

EVERYTHING I LEARNED ABOUT TEACHING I LEARNED FROM BAD EXAMPLES (OK, NOT EVERYTHING)

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ABSTRACT

Many business professors began their teaching careers without formal training on being an effective instructor. Teaching methods and techniques may be adopted from the professor's experiences as a student. For many, developing a teaching style is an iterative process of trial and error. This paper offers characterizations of twelve ineffective teaching styles. Each style is evaluated for the negative consequences of using the style, but each is also considered for potential positive contributions. The paper then examines a positive character role-model and offers suggestions for effective teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Many of us define ourselves as teachers. It is not what we do; it is who we are. Teaching allows us to touch the lives and minds of learners, which brings important obligations and responsibilities. I do not believe that I am accused of being an easy teacher. I have high standards, for myself and my students. I demand that my students give me their personal best; in return I keep my support for the students even higher than my demands.

I am still learning how to teach. I graduated from an excellent Ph.D. program, with great peers, wonderful teachers, a supportive environment, valuable tools for research success, but I was not really taught how to teach. Like many professors (Gelman 2005), I was placed into a classroom with virtually no formal teaching preparation, other than the fact that I had been a student for about a million years.

I learned a lot by trial and error. I am still learning by trial and error, because if you never try, you cannot fail, but you cannot really succeed either. While trial and error is a great way to learn, I am sure you have been told, it is much better to learn from other people's mistakes rather than your own. Therefore, I have always tried to examine my experiences as a student to avoid the errors I have observed. I have tried to actively look back at my educational experiences to understand, to evaluate, and to avoid as many negative results as possible.

While it is good to avoid other's mistakes, it is even better to implement other's successes. (You get less "error" with your "trial" that way.) When you find the silver lining in the dark cloud, you discover there is value in even the worst experience. I will try to share my insight of the best from the worst. Naturally, the names have been changed to protect . . . well to protect me. (By the way, if you are any one of my former teachers or mentors, please

understand that I am in no way characterizing you in this paper.)

PROFESSORIAL PROGENITORS

I am sure that I will not be the first person to draw a parallel between parenting and teaching. My first category of examples includes three teacher-types who have adopted a parenting style. These instructors approach students like family.

The "Mommy"

The mommy laments, "Did that exam give you a nasty boo-boo?" The "mommy" instructor is very well-meaning. This teacher approaches the classroom with a maternal and nurturing style. Clearly, the intension is to do the best for the student. Unfortunately, like parents that will not let their own pre-toddler child fall down and survive the bumps, this instructor protects the students to the point of impeding their academic development.

This instructor becomes overly concerned with protecting the students from his/her instructors' errors. (Male teachers can adopt a "mommy" style as well.) The instructor panics over assignments or exams that have proven to be harder than expected. This instructor is prone to reduce requirements on assignments, drop exam questions and/or drop entire assignments and exams to sooth the pain of an overly challenging task.

The dark mommy-cloud arises from what I call the "Hermoine Granger" syndrome (based on Rowling 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2003, 2005). This instructor, in an effort to nurture, often hurts the most contentious of students. A student that has studied harder, worked ahead and/or gone the extra mile is the most damaged by reduced value or changed criterion for any given assignment or test.

What is the silver lining? There is a great deal of positive to be learned from this instructor. This instructor genuinely cares about the students, and that is never bad. This instructor is always carefully monitoring assignments and exams to assure that the tools are adequately and accurately assessing intended learning. These teachers are not afraid to admit a mistake and to actually do something about a personal error in judgment.

The “Father”

The father’s favorite saying is, “Because I said so, that’s why. So do it and do it now!” The “father” instructor uses parental domination and an uncommunicative approach. The father never feels a need to explain him or herself. (Women instructors can adopt a father style as well.) This instructor gives an assignment and will tolerate no “back talk.” The father sets explicit parameters and expects no deviation. The father establishes firm rules with strict and detailed enforcement regulation.

The dark cloud from the father approach arises when the students do not understand or when they miss the big picture. College faculty members have extensive educational training, typically tightly focused within a specific body of knowledge. What may seem undeniably clear to the father may look fuzzy to the student in the classroom. If the father’s domineering style shuts down dialog, the students suffer.

Having said that, there is clearly a silver lining to our father figure. Students do need to know what is expected of them. Students need to get started sooner, rather than later. Students should not be rewarded for sloppy, late and/or incomplete work. Clearly stated expectation, guidelines, and due dates leave students with little room to negotiate. I offer one final word of warning to the fathers; build in an escape clause into your rigorous expectations. Some day, you may need to use it.

The “Grandparent”

The grandparent pontificates, “In my day, we had to program a mainframe computer with punch cards!” or some other such historic reference. The “grandparent” instructor has been around the academic block, even if he or she is fresh out of a doctoral program. The grandparent is historically cognizant.

The grandparent dark cloud is tedium. The grandparent tends to minimize current student concerns because it was always worse before. Current students are often judged as lacking when held up to the grandparent’s faulty, glorified memories.

On the other hand, there is an important silver lining. Placing current knowledge development into a historically accurate perspective is extremely helpful. Even so, a little history goes a long way for most students.

SCHOLASTIC SEGREGATIONISTS

Unlike the familiar roles of the Professorial Progenitors, Scholastic Segregationists are not nurturing. There are three teacher-types prone to stereotypic judgment. Some of them do not even realize what they are doing.

The “Southern Gentleman”

The southern gentleman’s tagline is, “Little missy, don’t worry your pretty little head trying to understand this.” In the most gracious of manners, the “southern gentleman” minimizes the contributions and the abilities of all students different from him or herself. These instructors, knowingly or unknowingly, devalue students because they are a different sex, a different race, a different religion, or any other difference the instructor can perceive.

Yoda (Lucas 1980)

Yoda complained, “He is too old. Yes – too old to begin the training” (Lucas 1980). Evasively or direct and to the point, the “Yoda” instructor has no problem minimizing the contributions of students older than average. Older students are denigrated and demoralized and often end up terrified.

The Borg (Hurley 1989)

A Borg-teacher would proclaim, “We will add your distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to serve us. Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated” (Hurley 1989). The “Borg” instructor is ethnocentric about students from other cultures. This instructor criticizes international students and ridicules them when they do not understand a particular example or concept.

In general, the scholastic segregationists have no single defining characteristic. Intolerant people come in all shapes, sizes, colors, ages, nationalities, religions, and both sexes. They single out individuals and groups of individuals based on their shapes, sizes, colors, ages, nationalities, religions, and/or their sex. There is an obvious dark cloud to bigotry. Prejudice breeds discontentment. Bigots sell short the dissimilar student or students.

Amazingly, there is a silver lining from the dark cloud created by these instructors. The segregationists recognize that people are different. Different students learn differently. Students often learn best using tools and styles different from those which the instructor prefers to use (Morrison, Sweeney, and Heffernan 2003). Non-traditional students have different backgrounds, different experiences, different exposures to technology, etc. None of these differences make them any less valuable, but we need to recognize when the difference has an educational

consequence (e.g., examples which are particularly unclear to international students) and we must accommodate the differences.

ACADEMIC ANESTHESIOLOGISTS

Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary (2005) defines anesthesia as something that creates a "loss of sensation with or without loss of consciousness." These are brain numbing instructors. Students may or may not retain consciousness after an encounter with either of these two.

The Entertainer

One famous entertainer is known for her excited exclamation of, "you like me, right now, you like me" (Fields 1984). The "entertainer" teacher-type is driven by student opinion and is motivated by teaching performance ratings. This teacher knows his or her students. He or she reads the same books, watches the same movies and television programming as the students. This instructor can use the latest blockbuster theater release to explain consumer behavior or brings the latest antics from *Survivor* (CBS.com 2005) into class discussions of distribution. This instructor uses appropriate cutting edge technology in the classroom. This teacher is fun, likable, and more than likely, easy.

The dark cloud of the entertainer style arises when the instructor removes from the class content anything which might remotely be seen as complex, difficult, challenging, controversial, mind-broadening, or otherwise uncomfortable. Course content suffers. Student learning suffers.

What is the silver lining from the entertainer? He or she really understands and can relate to the student. By reading the same books, watching the same movies and television programs as the students and using these as educational tools, this teacher makes course material easier to comprehend. In this class, complicated theories seem perfectly normal and understandable. He or she integrates appropriate cutting edge technology into instruction in such a way as to enhance the experience for the student. Furthermore, he or she is fun and likable. This teacher has happy and engaged students who are open to learning a great deal. As long as course content is not sacrificed, the entertainer is rewarding to emulate.

Professor Dolores Jane Umbridge (Rowling 2003)

Professor Dolores Jane Umbridge exasperatedly exclaims "you have been exposed to some very irresponsible teachers, very irresponsible indeed . . . I would like for you to turn to page five and read 'Basics for Beginners'"(Rowling 2003). In my opinion, Professor Umbridge is one of the most wretched teacher characters ever created. Her followers are intolerant of diverse per-

spectives. They take no risks. They teach straight from the book. They have old, yellowed notes which they read in class to the students.

The dark Umbridge-cloud is a boring, elementary school approach to class. Students are exposed to limited material. Students are forbidden the opportunity to learn or try new things. Students are completely denied experiential learning opportunities.

The silver lining from Professor Umbridge is the reinforcement of and firm grounding in the basics. Repetition does enhance learning. Dolores makes sure that everyone knows the foundations of the discipline.

EDUCATIONAL EVILDOERS

The last group of educators might be considered to be academic terrorists. There are four academic candidates for an "axis of evil . . . threatening the peace of the (academic) world" (modified from Bush 2002).

The Policeman

Students in the policeman's class fully understand that they "have the right to remain silent . . . anything (they) say may be used against (them)" in the classroom (modified from *Miranda v. Arizona* 1966). The "policeman" bullies students who ask questions in class. He or she humiliates anyone who speaks up. The overall atmosphere in the class discourages any class discussion.

The obvious dark cloud from the policeman approach is a silent classroom. Students are afraid to offer an opinion which differs from the instructor's. Even worse, the students are afraid to question a concept they do not understand.

The policeman's approach may not be all bad if implemented properly. So, there is a silver lining. It is important for us to encourage students to think through an answer. Students will undergo an amazing self-assessment process when asked to explain why they offered a particular answer. The policeman is probing and relentless and the student gains a more complete understanding. Students will learn to think before they speak. However, the most important consideration is to keep the students speaking.

The Drill Sergeant

The drill sergeant is likely to vituperate, "most of you worthless dogs don't stand a chance of understanding what I am teaching. You might as well get out of my class right now!" The "drill sergeant" condescends to already terrified students, because this instructor tends to show up in classes where the students are already uncertain of their ability. This teacher breeds fear and weakens student confidence.

The dark cloud to this approach is a self-fulfilling

prophecy. Students expected to fail will probably fail. Students thinking they will fail will probably fail. This instructor creates incompetent students.

Even the drill sergeant's approach has a silver lining. While this instructor's approach is wrong, sometimes the outcome is not. Some students do reach a class where they do not have the skills or experiences to succeed. We need to recognize when a student is "in over his or her head" and counsel and redirect students when they need to select a different path or take a step backwards to catch up.

The Grinch

"The Grinch hated (teaching) the whole (teaching) season . . . Now, please don't ask why – (research is) the reason" (modified from Suess 1957). The "Grinch" hates to teach; it is a distraction from conducting research. And all those "Whos" need to be punished for the distraction. The Grinch makes even the most desirable classes complicated and burdensome.

The obvious dark cloud – the Grinch has a heart too small for teaching. Teaching is an unwelcome interruption for this scholar. Naturally he/she tries to steal the joy of learning.

While the Grinch sees the students as an encumbrance, he/she does not view research that way. The silver lining from the Grinch is the tendency to bring research into the classroom. The Grinch tends to involve students in research projects and share results.

The Deceiver

The deceiver prevaricates, "Would I lie to you?" Among other deceptions, the "deceiver" may be prone to actively manage the teacher evaluation process by grading easy before the evaluation is administered and difficultly afterwards. As such, this instructor may actually maintain high performance ratings and still gets a range in the grade distribution. The deceiver does not waste time reading student's written work, but rather assigns grades for written work based on objective test performance. (Early in my academic career, a senior colleague once counseled me to do so in order to allocate maximum time to my research.)

The deceiver's dark cloud is obvious. The deceiver lies, cheats, and steals from the students in the most deceitful of ways.

What is the silver lining from the deceiver? There is none.

INSPIRATIONAL INSTRUCTOR

The Friz (Cole 1986)

Ms. Valerie Frizzle (lovingly called the "Friz") is the fictional teacher in the Scholastic Book children's series

the Magic School Bus. Her favorite instruction is to "Take chances, make mistakes, and get messy!" (Cole 1986, 1987, 1990, 1999, and others). While Professor Umbridge may represent one of the worst characterizations of a teacher (in a malicious sort of way – not poorly written), Ms. Frizzle represents one of the best. Her devotees push students out of their comfort zone. Her followers leave no question unanswered. They demonstrate everything and allow students to learn by doing.

Is there a dark cloud to Ms. Frizzle? Her students beg, "Please let this be a normal field trip!" With Ms. Frizzle, education is never commonplace.

CONCLUSIONS

The abuse and potential misuse of beloved characters may warrant apologies. I offer apologies to George Lucas and Star Wars fans and to the Roddenberry family and Star Trek fans. I apologize to the family of Dr. Suess and "Grinch" fans. I offer apologies to Sally Fields and her fans (who really like her). Finally, I apologize to all police professionals, professional entertainers, parents and grandparents, and gentlemen from the south. I offer thanks and praise to J.K. Rowling and Joanna Cole for the creation of such marvelous characters. That said, the characterizations of teachers, good and bad, offer a great deal of insight.

Remain a Student

Seek opportunities to keep learning. Flaum (2005) states "if you are not curious enough to learn something new every day, you are dead" (p. 52). He was addressing pharmaceutical executives, but he has a point. Organizations, including certifying, business and governmental, are moving toward required continuing education for professionals (Haas 2005). There is wisdom to be gained from following this lead. Our course content and structure must continually be revised to meet changing needs and business dynamics (Turner 2005). Businesses are demanding that we keep up (Albers-Miller, Straughan, and Prenshaw 2001).

While continuing education is important, we should not overlook the wealth of information within our classrooms. Ms. Frizzle is often in the middle of the action, helping but not interfering, and learning as well. Students are a wealth of knowledge; they see things we may have missed. Each student has the ability to provide a unique perspective.

Ground Theory and Reinforce Learning

Most of us are actively engaged in academic research. There is a great deal of value in using the synergy created between research and teaching (Straughan and Albers-Miller 2000). Including students in a meaningful way on

research projects is a wonderful way to help students learn and to open their eyes to new possibilities. Our research results bring validity to the theory we teach.

While teaching theory is important, academic theory often seems too esoteric for our students. We need to make theory seem less alien. Background and historic materials often help to put theory and intangible concepts into perspective. The use of current events and “real world” examples allow students to comprehend and apply theoretical concepts in a meaningful way (Albers-Miller, Prenshaw, and Straughan 2004). Graphics, images, and pictures can bring a concept to life.

Students must be exposed to the basic, underlying principles of the discipline. The concepts must then be reinforced with repetition and demonstrations. Repetition produces high levels of learning and generates deeper levels of understanding (Cooper 2004). All student questions must be answered and student performance must be carefully assessed to assure comprehension. Exercises should utilize experiential learning to allow students opportunities for application. Many educators share “a basic belief that effective learning occurs when students are actively involved with an experience and then reflect on that experience” (Frontczak and Kelly 2000).

Accommodate Differences

All students have value; all students are different, and resistance to learning should be futile. Different students learn differently. Accommodating a student’s preferred learning style increases both exam scores and student confidence (Dodds 2004). We need to accommodate student learning by considering all elements of diversity (e.g., age, gender). Good teachers utilize a variety of methods (e.g., nonverbal and numeric). Often, we need to develop innovative approaches to accommodate differences (Morrison, Sweeney, and Heffernan 2003). One of the trickiest demands is keeping the class challenging for the brightest student and achievable for the weakest student.

Make Your Students Comfortable

It is important to keep our students happy and engaged. Active learning can be more engaging (Massey,

Brown, and Johnston 2005). When we teach communication theories in business, we teach the value of knowing our audience. We connect better with students when we read the same books and/or see the same television and movies. We help our students enjoy class more when we have fun assignments and appropriate cutting edge technology. We must understand when students are not learning and make effective adjustments.

While students need the freedom to make mistakes, students are more comfortable if they know what to expect. We need to establish, communicate, and enforce expectations. But remember, having an escape clause allows you to have and show compassion.

We need to understand when we make mistakes ourselves. We need to grow and change from the process and update our approach to the classroom each semester. We need to admit when we make mistakes and make appropriate accommodations which fairly compensate all students.

Make Your Students Uncomfortable

I believe the most rewarding moments in teaching come when students blossom into critical thinkers and accomplish more than they ever dreamed possible. This does not happen when they remain in their comfort zone. It is really important to get our students to face their fears and learn to comprehend that which they believe is incomprehensible. Practice suggests that teaching students new and controversial issues cannot be done without generating a feeling of discomfort and without offending at least some of the students (Baetz and Carson 1999).

We need to use probing questions that make students think deep and think before they speak. Students need to be actively placed in problem-solving situations to learn and reinforce thinking and problem-solving skills (Smith 2005). Even fun classes need to have academic value; we want students to walk away with something meaningful, even if they were simply taking an “easy elective.” We are on the right track when students begin to question their preconceived ideas. Maybe our utmost goal is to be the teacher that our students moan about externally, but the one that changes lives forever.

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