

A teacher is not just a lecturer. I carry a greater burden than the distribution of a lexicon of facts. Each student that passes through my classroom carries a set of goals and impediments with them. My job is to find a path to their goals, through that which encumbers their confidence and belief in themselves, and then to encourage them to reach even further. To do so takes patience and humility on my part, a suspension of my judgment of their achievements and a focus on their potential, and an open atmosphere for dialogue and growth.

Every teacher brings to the classroom knowledge of what they are to teach in substance and a set of topics they wish to cover for a class. The core knowledge for the course to be taught and the ability to deliver it effectively are an ever present reality. A more important factor is the set of skills and the attitudes toward the subject that the students of a class bring with them. To teach well we must be able to bridge the great divide between the two. To address the former and not the latter leads to a class closed off to learning. To address the latter and not the former leads to an atmosphere which does not meet the standards of improvement as defined in the objectives of the course. I reinforce the confidence of my students by recognizing their accomplishments and the elements of truth that lay in their answers, even when they are incorrect. Patience in such situations is easy to find by recalling the difficulties I experienced when in their shoes.

When covering a topic, I cover the “obvious” details from the beginning. By anticipating the difficulties of my students, and through a thorough presentation, I can save the time spent clarifying what most teachers believe should be known by their students, but is often not. For example, when working with an equation on the board during class which involves concepts, such as finding a common denominator, a middle school learning objective, I include all the steps. On the surface it may seem appropriate to save one minute eliminating such details in a class, but the pound of cure following this penny saved is far too costly. I believe that when I humble myself and accept the things which my students should have known, but do not, I am better able to chart a road for each students success. As a second example; I often write detailed notes for each class, including skills from prerequisite courses, and continually include these details in my work to reinforce them. I can’t control what my students have learned before coming to me, but by such practices I believe I can help to leave them better prepared for the courses they must take following mine.

As an undergraduate I was advised in haste not to drop a course which I later failed. I recall this experience when I speak with students which have been advised to take overload schedules in an effort to regain Hope benefits, or to take a four hour course, in order to avoid a one hour survey course which meets once a week. Students do not take their courses in an insulated educational bubble. Each student must also balance life outside of the classroom with course work. When a student comes to me with only two options; stay in my course and fail, or to drop my course, I take time to speak with them about the relevant variables. This takes an investment of time and understanding on my part. Poor advising is often the culprit when a student finally reaches the point they are willing to sit down with me and find a solution when faced with the aforementioned situation. I query each student who finds him/herself in this situation about as many components of their life as it takes to put them in a position of power, when choosing how to move forward. If the student cannot succeed in my course, I want to ensure that when they must take the course again they will succeed.

All of the above things are not possible in an environment which does not welcome dissent, and the discussion which accompanies it. I believe humility in the face of ridicule, the ability to admit error, and acknowledge each of my students creates an open environment where no student hesitates to ask a “stupid” question, to answer when they are uncertain they are correct, or to point out errors they believe I have made in my board work. Each student in the course becomes a teacher in this type of environment; “when one teaches, two learn”. In the absence of this environment, questions that many students may have had go unasked for fear of ridicule and incorrect information propagates and is reinforced in the notes of the students. I make all of these efforts not to be the best teacher, but rather to continually improve for the benefit of each of my students, and myself.