience, made up primarily of pre-service teachers, listened closely. I spoke as a panelist, recorded the presentation, and interviewed members of the audience afterwards.

Speaking to Our Hearts

Almost all of the students on the panel emphasized the compassion of their teachers. Christy LaFace remembered her first grade teacher, Mrs. Dickstein, who “cared for all of us, valued us as individuals, and emphasized that our classroom was a community that we were all responsible for.” Kim Contegiacomo appreciated the sensitivity of her fifth grade teacher, Miss Singer, “who noticed that no one played with me on the playground, so she created a project [that helped] me. She linked up our class with a first grade class. The younger students became our reading buddies, and I had somewhere that I belonged.”

A fourth grade teacher sowed seeds that would inspire Amy Ferriso, now a pre-service teacher, to major in childhood education:

Mrs. Natal showed me how to find confidence within myself and believed in me when no one else did. She made me, as well as my classmates, appreciate how special we were in our own unique ways, while bridging the diversity in our classroom and creating a classroom environment where we made lasting friendships that continued throughout the rest of our schooling. She always pushed us to be more than we could have ever imagined.

During fourth grade, something tragic happened in my family life and, as a nine-year-old, it was very difficult to deal with. Mrs. Natal noticed that something was wrong and went

beyond the job of a teacher to help me to make sense of it all. Not only did she take the time to reach out to a child who needed her, but, [she also made] her classroom a safe place for me to forget about my troubles.

Mrs. Natal cared more about her students’ well being than she did about the pressures on them to perform well on “the test.” She welcomed her students into her life and shared her life with us in an appropriate matter. She reminded her students that she was human, and built strong lasting relationships with her students that still remain twelve years later.

Appreciating Our Creativity

At least one third of the presenters talked of teachers who valued their students as creative individuals. Professor Esther Fusco’s sixth grade teacher, Mr. Swearer, “talked to me as a person, fed into my interests, and helped me to become myself.” Graduate student John Schultz’s third grade teacher, Mrs. Cole, allowed him to listen to his *Sgt. Pepper’s* album every day during recess. “Her room became a haven for me at a time when all of the other kids were wearing Kiss t-shirts. She allowed me to be who I was.”

Teachers were memorable when they allowed creativity and choice in assignments. Some of this creativity was nurtured under thriving electives programs that were allowed in the elementary curriculum more than thirty years ago. I recalled my favorite seventh grade teacher, Mr. Watson.

One of the course options back then must have been anthropology. For an entire quarter, Mr. Watson’s class created a civilization (ours was an early one, so I, who was responsible for Communication, made a drum) and then we buried all of the artifacts we had created on the grounds of Long Lots Junior High School. At the same time, Mr. Marshall’s class, next door, did the same. Then we dug up each others’ civilizations, using cameras to take pictures of the level at which we found the artifacts, brushes to brush off the dirt, etc., then we wrote our anthropological reports, hypothesizing about the nature of the civilizations we had unearthed.

Long before educator Grant Wiggins² was writing about



essential questions and recommending that we explore a subject deeply, we were spending two and a half months acting as anthropologists, finding out the characteristics of civilizations and of anthropologists and archeologists.

Another elective Mr. Watson offered was on urban areas—present and future. My best friend, Anne Herlihy, and I researched the causes and patterns of crime and then made a crime board game. He let kids play it in class, only it turned out that we had designed it badly. How you moved depended on a roll of the dice, and there were so many hazards near the end of the game that the only outcomes turned out to be either jail or death. We had unwittingly created a game that it was impossible to win. Mr. Watson generously helped us out, saying (and laughing), “So, you’re saying that with Crime, you can’t win.” And Anne and I, who knew a good opportunity when we saw it, said, “Yes, yes, that’s it exactly!”

Mr. Watson introduced us to political cartoons, and I’ve been using them ever since. Understanding them was like being let in on a secret society of sophisticated humor, where we kids got all the jokes that the adults were laughing at. And, because we now knew what was going on in the world, we could then create our own cartoons.

Encouraging High Expectations

While many of the teachers clearly set high expectations for their students academically, it is also the case that teachers who encouraged their students to set high expectations for themselves made profound impressions on their students. Donna Levinson, dean of the College of Education, described her

sixth grade teacher, Mr. Willens, modeling creativity for his students. “He never did anything the same way two years in a row. It would have bored him.” His students learned to reject that which would be too easy and familiar; instead Donna spoke of having sought out challenges throughout her teaching career, and, like Mr. Willens, never teaching any lesson the same way twice.

Other presenters told of teachers whose thoughtful treatment of them after they had transgressed in some way allowed them come to their own conclusions about what kind of behavior they wanted to be known for and what kind of people they could choose to be. Graduate student John Schultz remembered a day in third grade when he had said something unkind to another child; he didn’t really know why, he had heard another child say the same thing and he repeated it. His teacher, Miss Cole, didn’t punish him, but engaged him in a private talk. Through this conversation, he came to recognize his responsibility for being a kind person. The memory is also important to John today because it shows how a teacher can be guided by the assumption that children who may go astray still have the power to find their better selves; thus, they should be treated with respect.

Demanding that We Think

The majority of the seventeen speakers that evening painted portraits of teachers who had exemplified Oliver Wendell Holmes’ maxim that, “Man’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.” One student, Esther Pascal, remembered her first grade teacher, Dr. James Cone, a



committed conservationist who made her and her classmates think about the consequences of their actions on the environment. The lessons were apparently long lasting: “To this day, I cannot throw away six-pack holders without cutting them up to protect the fish who could get caught in the loops” [if the plastic were to get loose somehow in the waterways].

Perhaps the most profound story of a teacher demanding that her students think came from Eileen Simons, professor of math methods, whose own students see her as a rigorous thinker. Eileen explained that it took a teacher to make her realize her own potential.

I started school as a very young first grader who had no preparation for school. I was neither developmentally or emotionally ready. My first grade teacher terrorized me, and since I hated being in her class, I became a master at being too sick to go. You can imagine what that did to my preparation for the following grades. I was such a poor student that my very bright and academically successful siblings called me “poor dumb Eileen” and that is how I thought of myself. When teachers called on me to answer questions, my standard response was, “I don’t know.”

That is how I went through six years of elementary school until I got to seventh grade and Sister Maura. About a month into the school year, Sister Maura called on me to answer a history question; I gave her my standard response. In a not too gentle voice she said, “Miss Granito, on your feet”—in Catholic school we stood when called on—“and answer the question.”

I stood and fumbled for an answer, an incorrect one. Then Sr. Maura started “coaching” me. She asked me a series of questions that led me to the correct answer and, when I gave it to her, she said, “That is absolutely correct, and don’t ever tell me again that you don’t know the answer.”

Know the answer? Me? She was the first person in my life who thought that. What did she see that others had not? She saw me, the real me, the one who wasn’t dumb. She saw a child who for most of her schooling was let off the hook probably because teachers thought that they were being kind.

She was usually very gentle and kind, but that day she was stern with me and in her sternness, she forced me to think, forced me to realize that I was not as dumb as I had come to believe. That day she helped me believe in myself, and that day she changed the course of my life. I have been grateful to her ever since.

Although many of the speakers focused on the rigorous, “thinking” attributes that involved challenging students academically, the majority of responses by the students revolved around the more affective, “caring” aspects of teaching. It is also the case that projects that stimulated people to be creative and innovative were strikingly presented and appreciated. We might conclude that effective teaching and learning links caring involvement with rigorous intellectual challenges. Perhaps teachers who show students their interest and caring will be best positioned to bring their students along for the intellectual journeys in their classrooms and beyond.

The Audience Reflects

My colleagues and I talked to members of the audience after the program. Their enthusiasm about the power of a teacher to make a difference was clear, as people pronounced the evening “heartwarming and motivating” and replete with “excellent examples and great models to follow.” One student described how, “in the car on the way home that night, I had to call my mother, who is also a teacher, to tell her how inspirational this program was.”

The program inspired students to “one day shape a child’s life,” “strive to be a better teacher,” “take a stronger interest in my students’ lives,” and “contact my most influential teacher and say, “Thank you.””

Before they had even landed their first jobs, pre-service teachers were reflecting on their upcoming role in the lives of young people. “I must be compassionate and encouraging with everything my students do.” “A teacher can be a molder and shaper of students’ lives and profoundly affect them.”

These prospective teachers realized that the effects of good teaching can last a lifetime. 🌐

Notes

1. The panel was organized by the Hofstra University Network of Elementary Teachers [HNET] in April 2008. There were many examples given of notable teachers from the higher grades, but this short paper focuses on examples from elementary and middle school.
2. Grant Wiggins, *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance* (New York: Jossey Bass, 1998).

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