

Washington Post: “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss
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A good teacher?

By Marion Brady

A few weeks ago I flew into Buffalo, New York, rented a car, and drove down to northeastern Ohio for a high school class reunion — the 55th — for students I’d taught when they were 9th graders in 1952.

They told me stories about myself, some of which I wish they’d kept to themselves, but what they had to say got me thinking about the teacher I once was.

I have a lousy memory, but it’s good enough to tell me that, notwithstanding assurances that I was their favorite teacher (what else could they say?), I hadn’t really been a good one.

I certainly wasn’t a good teacher in 1952. No first-year teacher is a good teacher.

I wasn’t a good teacher in 1958 either. Some people thought I was; they had spoken sufficiently highly of me to prompt a superintendent from a distant, upscale school district to come and spend an entire day in my classes, then offer me a considerable raise if I’d come and teach in his district.

I did. But I can clearly recall leaning against the wall outside my room during a class change and saying to Bill Donnelly, the teacher from the room next door, “There has to be more to it than this.”

The “this” was what I was doing — following the standard practice of assigning textbook reading as homework, then, next day, telling kids my version of what the textbook had covered. Pop quizzes and exams told me how much they remembered. (According to reunion attendees, not much.)

I still wasn’t a good teacher in 1963, but some people thought I was. I’d again been recruited, this time to teach in the “demonstration” school on the campus of a big state university.

Maybe I’m a slow learner, but I didn’t start to feel good about what I was doing until about 1970. What helped make that happen were a few, almost casual, words.

Once again, I’d been recruited, this time by a textbook publisher. They’d contracted with a husband and wife team to produce a series of textbooks, and the team had run out of steam about halfway through the project. The publisher hoped to salvage the series, thought I could do it, and offered to pick up my salary if I’d take a leave of absence and work on it.

I hedged. I wasn't sure I could deliver, so we agreed that, with my brother's help, I'd produce something. If they liked it, and an independent panel of their choosing liked it, then we'd talk about a contract.

Three months later we submitted our stuff. It was good enough. But someone on the outsider review panel wrote a comment that pushed me around a corner. Permanently.

Referring to a particular activity, he or she said the student was being asked merely to, "Guess what's on my mind."

I think the main reason I was recruited to ever-better positions was the degree to which I fit the "good teacher" stereotype. I looked and acted the part. I could hold a class's attention. I liked kids. I had useful, non-school, "real world" experience. The only things I'd really enjoyed when I was in high school were the extra-curricular activities, so the kids and I had in common the feeling that much of what we were doing was something to be endured.

I met most of the standard, "good teacher" criteria well enough, but I eventually concluded that when I played that role there wasn't much real learning going on. Whoever tossed off that short comment almost 20 years into my teaching career had put a finger on my problem: What was in my head wasn't important. What mattered was what was going on in kids' heads.

I changed. In fact, I changed so much that if I were still teaching in a high school of the sort most policymakers seem to think is good and an evaluator came in with a checklist to evaluate me, I'd probably soon be looking for other work.

I moved my desk to the back of the room and shoved it into a corner, with no room to get behind it. I traded student desks for easily moved tables and chairs. I stopped using textbooks. I told the principal my classes might be meeting elsewhere than in my room. I protested administrative insistence on lessons plans for the week ahead, arguing that I couldn't know what to do on Thursday until I saw what had happened (or not happened) on Wednesday. I gave a one-question test at the beginning of the year, and asked the same question at the end of the year.

But the single biggest change: I shut up and sat down, which is where today's evaluator would be most likely to find me. I came to believe that my most successful classes were those in which I felt no need to talk at all. I gave tough assignments — tough not because they required a lot of work but because they required a lot of thought, no less from me than from the kids. And because I felt I needed to know about the quality of that thought, I put them in small conversational groups where they were comfortable "thinking out loud." I either just listened, or became just another group member. The really good days were those when the groups challenged each other's thinking, and I just sat and watched them have at it.

The work hung together and built toward an aim everyone clearly understood. In journal articles I wrote at the time, I often summed it up with some version of this:

“Each of us has acquired from our society a conceptual model of reality. The most important task of a general education is to help us understand that model, the models of those with whom we interact, and the range of alternative models from which we might choose.”

That, I believed and believe, is true “basic education.”

In the 1960s, in high contrast to today’s top-down mandates, federal education policy encouraged educators to think and dream. And they did, coming up with some wonderful ideas that quickly found their way into classrooms.

And bombed. Looking back, the reason was clear — failure to heed the biblical warning about putting new wine into old wineskins. For example, the university at which I was teaching at the time developed kits of hands-on materials that helped kids figure out for themselves certain principles of physics. They peddled them to commercial manufacturers of educational materials, who packaged them beautifully, wrote glowing (and true) sales pitches about what kids could learn from playing with the equipment, and sold them.

Most of the materials ended up on shelves in schools across the country. Some of them are probably still there under layers of dust, artifacts of a genuine revolution that never happened.

Because, when it comes to change, you can’t do just one thing. Switching from passive to active learning — which is what that 1960s effort was all about — had, at the very least, implications for classroom furniture, textbook use, length of class period, student interaction, teacher understanding, learner-teacher relationships, methods of evaluation, administrator attitudes, parental and public expectations, bureaucratic forms and procedures.

Those didn’t change, so the new teaching materials, not being “system friendly,” were rejected. Worse, when system inertia caused the new materials to fail, there was a “back to basics” swing of the pendulum, and the seeds of today’s simplistic reading and math grind were sown.

Some random questions prompted by reminiscing: Why won’t the teacher effectiveness fad meet the same fate—change nothing because it tries to change just one thing? Might that not explain the supposed failure of the Gates Foundation “small schools” initiative? Is the present fixation on teacher characteristics reinforcing teacher-centered education rather than student-centered education? Are “effective” teacher qualities the same from kindergarten through 12th grade? Are the walls being erected by present reform efforts so high that real improvement is even farther out of reach?

And what explains the fascination with and faith in data and quantification that’s driving education “reform” in America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand? The Gates Foundation is spending \$45 million on a project titled Measures of Effective Teaching (MET). MEASURES of Effective Teaching! Is there something in our shared cultural heritage that causes us to think that everything can be measured and a useful number attached to it?

The new big thing in reform circles is that every education-related decision must be data driven. Why do we resist the fact that, more often than not, the inherent complexity of quality makes it impossible to quantify it? Is resistance to that fact a crippling cultural trait?

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Note: This op-ed piece was originally given a title by Valerie Strauss: “How long it took one teacher to become great.” The word “great” does not appear in the article.