

Why We Teach

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We're at that time of the academic year when the daily details begin to pile up. Teach a class, grade assignments, schedule advisees, and prep for tomorrow. It may not feel like a grind just yet, but it does require lots of focused energy, which makes this a perfect time for a quick reflection on why we teach. For some, teaching is just a job; it's a paycheck necessity. But for readers of a blog on teaching and learning, I'm pretty sure we're in it for something more than the bucks, which tend to be pretty modest anyway.

One commonly offered reason is that we aspire to pass on the knowledge of our disciplines so that the professions we care about can continue and others can pursue what we still don't know. That's a valid reason, but there are others, and one in particular resonates strongly with me.

I've long been intrigued by the teacher-as-midwife metaphor—both are present at the birth of learning. Most of the time learning is a painful, messy process, especially when the lessons are hard and life changing. For the person giving birth, it doesn't take long to start wondering how any result can be worth all this effort. There's pain, slow progress, and anxiety. To students attempting to learn, the process often feels lonely and uncomfortable. They may wonder: Do others struggle like this? Why is this so hard for me? What if I can't do this? Maybe I'll never get it.



Learning can and does happen without anyone alongside, but it's much easier with someone there who understands the process, knows about the struggle, and has been through it all before—the midwife teacher. Her (or his) presence is calming. She believes in the process. Her instructions are helpful. She brings knowledge and experience. She's been with many other students who've struggled to learn, and she knows that with effort, for all but a very few, the learning will come.

She's also there to guide not only the student but the learning as well—to make sure it's properly aligned and results

in a healthy understanding. Should there be problems, the midwife can help. What she gives to most learners is essential; something they wouldn't want to be without and that also engenders gratitude.

But despite all that the midwife does, the birth event is not about her. For me, that's the most powerful aspect of the teacher-midwife comparison. The midwife isn't there to give birth. Despite the teacher's understanding of what the student needs to learn and how he or she might learn it, the teacher cannot do the learning for the student. The journey to understanding must be undertaken by the learner. Someone else can show the way, perhaps suggesting alternative paths to the destination, but a student cannot learn vicariously.

At the end of the struggle, the learning arrives—sometimes all at once. It's just there, with the student wondering what in the world made it so hard. Other times, learning emerges slowly; it starts with brief moments of understanding, and then it finally all starts to make sense. Regardless of how learning arrives, it brings great joy. First to the learner—usually joyful relief, celebration, excitement, motivation, a whole gambit of emotions. But the birth also brings joy to the midwife. There's something about being there when a student finally “gets it” that never ceases to thrill. It doesn't matter whether the teacher has seen it a hundred times before. It's a big, important event every time, and it sparks a flurry of feelings.

Isn't this another reason that we teach—to keep the learning birthrate high? We pass on lots of specific information, the wisdom derived from long years of study, and the skill sets that make success a more likely outcome. But I keep thinking that our *raison d'être* is something bigger. While the daily details make it possible, they are only part of the process, not the birthday event. I believe we teach to help others experience the joyous wonder of learning.

This post talks about the teacher-as-midwife metaphor, but there are other metaphors for teachers. What's your favorite teaching metaphor, and what keeps you motivated throughout the semester?

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