

The Teacher

PATRICIA MCDANIEL DOMBART

On Being Human

One of the great feats of classroom teaching, especially at the secondary level, is to achieve a balance between being a teacher and being human. I am still working on this after 20 years.

When I first entered a classroom, I was well aware of the "Don't Smile 'til Christmas" dictum, and I meant to follow it. But it never suited my style. By Day Two, I was past smiling and up to grinning. Who could resist relating to the hulking machine-shop kid complete with grease-lined hands and "Ford Beats Chevy" stenciled on his jean jacket who leaned back after my first 20-minute lesson and whispered approvingly, "You done good"?

Twenty years later, my students are still making me smile. This year when I was out for surgery, the get-well cards with messages like "Roses are red/Violets are blue/John Donne isn't the same/Without you" and "Does this mean we don't have to do our documented essays? Get well soon anyway" evoked smiles even in my hospital room.

When I teach I often cross the line from teacher to human being, because I can't resist inserting personal anecdotes into English Literature lessons. For instance, when Samuel Pepys' *Diary* begins to induce terminal torpor, I switch to Mr. and Mrs. Dombart who, like Mr. and Mrs. Pepys, argue over neatness and spending money. When we do Pope's *Epigrams*, I use stories about my children, who often exemplify that a little learning is indeed a dangerous thing.

When I slip out of my mold and become a person with family and problems, the whole atmosphere of the class changes. Heads raise, eyes open and look straight at me, and if I'm really on a roll, they look at each other, nod, laugh, and even share some incidents of their own. We be-

come a little community instead of a series of desks.

But the paradox of being more human in class is that it forces me to be more teacher when class is not in session. Such openness strikes a chord in the many attention-hungry and needy students who are part of my load. So Curt in his camouflage outfit begins to linger to share with me his computer graphics, his Star Trek literature, even his transliterations of Runes; and Lisa is there at 7:30 a.m. to tell me how much she hates her mother's boyfriend and why she wants to have her own baby. And I can't take it. There is not enough time nor energy to be friend, and therapist, and teacher—and teacher is what I am. So I am unresponsive to Curt and retreat behind my pile of unchecked essays, and

I edge Lisa politely to the door and remind her that she should talk to the school social worker or to her guidance counselor.

Doing this gives me a class-A guilt trip. I feel like a hypocrite, like the priest in *The Exorcist* who loved mankind while praying in his room but was repulsed by the beggar in the subway. I contemplate assuming a straight subject-matter, task-oriented teacher pose in class, but I can't do it. I can't give up those moments of relating person-to-person and having my class become a community. And I don't know how else I could get through Pepys. □

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- an explanation of the relationship between what we call "thinking skills" and what others call "philosophy," by Barry Beyer
- comments by David Perkins on the connections between content and thinking in an interview by Ron Brandt
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