

The Importance of Good Teaching - The Teacher as the Leader of Tomorrow

by

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Speaking on the topic of “The Importance of Good Teaching” lends itself naturally to a number of approaches, from trying to define what one means by good teaching, to arguing for more institutional and financial support for teaching and teaching centres, or to talking about one’s own practices and what one thinks is important about one’s own teaching. But I’d like to take a different approach tonight and talk about what good teaching, and particularly good teachers, can do for an institution and for higher education in general.

Although there is much good and excellent teaching going on in our universities these days, it is easy to forget that good teaching comes from good people – people with a sense of service, the ability to create positive change, and the desire to make the world a better place. Reading through their teaching philosophies and hearing them present at conferences, I find these same passions reiterated over and over again from our best teachers. But what I’d like to discuss tonight is how these same qualities and passions can contribute more to a university than just good classes. I’d like to imagine how we can take the same qualities we find in good teachers and apply them to leadership roles in higher education.

Good teachers know how to make something out of nothing. They can take a less than successful student presentation or an awkward question and find a teaching moment there, expanding on the topic or filling in what is missing without making the student feel embarrassed or inadequate. Good teachers know how to let a silence hang in the air, to wait for an answer to a posed question, to let a situation breathe so that when the silence ends it is filled with something relevant and insightful. Good teachers know when to push and know when to lay off, because they learn to read people and to sense the right moment when a humorous comment or an aside will diffuse tension or boredom in a room, or when a student needs to be either pushed harder or given some breathing room. Good teachers are often shy but they know how to work a room. They have learned that the world is made up of unique individuals who have their own style of communication, their own needs, their own culture. Good teachers know they have to back up what they do in the classroom with sound research and up-to-date information. They know how to give feedback so the person being assessed doesn’t feel threatened, but instead inspired to do better the next time and to learn from individual successes and mistakes. A good teacher knows how to fire the enthusiasm and passion of students in even the driest or most difficult subjects, without descending to gimmicks or watering down the subject. A good teacher knows how to really listen to someone, to put themselves in someone else’s place, to come up with ways to help or guide a student when that student feels lost or alone in his or her work. Good teachers inspire confidence, whether it be in the lectures they give, the marks they assign, or in trying to sell students on an innovative methodology or new ideas. They give themselves entirely to their work, putting in long hours and going the extra mile to make sure they do the best for their students. And, good teachers don’t do it for the glory, or for the awards, although they are honoured to receive them, but because they feel called to teach on a deeply personal level.

I don’t want to emphasize the binary opposition many feel between teaching and research, or more specifically the perceived ontological difference between “teachers” and “researchers.” But those two endeavours often require very different mindsets and attitudes. Researchers have to put their research first – it takes a great deal of time and effort to be successful as a research scholar, and the nature of scholarship is that there are winners and losers. New discoveries and new ideas are published in order to challenge or change existing knowledge, and so researchers often have to guard very carefully their research findings and present them strategically to get their due as the owners of their intellectual property. Conferences often include legendary arguments between famous scholars who disagree on

fundamental, or not so fundamental, aspects of each other's scholarship. Michel Foucault's early works are written in an extremely complex and dense prose, because that's the way he had to write to break into the French intellectual scene. Only once he was established did he start writing in ways non-academics could understand. There's nothing essentially wrong with this way of approaching the world or one's work, indeed it is the foundation of intellectual life as we know it. But it tends to be an attitude that leads the scholar into increasing complexity. The mindset of people who we tend to label as "teachers" is entirely different – it is about breaking down those boundaries, making things accessible and understandable, sharing knowledge freely and cutting through the density. They don't simplify the material, but they make it available to people who are at first novices. Even though teachers spend solitary time preparing their courses, they are always looking outward, ceaselessly thinking about how to make their research and the research of others understandable to as many people as they can.

Although it is common for brilliant researchers to take on responsibilities as department heads, deans, vice presidents or even Presidents such as yourselves, I think we tend to want to keep teachers in the classroom, the place where they excel, the place where we feel they are most needed. But the very skills, the attitudes, and the activities good teachers engage in every day are precisely the skills we need most within the leadership roles in our institutions. Consider this: when a Chair can take all her department's constituents and bring them together for productive and efficient meetings, that's not just good communication, that's good teaching. When you can break the news to a colleague that he did not receive tenure, but can turn that meeting around so you help him to move on to another position, that's not just good mentorship, that's good teaching. When faculty and administrators' research, planning, and passionate engagement results in a collective agreement that is fair to all parties, that's not just good negotiation, that's good teaching. When a Dean shepherds a new mission or vision of a unit or a faculty and brings everyone on board, even those traditionally resistant to change, that's not just good leadership, that's good teaching. When you convince a major donor through honesty, directness and diplomacy to fund a major building project that will transform your campus and community, that's not just good salesmanship, that's good teaching. And when a Provost creates a detailed plan for an institutional review and takes all the financial, academic, and human factors into consideration, that's not just good administration, that's good teaching. All the things we want and need in these roles are things good teachers do naturally, tirelessly, every day.

So, instead of loading your good teachers with more courses, start thinking about bringing them into other arenas of the university – from spearheading committees on curricular reform, to leading academic units, to working with External on major campaigns. At first, this will be hard to do. People love to do what they love to do, so taking a teacher out of the classroom may be a hard sell at first, especially with the promise of lots of paperwork and meetings on the other side. But if you can let good teachers see that the results they get in their classrooms and the way they change lives could be applied to even more students, to even more teachers, and to even more constituents within and outside the University, they start to see what good teaching can do for our universities. They can see the dream that drives them all – to make the world a better place – can be realized through service in a much larger classroom. Make sure they still have opportunities to do traditional teaching, but don't let this goldmine of talent stay only within classroom walls, never taking part in making policies, creating vision, and guiding missions.

One of the great challenges of this era in higher education, as you well know, is the recruitment and retention of students. Without our students we have no future, neither economically nor intellectually. And what good students want in a University is good teachers. No one looks back on their 20-year college reunion remarking on the number of NSERC grants their professors received, or the sheen on a lovely new floor in a dining hall, or even a well-stocked library. The thing they remember, and the thing that brings their children back to that institution after them, is good teachers and good teaching – the people who shaped and changed their lives and their world. This is an exciting moment of opportunity for our institutions – let's hand the reigns over to our teachers and watch them lead us into tomorrow.