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Why Does Teaching Matter?

A conversation between Sir Thomas More and Richard Rich, a younger associate, regarding Richard’s future plans: “More: Why not be a teacher? You’d be a fine teacher. Perhaps even a great one.” “Rich: And if I was, who would know it?” “More: You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public at that...”

—Bolt (A Man for All Seasons, 1962, p. 6)

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What comes to mind when you think of the word “teacher?”
2. When did you first know you wanted to become a teacher?
3. What impact can a teacher have on the life of a student?
4. Why do you think teachers are undervalued members of society? Justify a position in which teaching is as “noble” as law or medicine.
5. How can teaching serve as a spiritual endeavor or a “calling”? 
Let's begin by listening to the thoughtful, poignant testimony of one of my students:

Self-exploration: Why Teaching/Why Me?

I think that I am a natural teacher. Therefore, it dumbfounds me that it took until my 37th year to realize that this was the path that I should be taking. Even as a child, I was the “teacher” when we played school . . . my blackboard was my prized possession . . .

The decision to teach came together like a puzzle. As corny as it sounds, the first glimmer that I had was when I saw a bumper sticker with the quote by the now-famous, ill-fated astronaut and teacher Christa McAuliffe, “I touch the future, I teach.” I was struck by the enormity of that statement, its implications and its validity. At the time, I was unaware of my interest in this field, but I envied anyone with the gift, and the calling to choose a career that could have such an impact on our world and its inhabitants. My career choices had tended towards “flash and glitz,” such as public relations and publicity. My skills as a writer, a leader, a speaker, and an enthusiastic and high-energy person worked well in these fields. These same skills, interestingly enough, are helping me in the classroom as I substitute teach.

How did I first realize that I adored children? I was blessed with my first son. Watching him grow and develop and master all of the “milestones” of those special years was unbelievable. Of course, I stayed home with him, nurtured him, and taught him, knowing that no one could do the job with the fervor and love that I could. I read with him, taught him colors and numbers, and even made trips to the grocery store educational: the produce aisle was a lesson in numbers, colors, and fruit and vegetable vocabulary words. It was at this point that people began to tell me that I had a “knack” with children and should think about teaching as a profession.

As the children grew and I participated in their school lives, as Class Mother and such, I so admired and envied those teachers. What wonderful and superior human beings they were . . . knowing so much about so many things and having the gift of imparting this information. They did it all! They managed a classroom full of children, when I felt overwhelmed by my two children. They remained cool, in control, and unbiased (mostly) toward even the obnoxious children, often seeing the specialness in the individual rather than the difficult traits . . . all this while they performed magic! They taught children to read, that most amazing skill, made sense out of math, and tried to impart humanity on children who seemed to have starred in Lord of the Flies. Could I do this? Dare I even think about it?

Apparently, the teachers thought that I could. When I began teaching multicultural lessons in my son’s class (we were the only Jewish people in a conservative Mennonite farm town), the teachers were so impressed that the
principal herself came in and asked me to present to all the other classrooms. The superintendent observed me and had me head up a committee dedicated to keeping the “Pumsy” self-esteem program intact in the district despite the rabid protests of a Fundamentalist majority. The superintendent praised me and strongly recommended that I teach. “You have a presence,” he told me, “a talent for explaining things clearly and in such a way that people want to know more and become excited by what you have to say.”

I know that I can motivate people. I have always had satisfaction from doing that, and it’s always been noted on professional reviews and letters of recommendation. To motivate and teach at the same time, hmmmm, that is the challenge and brilliance of a teacher. When I have had a long-term substituting assignment, I have seen, through summative reviews that, yes, I did teach the class the vocabulary or the social studies lesson, and I am so proud and grateful for this ability. It is so stimulating to me, so thrilling to see the first spark of curiosity and then dawning knowledge on those faces! The feeling is certainly a powerful stimulant to refine and train teaching skills to achieve this on a consistent basis. To be honest, I love the attention of all of those faces trained on me, as I gesture, explain, question, and try to fire their interest. I am a very active person, and the nonsedentary life of a teacher works well for me.

Also, I am touched by the attention and fondness that the children generally display toward me as their teacher. This is also my weak point, however. I am aware of my intense desire to be liked by the children, thus my force as a disciplinarian is vulnerable to compromise. I do deal firmly with students and keep learning how to do this better as I observe more teachers in action and teach myself and attempt various skills that I learn in textbooks. I also observe the masters . . . those classroom teachers that do it so well.

As far as prestige, I feel that nothing (except parenting well) is as important as teaching. Christa McAuliffe’s statement about touching the future is right on point. What other career impacts not only the present, but also the time that is yet to be. I feel that by teaching English/Language Arts, I will be giving my students the tools that they need to navigate through everything else that they will ever do in their lifetimes. All of my career and life experiences have convinced me that it is our language, its cadence, its literature, and the written and verbal communications that we use that determine how we will participate in the world around us. How enormously satisfying it is for me to impart something so meaningful and necessary. The students will always be judged, measured, and sized up by their communications skills. I hope to make a positive impact on them in these vital areas.

As a naturally warm person, the loving and warm feedback from the students is such a pleasure. Conversely, the catchall for my worries is, how will I deal with the student who just doesn’t like me, or is always disruptive and difficult, and that frankly, I dislike. When I see a child bully another, it is
hard to put my personal emotions aside and not come down unfairly on the child and say or do something demeaning to him or her. Sometimes, it helps me when I know that there is a rough family situation. My heart and desire to help and be a safe port in the storm of this youngster’s life usually aids me in summoning the patience and commitment that I need to see behind the behavior and try to do something positive about it.

I am very concerned with the chronically disruptive students who make the class an arena for power struggles and discipline strategies. Will I manage and handle an entire class when I am the regular, daily teacher instead of the lenient and fun treat of being the favorite sub? I will work very hard on this aspect and hope that experience will give me confidence in this area.

As for being bored, never! I have always maintained that only boring people get bored. There is so much to teach, to learn, and so very many ways to do so that I think my teaching will always be evolving. As long as I remain a student, reading, thinking, attending conferences, seminars, and classes, I will continually be learning new and better ways to share the wonderful knowledge that the world holds.

My philosophical beliefs fit in well with teaching. Everyone has potential. It is just a matter of how to reach it, to teach it, to maximize it to its fullest. Put another way, I once heard the mother of two retarded children tell my child, when asked why her boys “couldn’t talk right,” that they had their own gifts, that we are all gifted, but our packages are different and may be opened at varying times and in special ways.

The above statement brought tears to my eyes and fortitude to my heart. I see some clear patterns emerging as my career gets going and I start to feel like a powerhouse of commitment instead of the shaking mess I was after my divorce. I absorb the knowledge from my courses like a sponge because I am burning with the desire to be a wonderful teacher, an important part of young peoples’ lives, a positive experience in this sometimes terrible, but more often fabulous world of ours. I know that my strongest assets are my enthusiasm, dedication, people skills, and broad-based knowledge as well as the power to interest, excite, and stimulate others to listen, attend, and know more. I must conquer my all too intense desire to be liked by my students and gain their approval. Earning their respect, cooperation, and attention has to be what I strive for.

I so look forward to having my own classroom and my own students. I have much to learn myself, including how to foster independence in students. As I tell my students, “We will work well together today because this is exactly where I want to be, sharing the teaching and learning creative process with you. You can and will learn something with me today because you are bright, inquisitive, and you have the whole world in front of you. The things you get in the classroom will give you the keys to all of the doors in the future that await you.” I’ll succeed in teaching because I think it is more than a job,
it is a calling. . . . one that I have been working toward all of my life without knowing it. The journey is and will continue to be just amazing!

Life is a ceaseless journey. Who we are, what we decide to do, and how we do it are influenced by a multitude of factors. We are a composite of our genetic make-up, the influence of our parents, our environment, our experiences, and even social and political forces. Our personal strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, educational decisions, opportunities presented to us, help we receive from others along the way, and the many personal choices we all make influence our thoughts, speech, and actions. Why does someone go into teaching? Dan Lortie (1977), in a classic sociological study of American teachers, examined several primary reasons why people he interviewed became teachers. Aside from the more mundane explanations relating to material benefits and the desire to interact with people, Lortie and other researchers who came after him discovered that more fundamental and profound influences included the desire to engage in work that is personally and socially meaningful.

RECOLLECTION

I always wanted to become a teacher. I recall how I used to force my sister, four years my junior, to sit and take a test I prepared for her. Despite her protestations, I made her sit to take the exams. I’m not proud of what I did, but I do recall the intense joy I felt using my red pen to mark her answers wrong and to award a grade. The sense of power and authority I felt was uplifting. I regret, of course, coercing my sister in those days (happily, she has forgiven me). I matured since then, fortunately, to realize that teaching is not a matter of serving as an authority figure but, rather, helping another human being to achieve new insights and potential. I’ve come to realize that helping someone else is both personally and socially important.

What are your first recollections about considering teaching as your career? Why have you decided to teach? Why does teaching matter?
6  Teaching 101

Form 1.1  RESPOND

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<th>RESPOND</th>
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<td>Is teaching for you?</td>
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| 1. | I get asked for help a lot, and have a hard time saying no. | SA | A | D | SD |
| 2. | When I meet a person I’ll give that individual the benefit of the doubt; in other words, I’ll like him until he gives me a reason not to. | | | | |
| 3. | People usually like me. | | | | |
| 4. | I’m happiest interacting with people and aiding them in some way. | | | | |
| 5. | People tell me I have a great sense of humor. | | | | |
| 6. | I’m good at smoothing over others’ conflicts and helping to mediate them. | | | | |
| 7. | I believe that respect for authority is one of the cornerstones of good character. | | | | |
| 8. | I feel I’m good at supervising a small group of people, and I enjoy doing so. | | | | |
| 9. | I want my life to mean something. | | | | |
| 10. | I am more spiritual than most of my friends. | | | | |

Analyzing Your Responses

Note that the items are drawn from one of my previous books (Glanz, 2002) Finding Your Leadership Style: A Guide for Educators, published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. For a more detailed analysis, please refer to that work. Suffice it to say here that if you answered SA or A to the items in Form 1.1 you are well suited to teaching as a career. Don’t allow any one survey to sway you one way or another, but effective teachers, generally, are naturally inclined to help others, are caring, sensitive individuals, and possess a strong desire to make a difference.

Education is much more than transmitting some set of prescribed cultural, societal, or institutional values or ideas. Education is an ongoing, spirited engagement of self-understanding and discovery. Etymologically, the word “education” comes from its Latin root “educare,” meaning to draw out or to
lead. That is, in fact, our goal as educators—to draw out that unique latent potential within each student. As Smith (cited in Slattery, 1995, p. 73) poignantly explains, “education cannot simply tell us what we are, but what we hope to become.” When we teach our students, regardless of the subject, we serve as a catalyst for them to reach their potential. A fundamental human quest is the search for meaning. The process of education becomes a lifelong journey of self-exploration, discovery, and empowerment. Teachers play a vital role in helping students attain deep understanding. As Rachel Kessler (2000) concludes in her *The Soul of Education*,

Perhaps most important, as teachers, we can honor our students’ search for what they believe gives meaning and integrity to their lives, and how they can connect to what is most precious for them. In the search itself, in loving the questions, in the deep yearning they let themselves feel, young people can discover what is essential in their own lives and in life itself, and what allows them to bring their own gifts to the world. (p. 171)

As educators, we affirm the possibilities for human growth and understanding. Education embodies growth and possibility, while teachers translate these ideals into action by inspiring young minds, developing capacities to wonder and become, and facilitating an environment conducive for exploring the depths of one’s being. The capacity for heightened consciousness, the emphasis on human value and responsibility, and the quest of becoming are quintessential goals. Teaching thus becomes not only meaningful and important, but also exciting.

The tragic events of the atrocity that occurred on September 11th (2001) have affected all of us so very deeply—our lives are forever changed. Aside from each of our personal reactions and the ways 9/11 changed us as individuals—I am certain that we have also been affected professionally. I knew before 9/11 that my work as an educator was important. I knew at least intellectually that what I do makes a difference. Still, 9/11 has filled me with a renewed sense of determination and urgency. I know that education alone cannot put an end to hatred and I know I cannot alone change the world. Yet, I also know that in my way I can indeed raise the consciousness of others in terms of what it means to be a just, caring human being in a world filled with hate and injustice. Teaching for me, as never before, has become a moral imperative.

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary teachers. We need teachers who can challenge others to excellence; teachers who love what they do. We need teachers who help students achieve their potential; teachers who help students understand why and how to treat others with respect, dignity, and compassion.

Haim Ginott (1993) made the point that education is more than teaching knowledge and skills in dramatic fashion when he related a message sent by a principal to his teachers on the first day of school:
Dear Teacher:

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers.
Children poisoned by educated physicians.
Infants killed by trained nurses.

Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education.

My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane. (p. 317)

The challenges of teaching are certainly awesome. Overcrowded classrooms, lack of student interest, absenteeism, lack of preparedness, high incidence of misbehavior, lack of parental support compounded by social problems such as drugs, unstable family life, teenage pregnancy, poverty, child abuse, violence, and crime give pause to think. But think again. If not for these challenges, the rewards of teaching would not be so great. Our work matters. We make a difference. Listen to the words of praise this fourth grader has for her teacher:

Cherished Memories of Mrs. Siblo

As the flowers blossom
The weather gets warmer
And time is still passing.
June has approached quicker than ever.
Another school year is coming to an end;
And I won’t have Mrs. Siblo as my teacher ever again.
I feel kind of sad to say goodbye
To the greatest teacher that once was mine.
Before I go to achieve another full year,
I want you to know that the memories
I have of you will be cherished
And remembered every year.
As we were passing through the halls of PS 42
We were, quiet and not talking.
For we knew better, Class 4–227.
You made me laugh, you made me feel bright,
You guided me to always do right.
You taught me math,
And led me down the right path.
You taught me to spell
And use vocabulary well.
You taught me punctuation and capitalization.
You taught me reading,
And that was a great feeling.
Your evil eye is sweet, and kept me on my feet.
You were not an artist,
But you sure tried your hardest.
All the good you have taught me,
All the hard work we’ve shared,
Mrs. Siblo, you are indeed the greatest teacher
I’ve once had
I sure am going to miss you, I cannot tell a lie.
I better end this poem now before I start to cry
With my heart filled with memories and gratitude,
I will always remember you.
You made an impression that will stick with me,
Even while I earn my master’s degree.

Dana Criscuolo
PS 42, Eltingville
Staten Island, New York

Source: Reprinted with permission of Dana Criscuolo.

Not convinced? Listen to Dov Brezak (2002) relate the tremendous power of expressing and showing we care, and that we do make a difference:

One public school teacher in New York decided to give a tribute to all her students. She called them to the front of the class, one at a time, and told each one of them how he or she had made a difference to her and to the class. Then she presented each of them with a blue ribbon imprinted with gold letters that read, “Who I am makes a difference.”

Then, as a class project, she gave each student three more of the blue ribbons, and instructed the class to use the ribbons to show similar recognition to others. Students were to report back to the class on their experiences a week later.
One of the boys in the class went to a junior executive he knew and thanked him for his help in planning his career. The boy attached a blue ribbon to the executive’s shirt, and then gave him the two ribbons that were left. “We’re doing a class project on recognition,” he explained, “and we’d like you to find someone to honor. Present that person with a blue ribbon, and ask him or her to use the other ribbon to honor someone else as you honored him.”

Later that day, the junior executive went in to his boss, who was known as a grouchy fellow. He asked his boss to sit down, and he told him that he admired him deeply. He asked if he could place the blue ribbon on his jacket. Surprised, his boss said, “Well, sure!” Then the junior executive gave his boss the extra ribbon. “Would you take this ribbon and honor someone else with it?” And he explained about his young friend’s class project.

That night, the boss came home and sat with his 14-year old son. “The most incredible thing happened to me today,” he told his son. “One of my junior executives came in, told me he admired me, and pinned this blue ribbon that says, ‘Who I am makes a difference,’ on my jacket. He gave me an extra ribbon, and told me to find someone else to honor.

“I want to honor you. My days are really hectic, and when I come home, I don’t pay a lot of attention to you. Sometimes I scream at you for not getting good enough grades in school, or for the mess in your bedroom. But somehow tonight I just wanted to sit here and tell you that you make a difference to me. Besides your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You’re a great kid, and I love you.”

The startled boy cried and cried, his whole body shaking. Finally he looked up at his father, and through his tears he said, “I was planning on committing suicide tomorrow, Dad, because I didn’t think you loved me. Now I don’t need to.”

Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, for indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” It is up to each of us to change our world, touch a life, and to make a difference. We are involved in what Gary Zukav (2000) calls “sacred tasks.” In his words,

Your sacred task is part of the agreement that your soul made with the Universe before you were born. When you are doing it, you are happy and fulfilled. You know that you are in a special and wonderful place . . . . When you are not doing your sacred task, you are miserable.

(p. 241)
People have different sacred tasks. For some, starting a business might serve as a path for fulfillment; for others, it might be to raise a family, or cook. For us, it is teaching. Sharing, guiding, assisting, communicating, praising, encouraging . . . touching another’s soul. Moving them to realization and understanding. Recognize your sacred task. Never forget why you are a teacher. Each of us entered teaching to make a difference in the lives of our students. We see the uniqueness of each child and try our utmost to light that spark of potential that lies dormant within. We realize that our task also is not just to help our students do well in school, but, more important, to succeed in life. We encourage our children by teaching them to be caring, moral, and productive members of society.

In the end, our destination is to create a vision of possibilities for our students; a journey of self-discovery. I am reminded of Robert Browning’s observation that “a man’s reach should exceed his grasp or what’s a heaven for?” Browning gives us a moral message and serves as a moral compass. As we work against tough odds, we persevere. In doing so, we inspire our students to achieve excellence. We play a vital role. We shape lives. We touch the future. Christa McAuliffe was right.

I recently came across the Boris Pasternak poem from Dr. Zhivago. The poem is a fitting conclusion to this chapter. Or shall I say a beginning. A beginning of hope and possibility; of responsibility and vision.

You in others–this is what you are.
Your soul, your immortality, your life in others.
And now what?
You have always been in others and you remain in others.
This will be you–the spirit that enters the future
And becomes a part of it.

Our legacy is the future, our students. And that’s why teaching matters.

* * *

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

1. Interview an experienced teacher and ask why he or she has remained a teacher.

2. Read some biographies of great teachers such as Anne Sullivan Macy (teacher of Helen Keller), Jaime Escalante, and so forth.
3. How are teachers portrayed in movies and television? Are these portrayals realistic? Explain. (See Bolotin & Burnaford, 2001)

4. Describe a teacher you know who personifies the ideals espoused in this chapter. What sets him or her apart from others?

5. How can the ideas and ideals discussed in this chapter assist you in developing your Mission Statement?