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*Dear Dr. Canestrari:*

*I've been working at Kennedy High School now for just under a year. I've had the opportunity to see a ton of teachers because they signed all of us new folks into this mentoring program where we have to spend time observing our colleagues. Most of them are pretty good, although some of them are just awful. One of my colleagues is widely recognized as the best teacher in the school. I've always been a little bit skeptical about the awarding of such titles . . . until I spent the day shadowing him yesterday. Do you know Pat Stevens? He's the department chair in social studies and he's really sensational. The kids hang on his every word, he's dynamic, engaging and he really looks like he's having fun too.*

*Here's the funny thing though. When I try to be more specific, even to myself, I can't quite put my finger on exactly what makes him so good. I mean, I get what he's doing in terms of how he gets kids to participate. His language is clear and precise, he's energetic . . . but there's more to it than just his skills. At least that's the way it seems. I want to be as good as this guy, but I want to know what it is that makes him so good. And, he really is that good too. I just sometimes get the feeling that even if I did everything he does, even in the same way, it wouldn't quite be the same.*

*Pat Stevens really is great, but listing all the things he does right doesn't seem to capture it for me. I don't know. What do you think makes a great teacher?*

*Jean LeMoynes*

### ❖ HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND?

What do you think are the defining characteristics of a good teacher? Do all good teachers possess the same skills? Is it possible to learn how to be a great teacher or is this something people are born knowing how to do well? Think about teachers you had during your K through 12 experience. What qualities did the memorable teachers possess? What combination of characteristics do you think makes the best teachers? Keep these questions in mind as you read “What Makes a Good Teacher?” by Richard P. Traina. What questions do you have about the characteristics of good teachers? How can you extend the discussion of these ideas in class? Finally, how would you respond to Jean LeMoyne?

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### ❖ WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEACHER?

*Richard P. Traina*

At every level of education, there is a recurrent question: What constitutes good teaching? Some years ago, I embarked on an interesting bit of research in pursuit of an answer to that query. As a historian, I decided to explore the autobiographies of prominent Americans from the 19th and 20th centuries (some 125 of them). As these people—men and women of different social, economic, geographic, religious, and racial backgrounds—recounted their educational experiences, what did they have to say about teachers whom they valued?

The single most notable discovery was the extraordinarily consistent pattern in the description of the good teacher. I guess I would have to say good and *memorable* teacher. There were three characteristics that were described time and again—to an astonishing degree: competence in the subject matter, caring deeply about students and their success, and character, distinctive character. These attributes were evident regardless of the level of education or the subject matter being taught.

A command of subject matter, such that students picked up on the teacher’s excitement about it, was fundamental. Where there was ease on the part of the teacher “moving around the subject,” a dexterity of explanation and explication, students could feel the teacher’s

## 38 REAL CLASSROOMS

command of the material. That confidence was a root cause of a student's respect for the teacher, opening the student up for learning—making the student more engaged. Autobiographers frequently cited teachers whose keen understanding of the subject matter caused students to see the world differently.

The second characteristic seemed equally important: caring deeply about each student and about that student's accomplishment and growth. In this instance, it began with the teacher recognizing the student as an individual who brings particular experiences, interests, enthusiasms, and fears to the classroom. It was the teacher taking time to acknowledge a student's life outside the classroom, inquiring about the family's welfare or the student's participation in an extracurricular activity. It moved to an insistence that the student take pride in his or her work—stretching each person to a level of performance that surprised and delighted the student.

The third attribute, distinctive character, is the most elusive one, and it gives flavor or texture to the other two. (It is likely the attribute that contributes most to making a good teacher also a memorable teacher.) In almost all cases, there was something distinctive about the character of the effective teacher recalled in these autobiographies. It could be an unaffected eccentricity, a handicap or tragedy overcome, an unabashed passion for the subject, or a way of demonstrating concern for the student (although throwing chalk at or hugging a student are both outside of the "communication lexicon" these days). In any event, there was a palpable energy that suffused the competent and caring teacher, some mark-making quality.

I cannot emphasize enough how powerful this combination of attributes was reported to be. The autobiographers believed that their lives were changed by such teachers and professors. It should not be surprising that a vital bond through all levels of education should be the good teacher—the competent and caring "character."

# Questions for Reflection

**L**ook back at the letters and readings in **Part I: Real Classrooms**. Consider the following questions as you begin formulating *your own ideas* about how to apply theories of learning into planned instructional practice.

1. Consider the connections between lesson design and classroom management. How might the ways in which a teacher structures her or his lessons contribute to or detract from socially appropriate behaviors? What would Madeline Hunter and the Marzanos say about this?

2. Can force of personality alone inspire student learning? What might Richard Traina say about Madeline Hunter's emphasis on lesson structure? If one follows Hunter's model, but does not possess the traits Traina describes would you consider this person to be a good teacher?

3. How would a teacher introduce cooperative learning to students who have had little experience working with their peers? How can one evaluate a particular teacher's effectiveness if during an observation all the students are working in groups and the teacher is not providing any direct instruction?

4. How might teachers incorporate Hunter's lesson components into the kind of cooperative learning formats Aronson suggests?

## ❖ YOUR OWN IDEAS

What ideas seem most important to you as you reflect about teaching and learning in real classrooms? What do you think is most important for new teachers to consider? What further questions did the authors

40 EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY IN CONTEXT

raise for you in Part I that have not been adequately answered? Use the space below for your reflections.

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# Suggested Readings

- Aronson, E. (2000). *Nobody left to hate: Teaching compassion after Columbine*. New York: Worth.
- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*. New York: Norton.
- Canestrari, A. S., & Marlowe, B. A. (2004). *Educational foundations: An anthology of critical readings*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Coles, R. (1990, September). Teachers who made a difference. *Instructor*, 58–59.
- DiGiulio, R. C. (2004). *Great teaching: What matters most in helping students succeed*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. (1999). *Learning together and alone: Cooperation, competition, and individualization* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kobrin, D. (1992). *In there with the kids*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kohn, A. (2000). *Beyond discipline: From compliance to community*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Marlowe, B. A., & Page, M. L. (2005). *Creating and sustaining the constructivist classroom* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Noddings, N. (1995). Teaching themes of care. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76, 675–679.
- Perrone, V. (1994). How to engage students in learning. *Educational Leadership*, 51(5), 11–13.

