

# A THEORY ON WHAT MAKES A MASTER TEACHER

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## ABSTRACT

*Being considered a “master teacher” in your field represents a goal many educators strive for their entire careers. The current paper reviews the origins of the term, its widespread use, and some perspectives from master teachers and their students on what it means. Several models from the literature are presented and compared with the goal of uncovering significant underlying dimensions. Finally, a role-based model of master teaching is developed, drawing on the tasks and strategies of bureaucrats, traffic cops, martial arts sensei, and Vegas lounge singers.*

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## CONCEPT ORIGINS

Evolving from its Middle English origins prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, modern usage of the term “master” includes a variety of definitions. The ones most pertinent to the subject of this paper involve, “a worker or artisan qualified to teach apprentices; an artist, performer, or player of consummate skill; and a great figure of the past (as in science or art) whose work serves as a model or ideal” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* 2000). When used as a superlative, “master” is associated with dominance, proficiency at the highest level, and skill deriving from an in-depth knowledge of some subject.

A review of literature databases employing master teacher as a search term yielded a significant number of citations covering many disciplines (see Figure 1). The articles ranged from the obituaries of prominent educators who had been identified as master teachers during their lives to profiles of their current counterparts. In many cases, the authors attempted to capture, in somewhat informal terms, the quintessential quality or qualities that set their subjects apart from the ranks of competent educators and warranted the term master teacher.

## PERSPECTIVES FROM MASTER TEACHERS AND THEIR STUDENTS

It is a commonly held view that through experience and training, teachers understand both their subject matter and how to teach it effectively. Master teachers make it a priority to update their knowledge and refine classroom skills through ongoing professional development. Furthermore, they infuse their instruction with authority and discipline and use cultural experiences to link new concepts and make them live for students (Draper 2000). Some researchers have asserted that a key differentiating factor for master teachers is the practice of incorporating their own value orientation and invitational teaching style (Pissanos and Allison 1993) or their ability to reduce problems to manageable size (Strohm 1992).

In a review of the literature, many authors highlighted other pedagogical differences and philosophical underpinnings that separate master teachers from their more “conventional” counterparts. One author cited such facets of master teaching as an innate sense of logical organization and clear communication of each concept via graphics, demonstrations, and animation

**FIGURE 1**  
**SELECTED MASTER TEACHER FIELDS AND**  
**ARTICLE CITATIONS**

Field of Study/Expertise	Citations
Accounting	Hunt (1990)
Acting	Klein (1999)
Art	Nathan (1999); Morris (1989)
Ballet	Mattingly (2000); Harris (1995)
Baseball	Johnson (1998)
Belly Dancing	Greist (1997)
Capoeira (Dance/Fighting)	Dunning (1998)
Child Psychology	Cantor (1994)
Chinese Opera	Gargan (1998)
Choreography	Tommasini (1998)
Elementary Education	Porter and Foster (1998)
English	Webb (1998)
Football	Stockard (1996)
Geometry and Algebra	Whitaker (1999)
Golf	Ott (1997)
History	Boyd (2000)
Indian Odissi (Dance)	Dunning (1996)
Information Systems	Hunt (1990)
Karate	Wren (1994)
Language Arts	Whitaker (1999); Uffen (1997)
Physical Education	Pissanos and Allison (1993)
Piano	Davoine (1998)
Sociology	Donal (1986)
Theater (Movement/Clowning)	Gehman (1994)
Track and Field	Moore, Cook, and Mravic (2000)
Violin	Anonymous (1995)
Writing	Klein (1999)

(Musil 2000). Another author (Davoine 1998) focused on the ability of master teachers to develop skills in students such as ways of identifying a problem, of making students ask ourselves the right questions, and have them find their own answers. She expresses the view that master teachers consider themselves more like a coach than a professor (Davoine 1998).

This perspective transcends pedagogy or content and includes other personality facets.

Students of a language arts master teacher spoke of the energy and enthusiasm he brought to the lesson. The teacher spoke of the love and respect and appreciation that goes in his classroom and that he makes it a point to reach out to

students and make them feel like they're special in order to ignite a spark in students. In the case of Kimya Moyo, a geometry and algebra teacher, she states her belief that education is almost spiritual. To her, for teaching to be effective, it has to be about establishing relationships with students that take you into that child's world. She believes that if you can take kids to that place where they can verbalize and conceptualize and problem-solve, it's better than if they're doing a dozen drills. You have to adjust to where they are and get them to trust you." Many also spoke of this individual consideration of students – "every student is different" (Whitaker 1999). A different master teacher explained it this way, "each one has different problems to face, a different way of learning or understanding, and a different perception of what you are trying to explain. In my opinion, it takes great effort from both the teacher and the student to adapt to each other. There is certainly no pattern" (Davoine 1998).

Borrowing from some of the business management literature and concepts of continuous improvement, some take the term master teacher with a grain of salt.

"I don't like to call anyone a 'master,' really. I'd rather call them a person on the path to mastery, but we'll use the term anyway. I think that no one can ever totally master anything, but we can all be on a path to mastery. I think one of the things that characterizes almost all of them is that they're not only willing to stay on a plateau in between spurts upwards for a long time and are not only willing to practice, but also love to practice. And, if I can make a radical statement, they can love the plateau. Almost always those who are at the top of their field are the ones who love to practice" (Akiyama 2000).

### **FORMAL ATTEMPTS AT SPECIFICATION**

Excellence for teachers is demonstrated by bringing out the best learning of each student.

While the search for criteria specific to effective teaching has been a serious research question for close to half a century, identifying those central to the excellent, or master teacher, has been elusive. According to White (1991) the concept of excellence will be a multivariate measure of the classroom environment created by an individual called a master teacher.

In a study reviewing more than 140 journal abstracts in the period 1986–1989 relating to the key words, "master teacher," (White 1991) only one study identified the characteristics of master teachers (Allen 1987). Other studies have examined the question of what role master teachers play in the educational process and include staff developer (Caldwell 1985), effective teacher (Doyle 1986), curriculum leader (Abeles 1987), and strong provider of instructional leadership (Zumwalt 1986).

In the educational research on criteria for teaching effectiveness, one conclusion seems valid – personality and attitudes are inextricably bound to classroom evaluation (Anderson, White, and Wash 1966; White, Kenney, and Gentry 1966; White and Anderson 1967; White 1969, 1971; Torrance and White 1969; White and de la Serna 1976; White and Holman 1978; White and Burke 1984; White, Burke, and Karlin 1985). Surveying a random sample of teachers and schools from 48 states, Ryan (1960) found that the three highest factors in teacher effectiveness at the elementary school level were personality traits: (1) warm, sociable, and deferring as opposed to cool, aloof, and reserved, (2) business-like, orderly, and evaluative vs. careless, slipshod, and unplanned, and (3) enthusiastic and exciting vs. dull, routine, and boring.

More structured investigations have been conducted by George (1997), Weaver et al. (1993), Lavelly et al. (1990), and Allen (1987), (see Figure 2). Common threads found among all of the studies include a commitment of time and effort that occurs outside the classroom, both before (in terms of preparation and planning) and after (for interaction with students and follow-

**FIGURE 2  
FOUR APPROACHES TO MASTER TEACHING**

<b>George (1997)</b>	<b>Weaver et al. (1993)</b>	<b>Lavelly et al. (1990)</b>	<b>Allen (1987)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Design a highly structured teaching setting that also allows students to enjoy the learning process.</li> <li>◆ Align the curriculum such that all class time is aimed at the knowledge, skills, or attitudes to be taught and learned.</li> <li>◆ Create a classroom climate that ensures that everything gets off to the right start.</li> <li>◆ Maintain the forward progress, or structured momentum, of the class.</li> <li>◆ Engage students in carefully using what they have learned.</li> <li>◆ Make sure that individualized instruction is highly targeted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Demonstrate effective delivery/presentation skills.</li> <li>◆ Show enthusiasm for subject matter and job.</li> <li>◆ Get down to students' interest level including demonstrating listening skills.</li> <li>◆ Use rigorous standards, tough but fair exams and policies.</li> <li>◆ Use concrete, everyday examples and illustrations.</li> <li>◆ Demonstrate commitment through time spent in preparation, organization, and fresh material.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Expert pedagogy.</li> <li>◆ Subject mastery demonstrated by testing.</li> <li>◆ Roles and duties.</li> <li>◆ Professional activities.</li> <li>◆ Demographic data.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Superior preparation.</li> <li>◆ Exceptional teaching strategies.</li> <li>◆ Motivation and communication skills.</li> <li>◆ Sound curriculum knowledge.</li> <li>◆ Interpersonal competence.</li> <li>◆ Classroom management proficiencies.</li> </ul>

up) as well as organization and creativity in the classroom. Given the diverse skill set needed to implement the various strategies identified in the studies and the singular nature of the individual master teacher, a role-based model, one that incorporates many of these identified factors, is warranted.

### A ROLE-BASED MODEL

Given the number and variety of strategies and tasks identified by the four authors cited in

Figure 2, educators striving to implement them (or a substantial majority) will have a significant challenge ahead of them. One way to envision the solution is to separate the components according to the major dimension of place, i.e., those that take place in the classroom and those that take place out of the classroom. A further inspection of Figure 2 will reflect a second major dimension to the strategies identified, namely focus, i.e., whether the strategies are content-based or stylistically-based. The resulting two by two matrix results in four quadrants with each sufficiently

**FIGURE 3  
MASTER TEACHER ROLE/ACTIVITIES MATRIX**

		Outside the Classroom	Inside the Classroom
		Bureaucrat	Traffic Cop
<i>Content Issues</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Syllabus construction (policies, assignments, calendar).</li> <li>◆ Assessment activities (tests, quizzes, projects, feedback).</li> <li>◆ Reading, conferences, seminars, interaction with other faculty, listserv activities designed to staying current in field and keeping materials (content) up-to-date.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Organization of material and activities.</li> <li>◆ Adaptive management of people, technology, and materials.</li> <li>◆ Contingency planning for unanticipated “opportunities” to facilitate learning.</li> <li>◆ Enforcement of policies.</li> </ul>	
		Martial Arts Sensei	Vegas Lounge Singer
<i>Stylistic Issues</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Maintaining office hours/before-after class accessibility for consultation and/or coaching.</li> <li>◆ Reading, conferences, seminars, interaction with other faculty, listserv activities designed to continually improve delivery methods (pedagogy)</li> <li>◆ Classroom visits to colleagues’ classes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Knowing your audience.</li> <li>◆ <i>Working the room</i> to include participation and multiple voices.</li> <li>◆ Conveying a sense of enjoyment of the material and the experience.</li> </ul>	

unique to warrant a separate role label, capturing the essence of the tasks and strategies appropriate to the cell, and description (see Figure 3).

### **Lessons Learned from a Bureaucrat**

The bureaucratic role is a necessary one for the master teacher. Centering around content-based issues outside of the classroom environment, the overall course planning, scheduling, and general administering of the education experience takes place when the educator is playing this role. It also incorporates the continuous improvement component mentioned in numerous articles as key to master teachers.

### **Lessons Learned from a Traffic Cop**

As anyone who has taught in a classroom with more than one student can attest, working through a planned session requires an innate sense of organization, adaptability, and thinking on your feet. To obtain the class or course outcomes, directing the process, to whatever degree is required by the circumstances, so that students sense the direction without feeling stifled in their contribution or the experience, requires the talents of a traffic cop.

### **Lessons Learned from a Martial Arts Sensei**

The spiritual, some would say Zen-like, qualities associated with master teachers stems in part from the continuous improvement aspect of their behavior directed at pedagogy. It also encompasses the coaching and nurturing aspects of the teacher-student relationship, taking into account

accessibility outside of the classroom, whether it is face-to-face or electronically.

### **Lessons Learned from A Vegas Lounge Singer**

Perhaps the most under appreciated role of the master teacher is that termed the Vegas lounge singer. Vegas lounge acts draw in quite a lot of people (they must be doing something right). True they are performing, but they are also delivering value to their audiences. The conveying of enthusiasm and enjoyment of what they are doing is significant. Remember that it was that enthusiasm and enjoyment that led us to this career path/profession and allowed us to sustain ourselves through the rigors of the PhD program, while for many juggling family, social life, work, and other responsibilities. The Vegas singer is polished, adaptive, and in the best sense of the word they “work the room” (the parallel to large section introductory classes is not lost on this author).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Whether in marketing or another teaching field, identification as a master teacher represents and ideal to be strived for. And for those who attain this pinnacle in professional development it represents not an ending point but a benchmark for their ongoing efforts. The range of tasks and strategies connected to teachers at this level requires they take on many roles, both in and out of the classroom. The goal remains the same however, to bring about the best learning possible for each student.

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