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Abstract

This phenomenological study took place at a Christian liberal arts university in Missouri. Specifically, the study assesses ten undergraduate students' perspectives regarding the characteristics of the best teacher of their academic lives. Ultimately, 17 characteristics emerged as standards for great teaching. The results indicate that the most powerful learning environment is one in which the teacher is dynamically connected to the subject. Our results strongly support Parker Palmer's (1998) argument that the subject matter itself is "the great thing" (p. 117) that focuses the authentic teacher in the community of truth. Consideration of these characteristics in relation to how teachers honor their subject matter may serve to enhance the learning experience for everyone.

Recalling Subject Centered Enthusiasm: The Essence of Great Teaching

Vickie Shamp Ellis and Neal P. Cross

Abstract

This phenomenological study took place at a Christian liberal arts university in Missouri. Specifically, the study assesses ten undergraduate students' perspectives regarding the characteristics of the best teacher of their academic lives. Ultimately, 17 characteristics emerged as standards for great teaching. The results indicate that the most powerful learning environment is one in which the teacher is dynamically connected to the subject. Our results strongly support Parker Palmer's (1998) argument that the subject matter itself is "the great thing" (p. 117) that focuses the authentic teacher in the community of truth. Consideration of these characteristics in relation to how teachers honor their subject matter may serve to enhance the learning experience for everyone.

Justin, an undergraduate computer science major, was asked to reflect upon the best teacher in his entire academic career. Remembering his 8th grade history teacher, he wrote, "He has that stance where one leg is straight and the other is bent at a 90 degree angle, balanced on the chair, while leaning over and speaking when something is intense. Leaning closer until he was about to fall off the chair" (J. West, personal communication, April 20, 2007). Justin vividly remembered his teacher compelling his attention to the 'intense' topics. While teaching a graduate class, *Authentic Teaching*, my colleague and I decided to investigate what Justin and others remembered about their greatest teachers. Education devotees doggedly endeavor to highlight the paths to great teaching. Organizational formats are discussed, curriculums are disputed, strategies are debated, and desired attributes are listed; but far less attention is given to one of the most essential elements involved in teaching—the teacher's subject matter enthusiasm.

Many have read about professors who were perceived as so intensely connected to their research

that they failed to teach students. But what about quintessential teachers whose passion for the subject matter serves to mesmerize and inspire students? Abboud and Kim (2006) explained how many Asian students ultimately arrive at the top of the class; they wrote, "You are your child's best role model, so be enthusiastic toward learning and education—and your career" (p.7). Although Abboud and Kim were writing to parents, research holds the same truth regarding teachers' behavior in the classroom. If educators will dare to reveal their unique interest in the curriculum they teach, the students will benefit greatly.

Besieged by the volume of information that describes what skills and characteristics are required to be an excellent educator, we discovered that much of the literature regarding great teaching deals with general characteristics that have been described and discussed ad nauseam since the late 1960s. Given the importance of great teaching, we wanted to discover how individuals described their best educators. Ultimately we reveal the characteristics of great teachers as described 10 of their former students. Our goal in this work is not to ask teachers to ponder these findings and emulate them, but rather to consider the findings in relation to how their teacher presence honors the subject matter. Therefore, we focused on specific actions, words, or phrases that students remembered about their best teachers. This study, inspired in part by Palmer's (1998) work, *The Courage to Teach*, seeks to strengthen the notions that the most memorable educators are those who have made significant contributions to students' content-matter knowledge base.

Significance of the Study

Some researchers have explained that a good education is a result of not only engaged learners but also engaged teachers. What then, is the best way to garner the attention of both? In Whitaker's

(2004) “The Poor Lecturer’s Classroom,” he argued that of the words that make up the phrase, *poor lecturer’s classroom*, the terms *classroom* and *lecturer* are not at fault; “An effective lecturer could hold a class spellbound, delivering important information in a way that makes sense, laying the groundwork for active learning” (p. 14). Likewise, Palmer (1998) argued that schools have no silver-bullet methodology, no preeminent organizational standard, and no best teaching personalities. He explained that when teachers’ identity and integrity are honestly integrated with their insight of the subject matter, a dynamic learning community flourishes. Moreover, Palmer referred to the subject matter as “the great thing,” (p.117). In the midst of *the great thing*, teachers (along with their personal integrity and community engagement) are able to *be there* sincerely for students during the ongoing learning process. This combination of identity, integrity, community connectedness and *the great thing* appears to create the most teachable moments; moments when students are likely to say, “Dr. A is really *there* when she teaches” (as cited in Palmer, p. 10). Through our research, we essentially wanted to discover what students meant when they perceived their most memorable teachers were *there* or *present*. Such a focus begs the question, “What is *being there*?”

For Heidegger, fundamental truth emerged from a person’s innate self-awareness as s/he experienced the world (Gutek, 2004). Although a person’s unique, intuitive nature is related to our study of great teachers, we developed a more tailored definition based upon the data generated from our study. Namely, we define the concept of *being there* as a teacher’s genuine display of enthusiasm or passion for the topic itself, the learners, and the involvement of the topic with self, students, and the world. *Being there* is critical in electronic, traditional, and hybrid classrooms; in all formats the educator is obligated to share and generate student interest in and connection to the subject matter. Palmer asserted that a subject-centered (as opposed to a student-centered or teacher-centered) learning environment is differentiated by the fact that *the great thing* (the curriculum) “has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable for what they say and do” (p. 117).

In other words, the topics are innately authoritative enough to revolutionize the thinking of both the students and teacher. Accordingly, he wrote, “Here, teacher and students have a power beyond themselves to contend with—the power of a subject that transcends our self-absorption and refuses to be reduced to our claims about it” (p.117). Therefore, authoritative subject matter can anchor a teacher’s *being there*. In the end, we endeavored to answer the following questions: 1) What particular aspects of best teachers emerge as the most memorable; and 2) To what extent were those aspects related to the perceived teacher’s interest in his/her subject matter?

In the spirit of Barritt (1986), we also place an importance on “the heightening of awareness for experience which has been forgotten and overlooked” (p. 20). Though we are looking at the unforgettable rather than the forgotten, our informants have revealed details about how individual teachers displayed subject interest, a phenomenon that is generally overlooked. By eliciting best teaching data, we hope to give practitioners a better understanding of the types of clues students have for assessing their subject-matter interest. Since student motivation is nearly unattainable if teachers expose their lack of interest in the subject (Eggen & Kauchak, 2006), learning how interest is displayed is crucial to the enhancement of academic environments. In the final analysis, if this work serves to heighten educators’ awareness regarding how students gain insight into teachers’ measure of interest in the topics, we will have accomplished our goal.

Related Literature

When the National Academy on Education (NAE) discussed the topic of ‘Teaching Subject Matter,’ (see Darling-Hammon & Baratz-Snowden, 2005), the article indicated that the most important questions beginning teachers should be able to answer are as follows:

How do we define the subject matter; what are the different purposes for teaching the subject matter (e.g. why is the subject important for students to study); what does understanding or strong performance look like with regard to this subject matter; what are the primary curricula available to teach the subject matter; how can teachers access student understanding and performance

within a subject matter domain; and what are the practices that characterize the teaching of particular content? (p. 20-21)

In other words, the NAE failed to argue that one of most important questions is: how do teachers personally relate to the subject matter? Teachers could answer all such questions thoroughly and positively, yet never disclose whether or not they are genuinely interested in the subjects they are teaching. Likewise, Corbett and Wilson (2002) discussed common characteristics great teachers' possess and described great teaching as involving teachers who are skilled in classroom management as well as situational awareness. They never mentioned the teacher's presentation of the subject matter.

Conversely, Eggen and Kauchak (2006) submitted that "student motivation is virtually impossible if teachers model lack of interest or even distaste in the topics they teach" (p. 38) and illustrated the point by referring to uninspiring statements such as, "I know this stuff is boring, but we have to learn it" (p. 38). The, "Guys, I know this is as exciting as watching your grandmother eat green beans" mentality serves to weaken not only the curriculum, but also the teacher's presence. Moreover, such statements add a layer of pessimism to students' lives.

When teachers convey their own enthusiasm for the subject matter, they train students to value learning as a reward in itself (Good and Brophy 2003). Furthermore, as the teachers model their interest in the topics being discussed, they also garner more attention. Good and Brophy argued, "They [teachers] can share their interest in current events and items of general knowledge (especially as they relate to aspects of the subject matter being taught.)" (p. 235). Good and Brophy's work called attention to the rewards that come from teachers' willingness to reveal their personal connections to the curriculum. Finally, Gehrke (2005) emphasized one aspect of the literature that we focused on through our research analysis, genuine teaching. Gehrke clarified that teachers must have a strong understanding of themselves in order to help their students.

Perhaps what educators are coming to understand is that when it comes to educating, the teacher's *being there*—genuine display of enthusiasm or passion for

the topic itself, the learners, and the involvement of the topic with self, students, and the world—is rewarding to both the teacher and the students. Ultimately, enthusiasm and passion are contagious. In fact, some students eventually excel in classes that they never imagined would hold their interest; the teacher's dynamic connection to the subject matter enticed the students until there was no turning back.

Methodology

In this phenomenological study, we questioned students about their greatest learning experiences. Specifically, we asked participants that they intentionally recall the "memory, image and meaning" (see Creswell, 1998, p. 52) as the memory, images, and meanings related to the finest teaching they had ever witnessed. The investigation was based on the following basic assumptions:

- 1) participants responded honestly;
- 2) participants responding to question #2, #3, and #5 did not differ significantly from participants with a similar world view; and
- 3) obtaining responses from students who have experienced at least 13 years of formal education (kindergarten through sophomore year of college) would generate meaningful data.

Data gathered in the form of both email interview responses and one-on-one interview follow-ups were analyzed in order to discover details related to how the students' best all-time teacher displayed passion for and/or curiosity in the subject matter. The data were solicited and retrieved from the first 10 respondents who agreed to participate in our study during the spring of 2007. After the original five questions were designed, they were sent to an outside evaluator and tweaked before they were sent to our participants via email. Following, we assessed the need for follow-up questions and met together each week to review and evaluate the data. Person-to-person, follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant.

Finally, the following limitations applied to this research: 1) question number five on the email questionnaire called for speculation on the part of the participants; 2) the study was limited to data obtained from ten undergraduate students; and 3) the study involved participants from a Judeo-Christian world view.

Participants and Questionnaire

We decided that undergraduate students would be solicited as potential participants. By interviewing students involved in an academic setting, we believed the participants would be consciously or subconsciously primed to think about the experience of learning from a great teacher. Basically, we agreed that members of an undergraduate student body would serve as “information rich cases, that is individuals...that provide the greatest insight into the research question” (Devers & Frankel, 2000, p. 264) due not only to their ongoing educational experience, but also due to the fact that they could reflect upon 13—16 years of learning. Our ten participants ranged in age from 20-29.

The first question the undergraduates received read as follows: *Which of your teachers was more memorable than all of the other educators in your whole academic career?* If the interviewee read the phrase, “more memorable” to mean *awful memorable* rather than *quality memorable*, the following redirect question would have been returned to the participant: *How do you know someone is a good teacher?* Additionally, if the interviewee did not include the information within his/her response to the first question, the following question would have been submitted: *At what point in your academic experience did you have this teacher?*

Next the participants received the following three questions via email: 1) *What ways did s/he express that s/he liked or did not like the subject/topics;* 2) *Would you describe the way he/she related to you and your classmates;* and 3) *Please list any specific actions, words or phrases you still remember from him/her?* The results from questions one through four were stripped of names and email addresses and copied in preparation for category analysis. Finally, the interviewees received the last question that would be submitted via email: 5) *If you could plan a time to visit with him/her, what would you discuss?*

The incoming data were analyzed in order to determine which of the original five questions warranted a follow-up interview. We determined that question four (*Please list any specific actions, words or phrases you still remember from him/her?*) had the greatest potential to the answer

this critical question: How did these great/memorable teachers display their subject matter interest? Next, we scheduled a one-on-one interview in order to solicit more information concerning their answers to question four. The interviewers read the participants’ results back for confirmation then asked the follow-up question using phrases such as the following: *Tell me more about Can you give me another example of what you mean by . . . or, I think I understand what you mean but can you describe this further?*

The researchers clustered all the data from questions number one through four (1) *Which of your teachers was more memorable than all of the other educators in your whole academic career?* 2) *What ways did s/he express that s/he liked or did not like the subject/topics;* 3) *How would you describe the way s/he related to you and your classmates;* and 4) *Could you list any specific actions, words or phrases you still remember from him/her?*) into emergent categories using SMART Board for recording results of the descriptive data.

The data from each participant were examined and analyzed line by line and the emergent categories were counted. For instance, one informant explained how her all-time best teacher was ‘fun.’ The participant discussed how the teacher made her classes *fun*, not only in response to question one, but also in response to question number two; therefore the, *fun* category was counted twice for the same informant. Each time a new category was addressed by a participant, the new category was recorded. Hence, even though an idea was only mentioned one time by any of the informants, the idea was recorded as an emergent category. Though many of the notions students described were strikingly similar (for example, *caring* and *affirming*), we listed each new notion as a unique category. However, we made a few exceptions and grouped phrases such as “the teacher gave encouraging responses” and “the teacher was affirming when she talked to me” as the same.

Next, we analyzed the follow-up responses from question four in terms of the extent they were similar, overlapping, or referred to the teacher’s interest in subject matter. Our evaluation of these issues was the focus of our final discussions. Finally, the students’ responses to question number five (*If you could plan a time to visit with him/her,*

explain what you would discuss?) were evaluated separately. The responses to this question were handled apart from the other data because the question demanded speculation over an event that has not occurred. Nevertheless, we also evaluated the results from this question in order to appraise the ongoing strength of the former student-teacher relationship. Before recording the results, we evaluated all of the data and data analysis, double checking for accuracy and thoroughness. Ultimately, the students' memories of their best teachers were recorded and presented to an outside expert for evaluation.

Results

Results from question number one through question number four

Although most of our effort in this study focused on our follow-up responses to question number four, a general assessment regarding all of the responses from questions one to four (from the original e-mail) merits some attention. The list of "Characteristics of Great Teachers" involves 17 words or phrases that surfaced as the researchers read through each email response. The emergent categories are displayed on table 1.

Category	Frequency	Explanation
1. Caring	5	Demonstrated concern for the students
2. Involvement	5	Involved in activities beyond the classroom
3. Positive morals/ethics	6	Displayed dedication to JudeoChristian values
4. Passion	10	Communicated enthusiasm for the subject matter
5. Affirming	10	Appropriately used encouraging responses
6. Fun	4	Used humor and other interesting approaches
7. Genuine	5	Came across as an authentic person
8. Situational awareness	4	Sensitive to students needs
9. Individualized attention	10	Able and willing to meet students unique needs
10. Role model	1	Served as a role model
11. Life application	3	Explained concept's relevance to daily life
12. Personal narratives	6	Shared personal stories to clarify concepts
13. Content teaching	12	Dedicated to teaching the subject matter
14. Prepared	3	Consistently organized and ready for each class

15. Positive	2	Displayed a positive attitude
16. Classroom management	5	Maintains a productive learning environment
17. Epiphany	1	Catalyst for a positive life epiphany

Table 1, Emergent Categories of Teachers

We often hear the phrase, “teacher as role-model,” yet only one student indicated her teacher was chosen as a best teacher because the teacher was considered a *role model*. We were equally surprised that the teacher’s *positive attitude, life application* and *prepared* characteristics received three hits or less. After all, these categories are consistently found in discussions on good pedagogy. Notably, students made reference to the *passion* and *affirming* categories ten times; however, the category that emerged more often than any other category, *content teaching*, was indicated twelve times. This key finding dynamically relates to the teacher’s relationship within the subject content knowledge.

Not only was *content teaching* the most prevalent category emerging from the data, many of the other categories overlapped *content teaching*. For example, *content teaching* was critical to participant A1; he stated, “Dr. W. expressed his love and passion for the topics in many ways. He gave us examples of his own personal experiences as well as teaching us the content that was in the book. He really made me proud to be in the physical education field.” (personal communication, April 12, 2007). Here, this description highlighting the subject matter also emphasized the *personal narrative* category as well as *passion* category.

Moreover, participant A2 (Justin) highlighted the *content teaching* category when he commented how his history teacher, “Always spoke with passion. He shared his previous experiences at such places as the National Holocaust Museum and Auschwitz, as well as many places in civil war history” (personal communication, April 20, 2007). Participant B1 shared how her professor of elementary education displayed her *being there*, “She obviously had a passion for children’s books. Her enthusiasm about the books that she would

share was infectious and it made the entire class excited to go out and purchase these books for our own future classrooms” (personal communication, April 16, 2007). Although the best teachers expressed themselves in individualized ways, they communicated their involvement with the topic, with self, with students, and with the world. In doing so, we believe they effectively revealed their commitment to *being there*.

Results from follow-up questions related to question number four

One participant’s (A1) response to question number four, *please list any specific actions, words, or phrases you still remember from your favorite teacher* (via the second email) was, “I remember the phrase ‘Who owns the problem?’ He would say this when we were trying to figure out or solve a problem.” In a follow-up person-to-person interview, A1 was asked to give more information regarding the teacher’s use of the phrase, “Who owns the problem?” A follow-up question (“Why do you think he used that phrase?”) was asked and A1 explained that his favorite teacher, Dr. W., wanted to keep everyone on-track. A1 argued that the phrase not only established a logical and objective path to problem solving, the phrase also made the students keenly aware of their own responsibility. He stated, “For example, when a student would come in and make a lot of excuses about why they didn’t get their homework in, he would say, ‘Who owns the problem?’” (personal communication, April 18, 2007).

Additionally, participant A1 explained that the phrase (“Who owns the problem?”) became Dr. W’s mantra. He said, “Students will walk by him on the sidewalk and instead of saying, ‘Hi,’ they’ll say, ‘Hey, who owns the problem?’” A1 described the greeting exchange as fun for both the students and Dr. W. Since the phrase carried shared connotative meanings as well as a denotative meaning, Dr. W. and his students seemed to celebrate the influence

of the phrase. The mutual understanding of this phrase seemed to offer Dr. W another path to display his commitment to *being there*.

Participant A2's response to question number four (via the second email) contained three different memories:

[1] He has that stance where one leg is straight and the other is bent at a 90 degree angle balanced on the chair, while leaning over and speaking when something is intense. Leaning closer until he was about to fall off the chair. [2] I can remember him sticking up for some of the students who weren't athletic or intelligent or both. [3] West the pest...because I was always faster than him...He pushed me off the track at the start of a race in practice so he could win. (personal communication, April 19, 2007)

This passage emphasizes that A2's memories are multifaceted. A2 remembered not only his teacher's nonverbal, physical stance, but also his teacher's resolve to protect others and his teacher's interpersonal banter.

When A2 was asked about these specific memories in a follow-up interview ("Please tell me more about this physical stance"), A2 stated "Yeah, it was a Captain Morgan stance." [As an aside] he continued, "You know from the rum commercial." He described his favorite 8th grade history teacher moving into the stance when "a student said something that struck him in regards to a specific part of the topic." Finally, A2 stated that "He would start to talk from there and you could feel it in his voice and see it in his actions that he was getting more intense and more passionate about the subject matter" (personal communication, April 19, 2007).

Next, the interviewer asked A2 if he remembered anything specific about how this teacher defended students who were not "athletic or intelligent or both." A2 explained that when a student would do something embarrassing, the teacher would draw attention away from the student and on to himself. Sometimes the teacher would use a joke or simply do something ridiculous to garner the attention of the other students. Finally, A2 stated, "In fact, his responses to those moments were so subtle that we didn't even know he was coming to the students' defense" (personal communication, April 19, 2007).

When asked about his 3rd memory of his greatest teacher, ("Tell me more about why you wrote about this memory") he stated, "West the pest...because I was always faster than him. He pushed me off the track at the start of a race in practice so he could win." A2 explained how the teacher was joking around with him and that he believed they both enjoyed the teasing. He speculated that since he was a soccer player at the middle school and this history teacher was a soccer coach at the high school, the teasing was a way of letting him know they were similar. Finally, A2 stated, "He had these 'catch phrases' for all the students. He knew how to connect. He could speak my language as well as to a group. Well, he knew how to make an individual connection with each of us" (personal communication, April 19, 2007).

Participant B1's response to question number four (via the second email) was, "One phrase that she would always use to encourage us on our projects, assignments, and exams was, 'Just do your best, and let God do the rest.'" In the follow up interview, B1 expressed that the phrase was very significant saying, "It generated peace and confidence in the midst of a stressful situation. It was a spiritual truth to me that as I worked hard to prepare for my career, God would honor my effort" (personal communication, April 18, 2007).

B2's response to question number four (via the second email) was about an elementary classroom activity. B2 stated, "She had us keep a poem journal and she would comment back to us, usually in a paragraph and not just about our writing. It might be about how good we were in class or something she noticed." When asked if B2 remembered anything she wrote in the poem journal, she commented, "We would write about what the poems reminded us about in our lives. The journal meant so much to me that I have it. She would compliment us for almost anything." (personal communication, April 20, 2007).

Participant B3's response to question number four (via the second email) was, "He is very proficient in diction and pronunciation and he would pronounce the word metaphor the correct way which actually sounds like *metafer*. He also loved the inoculation theory." In a follow-up, person-to-person interview, B3 was asked to explain the inoculation theory. B3 stated,

The inoculation theory is a communication theory when you base upon the concept that when persuading someone to do something, it is effective to give them arguments against what you want them to do so they will in turn justify the action and create arguments as to why they should participate in the behavior. It is one big example of how we are brainwashed everyday.

(personal communication, April 19, 2007)

B3 effortlessly explained the theory indicating the information was securely anchored. Moreover, she expressed her pleasure with understanding the theory.

Participant C1 explained that the statement he recalled from his most memorable teacher, Professor C.B., was, "God expects faithfulness, not necessarily fruitfulness in ministry" (personal communication, April 18, 2007). When asked to expand on the meaning of that statement in a follow-up interview C1, clarified that Professor C.B. was stressing to his students that people tend to place a larger emphasis on numbers rather than quality in ministry, which is the less important factor. C1 explained that his professor assisted him in understanding where the focus of ministry ought to be directed. C1 paraphrased Professor C.B.'s contention in the following way:

As long as you are doing what God has called you to do that is what's important. When you do the right thing you might not have the outcomes people want you to have, but you need to remember God is what counts. (personal communication, April 24, 2007)

In response to question four, participant C2 described her memorable teacher's actions in the classroom. C2 stated, "...one action I remember is we kind of had a boy that must not have showered regularly, so when we went out for recess or P.E. she would always spray air freshener before the boys came in" (personal communication, April 18, 2007). In a follow-up interview with C2 the interviewer asked, *what was it about this particular action that made it stand out more than all the rest?* C2 replied, "It was good times. I liked goofing off with her. It showed us she wanted us to have fun at school and enjoy it" (personal communication, April 23, 2007).

When participant C3 responded to question four he explained the actions taken by his memorable teacher that provided him with one-on-one attention.

I remember she would make me write all my work out the way she taught it on the first assignment. Then we would do another assignment just a little harder and she'd have the other kids show their work, but let me solve it using whatever method I could think of . . . I only cared and liked her class because she made me feel like I was more than what I was. (personal communication, April 21, 2007)

In a follow-up interview C3 was asked, *why did this action make you feel like more that you were?* C3 answered, "She saw only doing it her way held me back. Knowing I learned differently and adjusting to that made me feel I was worth something" (personal communication, April 23, 2007).

When participant D1 was asked to consider why she listed treats, jokes, personal stories (related to family, music, and her dissertation) class games, and her general open-door policy as the most memorable, she stated, "Dr. G. was always concerned with application of the subject, so that students would learn the most possible from the class" (personal communication, May 2, 2007).

Our D2 participant indicated in that her most vivid memories were 1) she [the teacher] had an open-door policy (both at school and home), and 2) she [the teacher] was the leader of the campus Bible study. When asked for more details about the two memories, she stated,

Mrs. S. would notice a student who was troubled, pull them aside discreetly, and encourage them to come back during study hour. While she did the same with opening her home to students, she was more selective with this option compared to school day time." (personal communication, May 3, 2007)

When asked to share more about her second example, D2 explained how the Bible study had been faltering but the teacher served to revitalize the group. In her closing thoughts about Mrs. S., D2 said what made this teacher especially memorable was her overall concern for students. She said that

the teacher would help her students with any topic “from being dumped by her prom date, to grades, to spiritual issues” (personal communication, May 3, 2007).

Results from question five

Though the follow-up questions to question number four responses focused our study, question five was peripherally related. Essentially, we asked our participants to speculate on this question in order to assess the ongoing strength of the students’ connection to the educator. From this data, we hoped to develop future research questions. The informants’ responses to question five, *if you could plan a time to visit with him/her, what would you discuss?*, produced a variety of responses. For instance, informant C3 discussed, “I would have to thank her for taking the time and seeing me and wanting to make sure I succeeded” (personal communication, April 23, 2007). B1 believed that she would, “Discuss what an impact she has made on my life. I would also thank her for all of the encouragement and kind words during the last few years” (personal communication, April 17, 2007). Some hoped to share more as friends about personal lives and others wanted to continue in the role as a learner.

Essentially each speculative response fell into one of the following areas: 1) Student wanted to visit with teacher as a friend; 2) student wanted to visit with teacher as ongoing teacher; and/or 3) student wanted to visit with teacher as former teacher. Although the responses were all unique, the attitude of the informants toward having the opportunity to visit with their most memorable teacher shared one commonality: all participants communicated they would appreciate the opportunity to, once again, meet with their memorable teacher.

Discussion

To answer our research questions (*what particular aspects of best teachers emerge as the most memorable? and to what extent are those aspects related to the perceived teachers interest in his/her subject matter?*), we focused on the data generated from question four. We believe the frequency per category is suggestive of a hierarchy of great teaching characteristics. Five of the categories, *role model, epiphany, positive, prepared, and life application*, received three hits or less suggesting they were the least important among all the best

teacher memories we analyzed. Before gathering data, we did not anticipate anyone would claim to have had a major *epiphany* as a result of a teacher’s work. Conversely, we assumed most of our participants would list the teacher’s impact as a *role model* as well as the teacher’s *positive* attitude when describing their best teacher. Maybe perpetual optimism and role modeling are not imperatives in great teaching. On the other hand, perhaps role modeling and positive attitudes were such vital characteristics our participants perceived they were simply understood.

Further, though only three participants indicated that their greatest teacher was *prepared*, we argue that teachers are not successfully able to share *content teaching* if they are not prepared. Additionally, although *life application* was specifically mentioned only three times, several participants shared memories that illustrated they retained *life applications* from their best teachers (e.g., Professor C. B.: *What is important is to do what has God has called you to do*; Dr. W.: *Own your own problems*, etcetera). Thus, the overlapping nature of some categories was inescapable. Although the participants considered these categories (*role model, epiphany, positive, prepared, and life application*) important enough to mention, we focused on the categories that were specified four or more times.

Hence, the most important characteristics emerged in the following manner: 1) *content-centered teaching*; 2) *passion, affirmation, and individualized attention*; 3) *positive morals/ethics* and willingness to use *personal narratives* to explain or clarify concepts; 4) *caring, involvement, genuine, and classroom management*; 5) *fun, and situational awareness*.

Regarding *content teaching*, this category reflects teachers’ work in the learner’s cognitive domain; whereas all other categories listed in group 2, 3, 4, and 5 reflect teachers’ work in the affective domain.

The good news is that *content teaching*, which received the highest frequency, is respected and appreciated by students more than educators may intuit. The bad news is that much of the literature on great teaching ignores how teachers’ zeal for the subject matter validates and strengthens the influence of the curriculum. We believe that when *content teaching* of the cognitive domain is combined with the most frequently named

categories from the affective domain (*passion, affirmation, and individualized attention*) educators maximize their commitment to *being there*. Though the affective domain categories listed in groups 2, 3, 4, and 5 ultimately earned more attention from our participants (combined frequency of 70 for *passion, affirmation, individualized attention, positive morals/ethics, personal narratives, caring, involvement, genuine, classroom management; fun, and situational awareness* versus a frequency of 12 for *content teaching*), we suggest that those characteristics would have been less meaningful had they not been anchored by the work in the cognitive domain. In any case, in concert with affective teaching strategies, a well designed curriculum fosters great academic memories.

Moreover we believe students remembered these top characteristics (*content-centered teaching, passion, affirmation, individualized attention, positive morals, personal narratives, caring, involvement, genuine, classroom management; fun, and situational awareness*) because they are dynamically connected to an educator's appreciation and respect for his/her role as an educator as well as his/her appreciation and respect for the curriculum and its potential impact on students' lives. Further, we were also pleased that our participants described best educators from several academic levels—elementary school, junior high, high school, and university.

Furthermore, though the responses generated from task four (*please list any specific actions, words, or phrases you still remember from your favorite teacher*) were clearly dissimilar, the amount of detail afforded to these memories (going back as far as a decade) was remarkable. At the end of the day, a teacher cannot know what each student is most likely to remember. For instance, if we were to ask Justin's former teacher to imagine what his students would likely remember from his 8th grade class, the teacher may not have thought about the physical stance he assumes during an intense portion of the lesson.

Conclusion

These results serve to remind teachers that moments of *being there* are effortlessly noticed and clearly remembered. Our results support Palmer's (1998) work describing teachers who unashamedly reveal

their identity and integrity as they connect students to the curriculum. Palmer wrote, "When the great thing speaks for itself, teachers and students are more likely to come into a genuine learning community, a community that does not collapse into the egos of students or teacher but knows itself accountable to the subject at its core" (p. 118). Based on the memories of the ten undergraduate students in our study, the subject matter is the main vehicle best teachers use to impart their enthusiasm and passion for knowledge.

Those of us called to Christian education have the opportunity and spiritual compulsion to serve as salty lights (Matthew 5:13-14). In that spirit, we are adding salt to help preserve our students' learning. Likewise, the flavor of salt saturates and enhances the entire entrée. As we dedicate ourselves to the mission of Christian higher education, our lives and our students' lives are energized through service to one another. Ultimately, we argue that saltiness begets passion. Furthermore, in Ephesians 6:7 (New International Version) we read, "Like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly as if you were serving the Lord, not men because you know the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether slave or free." The opportunity to serve as professors, *as unto the Lord*, is a blessing.

As Christian educators we read, discuss, and ponder the integration of our faith in higher learning. Joining our interest in students and their learning to our curriculum and connecting those components to our passion/interest for our subject is the ultimate expression of the integration of faith and learning. Being a Christian educator is more than infusing Bible verses in the curriculum; being a Christian educator involves reflecting back the hope of God's Kingdom and the excitement for God's creation. We reflect God's hope when we model enthusiasm. We reflect excitement for God's creation when we challenge students to find truth and pursue excellence. As professors, our demonstration of shameless enthusiasm toward our topics and toward our careers is a testimony of our own joy and wonder.

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