

How I Teach

*Which may not be how you should teach,
but since the title allows me both an apologia
and a good rant in one go, it hardly seems
sporting to resist*

Effective teaching is all about *feel*. If you're buzzing and you know your material well enough, it'll be happening. All the modelling, scaffolding, so-called 'best practice' and (even more so-called) 'evidence-based research' in the world can't make it happen better than *you* can, on the back of simply your own knowledge, good-will and enthusiasm. The professional claptrap exists mostly to keep teacher-education programs in business. If such programs manage to graduate a few good teachers, it will have happened more or less by oversight. Those few will not have been crushed by the educationalists' formula-mongering and craven submission to different kinds of managerial control-freakery. They'll have worked it out for themselves—which is really the only way to do it. A couple of years ago I spent one misguided semester in a graduate DipEd program after twenty-five years as an on-again off-again university lecturer. Okay, there was an old-dog-new-tricks thing going on, I guess: I'd already got used to what worked for me in hundreds of lecture-halls and classrooms on three continents. But a lot of what I found myself subjected to in the units I had to attend for the DipEd simply beggared belief. A third of it was crowd control.¹ Another third involved the fine art of kow-towing to the managers, bureaucrats and ministers charged with the oversight of your every working day, and the remainder comprised a gussied-up (yet somehow dumbed-down) behaviourist agenda that encouraged us to do scarcely more than show the little rodents lots of YouTube videos in the hope they'd push the requisite curriculum-levers in the maze and thereby win their pellets.

Mechanics. Procedures itemised on crowded PowerPoint slides. Long lists of do's and don't's. Any idea that teaching might involve the passionate pursuit of beauty and truth because they matter so much it hurts some days never got any look-in. The default assumption seemed to be that you would have all this *stuff* over here that you'd be charged with hauling over *there*, somehow into your students' possession. The rest could get a bit vague. My fellow DipEd candidates slouched listlessly behind their laptops in lectures and tutorials, many engaged with social media and shopping websites. How any of these proceedings were to transform them

¹ It was a *secondary* DipEd course, so perhaps this was inevitable.

into happening teachers baffled me. It wasn't entirely their fault, either, apart from maybe a common touch of young-adult slackness we're all entitled to. There was little in what was presented to them that could kindle, inspire or motivate. All pro-forma, all aimed at inculcating a grim methodological *consistency* on a lowest-common-denominator basis. Nothing aimed at provoking anything uncommon. Heaven forbid.

For most of the students, a primary consideration was the prospect of a steady job at the end of it all. Most had not fared well—in a tight job market, it must be allowed—after completing their undergraduate degrees, so their decision to pursue a teaching qualification was *faut de mieux*. I commonly heard students saying 'I couldn't think of anything else to do'. I remain haunted by how little the program did to help those students find that core of kindled inspiration that alone can transform data-transfer into real, life-changing teaching and learning.

Done is done, however. I bailed after one semester and have since set myself up on my own to do what I do best, offering courses to the public. Am I a good teacher? Many of my students tell me I am, and I'm grateful for their good opinion, but it's not for me to say. I know I love what I do and can see little other reason for doing it. If my students derive any pleasure and profit from our proceedings, my love of the literature we discuss and my delight in sharing it will no doubt have helped it all along. But I haven't got a method. I'm always curious about how others respond to texts and issues that have fascinated me, and I've been careful never to insist that they see everything exactly as I see it. In fact my students often lead me to new ways of regarding texts I've been working with for decades.

In any event, my unhappy sojourn in the badlands of the DipEd program did at least move me to think harder about what I *do* love about teaching and how my typical ways of exploring literary texts with students differ from the reigning orthodoxies peddled in the overpriced textbooks and under-accomplished lectures of the educationalist establishment. My ways of doing what I do are grounded on three decades of experience and have taken no account of current educational research. My instinct for what works is highly subjective and impressionistic, those personal qualities that the rigours of the traditional scientific method demand we exclude.

Screw that. Teaching is a fine art, not a science. There are no generalised nostrums we can apply universally, consistently or impersonally. Every good teacher is good in her or his own way. Good teaching can't be made to happen, especially not by the application of any formulae, but I reckon we may just be able to factor out a

few common enabling necessities. None of these will *make* you a good teacher, but good luck trying to become one without them.

1. Love Your Matter—to Pieces

Short and sweet for starters. Don't love it? Don't try to teach it, then. Your subject should get you out of bed singing in the morning. Discussing it with even the slowest of interlocutors should make your day. If that makes me sound like Maria von Trapp on prozac, then blow me down with a feather and marry me to an Austrian baron. Say no more.

2. Know Your Matter—Big Time

We could argue the chicken or egg thing about love and knowledge. Do you have to *know* something before you can love it? Or is love a necessary pre-requisite for full knowledge? In my experience they sort of come along at the same time, but then my specialty turned out to be medieval English literature, which now and again leaves me wandering a few less travelled margins of public taste. However it works, my point here is that there's no substitute for all-round, hands-on, long-term familiarity with your subject and all its quirks and puzzles. You have to have *played* with it, and it has to have delighted you, long and well. No amount of formal study under the guidance of the best teachers in the world can give you this (though it won't hurt!). Whatever your subject, when it's up for discussion you have to be the biggest and most shameless geek, nerd and tragic in the room (see how love and knowledge kind of complement each other?). This doesn't mean being able to answer every question perfectly—though it should leave you willing to have a cheerful go. No teacher can afford the train-spotter's socially disabling obsession, and grim, unsmiling expertise can be a bit of a passion-killer (think about it). A comfortable capacity to say, 'Hmm. Interesting. Not sure about that one', is the necessary flip-side to this same coin.

3. Never Stop Learning—Mostly on the Job

However well you *do* know your subject, teaching it will afford you endless opportunities to deepen and make subtler your grasp of its fascinating intricacies. If

you don't find its intricacies fascinating, you shouldn't be teaching it (see 1 above). Keeping up with published research, though sometimes necessary, is the activity of what Gore Vidal cheerfully termed the 'scholar-squirrel'. Fact-heaping. Nut-stashing. It may give you fresh matter to teach, but only after you've fully digested it and made it your own. Otherwise you'll be just a free-range Wikipedia page. Especially if your subject can be demanding—try teaching Old English grammar or the history of Calvinist theology—you need to exercise a high degree of imagination in anticipating what your students will find difficult or puzzling. By getting a feel for how your subject might baffle newcomers, you can revisit your own initial encounters with those irregular strong verbs or with those knotty questions of predestination and free will that turned you into a tragic in the first place. In re-running that early stretch of your acquaintance with your subject, you will often notice things about it you missed the first time around. Those ah-hah moments can be far more valuable than any amount of someone else's abstract, second-hand insights published in some academic journal, precisely because they'll be *alive* and in touch with the vital pith of your subject.

4. Sticking It to the Man

Real teaching should always have a sly, questioning, subversive edge. Ask Socrates. Yes, I know—hemlock. It remains at least a figurative occupational hazard for real teachers. I've been handed a cup or two in my time. The serious issue here is how, like the *archons* of Athens who didn't get Socrates, those charged with administering educational institutions tend not to get what real teachers do. Despite any number of honourable exceptions, heads of schools, deans, vice-chancellors, principals, head teachers, government ministers and (worst of all!) teacher-education specialists tend quickly to lose touch with the lived reality of teaching as they pursue other agendas.

The modern cult of management, especially as it is practiced in educational institutions, too often runs counter to the very processes it seeks to manage. It prizes predictable and consistent outcomes over speculative élan and open-ended quest or exploration. It wants to make things happen, always to know what's going on and generally to be in charge. The manager is the good teacher's worst friend. The manager wants to see the same one or two dependable results, day in and day out, where the teacher wants any or all of a hundred different miracles to unfold in the air

between his matter and her students. Where the teaching is alive, *anything* could happen. Demanding specific results or imposing overdetermined (and too often simply stupid) methodologies kills off real teaching.

And if you think putting squadrons of box-ticking, bullet-pointing, report-writing, suit-wearing and bureaucratically compliant desk-jockeys in charge of education is going to make much good happen, you'd be better off hiring the fairies from the bottom of your garden. *Much* better off—those fairies know a thing or two.

There. I *did* say I was going to allow myself a good rant in all of this, and I have duly ranted. It's really not rocket-science and boils down to this: if you want to be a good teacher, all you need is to know your subject inside-out, love it to pieces, and get good at communicating that love to others. That's all. Everything else is educationalist flim-flam and higher academic CV-padding. Of course, the gate-keepers of various educationalist establishments will require you to jump through umpteen hoops and to scurry nowhere fast on sundry hamster wheels. You do what you have to, within the limits of what you can stand, but don't take any of it too seriously. And be prepared, once you've qualified, to shake the educationalist dust from your sandals, to stray from every lesson-plan you're obliged to generate (until you learn not to bother with them in the first place) and to raise an unholy fuss when any bureaucrat interferes with your doing what you *know* you do best. *Nolite bastardes te carborundum* May the Force be with you.