

The Annoyance of a Good Example

Evaluators teach best by example,
just as good teachers do.

Whenever I taught the students of the "Writing Lab"—our high school's euphemism for a class into which were scheduled the habitual failures, absentees, and discouraged students of English—they thought I was a failure, too. Otherwise, why would I have been given them as students? One student even asked me if I had done something to anger the principal.

As I determined to convince them they could achieve, I struggled with the view they had of themselves and the one they were forming based on teachers they had known and their day-to-day experience with me. I had to be both a person who believed in their abilities and one who was worthy of being believed.

I never convinced them wholly that they were persons of value to society, but sometimes I did persuade them that I believed they were real students, thoughtful and capable. My expectations could never overturn the weight of a school system and society that labeled them failures. My example—determined, exasperating, and refusing to accept their low self-appraisals—mattered.

They watched me learning to handle my own powerlessness, ignorance, and anger. My letter to the school administration about the misuse of the loudspeaker—detailing the interruptions it caused and the message it projected that what went on in our classroom was unimportant compared to the illegally parked car that needed to be moved—was important because I did not punch out the principal, I wrote to him, and because, for awhile, the loudspeaker quieted. My needing to be taught what "press the pedal to the metal" meant and my genuine delight in learning this new phrase were also lessons for them about vocabulary. My anger at their insults to one another and my insistence that our room was a sanctuary from such verbal violence was another.

Not every teacher would act as I did, nor is that ever desirable. The examples we set are different, but they are what we teach. The "Writing Lab" students needed to be able to imagine themselves as me, however remote the comparison. As teachers, we reveal ourselves; this self-disclosure, for good or ill, teaches our students even if all our planned subject-matter lessons fail.

The understanding of teachers as models and examples is missing from most attempts to evaluate effective teaching, yet this difficult, intangible, risky, personal, even artistic side of teaching most teachers value above all else. However much we may joke about it, we take pride in it, want to be recognized for it, and disdain evaluation systems that leave it out.

But how to include it? Criteria in lists and charts might be less easily disdained if the teacher, as model and example, were in turn acknowledged by an evaluator who is "the annoyance of a good example." Evaluators should not be easy marks, graduates of a crash course in checklists of teacher behaviors or replicable lesson plans. I don't want to laugh at them behind their backs in the teachers' lounge and dismiss their thoughts as irrelevant, nor do I want to disseminate greedily to court their favor. Annoyingly good examples have certain identifiable qualities.

They see me as an equal, not an adversary. When teachers leave classrooms for administrative jobs, they immediately notice their new access to toilets, telephones, and supplies. They

may deal with other people one at a time, rather than in groups. They are no longer under constant scrutiny. Once these perks are acquired, it is difficult to believe that people without them are equals. Somehow, teachers must deserve their childlike status.

I don't ask my evaluators to give up their adult luxuries, only that they acknowledge them as such and don't fool themselves into thinking that, because they now have the key to the loudspeaker system, they have become spellbinding to listen to. Rather than try to contain me within my present boundaries, their role is to encourage and support, to see me not as an adversary to be controlled, but as a colleague whose ideas require consideration.

They teach. The best way I know of to remain on an equal footing with others is to do what they do, to try to see things from their point of view. Whoever comes to evaluate my teaching must be a teacher too. We do not know what would happen if every professional person in a school building taught at least one class. I think it would change the workplace profoundly, allowing us all to teach fewer students and try out talents for administering, counseling, and acting as resources to each other in our areas of expertise. Students would be surrounded by annoyingly good examples, people who read and learn and see education as the most important happening in the building.

Those who went into administrative work because they were poor at teaching would have the opportunity, with only one class, to learn how to do it better with the help of their colleagues. Those who left teaching, although they enjoyed it and were good at it, would have the opportunity to try their hand at administration, curriculum, research, counseling, or staff development without completely leaving the classroom; they would be able to ground their new professional activities in the reality of the classroom.

I want to be evaluated by people who know they are still learning how to teach rather than by those who think they know how or think that they understand the task theoretically.

They are students of the discipline I teach. The people who evaluate me need to know my field and to know

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whether I know it. We need to be able to sit down together and discuss the latest research, books, professional conferences, and teaching strategies. We need to discuss as colleagues what we have both experienced.

When we discuss staff development, my evaluators need to consider me as a giver as well as a receiver of it, a creator of curriculum as well as a recipient of it. Together, as equals and colleagues, we would plan the continued growth and development of our skills and find ways to help our fellow teachers.

They assume that my observations of my work are as valuable as theirs. As I respond daily to the demands of the subject matter and the needs of my students, I observe my own teaching and try to understand better how my students learn. My work as a teacher includes the roles of researcher, inquirer, recorder, documenter, and analyzer of teaching and learning. A profession is defined by its practitioners.

I want the people who evaluate me to see their role in the same way, as

something to learn about. We read each other's professional writing and evaluate one another's analyses. We work together to publish and give presentations on our work, taking professional responsibility for sharing what we have learned with colleagues. If my evaluators present me with some problems that they see me struggling to solve in my classroom, they enable me to study the matter, gather the necessary data, and support my efforts to understand the problem and solve it.

They want to be evaluated by me. My evaluators expect that I, in turn, will discuss their work with them—that we will evaluate each other. Standards for the profession will be in a continual state of revision, arrived at through the discourse of the persons within the profession. Certain people will set annoyingly good examples.

I am not interested in "images," in what we want to cajole others into seeing and thinking, but in the message we send sometimes without knowing it, of what it means to teach and to learn. What is the example a teacher sets for students? What example do evaluators set for teachers? What example is set by a teacher for other teachers? What example do educators in general set for the community?

"The annoyance of a good example" comes from Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, whose calendar provides aphorisms for the opening of each chapter of the novel. The aphorism heading Chapter 19 reads, "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." In Chapter 15 the heading reads, "Nothing so needs reforming as other people's habits." All educators, regardless of our titles, are teachers, and we are all in the uneasy business of being good examples and encouraging changes in other people's habits. We deserve evaluation that acknowledges the exemplary life we lead, however annoying. □

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