

Teachers on a Mission

By Billy Riggs

Good teaching does not occur by accident. On the contrary, it is the result of finely honed skills and an intimate knowledge of the dynamics of human learning and motivation. Almost every weekday around the world dedicated school teachers invest their time, energy, resources, even their money in their students, hoping against hope that some of what they are saying will penetrate the cranial bone, lodge in the soft gray tissue beneath, and re-emerge years later to make a positive difference. But the process of changing lives need not be left to happenstance and blind optimism. Those teachers who consistently make a profound difference in the lives of their students, exerting a lasting influence that far exceeds the content of their curricula, share several qualities in common. Foremost among them is the level of their motivation.

Because I was the second child in my family my older sister, Pam, had already blazed a trail before me in the public school system of my hometown. She brought home glowing reports about some of her teachers, and dire warnings about others. Some teachers, my parents could see, had not merely educated her, but had inspired her to embark on a lifelong quest for learning. They had found a spark of interest within her, and had fanned it into flames, if not an inferno. They had piqued her curiosity and aroused her sensibilities. They had done what teachers are *supposed* to do, and what all truly great educators manage always to find a way to do. As the old adage says, "Give a man a fish, and you've fed him for a day; teach a man how to fish, and you've fed him for a lifetime." But these remarkable teachers had not merely given my sister a fish. Nor had they been content to just teach her *how* to fish. They had somehow found a way to make her *want* to fish.

Most of my sister's instructors in those years had provoked little or no comment at all, save a perfunctory mention over the dinner table of a homework assignment or an interesting event that took place in class that day. These teachers had done their jobs; they had faithfully prepared and delivered their lesson plans. They had been punctual and responsible and had worked many long, thankless hours. They had attended football and basketball games, chaperoned on field trips, served as hall monitors, and sponsored school clubs. No doubt many of them were intellectually bright, and academically accomplished. But somehow, despite their giftedness and efforts, they had failed to make much of an impression. Their dreams of making a profound difference in the lives of their students went unfulfilled.

And then, there were *those* teachers. We've all experienced them. On and on they droned, day after day, rarely looking up from their notes long enough to see a few students staring out the windows, doodling on their notebooks, or slumbering in a gelatinous puddle of their own drool. Rather than fanning a spark into flames, they had drowned glowing embers with a veritable flood of banal, unimaginative lectures. They

had raised ennui to an art form, and – for some unfortunate students – had forever squelched their desire to explore the subject matter of that class.

A few weeks before school began each fall, an ominous envelope arrived in my parents' mailbox from the school district on important-looking stationery. We knew that inside were my teacher assignments for the upcoming nine months. The contents, we hoped, would elicit a spontaneous and enthusiastic chorus of the doxology, complete with feasting and merriment of Dionysian proportions. If the right names were typed on the list within, school's opening day would be eagerly anticipated as the beginning of an adventure. God would smile, the angels would sing, and all would be right with the world. On the other hand, we recognized, the envelope could hold ample reason for weeping, wailing and the gnashing of teeth. Our home could become the setting for jeremiads, elegies, and funeral dirges. Autumn's arrival would be dreaded like execution day to a condemned prisoner, and each grain of sand that passed through the narrow opening of the hourglass would be heard as though a boulder had crashed to the ground. Of course, there was also the possibility that the list of teachers to which I was assigned could produce little more than a shrug, a palpable sense of relief as I recognized that it could have been much worse.

Now, decades later, I try to analyze why some teachers were so effective while a few others with similar educations, teaching the same subjects to the same people may have been actually *harming* their students. I have deduced that the most fundamental distinction between the best and worst teachers in any school lies in their underlying motivation for teaching. The best teachers on earth are invariably those who perceive themselves to be on a mission of the utmost importance. Driven by a visceral obsession to help students maximize their potential, such educators seem to cast a magical spell over those around them, igniting their passions for learning and exerting an almost magnetic pull on their students reminiscent of the Pied Piper. The intensity in such a teacher's eyes and the exigency in his or her manner communicates to the pupil that learning is essential, and that a failure to do so is potentially catastrophic.

All great leaders are driven by what I have come to call a "Magical Dream," a grand vision to which all of life's hopes and energies are harnessed. For Alexander the Great, the dream was world conquest. Fulfilling his life purpose at the tender age of 33, he "wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer." For America's founding fathers, the vision was of a free society, and around that dream they united the fledgling thirteen colonies to take up arms and repel the armies of the mightiest empire on earth. Their passion and commitment was made clear in the closing words of the Declaration of Independence: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." For Abraham Lincoln the mission was to preserve the Union and abolish slavery, and behind that mission he united a host of people that eventually – at an astounding cost – accomplished both. No one has exemplified this principle in the modern era better than Martin Luther King, Jr., who stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 and declared, "I have a dream.... That this nation under God shall rise up, and live out the full meaning of her creed, that all men are created

equal.” Those who stood in the listening throngs that day tell of goose bumps, renewed vision and steeled resolve. They had internalized the passion of the speaker and had made it their own. Years after his death, the dream is more alive than ever, as the flame of passion was kindled and rekindled in progressively more hearts and minds.

Three hundred and fifty years before the birth of Christ, the philosopher Aristotle summarized what he believed were the most salient characteristics of a highly persuasive person. He described them in his native Greek language as *Ethos*, *Pathos*, and *Logos*, words that we might translate as credibility, passion, and logic. This holy trinity of persuasion remains as reliable a guide today as it was more than two millennia ago; though times have changed, people are fundamentally the same. The factors that magnetically attracted students to this ancient master teacher will do the same for any teacher who follows his pattern. It is no wonder then that Aristotle’s class lecture notes have survived for 2400 years, and are still studied today. Among his students was the aforementioned Alexander the Great, whose ability to induce others to follow him was nonpareil. Exploring these foundation stones of influence is critical to becoming a highly effective teacher.

I. *Ethos*

Ethos is a Greek word which has been transliterated directly into English and refers to the distinctive character of a people or an era. It also forms the root of the English word “ethics.” As Aristotle used it, the term *ethos* refers to the credibility the teacher has with his or her students. *Ethos*, then, is the cornerstone of effective teaching, for without it the student has no reason to listen, let alone internalize the would-be teacher’s message. Aristotle, in turn, broke down this concept into its three constituent parts.

The first component of *ethos*, he believed, was *phronesis*, roughly translated “intelligence.” Before a teacher can hope to make a life-changing impact, it is essential that his or her students believe that their instructor is a reasonably intelligent person and is knowledgeable of the subject being taught. For this reason, thorough preparation for each lesson is mandatory. Those teachers whose lessons penetrate the souls of their students to stay with them for decades are typically those who have *done their own homework* before assigning it to their pupils. I remember in my second year of graduate school taking a course from a teaching assistant who had graduated only a couple of years before. To this day I still marvel at how often I, a student, had to correct him in class. His lectures were replete with factual errors that revealed he had never even read the textbook! He was simply “winging it,” and trusting that his students didn’t know enough to catch on. For this reason, I was skeptical of everything he said in class.

The second aspect of *ethos*, according to Aristotle, was *arête*, virtue. People are more open to learning from teachers they believe to be genuinely good, fair and honest. Instructors who show preferential treatment to some students over others are undercutting their own ability to impact both the favored *and* the unfavored, for they gradually lose the respect of both. In graduate school, one of my professors required that pupils write their names only on the backs of tests before turning them in, so that he could grade each one

completely before finding out whose paper it was. He did this, he said, because he had detected in himself a bias against people with red hair! I gained a great deal of respect for him due to his honest admission of this weakness, and his determination to overcome it.

The final component of *ethos*, according to the ancient Greek educator was *euphonia*, literally “good knowledge.” The term, as used by Aristotle, referred to a noble intent, teaching for the good of society rather than for personal prestige, profit, or gain. Instructors who are renowned for not merely transferring information, but for changing lives, ruthlessly discipline themselves to see beyond their own day-to-day activities to gaze at the long term benefits the students (and society) will reap. Great teachers see themselves as world-changers, those who send students to college who might otherwise be headed to jail, those who motivate children to become hooked on learning instead of drugs, those who inspire success instead of failure.

II. Pathos

A hallmark of highly effective teachers is their passion. Pupils sense urgency in their teacher’s words, intensity in his or her eyes, facial expressions, and body language that demands a response. The lessons flow from such an instructor’s lips as though life and death hang in the balance. The teacher is animated and active as though trying to persuade students to evacuate a burning building. It is this combination of energetic motion and forceful speaking that holds students spellbound. A teacher who exudes no enthusiasm, who delivers lessons devoid of feeling, will never persuade students.

During teacher inservice events I have frequently referenced what I call “The Law of Vicarious Expenditure of Energy.” The teacher should begin each lesson with the assumption that a particular amount of energy will be expended in the classroom during that class period. Either the teacher will burn up the allotted energy by walking, gesturing, talking, smiling, and so forth, or the students will use it by shifting in their seats, coughing, whispering to classmates, or doodling. A spellbinding communicator is invariably one who expends a vast amount of energy during a presentation. Such energy is pulled from the reservoir of powerful emotions regarding the content and importance of the lesson and its potential impact on students’ lives.

III. Logos

The final component of persuasion is, quite predictably, a logical, cohesive argument. Salient points are built layer upon layer like the bricks of a house, each one resting on those that were laid before. Sadly, this is the least important of the three, a point driven home by the prevalence of scores of philosophies and world views that are at best indefensible and at worst insane. Nevertheless, a well-reasoned argument – all other factors being equal – will usually prove more persuasive than an illogical one. Once again, the need for a teacher to thoroughly prepare for each lesson is underscored. It is almost impossible to create a cogent argument without careful thought and a clear outline.

CONCLUSION

A teacher who is credible, passionate, and clear-headed is a force to be reckoned with in the classroom. It is such special educators that are remembered and praised decades later by a host of grateful former students, for they are not merely doing a job, they are fulfilling a calling. They differ primarily from poor teachers in their love for students and their passion for learning. They are teachers on a mission.

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